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# Deploying contact centre AI solutions ethically

An Odigo eBook

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# Introduction:

Today, automation is becoming a key investment for businesses, and services enhanced with artificial intelligence (AI) are no longer a novelty to most customers. The rapid trend towards digitalisation means an increasing number of contact centres are learning how best to leverage AI solutions at appropriate stages of their customer journeys. The benefits of increased flexibility and convenience on both sides of the equation suggest that, as confidence continues to grow, so will the extent to which customer services are intelligently assisted with AI-powered technology. However, it is important to consider the ethics of how AI is deployed, ensuring it considers the vulnerabilities of customers and the different compliance and regulatory frameworks businesses must adhere to.

Before considering ethics, though, it is a good idea to review what AI is. This is especially important in contact centres where there are also automated services which don't necessarily constitute AI. In fact, sometimes both processes can work sequentially during a single interaction; for example, AI-powered call qualification leading to an automated transaction. The **definition of AI seems to vary** but what is important here is a broad working understanding, not technical, academic correctness.

## Automation

- Taking the robot out of the human.

- A pre-programmed set of decisions that software follows to complete a task.

- Always gives the same answers to the same questionsunless re-programmed.

- Works well for repetitive, rules-based tasks.
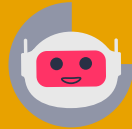
## Artificial intelligence

- Putting the human into the robot.

- A machine or system programmed and trained with machine learning models to seek patterns and self-select from the presented options along a decision tree.

- Can self-learn and adapt over time to become more accurate.

- Works well for problem-solving tasks that require learning and adaptation.

**Automation**

**AI**

With a clearer understanding of the differences, it is possible to start considering what could happen from an ethical perspective when customers are interacting more and more with technology and less with agents. What situations could arise when deploying and using AI solutions require an ethical approach? This eBook explores:

A step-by-step approach to ethical AI concepts.

Practical considerations when applying aspects of an ethical code or framework to **AI innovation** in a contact centre.

How Contact **Centre as a Service (CCaaS) solutions** can help operationalise this.

# What are AI ethics?

Ethics is the application of human concepts of right and wrong to different scenarios, in this case to the development and use of AI. This is not some Sci-Fi-esque robotic law about programming AI solutions not to harm humans. Sentience is not the goal of AI in a customer service setting. In fact, AI tools are here to help: by improving **routing** thanks to natural language processing (NLP)-powered qualification; providing better understanding of the natural language customers use **natural language understanding (NLU)**; and assisting agents by operating alongside conversations to suggest next best actions.

In this context, when the goal is to improve customer experiences, AI ethics refer to the consideration of the unintentional negative consequences that could result from their use. Furthmore, who or what is responsible for managing and minimising these consequences.

**Back in 1979, The Belmont Report** suggested a set of 3 basic ethical principles which were created to protect people participating in research. These have stood the test of time and their use has been extended to wider applications. Even now, **IBM refers explicitly to them** when considering AI ethics. These principles can be used to help draw focus to specific areas for attention:

**Respect for persons:** this includes protecting those with diminished autonomy or vulnerable customers. It also brings in the concept of choice and consent. Customers should be knowingly interacting with AI by choice and have the ability to choose an alternative service.

**Beneficence:** this is more of a research concept but can be thought of simply as the welfare of people interacting with AI services. In an almost medical sense 'do no harm' could be interpreted as making sure AI services do not have negative outcomes by planning the appropriate use of AI solutions. This also ties in with the next point and concepts of accountability which will be discussed later.

**Justice:** as with all things, it is necessary to consider fairness and equality, including who will benefit and could that be to the detriment of others. A relevant example is that of avoiding the accidental introduction of bias into AI solutions.

A whole range of organisations – **Google**, **Microsoft** and **Capgemini**, for example – have taken the next step of drawing up ethical codes or frameworks. This is a positive step towards raising awareness of AI ethics and helping to apply it to the working processes and decision making. Inside the contact centre, **IBM's suggestion** to leverage existing organisational structures to help manage ethical AI governance might be considered a sensible approach.

Taking full advantage of this can be as simple as expanding the scope of teams that already help with data protection plans and **quality assurance**. In order to take the next step, what should these teams think about on a practical level to minimise risk and maximise effectiveness in an AI-infused contact centre?

