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as it was meant to be

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Implementing automation in the contact centre – a guide for the utilities sector

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Introduction

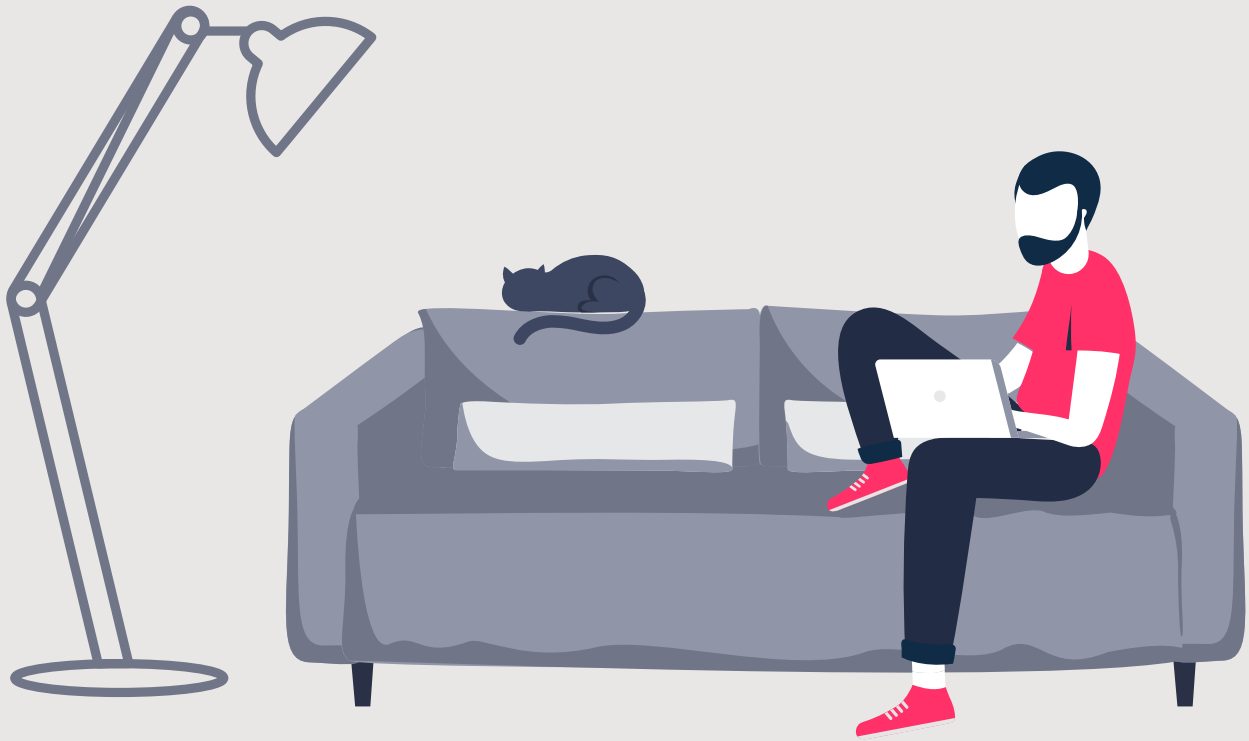
Driven by the closure of in-person facilities and Covid-19-induced lockdowns, the digital migration of services is racing ahead, and nowhere more so than in the utilities sector. As McKinsey states, "When the crisis hit, utilities had to change how they typically interacted with their customers. With payment offices closed and customers staying at home, digital channels became much more important."

> "There is a general trend of customers moving online, with some online activities growing more than 40 percent."
>
> McKinsey, June 2020

In the face of rapid technological and social disruption, organisations in the utilities sector are increasingly looking to artificial intelligence (AI) and Internet of things (IoT) devices to facilitate better operational efficiency through predictive analytics and systems maintenance.

These innovations, initially used in back- office operations, are now being passed on to customers through better service and support. The introduction of smart meters in 2011 began a trend of increased automation and predictive utilities services aimed at providing customers with greater accuracy and transparency.

