Elevating Empathy: Achieving Human Connections in an AI-Powered World

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Featuring Insights From

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Introduction

"Artificial intelligence (AI) is about augmenting rather than replacing humanity."

The statement has become inescapable in the customer contact community, and with good reason. By emphasizing its role in elevating experiences, contact center leaders preempt concerns that the rise of AI will lead to more robotic, transactional interactions. They also quell the concern – one present on 70% of contact center frontlines and shared by many consumers – that AI technology will lead to a dramatic reduction in workforces, and thus remove the "human touch" from customer journeys.

This optimistic perspective is a fully justified one. Capable of uncovering actionable customer intelligence, optimizing workflows, and helping employees elevate their sales and support conversations, modern AI technology can indeed augment humanity. It can indeed empower organizations to move beyond transactional support and start building lasting, lucrative, empathetic customer relationships.

This transformation is not, however, guaranteed. In order to maximize the impact of their AI investments, contact centers will have to build a framework for empowering

"Humans will step in for edge cases, emotionally charged moments, and decisions too nuanced for AI alone. The focus will also shift from volume to value — delivering personalized, white-glove support that builds loyalty and drives growth, especially for top-tier customers."

- Phil Tomlinson, SVP of Global Offerings, TaskUs

humanity. They will have to acknowledge limitations in their existing agent experiences, overcome challenges in their systems and processes, prioritize the best possible use cases, and supplement technology with human-centric philosophies.

This Analyst Report will help you navigate those challenges and imperatives, enabling you to elevate empathy and achieve human connections in an AI-powered world.
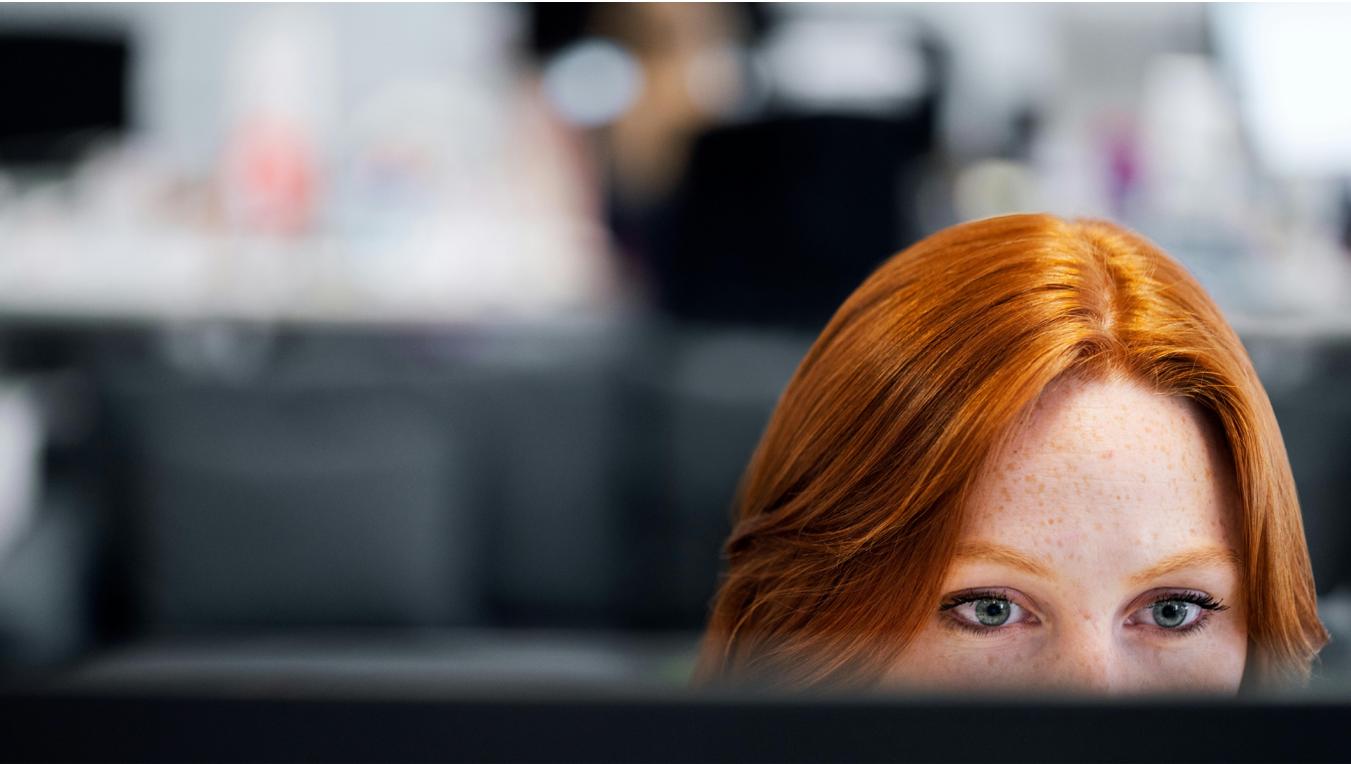
3 Reasons Contact Centers *Must* Rethink Employee Empowerment