# Working towards positive client outcomes

Within contact centres today, it is virtually impossible to point a finger and say that any outcome was 100% thanks to – or, conversely, 100% the fault of – an AI solution. Often, by working alongside other processes, it is just another step within a customer journey. For teams trying to deploy AI effectively and ethically it is therefore important to consider any possible scenarios where these steps may lead the journey in the wrong direction. If ethics is applying the concept of right or wrong to behaviour or processes, it may not be surprising to learn that the key to deploying AI ethically is planning for positive, or 'the right', customer outcomes.

## The following principles should guide this approach:

### Final authority is not for AI

Although things like AI-based suitability recommendations, for example for a credit card application, can help reduce the number of unsuitable applicants, to protect vulnerable customers, the final decision – especially in complex or sensitive situations – should be made by an agent or supervisor.

### No dead-end interactions

If **AI-powered routing** and bots are unsuccessful, there should always be the option to escalate or at least provide a next-step-contact. Allowing situations where clients are potentially blocked from accessing further support by running out of options or reaching a dead end is not great customer service – in fact, it fails to serve the customer at all.

### Value human empathy and thought processes

Highly complex, sensitive situations should not be delegated to AI-led services. Empathy and understanding can make a world of difference to a stressed, anxious customer, even when agents need to give answers they don't like. Acceptance is easier when customers feel they have been listened to and understood.

Agents deal with many complex and atypical situations every day and agent-assist functions can be a huge help in making next step prompts, but the agent should retain the right to dismiss these suggestions. To capitalise on the power of machine learning (ML), however, the reasons for this should be inputted into the systems to improve accuracy.

### Client choice

For many reasons, such as universal accessibility, vulnerability and simply freedom of choice, clients should not be forced to engage with 100% AI-only services.

### Draw up an ethical code

Follow the example of other leading organisations by creating an ethical code highlighting the key considerations.

# Elements of an ethical AI code

## Transparency

Part of establishing customer trust is making it clear when they are interacting with an AI-led service rather than a human. By clearly demonstrating through visual or audio cues what the nature of the interaction will be, the **uncanny valley** situation can be avoided. This happens when customers are put off by the uneasy sensation of almost but not-quite-right human-like interactions. Additionally, if a customer calls and is adamant they were given wrong information when chatting to an agent, when in reality they had been engaging with a bot, this simply causes confusion and bad feeling.