Over the last twelve months, this trend has accelerated at breakneck speed. Digital is more important than ever, and utilities must now work out how to weave the technology underpinning digital services – intelligent automation (IA) – into the very fabric of their customer engagement, developing an omnichannel customer experience (CX) that delivers greater satisfaction and retention.



Technology is having a direct effect on the way customer relationships are started and nurtured. Contact centres are at the heart of any organisation's CX effort and, with the amount of data generated in modern contact centres, can play a huge role in overall business strategy.

Embedding IA into the contact centre is a must for utilities going forward. **The importance of accuracy and seamless service delivery for the utilities sector must be represented and delivered, in great part, by its contact centre operations.**

These demands, coupled with the rise of remote and hybrid workforces, create a market ideally suited for Contact Centre as a Service (CCaaS) solutions. CCaaS providers can supply integrated, customer-facing channel hubs that empower agents to deliver rewarding, personalised customer service. Additionally, they offer the kind of intelligent technology needed to bring automation into operations seamlessly and profitably, as well as communication tools that include internal peer-to-peer engagement systems, facilitating collaboration between geographically dispersed colleagues.

With all of this in mind, utilities sector managers looking to implement automation should look to CCaaS as a way of transforming customer service for the better. More and more businesses from different industries are doing so, leading to a rise in the adoption of CCaaS solutions, accelerating a trend that saw Gartner predicting that by 2022 CCaaS will account for roughly 50 percent of preferred adoption models in contact centres.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the vast business potential of automation, it’s not always easy to know where to start. This guide will provide a comprehensive, practical approach to which contact centre services can be automated, why and how.

It is a challenging time for the utilities sector. As per Price Waterhouse Cooper, "Electricity demand is down significantly in many territories, and the market for transport fuel has shrunk dramatically." Add to that the ongoing struggle to maintain public trust and differentiation, and there are numerous challenges for utilities business leaders to overcome in both the near and long-term future.