Customer contact leaders are not simply insisting that agents will have a place in the AI-powered contact center of the future. They are asserting that these agents will take on a *more pivotal role*, handling the most nuanced inquiries from the most demanding customers. They are banking on these agents to go beyond answering support inquiries and deliver significant business value.

Three-in-five contact center leaders, in fact, say their agents will almost exclusively be focusing on these high-stakes inquiries by 2030.

Exciting for both the agents who crave more stimulating work and the businesses that want to maximize the impact of their teams, this powerful future does of course come with a caveat. Contact center leaders will have to empower their teams to thrive in this new normal.

Presently, the typical contact center is not creating the ideal environment. Three sobering employee experience realities – challenges contact centers must address as they pursue the optimal AI-human balance – follow.

Agents are not yet Ready for "Consultative Work"

The prospect of using "AI for simple issues so that humans can focus on complex ones" has become a rallying cry for investment into automation technology. It has joined concepts like "the customer is always right" and "happy agents equal happy customers" as a defining contact center cliché.

Unfortunately, it neglects an important reality: the typical agent is not ready for complex work.

A mere 16% of contact center leaders feel their agents possess the competencies needed to thrive in a more consultative role. Consumers echo this concern, with only 22% expressing confidence that customer support agents are experts in what they are supporting.

Without addressing this critical skill gap, contact centers will not simply squander their AI transformations but actively worsen customer and employee experiences. Customers will not receive the "consultative" support they are expecting, thus amplifying the frustration they already experienced when having to escalate from self-service to an agent that could supposedly help them.

Agents, moreover, will experience frustration with the difficulty of their work, which could have an adverse impact on culture, satisfaction, productivity, and long-term retention.

Empathy Remains Elusive in Customer Contact

In the eyes of consumers, today's agents are not simply struggling to demonstrate expertise. They are also struggling to demonstrate the warmth and empathy needed to thrive in a more consultative role.

Only 16% feel the typical agent demonstrates emotional intelligence. Less than 20% believe agents seriously care about solving their problems, and a staggering 60% feel these employees are routinely impolite and unfriendly.

Though alarming, these statistics do not necessarily mean today's agents are cold people incapable of achieving human connections. Rather, they speak to the limitations agents face in the existing contact center.

So consumed by repetitive interactions and frustrating back-office tasks, many agents lack the flexibility or mental energy to engage in intimate, thoughtful dialogue with customers. An overemphasis on "efficiency metrics" and rigid processes compounds this challenge, disincentivizing (if not outright prohibiting) agents from devoting extra time and creativity needed for truly connecting with customers.

Insufficient "soft skill" training further inhibits performance, as agents lack guidance on how to demonstrate their innate compassion and empathy in a customer support context.

Contact Centers Continue to Struggle with Engagement and Retention

A staggering 93% of contact center leaders stress the need to improve employee retention. Upwards of 60%,

moreover, cite challenges with employee buy-in. This disengagement has long kept contact center leaders up at night, and the challenge (and stakes) will only grow amid the AI transformation.