## Security

It is much easier to trust something when you understand it but also when there is an open dialogue around security. AI solutions are trained with and continue to learn using customer data. Therefore, to improve and bring greater effectiveness, customers need to be able to trust companies to use their data responsibly and protect it.
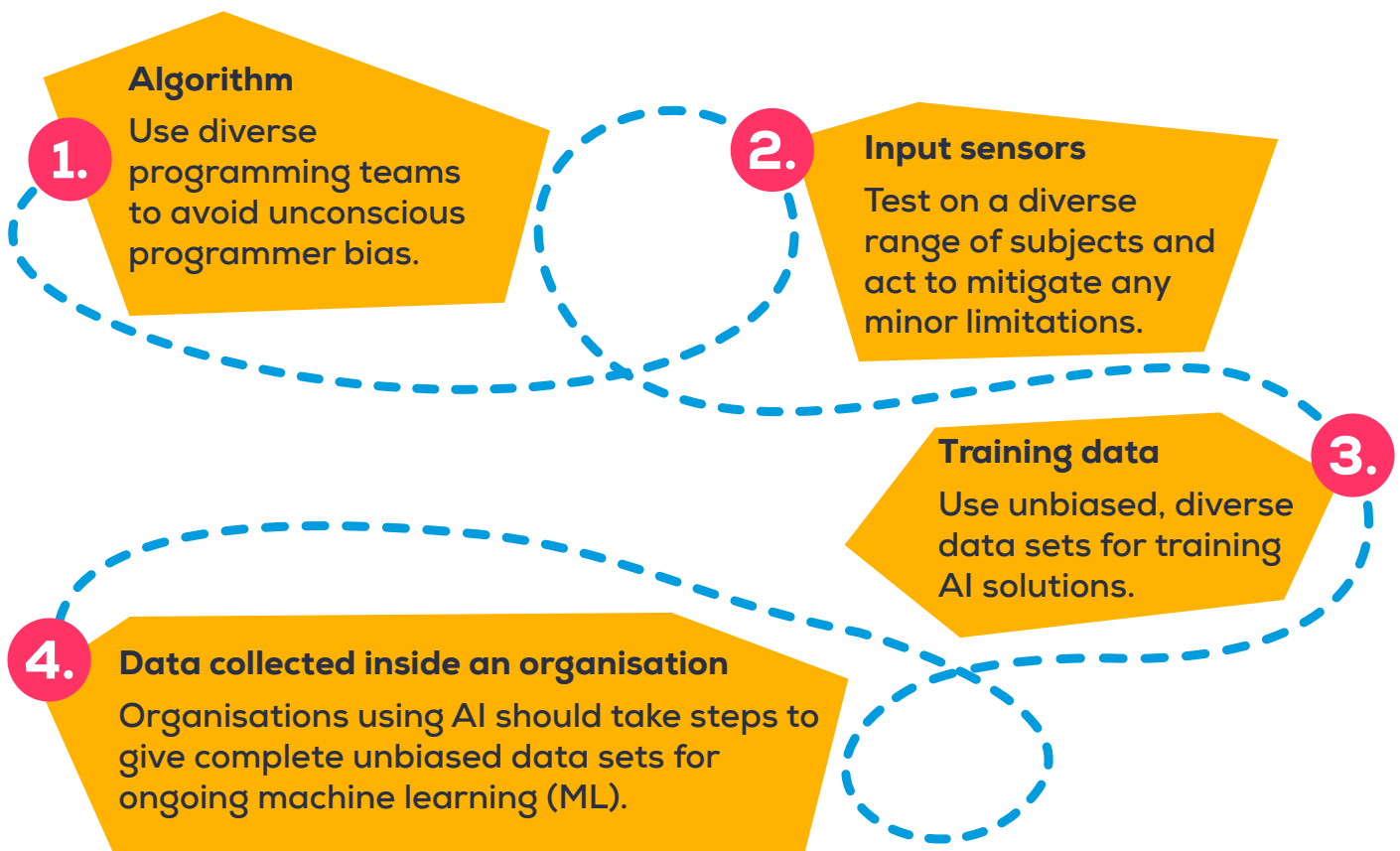
The **internet of things** (IoT) refers to the proliferating number of devices containing sensors which interconnect with other devices, for example smartwatches and smart speakers. This means more and more data is available to organisations. From an ethical point of view, only data that is relevant should be collected and doing so will go a long way towards maintaining customer trust and goodwill, which is what is ultimately required if organisations want to retain access to this information.

Security of the data itself can often be made easier by leveraging AI-solutions through, for example, a CCaaS solution which has **built-in security**. Organisations can also familiarise themselves with **industry security standards** which help to ensure they are fulfilling the ethical obligation to protect customer data.
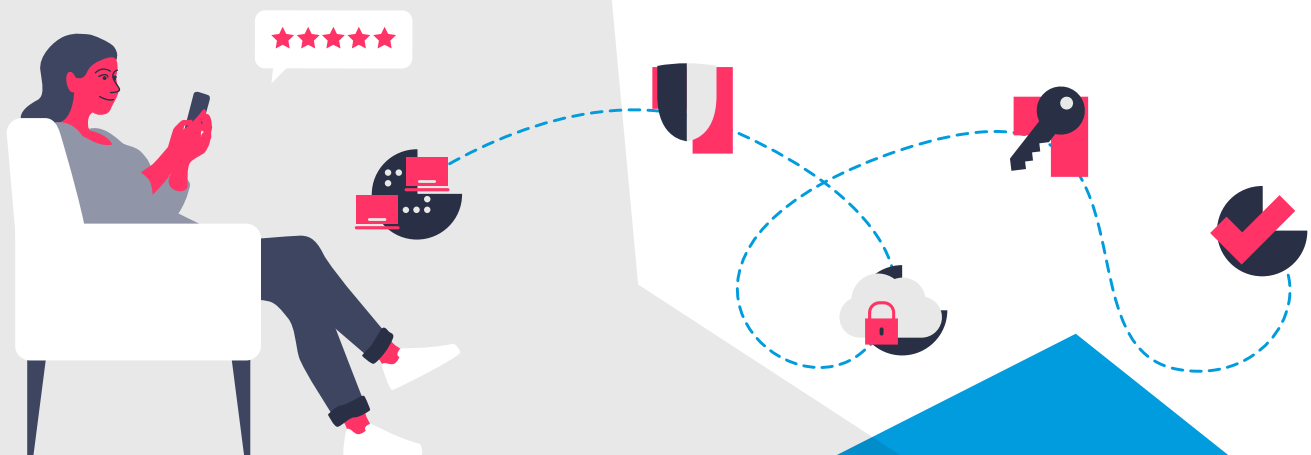
# Ensuring fairness and avoiding bias

