

Remote Agents: Managing a WFH Contact Center

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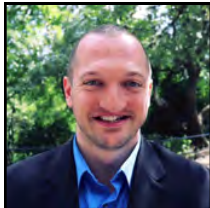


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Allison Corley

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Although ill-advised, it was once very easy to ignore a business continuity plan during periods of fortune and economic prosperity. However, throughout the behavioral shifts behoved by the COVID-19 pandemic, businesses are seeing the consequences of their inactivity. They are unprepared for the changing realities of the workplace, and unable to swiftly satisfy consumers.



“Make no mistake: the current climate will require tactical changes. Brands may have to focus on different product lines. They may have to implement new customer service policies. They may have to reshape their sales and marketing messages. They *surely* will have to harness digital and remote work capabilities.”
- **Brian Cantor**

It is time to rethink the approach of make-shift remote work operations, not only to support work-from-home in the near-term but to ensure your CX remains strong in the face of future risk.

Technology and data aggregation is changing the nature of agent-to-customer interactions. With omnichannel offerings including voice, email, chat, text, and social media, the challenge is to not just identify the most efficient automation practices, but to find ways to optimize interactions between humans and technology, emphasized by data alignment. Never has such concepts been more imperative in the success of today’s workforce.



THE RISE OF REMOTE WORK



According to a recent [Forbes](#) article, when you dive into remote work statistics from the past, you will find that in the U.S. alone, there was a [159% increase](#) in people who are working remotely from 2005 to 2017, years before the pandemic shifted the way contact centers now operate.

90% of employees say more flexible work would increase morale and 80% experience less stress in remote work, improving productivity and organizational profitability. The question remains, *how do we do it?*

Now with economic pandemonium caused by the novel coronavirus, it's not merely customer-centric industry titans, such as Google, Twitter, Microsoft, Amazon, or Facebook who are doubling down on work-from-home business continuity plans. Now the vast majority of businesses around the globe have implemented long-term, mandated, remote working policies.

To ensure their customer experience continues to remain competitive, more contact centers are exploring the advantageous ramifications forced upon the industry by behavioral pandemonium and health regulations. This report will serve as your guided advice and analysis to empower agents during the digital era of remote working. It starts with reevaluating front-line metrics.

CX DELIVERY CHALLENGES



KPI ALIGNMENT – Remote agents are no longer viewing a common wallboard in the contact center or huddling in groups to review performance. Work-from-home agents can, however, remain aligned with the key CX KPI's by making sure they know how their metrics platforms objectively score specific performance attributes. Once that objectivity is understood, it's a necessity to ensure agents have access to their own progression metrics.

ENGAGEMENT – Engagement is arguably the greatest challenge across any industry's workforce management during remote working and minimal face-to-face interaction. Enabling agents to compare their performance scores against other team members and/or with other teams can exponentially increase remote agent engagement.



“Gamification, for example, improves focus and is just as effective when applied within a remote situation as it would be if bounded by the walls of a contact center. ‘Virtually huddle’ as a team using whichever video-conferencing tool your company has adopted during this time to build camaraderie. Winners can even be rewarded by the managers with digitally delivered prizes! - **Jeff Gallino**

RECOGNITION – Instances where CX has a positive impact on events are frequently recognized by the emotions and enthusiasm expressed by a caller. This valuable feedback should be used to individually as well as “publicly” recognize the agent, within their peer group. And it doesn't have to stop there. Sharing snippets of positive unsolicited feedback with leadership beyond the contact center doubles down on the positive recognition benefit for the agent responsible. This is even more important when agents may be working in isolation without the benefit of social interaction or contagious camaraderie.

PROCESS DISCONNECT – Watch out for physical challenges such as VPN/network changes and customer request transfer and handling processes impacted by a need to communicate with newly remote team members – as well as other challenges that introduce longer hold times and less-than-fluid transfers. This is where the importance of speech analytics comes in-to play.



REMOTE AGENT SUCCESS IS PREDICATED ON SPEECH ANALYTICS

Agents who have suddenly shifted to work-from-home or another remote situation may be challenged by unfamiliar equipment or new procedures mentioned above. Speech analytics helps identify CX impacting attributes and prioritizes changes to mitigate negative engagements.

Emphasizing speech analytics in the new digital era of remote working can pick up agent issues even when not expressed by an agent or customer in words. For example, long blocks of agent silence during calls, or long periods of inactivity between calls, are frequently key indicators that a procedure or response aren't meeting standards in this new environment, and need to be resolved.

“A pandemic will (and already has) created unanticipated issues for everyone. Data-supported insights from contact center interactions can help to identify these ‘hotspots’ along with metrics that enable assignment of importance based on volume, intensity, customer profile and more.” - **Jeff Gallino**



Discovery tools enable quick identification of new topics that haven’t previously appeared, as well as changing volumes of topics that do appear. Reviewing desired outcomes and the conversations that led to them enables an enterprise with speech analytics to drive agent behavior towards those desired actions.