Yes, by automating simple tasks, AI will enable agents to focus on more enriching work. This could have a positive impact on agent sentiment.

However, it will also expose agents to the most challenging conversations with the most demanding, emotionally charged customers. These conversations can have a significant impact on agent well-being, exacerbating any negative sentiment or frustration. If contact centers are paying insufficient attention to employee wellness now, the consequences can be drastic as the AI transformation takes hold.

These complex interactions, moreover, will require agents who are more experienced and immersed in the organizations they are representing. Whereas a new, indifferent agent realistically could provide scripted instructions on how to reset a password, it will take a happy, masterful one to navigate a confusing, emotional, personal matter.

Without remedying lingering engagement and retention challenges, contact centers will not have access to this caliber of agent.

6 Ways to Augment Agent Performance in the Age of AI

The rise of AI is illuminating enduring employee experience challenges. It is also creating more severe consequences for businesses that have not yet created agent-centric frameworks.

However, it can also be the solution to many of these challenges. By priming their organizations for AI, selecting the right use cases, and demonstrating an unwavering commitment to human-centric care, organizations will cultivate teams of agents who are not only happier but more capable and productive.

Six opportunities for elevating the impact of AI follow.

Opportunity #1 | Transforming Training to Unlock Next-Generation Capabilities

As they pivot to complex work, agents will require new skills and competencies.

Per the overwhelming majority of contact center leaders, these new capabilities will include mastery of complex topics, comfort navigating and de-escalating emotionally charged conversations, fluency in multiple contact channels, savviness at detecting and analyzing customer feedback, familiarity with modern, AI tools, comfort going off script, and a flair for generating sales.

To cultivate these skills, successful contact centers will revamp their training and coaching strategies. This will include rethinking curricula to focus on empathy and "soft skills," deeper product knowledge, and AI fluency. It will also require a change in learning style, pivoting from generic "classroom" sessions to scenario-based learning, personalized coaching, AI-powered micro lessons, and real-time conversation guidance.

To further improve team development, forward-looking organizations will harness the power of AI-human collaboration. By having human agents support customer-facing AI in a custodial way, contact centers will help agents become more comfortable with AI, detect common customer requests and intents, spot inefficient processes, and provide recommendations for elevating the automation.

Opportunity #2 | Eliminating Critical Sources of "Agent Effort"

Without the freedom to be productive, even the most skilled, emotionally intelligent, capable agent will struggle to perform high-value work.

Insofar as more than 70% of contact center leaders say their agents are spending too much time navigating fragmented systems, searching through knowledge bases, and accessing customer data, the typical agent clearly does not have this freedom.

Eliminating agent effort, therefore, represents a pivotal step on the journey to AI transformation.

"Empowering agents starts with removing friction. One of the biggest pain points is fragmented systems. Many still juggle 10 to 12 tabs just to resolve a single issue, switching between CRMs, knowledge bases, and other tools. It slows them down, increases errors, and drains focus. Used thoughtfully, AI removes the clutter and helps agents focus on what matters."

- Phil Tomlinson, SVP of Global Offerings, TaskUs

Not simply a way to make agents more productive, reducing friction is a crucial way to improve employee satisfaction and retention. The day-to-day work experience weighs *immensely* on agent satisfaction; the smoother the experience, the happier the agent.

Unifying systems will also help organizations better capture, analyze, and democratize intelligence, enabling agents to deliver more predictive and personalized support. This will further elevate the impact of their work, while yielding the harmonious calls that keep agents happy and engaged on the frontlines.

Opportunity #3 | Using AI to Assist Rather than Assert

Streamlining processes and unifying the contact center environment will free agents to focus on more complex work. Agent-facing AI can then make them better at that work.

"AI gives agents the insights and support they need to show up with empathy, speed, and relevance. It surfaces real-time context like past interactions, preferences, and sentiment so agents can build a personal connection with customers."