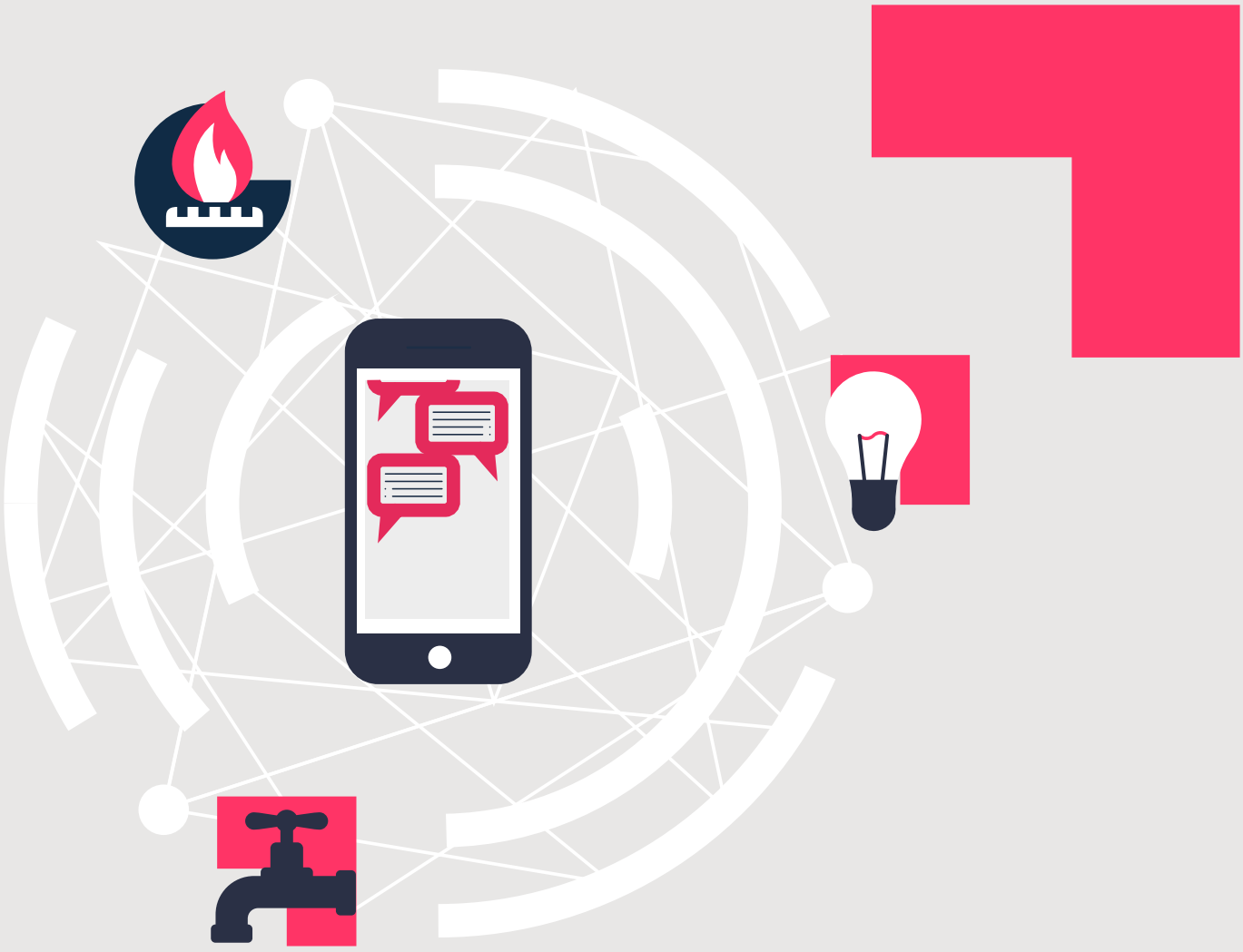
With the correct introduction of intelligent automation in the contact centre, however, utilities can achieve internal process efficiencies and establish a better relationship with both new and existing customers, unlocking long-term growth potential and achieving a competitive edge.

This guide will provide the insights needed to start your automation journey and access these benefits, whilst providing a roadmap to the future of customer service in the utilities sector.

Where and why to implement automation

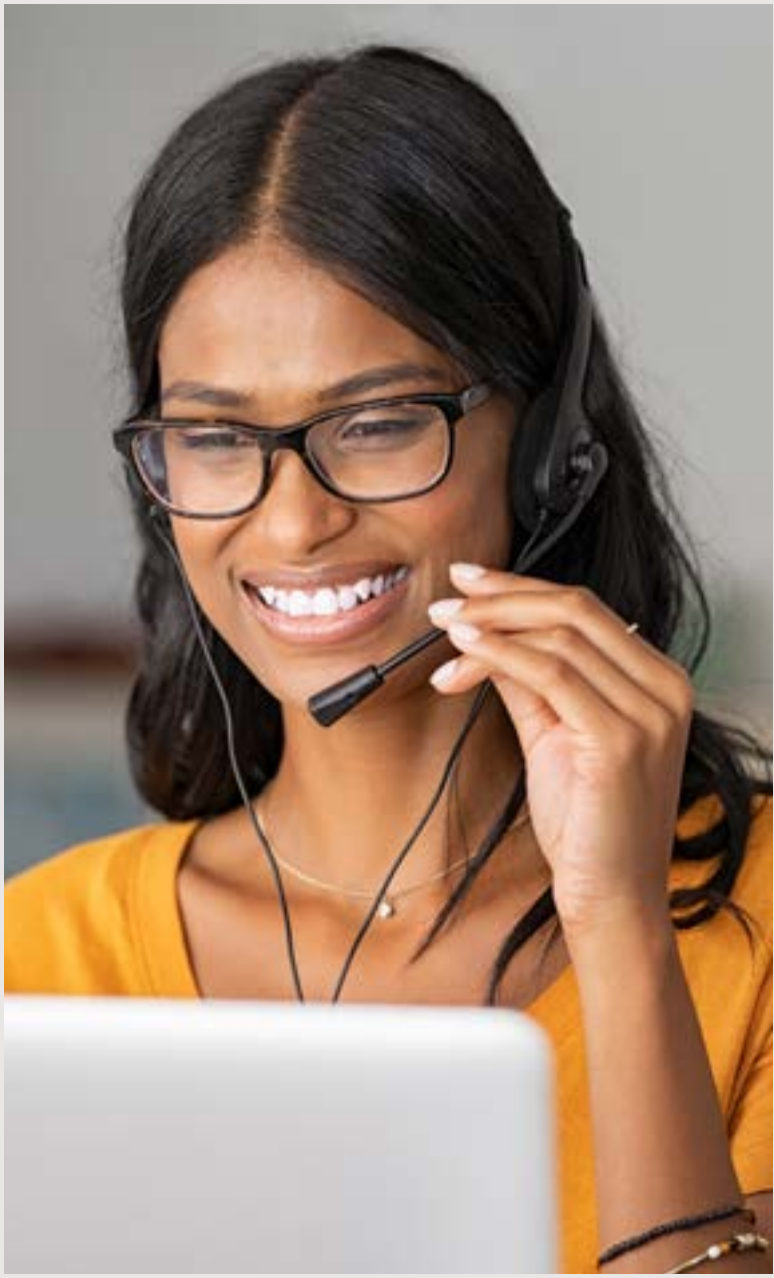
Utilities are central to everyday life, so they need to be provided quickly, effectively and without interruption. Solutions, therefore, need to be equally fast, successful and reliable. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, organisations must combine effective scenario planning with CX transformation plans that build resilience against possible future volatility, while standing out from the competition.