“How do you know what matters most to prioritize next step? Speech analytics helps with automated scoring that surfaces the most critical issues to address first, based upon behavioral indicators on the part of both your agents and your customers.” - **Jeff Gallino**



EMPHASIZING VOICE OF THE BRAND

“Communication is one of the most important things to get right – always, crisis or not. I often say that communications are the most-overlooked parts of the customer experience and employee experience. That needs to change. Communications must be open, candid, transparent, timely, relevant, personalized, and consistent.” - **Annette Franz**



While communication tools are important during “crisis or not,” the reality is that we are living in one. Intelligence discovered during the evolution of a pandemic is especially important for managing how frontline agents are transparently communicating with customers and representing the brand. A “resolve the issue and get them off the phone” environment may create more problems than it solves as customers feel they are not being heard and may even leave them feeling disrespected.

For example, mentions of “coronavirus” by callers that are met with great uncertainty and very minimal (if any) empathy by remote agents are red flags for a lack of training and support to help deal with worried callers. Using speech analytics to measure a defined “Brand Purpose” that positively aligns with a positive (or sometimes return to neutral) customer sentiment can demonstrate that the brand was properly represented by the agents’ responses and actions to effect that change, even in the comfort of their own home.

MICRO-COACHING THROUGH REAL-TIME DATA



“When we score our agents based on things like empathy, one of the challenges we come up with is empathy isn’t always necessarily a recall... really driving the agents [and managers] to find ways to be empathetic without having to say ‘I’m so sorry.’ [It’s about] really putting humanity back in the technology and processes in the way that we’re coaching our agents.” - **Allison Corley**

A coaching framework that includes bi-directional agent communication helps agents engage in a culture of performance optimization. In this model managers can identify when an agent might need some performance adjustment, while agents can respond with what the cause may be or request a specific level of assistance – just as easily done digitally from a distance as face-to-face. This is particularly impactful for causes that are well outside of an agent’s control (i.e. incorrect website instructions, inability to update knowledge base, bad audio connection, etc.).

Additionally, presenting agent performance metrics that allow them to view how they are performing relative to their peers helps raise performance across the board. Once again, this is immaterial to their physical location.

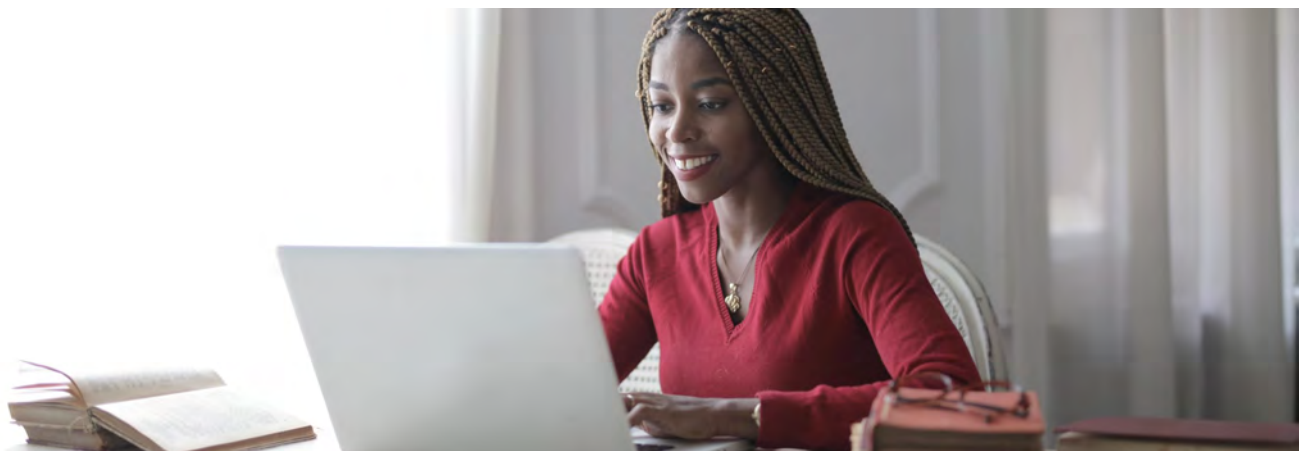
REAL-TIME AGENT ASSISTANCE – Driven by learnings derived from machine learning across a universe of millions of previously mined calls, the right technology can make a difference for agents and callers before an interaction ends. In these situations, data aggregation works to reveal something of note such as dissatisfaction, churn language and more. When these behavioral indicators occur, a suggestion can pop up on the agent’s remote desktop to change the conversation or perhaps make a specific offer. This is particularly effective for agents working in isolation who may or may not have immediate access to colleagues or managers with whom to consult on how to solve a given issue at the very moment the issue arises.