Of course, no AI system would be considered ethical or even to provide good customer service if it was deliberately unfair or biassed. However, nothing is perfect, and it is possible that systems are accidently or inadvertently biassed, so it is worth considering how each step in the development of an AI system can be checked to minimise this. The table below shows various stages or components in that development and how to minimise the chances of bias being introduced:

**1.**

**Algorithm**

Use diverse programming teams to avoid unconscious programmer bias.

**2.**

**Input sensors**

Test on a diverse range of subjects and act to mitigate any minor limitations.

**3.**

**Training data**

Use unbiased, diverse data sets for training AI solutions.

**4.**

**Data collected inside an organisation**

Organisations using AI should take steps to give complete unbiased data sets for ongoing machine learning (ML).

Perhaps the simplest way to summarise and illustrate how to minimise bias is with the saying **rubbish in, rubbish out**. That is, the quality of the results coming from an AI solution depends on the quality of the data fed into it. For example, if an organisation has data silos which result in AI processes only being able to access an incomplete picture, the accuracy of the output will be reduced. CCaaS solutions can provide integrated histories from all past client interactions, giving AI solutions a more complete data set – in other words, a **360-degree customer view** – to inform decisions and constitute a simple but practical step in helping to avoid bias.

# Protecting agents

One of the most well publicised ethical concerns is that AI systems will steal jobs from people that need them. Rather than simply dismiss this as scaremongering or take it at face value, it is better to look more closely at how to strike a beneficial balance between agents and AI:

### Using the right tools for the job

Not all jobs are AI suitable. **The Bank of England** explores the concept of robots taking over jobs and points out that increasingly human roles in the future will require a different skill set; social and emotional skills, for example.

### Eliminating unwanted jobs

Although not universally true, many of the 'low skill', repetitive tasks AI-systems can handle fall low on the scale of satisfaction. The **Great Resignation** has several driving factors, but job satisfaction and a sense of purpose rarely arise from performing monotonous tasks.

### Working together, not in competition

As already mentioned, customer journeys are now much richer and do not rely on a single channel or type of interaction. AI interactions are often part of a process which includes agents, and viewing it like this promotes a healthier approach where agents and AI systems work synergistically, rather than 'one or the other'.

As part of a growing discussion around agent wellbeing, perhaps as the **BBC suggests**, the Great Resignation may prompt a greater reshuffling of priorities and changing attitudes towards work. For contact centres, CCaaS solutions instil more flexibility into the working environment to help create greater choice for agents making decisions about their working life. These cloud-based solutions can not only help to organise secure and engaged hybrid working models but also, thanks to AI and automated services, remove some of the burden of repetition so it can be replaced with training for more skilled and satisfying careers.

# Accountability

When it comes to responsibility, or the justice element of the Belmont report principles, there is perhaps less definitive guidance. AI systems themselves cannot currently be held accountable, but the organisations using them can be. While it may be true, **as some suggest**, that there is not a significant amount of legislation to regulate AI practices, in the customer service industry negative publicity or poor customer feedback can also play a powerful self-regulatory role. Organisations aim to use AI solutions to improve customer satisfaction, so negative repercussions are a strong motivator to implement AI services judiciously. Data-driven policies, **analytics**, customer feedback and surveys have an important role to play in helping to monitor and improve the function of AI-led services in the same way as they are used for agent-led services.