- Phil Tomlinson, SVP of Global Offerings, TaskUs

As they invest in real-time agent assist and copilot solutions, savvy contact centers will nonetheless be careful to rein in the technology. The goal should be to flesh out likely customer intentions, detect sentiment, simplify knowledge lookups, and recommend responses and actions. If the agent-facing AI instead functions as a fancy script, rigidly telling agents exactly what to say and how to say it, it will essentially eliminate the human touch — and negate the entire benefit of the AI transformation.

AI that is overly controlling and restrictive, or just difficult to use, could also have a deleterious impact on agent morale.

"AI works best when it amplifies human strengths."

- Phil Tomlinson, SVP of Global Offerings, TaskUs

Aggressively prescriptive AI will also stunt agent development. If agents begin to rely on AI as a script rather than a guide, they will struggle to internalize the "why" behind certain policies, processes, and resolutions. They will essentially become the cab driver who cannot navigate city streets without strict instructions from a GPS.

Opportunity #4 | Redefining the Role of the Supervisor

As agents harness new tools and skills to tackle new types of work, they will require new forms of support. Accordingly, the role of the supervisor must also change in the contact center of the future.
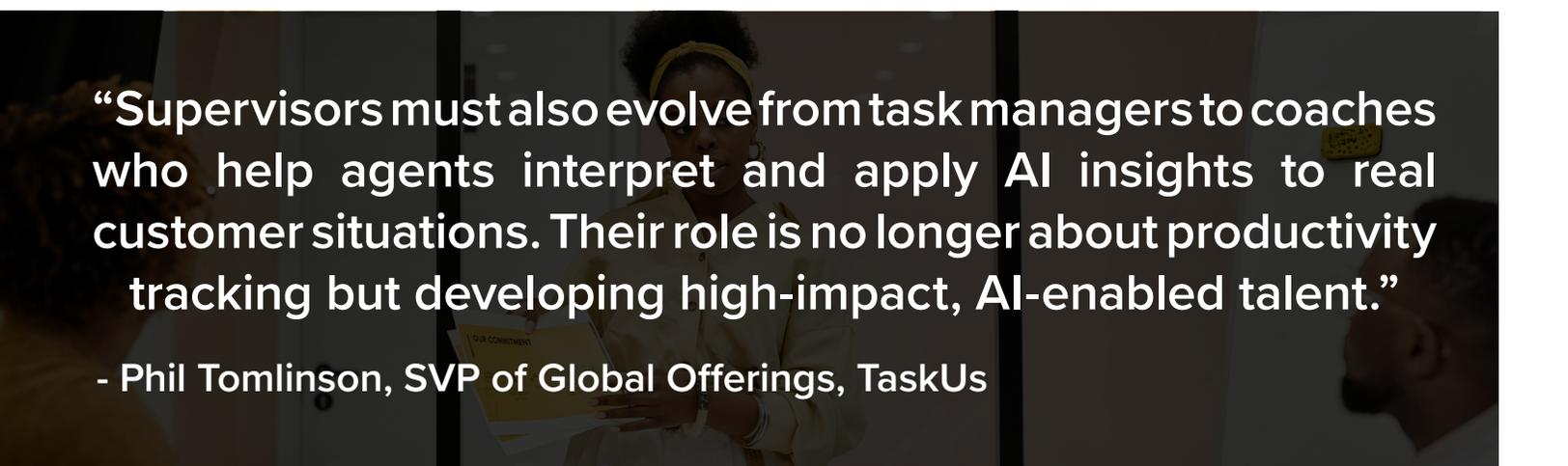
> "Supervisors must also evolve from task managers to coaches who help agents interpret and apply AI insights to real customer situations. Their role is no longer about productivity tracking but developing high-impact, AI-enabled talent."
>
> - Phil Tomlinson, SVP of Global Offerings, TaskUs

Rather than evaluating and developing agents based on "templates" for success, modern supervisors will have to recognize the individual nuances of each agent. They will have to spot and address unique strengths and weaknesses, train them on softer skills and emotional intelligence, and pay closer attention to employee sentiment and buy-in.