To enable this, the utilities sector needs to develop a self-service strategies that offer seamless access that supports customers and empower agents to do more with less. Automation is key to this approach, through the deployment of bots. In addition to improving response times and accuracy, bots can facilitate easier collection and analysis of customer data, which business leaders can use to further refine customer engagement strategies and develop new, more relevant products and services.



Other areas for potential integration of automation in a utilities contact centre include:

- **Smart meter readings and billing disputes**
  Improving real-time accuracy of customer usage allows for easy settlement of billing disputes and the development of bespoke services and packages.
- **Agent agility**
  Using intelligent analytics provides agents with broader access to customer history and encourages more flexible recommendations, tailored to an individual customer's needs.
- **Digitised B2C channels**
  Providing greater clarity of communication, allowing for self-monitoring and greater customer control, levelling the playing field and never leaving customers surprised by a bill or change in service.
- **24/7 support**
  Deploying chatbots and other automated services to provide 24/7 support availability for customers and facilitate faster response times.
- **Routine query handling**
  Using machine learning (ML) to develop consistent, programmable answers to FAQs, freeing agents to focus on more high- value queries.
- **Instant transactions**
  Enabling automatic payment options and receipt generation.
- **Auto-recommendations**
  Operationalising real-time data analytics to build next-best-action reporting and send context appropriate auto-recommendations with behavioural targeting.



Whilst by no means an exhaustive list of the potential applications of automation, it shows the breadth of possibilities open to contact centre managers. Focusing on automating these areas can help drive efficiency and customer satisfaction in the utilities sector.

Firstly, freeing up agents from the need to handle routine queries and time-consuming tasks, such as data entry and collection, will allow utilities providers to maximise the use of available resources during times of budgetary constraint. Not only does this help to reduce operating costs and increase productivity, but it improves agent experience (AX).

Secondly, enhancing access to services and support will improve the overall customer experience, boost retention and attract new customers.

While most utilities in the UK are now private enterprises, they still provide a vital public service and are run in a similar way to public sector organisations. This brings with it various imperatives, such as the need to minimise downtime and provide outstanding levels of customer service.

Various examples from the public and private sectors provide evidence that **targeting an omnichannel customer experience can provide a great return on investment (ROI), justifying the initial spend required to implement automation**.