There is a great deal of pro-AI sentiment due to the potential ways it can be leveraged for the benefit of society. In line with this and to promote responsibility, the **UK government's AI strategy and 10 year plan** identify Governing AI effectively as a major pillar:

"Ensuring that national governance of AI technologies encourages innovation, investment, protects the public and safeguards our fundamental values, while working with global partners to promote the responsible development of AI internationally."

**National AI Strategy 2021 GOV.UK**

**GDPR and negligence legal frameworks** are a large part of current legislation, but as these are tested over the coming years, the need for new laws may arise. By using CCaaS solutions to make GDPR compliance easier and using them to deploy AI services that have been planned using an ethical framework, organisations can be prepared by taking positive steps towards addressing accountability.

# CCaaS solutions can be a tool for ethical AI use

Thanks to AI solutions the modern contact centre has evolved rapidly towards personalised services. **Using customer data**, makes it is possible to provide more accurate support at each interaction and cut down on excess unwanted communications. This brings a new, tailored level of service and convenience while concurrently helping agents themselves achieve greater satisfaction. Despite this, some components of AI solutions are still in an earlier stage of what **Gartner refers to as the hype cycle for customer service support technology**.

Attitudes and expectations for new technology tend to change over time. After moving past what is known as the peak of inflated expectations these technologies then reach the plateau of productivity. At this stage, clear market advantages lead to mainstream adoption, and not only are CCaaS solutions right on the cusp of this stage in the cycle they come equipped with conversational AI and **intelligent automation**. Though less well-established, these technologies are far from novel to the industry. By leveraging them through a mature CCaaS solution with an ethical AI framework, it is possible to keep up with customer service trends and expectations for digital services, as well as future-proof contact centres against changes in the market.

CCaaS solutions offer contact centres both the AI tools to cater to customers' changing needs but also tools for tracking key performance indicators. In this way, AI can be seamlessly integrated and expertly monitored, to give business leaders the power of AI, and the insights needed for ethical supervision.

To benefit from Odigo's experience in CX culture, CCaaS and the ongoing trends of customer service,

## Click here to contact an Odigo expert
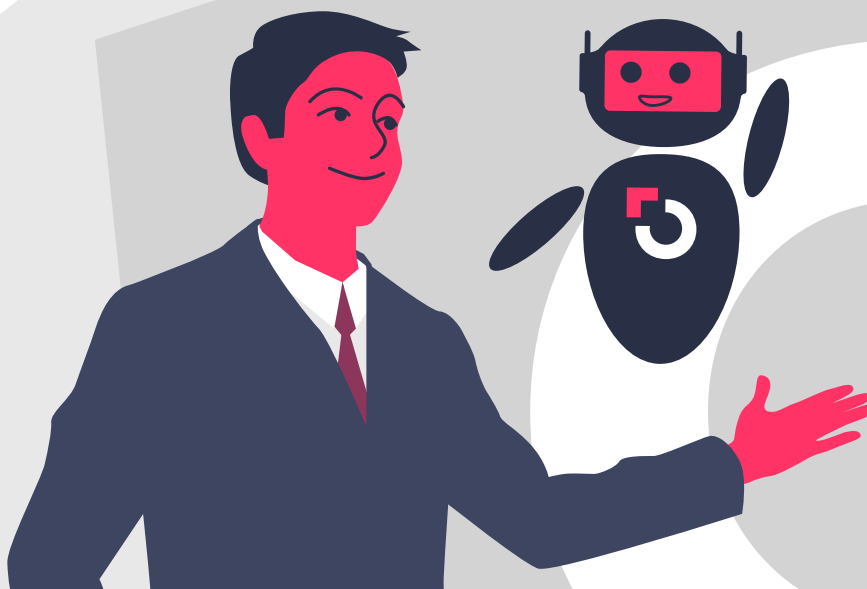
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## About Odigo

Odigo provides Contact Centre as a Service (CCaaS) solutions that facilitate communication between large organisations and individuals using a global omnichannel management platform. With its innovative approach based on empathy and technology, Odigo enables brands to connect through the crucial human element of interaction, while also taking full advantage of the potential of digital.

A pioneer in the customer experience (CX) market, the company caters to the needs of more than 250 large enterprise clients in over 100 countries.

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## Customer experience inspired by empathy, driven by technology