With capable, automated dashboard solutions, it is immaterial whether an agent, or team of agents are all in one room, or distributed across their respective homes, miles – or even thousands of miles – away.



“So long as agents are logged into a speech analytics platform managers can use their coaching dashboards to view in real time the scores and outcomes of individual agent calls, listen to poorly scored calls, identify areas where improvement can be made, send a note to the agent that includes an isolated audio snippet of the call along with instructions on how to better handle that segment in the call, and drive improved agent behavior in the future.” - **Jeff Gallino**

And as stated above, long periods of inactivity, silence, and other traditional metrics that may be impacted by a work-from-home environment can be just as easily monitored, identified and acted upon by managers working from their real-time data dashboards, as if they were strolling down the aisles between hundreds of contact center cubicles.



MEASURING EFFORT IN A DIGITAL ERA



DATA AND TECHNOLOGY FOR AGENT EFFORT – Real-time analytics can proactively identify agent challenges in a virtual world. Examples of metrics include “percent silence” and “understandability” and help to pinpoint peaks in effort expended by agents even when they are not specifically expressed in words. Comparison to peers on granular behaviors, such as out-of-the-norm silence due to hold or declining understandability scoring are creative methods for proactively discovering which agents are experiencing the biggest challenges – potentially caused by their environment – and working with them individually to improve. Agent effort can and should be measured regardless of the location or circumstance to help front-line employees encourage favorable interactions as well as contribute toward a more effective and engaging employee experience.

DATA AND TECHNOLOGY FOR SUPERVISOR EFFORT – It makes it more difficult to sense agent challenges as well as to huddle for coaching when supervisors can’t walk around the contact center to engage with their agents. Being able to share actionable insights due to automated scoring for behavioral indicators supported by emotionally engaging audio examples help draw a remote workforce together. Supervisors can confidently establish a benchmark for quality with performance metrics scored persistently, objectively and accurately without manually searching for what to coach on, or the need to be physically co-located with their teams. So long as supervisors can turn on a laptop or tablet and access their dashboard, they can manage and coach their teams – from their couch, kitchen table, or basement.

“I hope that some outcomes of the current [remote] situation are that the expanded business processes and policies that help to protect employees and customers become the new norm... that leaders view the experience for employees and customers differently, and that they see that change is hard but doable! Look what some companies have accomplished in a few short weeks (days)!” - **Annette Franz**



No one's safe from the behavioral economic consequences brought upon by the coronavirus. But adapting to remote working capabilities with data alignment will give your contact center and organization the best chance at being on the favorable side of financial Darwinism.

About the Author



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Matt Wujciak is a digital writer, editor, and content marketer for CCW Digital, the global online community and research hub for customer contact professionals. In his role, Matt writes daily articles, conducts executive interviews, produces and speaks on podcasts and online/live events, and contributes to social media brand management. Matt covers a wide variety of topics relating to customer experience, digital marketing, consumer behavior, design thinking, UI/UX, brand strategy, and more. His reporting has appeared in various web publications and has been featured by a number of industry leaders, including NYT bestselling author Shep Hyken.

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Upcoming Events

APRIL

CCW Virtual Executive Exchange
April 22-23, 2020

Design Thinking Digital Summit
April 23, 2020

<https://www.designinnovationglobal.com/events-design-thinking-digital-summit/>

MAY

CCW Virtual Executive Exchange
May 13-15, 2020

New Standards for Contact Center Performance
May 19-22, 2020

<https://www.customercontactweekdigital.com/events-new-standards-for-customer-contact-performance>

JUNE

CCW Virtual Executive Exchange
June 23-25, 2020

JULY

Chief Experience Officer Exchange Denver
July 27-29, 2020
Denver, CO

https://www.customercontactweekdigital.com/events-cxoexchange/?mac=CMIQ_Events_Title_Listing

AUGUST

CCW Executive Exchange St. Louis
August 16-18, 2020
St. Louis, MO

https://www.customercontactweekdigital.com/events-ccwexecutiveexchange/?mac=CMIQ_Events_Title_Listing

CCW Vegas
August 24-28, 2020
Caesar's Forum, Las Vegas

https://www.customercontactweekdigital.com/events-customercontactweek/srspricing?mac=CMIQ_Events_Register_Listing#/

SEPTEMBER

Design Thinking
September 8-11, 2020
Hilton Austin, TX

<https://www.designinnovationglobal.com/events-design-thinking/srspricing#/>

CX Trends, Challenges,& Innovation
September 22-24, 2020

<https://www.customercontactweekdigital.com/events-customer-experience-trends-challenges-innovations/>