They will also want to help agents accentuate – rather than minimize – their individual personalities and proclivities, as those quirks and nuances will be the key to forming human connections.

Heightening the challenge, the modern supervisor will also have to provide this support in an era of flexible work arrangements and unconventional schedules.

Beyond rethinking hiring and training, contact centers can leverage modern technology to elevate supervisor performance. AI-based quality monitoring will help frontline leaders zero-in on specific development needs and opportunities, allowing them to deliver personalized support and guidance at scale.

Opportunity #5 | Redefining Metrics, Outcomes, and Opportunities

Consultative, human-centric support is about escaping the shackles of rigid scripts and processes. It is about truly listening to customers, empathizing with their needs, and then delivering creative and personalized resolutions.

Delivering this type of experience requires more than the right tools and training. It also requires the right mindset. Agents have to know that humanity is the end goal.

This means providing agents with the freedom to go "off script" to provide resolutions, ideally without cumbersome approval processes. It means rethinking metrics to ensure agents do not feel any pressure to rush off the phone or default to the "simple resolution." It means redefining quality monitoring to emphasize holistic outcomes, sentiments, and experiences - not simply checklists of required phrases.

It also means providing agents with an opportunity for a more rewarding, fruitful future. If leaders are going to ask agents to develop new skills, use new systems, and handle more challenging conversations, they will have to provide the appropriate incentives and career paths. Employees will need to see the upside to become a more "consultative," empathetic agent; otherwise, many will long for the simplicity of being a transactional script-reader.

"As agents take on more complex work, performance management must shift from measuring efficiency to enabling impact. Traditional KPIs like handle time and adherence should give way to outcome-based metrics that reflect real value: resolution quality, empathy, customer sentiment, and problem-solving impact."

- Phil Tomlinson, SVP of Global Offerings, TaskUs

Opportunity #6 | Committing to Employee Wellness

No matter how well-trained and empowered agents are, they will face challenges in the era of complex work. They will receive an inquiry for which there is no clear resolution. They will deal with a disrespectful customer. They will have to navigate an emotionally jarring medical or financial situation.

To put it simply, they will deal with potential threats to their mental health.

In the spirit of "happy agents equal happy customers," contact centers cannot ignore this reality. They cannot pretend that the pivot to intellectually stimulating work will be enough to keep all agents over the moon.

Instead, they must commit to meaningful wellness programs. From monitoring agent sentiment, to having regular, personalized check-ins, to offering wellness and support programs, to improving workplace culture, they have a responsibility to create an environment of warmth, harmony, and empathy.

Beyond providing support for agents, the best wellness programs offer agents a seat at the table. They let agents openly communicate feedback and ideas. They involve agents in the technology sourcing process. Ultimately, they show that they are committed to putting agents in position to connect with customers.

Synergy Yields Success: Achieving Results By Rethinking AI *and* Humanity

The era of approaching technology and humanity as disparate concepts is over. If contact centers want to elevate experiences and achieve more powerful connections with customers, they have to foster a synergy between their AI technology and human employees.

"When AI and humans work in sync, customers get the best of both worlds: speed and convenience from automation, and care and connection from real people."

- Phil Tomlinson, SVP of Global Offerings, TaskUs

By pursuing the aforementioned six opportunities, contact centers will begin to achieve this synergy. They will begin to leverage AI not as a "deflection" tool but as a gateway to more engaged agents who are more capable of human-centric support.

By achieving that empowering dynamic, contact centers will unlock quantifiable — and considerable — business results. Their operation will perform more smoothly, their customer relationships will be stronger, and their financials will be healthier.

Committed to elevating humanity in an AI-powered world, TaskUs is working with organizations to maximize these results. Examples of these transformative success stories follow.

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Brian Cantor is the Managing Director of Customer Management Practice's Digital division. Driven by a passion for helping brands better empower their employees and more meaningfully connect with customers, Brian oversees research, product development, editorial vision, and commercial strategy for properties like CCW Digital and Customer Engagement Insider. Reaching a community of almost 200,000, these digital properties offer industry-leading commentary, research reports, and virtual event sessions.

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