However, given the need for uninterrupted service, the utilities sector can often find it hard to integrate automation without impacting the effectiveness of existing systems. Similarly, AI-driven tools like intelligent automation have, up to now, been seen primarily as the concern of IT teams, which can lead to automation projects languishing in siloed departments, never quite realising their true business potential.

Managing and scaling customer communication has always been difficult, especially for utilities providers, but expectations on contact centres have risen significantly in the last year. **Studies show 60 percent of consumers value the ability to solve issues quickly as the single most important aspect of good customer service.** Add to that the expectation for seamless, multichannel contact points, and there is an obligation on businesses to up their game when it comes to scalable customer service.

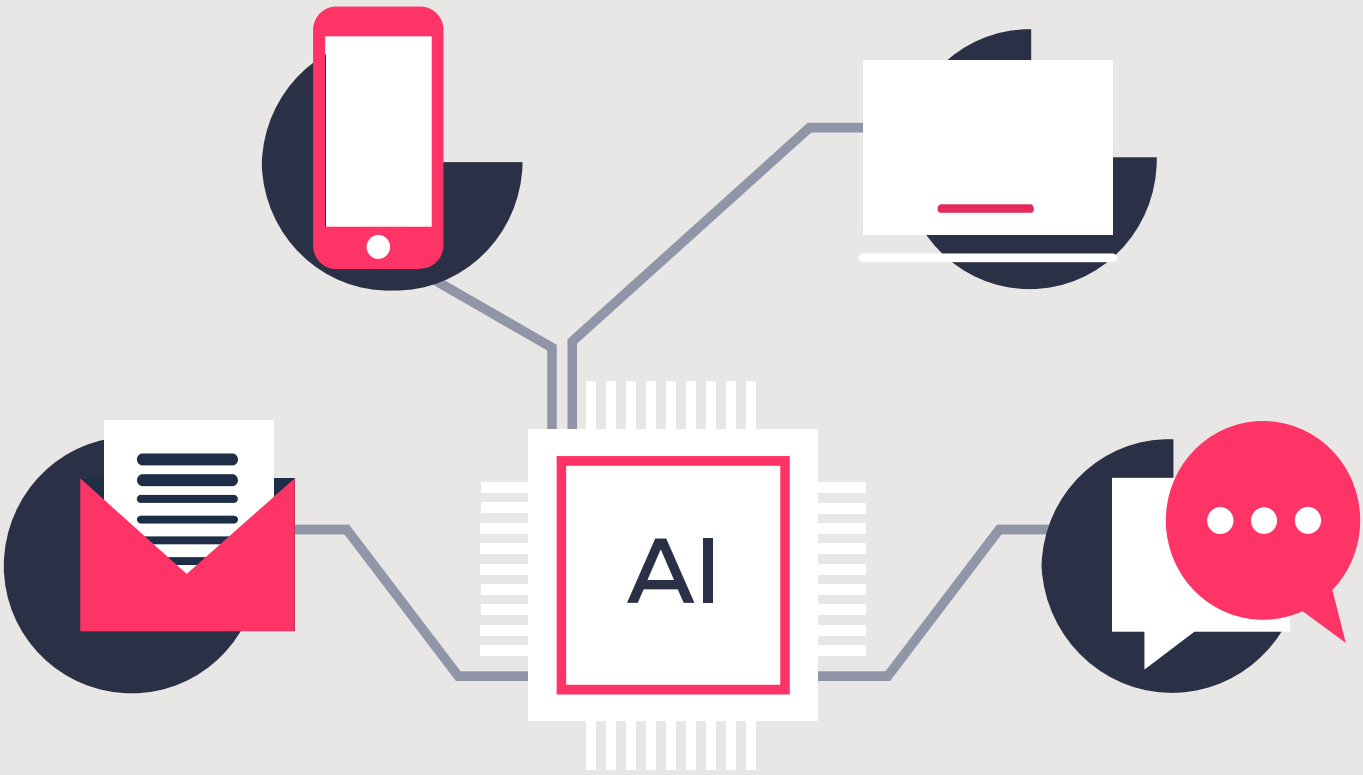
The next section of this guide will provide step-by-step instructions for identifying which specific areas of customer service to automate and how to go about implementing that automation.

