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Contact Centre AI, Customer engagement

The 3 most serious COVID challenges in UK contact centres

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According to the latest research by ContactBabel, 65% of UK contact centres have seen COVID-19-related issues impact their customer experience. We dive deeper into the study's findings, exploring the complex impact of the pandemic, and revealing the three most serious challenges that UK contact centres have been battling.

Every year, ContactBabel surveys hundreds of senior CX and customer contact professionals, working for UK brands. When the analyst reached out in May and June of 2020, one subject was unavoidable.

As well as providing the usual in-depth dissection of CX strategy and operations, this year's report – which Nuance sponsored – paints a timely portrait of the impact of COVID-19 on UK contact centres.

It's a complex picture, as you might expect from a sample that includes businesses of all sizes, in industries from finance and retail, to housing and the public sector. But with 65% of all respondents experiencing CX issues as a result of the pandemic, here the three most 'severe' or 'challenging' problems UK contact centres have had to overcome.

1. Very high contact volumes

42% of respondents say high contact volumes have created 'challenging' or 'severe' CX issues – a figure that rises to 75% for retail respondents. This is also the most prevalent 'severe' issue across the board,

faced by 1 in 10 of all organisations surveyed.

It's important to understand, however, that businesses in some industries – luxury goods, car insurers – experienced the opposite trend.

ContactBabel's study cites an early April report by Channel Doctors, which provides a fascinating, if limited, snapshot of the immediate aftermath of the UK's lockdown. As ContactBabel observes, "It seems fair to say that for every survey respondent whose customer contacts had increased, there are almost as many that had seen a corresponding decrease."

It's also worth remembering that, for many UK organisations, COVID-19 will have changed the content of customer contacts as well as their volume. With new, pandemic-related questions being asked, some brands may well have seen call lengths increase – and CX worsen – even as their overall call volume remained stable.

2. Remote working set-up/tech

There's a tie for the second most common 'challenging' or 'severe' CX issue. But given it's the more widely experienced – a further 40% of respondents cited it as a 'moderate' problem for their organisation – we've placed 'remote working', and its related issues, higher on this list.

Again, this headline conceals a much more nuanced reality. As ContactBabel's report states, "45% of large contact centres reported challenging or severe issues with remote working technology, compared to 19% of contact centres with fewer than 50 seats." The report also observes that respondents "already using cloud-based solutions found few major issues with moving to homeworking."

Although contact centres with different headcounts and IT models experienced different levels of pain during the shift to remote working, the shift itself was dramatic, and near universal. In 2019, ContactBabel reported that just 3.8% of UK agents were based at home. In its early April 2020 survey, Channel Doctors found that 84% of respondents had already moved from a centralised office environment to a predominately home-based one.

3. Decreased headcount (and decreased budgets)

At that same early stage of lockdown, 20% of respondents had already used the UK government's job retention scheme to furlough staff members, and decrease their headcounts.

By May and June, a third of the CX leaders ContactBabel spoke to said headcount reductions had led to 'challenging' or 'severe' issues with customer experience.

And it isn't just contact centre headcounts that have shrunk. While CX issues relating to decreased budgets have been less common, they account for a fifth of all issues reported as 'severe', as organisations have become much more protective of their cash reserves.

How customer service teams have responded

ContactBabel's findings back up Nuance's experience of working with customers worldwide throughout the onset of the pandemic.

We helped brands with high contact volumes and decreased agent headcounts to rethink their customer service strategy at speed, to reflect the new engagement landscape and evolving customer needs. A number of our clients have recently discussed some of these challenges in our 'Creating Compelling Customer Conversations series' and how they're having to adapt.

Some chose to make greater use of callback features on their voice channels, effectively shifting demand peaks to quieter times. Others developed their ability to message customers at scale, and answer questions before they were asked. We also saw brands expand the scope of their virtual assistants, to support customers through a greater variety of self-service journeys.

Download the full report

In this COVID-focused post, we've barely scratched the surface of ContactBabel's landmark report. *The UK Customer Experience Decision-Makers' Guide 2020-21* alsoincludes in-depth analysis of:

- Where UK contact centres have invested in tech – and where they're investing next
- The most common features of CX improvement programmes
- How UK customers view CX – versus how UK businesses do

- UK customers preferred engagement channels, by interaction type
- Popular approaches to CX benchmarking, and their advantages/drawbacks

Tags: Retail

About Sebastian Reeve

Seb Reeve is a customer experience industry leader who is always seeking to provide thought-leadership, lateral-thinking and decision-support for Fortune 1000 Enterprises who are both his customers and partners. Reeves has more than fifteen years of experience in deploying technologies to improve the user experience. In his current role at Nuance as EMEA Director of Product Management and Marketing, he is responsible for defining and evangelizing the Nuance customer care proposition across Europe, the Middle-East and Africa – sharing how companies can create extraordinary automated experiences which their customers actively choose to use rather than simply tolerate and complain about, promoting best practices in AI and Machine Learning to the world of Customer Experience.

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