How to implement automation in the utilities sector

The most important thing to understand is that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to automation. Different utilities providers have different needs driven by individual business objectives or industry-specific compliance requirements and customer expectations.

Fortunately, there is a wide suite of technological contact centre options to choose from, including (but not limited to):

- **Machine learning (IML)**, which provides systems with the ability to automatically learn and improve from experience without being explicitly programmed.
- **Natural Language Processing (NLP)**, which enables a computer program to understand human language as it is spoken and written – referred to as natural language. It is used to help build chatbots and other automated communication methods.
- **Cognitive agents**, that improve user experience (UX) for both agents and customers alike. This self-service technology is capable of understanding human language to provide accurate information and quickly direct customers to the next optimal step.



How utility providers approach automation will depend on their business objectives and the technology they choose to use to achieve those objectives. A simple example is bots. Instead of having an organisation's contact centre agents spend most of their time dealing with routine queries (e.g. 'when will my next bill come through?' or 'how can I switch my tariff'?), use ML and NLP to build chatbots that recognise the commonality in these queries and deliver consistent, highly accurate responses to them on a 24/7 basis.

Whichever strand of automation a business chooses to use, there are some key steps to adhere to in order to build a robust, open-minded organisational culture around this new approach.

This advice is no different for the utilities sector. Contact centre leaders must think in terms of AXD. This approach must take the three key drivers that matter most to customers into account: simplicity, reliability and consistency.

Attention to the user journey, and how it relates to internal business processes and technologies, will determine the greatest opportunities for ROI within any business. The term 'user' remember, can refer to agents, as well as end customers.

Step 1: Mapping the customer journey

Before embarking on any digital transformation project, it is vital to map the end-to-end customer journey. Only by mapping and understanding how a customer moves through and between contact channels can contact centre managers identify the most effective processes to automate.

McKinsey found that business decision makers who steer effective automation projects "view automation from the perspective of the end-to-end customer journey. Seeing the journey through a holistic lens allows automation to be properly integrated through an approach we call automation experience design (AXD), which combines human-centered design and automation".

As an example, a leading UK energy supplier was looking to identify opportunities for customer experience transformation. The solution was to replace its existing on-premise contact centre platform with a cloud solution, enabling the energy supplier to deliver quicker, simpler and more effective service to customers. A CCaaS solution also gave the utilities supplier greater autonomy over ongoing maintenance and access to a full suite of features for future innovation.

Step 2: Identifying the best areas for application

Once customer journeys have been mapped, the next step is to create a list of possible processes to which automation could be most effectively applied. From the customer perspective, these will inevitably include services which would benefit from increased reliability and consistency. 24/7 touchpoints are a perfect example of this, and one of the core benefits of automation.

Customers need a way to get in touch outside of normal office hours if something goes wrong, or they need quick access to key information about their account. Applying automation to 24/7 response methods, like bots and emails, can enhance access and reduce the burden on agents during office hours.

Similarly, customers looking to find out the result or status of a dispute shouldn't have to continuously call up to find out that information. By using ML to improve self-service tools, utilities sector leaders can drastically reduce response times and use automated communication methods to convey the results straight to the customer, saving time and labour for all involved.

In addition to the direct customer service benefits, ML presents numerous potential indirect benefits, such as grid edge insights, outage prediction and identification of suspicious metering points. Though this guide is focused solely on useful applications of automation in the contact centre, it's worth noting that a broader holistic approach to this can yield net positives across the whole spectrum of the industry.

Step 3: Investing in change management

Any organisational or infrastructural transformation requires a focused investment in change management. Particularly **when new technology is being introduced into both back of house and customer-facing processes, change management is essential to minimising disruption**.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), the professional body for HR and people development, emphasises the importance of change management within the frame of rapid technological acceleration: "Change is taking place at an accelerating pace and there's evidence change initiatives often fail. The complexities and difficulties of delivering change are well established, with failure rates frequently cited as high as 70%. Failure to introduce effective change can have a high impact: loss of market position, removal of senior management, loss of stakeholder credibility, loss of key employees, and reduction in employee engagement and motivation."

Automation can cause significant disruption to existing processes and leave agents and other employees uncertain about their remit and the tools available to them. Successful IT projects rely on the ability of organisations to implement new practices and tools with the support of the employees who will use them.

Effective change management involves collaborating with and aligning all stakeholders around the project from inception, not just after implementation.

In a heavily regulated utilities sector with costly overheads, making this initial investment is by no means easy. Coupled with the zero-downtime imperative, these obstacles might discourage many from introducing disruptive new technologies in their contact centres.

CCaaS solutions hold an edge here. Typically, CCaaS providers will install subject matter experts to work with an organisation's customer contact team, assisting with the design of new systems, so that these are developed in sync with business objectives. They also offer long-term support to ensure cultural and strategic change gets the most out of an automation project.

This hands-on, real-time preparatory and operational support can make the difference between change project failure and success.

Step 4: Understanding key customer satisfaction drivers

In order to prioritise the most effective areas for automation (with regard to ROI), business leaders in the utilities sector must understand the key drivers of customer satisfaction.

As McKinsey reports, for consumers in the UK, reliability and simplicity are the two most important factors in good customer service. Speed is also key, with factors such as employee professionalism and responsiveness of a lower perceived importance by survey respondents.

What these results indicate is that utilities sector organisations would be better off focusing on increasing ease of access to essential customer support channels. And whilst direct customer-to-employee interactions can never be discounted, their lower ranking in this service reflects a growing acceptance of automated support services.

Utilities suppliers that can improve on the key metrics of speed and reliability stand to benefit from significant gains. Every organisation is different, and priority areas will depend on where these metrics stand at the time any change project is initiated. Either way, failing to identify the factors that most drive satisfaction amongst consumers is to miss an opportunity when it comes to getting the most from an automation project.

Step 5: Developing an implementation strategy

Once technologies are chosen and priority areas identified, the next step is to develop an implementation strategy. This step involves considering the technical requirements involved with integrating automation into existing and newly-installed systems. However, it also involves creating cultural awareness of the project across the organisation and delivering a pipeline of data-driven, practical automation candidates.

EY has some sage advice for organisations just starting out with IA: "If you are on your first IA frontier, you may start with a pilot, wrap a governance model around those capabilities, build out a pipeline of opportunities ripe for IA, educate yourself on the technologies, and use new solutions to realise scale and eventually stable consumption. Organisations experiencing the greatest success have a balanced approach in their first six months across strategy, governance and technology."

A coherent and well-communicated strategy encourages buy-in from all stakeholders, including the contact centre agents who will interact more frequently with the new technology than others. Bringing these agents along will allow them to contribute useful ideas and feel the value of being part of a broader purpose or program.

Governance should also form a key aspect of any implementation strategy. A governance doctrine provides a central pillar around which purpose, outcomes, roles and responsibilities, organisational readiness, process, technology and production support can gravitate.

Ultimately, this will ensure there are no 'crossed wires' when it comes to implementing and using automation within the contact centre.

CCaaS providers deliver the necessary differentiation at this stage of the process, as they have in-depth experience implementing their solutions within the existing infrastructures of their clients or partners. This requires deep knowledge not just of the technology involved, but of the impact its introduction can have on working practices, governance requirements and reporting, which the best CCaaS solutions come equipped with.

Step 6: Establishing key delivery processes

The final step before introducing automation is to establish key delivery and IT enablement processes for installing the solutions identified. Though a continuation of the previous step, the range of different methodologies to choose from makes this a key decision-making step in itself.

Many commercial organisations follow a Systems Development Life Cycle (SDLC) methodology. SDLC phases include planning, system analysis, system design, development, implementation, integration and testing, along with operations and maintenance.

SDLC can be applied to the implementation of automation within the contact centre, such as with chatbots, automated communications and cognitive agents.

The choice for utilities organisations is whether to employ a traditional waterfall approach – in which each phase must be completed before the next phase can begin, or an agile approach. Ideally, a hybrid methodology that marries both of these standards allows for the centralisation of governance and best practice whilst encouraging flexibility and individual judgement within projects and teams.

Summary

The aforementioned automation benefits – improved customer and agent experiences, better return on investment, high accuracy of informational output being just a few – will not be revelatory to many business leaders. Indeed, according to KPMG research, prior to Covid-19, **40 percent of companies were actively investigating automation, self-service, ML and AI. Since February 2021, early indications show that number has increased to over 55 percent**.

The trend is accelerating. What these numbers show is that if organisations fail to 'read the room' with regards to automation, they risk falling behind their competitors. CCaaS providers offer flexible, scalable cloud-based solutions, optimal for utilities providers looking to rapidly deploy automation without disrupting existing services.

The time is ripe for the utilities sector to invest in developing a more sophisticated form of customer service: one that makes access to information easy and enhances customer experiences, thereby driving value for businesses and consumers alike through increased reliability and ease of contact. PwC highlights the need to accelerate new ways of working, including automation and digitalisation, and stresses the need to consider behavioural changes. This goes for contact centre workers and customers alike. During the pandemic, workforces have been exposed to new methods and may now expect a hybrid between remote and on-premises working arrangements.

Meanwhile, consumer demand for hassle-free digital support only continued to increase, with McKinsey reporting that 75% of people using digital channels for the first time expect to continue doing so.

Each of these expectations delivers an imperative for technological transformation. The utilities sector has often been ahead of the curve on this, but the timescale for completion of digital transformation projects has been drastically brought forward by the events of 2020.

As CX culture continues to change, the utilities sector must grasp opportunities to revolutionise contact centre operations in order to stand out in the new normal. That's why organisations are turning to Odigo, a leading Contact Centre as a Service (CCaaS) provider. Get in touch to find out how Odigo can enhance the utilities sector CX.

Glossary

Artificial intelligence (AI): The theory and development of computer systems able to perform tasks normally requiring human intelligence.

Automation: The use or introduction of automatic equipment in manufacturing or other process or facility.

Automation Experience Design: A design and orchestration framework that helps companies keep their automation efforts on track by mapping customer journeys.

Change management: The management of change and development within a business or similar organisation.

Chatbot: A computer program designed to simulate conversation with humans, especially over the Internet.

Contact Centre as a Service (CCaaS): A software deployment model that enables companies to only purchase the technology they need and is commonly operated by a vendor to reduce IT, integration and support costs.

Intelligent automation (IA): IA is the combination of artificial intelligence (AI), and process automation that is used to create smart business processes and workflows that think, learn and adapt on their own.

Internet of Things (IoT): The interconnection via the Internet of computing devices embedded in everyday objects, enabling them to send and receive data.

Machine Learning (ML): Machine learning, one aspect of artificial intelligence, is the study of computer algorithms that improve automatically through experience and by the use of data.

Systems development life cycle: The systems (or software) development life cycle, also referred to as the application development life cycle, is a process for planning, creating, testing and deploying an information system.

Self-service: Self-service is a means of offering customers tools and information so they can find information or gain access to a product or service themselves.

Utilities sector: The utilities sector refers to a category of companies that provide basic amenities, such as water, sewage services, electricity, gas, phones and Internet.

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About Odigo

Odigo helps large organisations connect with individuals through world-class, cloud-based contact centre solutions. Its cutting-edge, proprietary technologies enable a seamless, efficient, omnichannel experience for its customers and a satisfying, engaging experience for service agents.

Odigo serves more than 400,000 agents and business users globally. With a 25-year history of industry firsts, Odigo has more than 250 clients around the world.

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