



Navigating the Contact Centre in a Crisis

The Role of Effective Communication & Collaboration

AUTHORED BY

Audrey William

Principal Advisor, Ecosystem

PUBLISHED

June 2020

Table of Contents

3		Executive Summary
4		Situation Overview
6		Best Practices for Managing Communication and Collaboration in a Crisis
12		About the Author
13		About Slack
13		About Ecosystem

Executive Summary

Customer experience (CX) decision-makers are currently facing unprecedented challenges in ensuring business continuity, keeping the focus on excellent CX, and managing and motivating a largely remote workforce.

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, not only are organisations seeing high inbound activity, they are having to manage Contact Centres with agents who are dispersed and working remotely. Media outlets have reported extreme wait times for customers across verticals including Financial Services, Insurance, Telecommunications and Government.¹

Driving CX is a top business priority for most organisations in the Asia Pacific region. Customers expect great service - including speed, immediate availability and accuracy. To ensure that CX, organisations are trying to deflect calls to non-voice channels - social media, video calls, SMS, email - as far as possible. Some organisations have been caught off-guard and are struggling to maintain their day-to-day Contact Centre operations while others have adapted seamlessly to the increased volumes and customer demands.

As remote working for agents becomes the New Normal, communication and collaboration has become critical to the CX. Organisations must re-evaluate how they manage remote Contact Centre agents, the tools they use, and their overall communication to ensure that agents stay connected. It is time for CX decision-makers to empower their agents with precise, timely, relevant information, without creating an overload.

This Whitepaper discusses the best practices in communication and collaboration that organisations should follow in their Contact Centre operations to navigate their way through the current complexities of remote work. The data findings cited are from the global Ecosystem CX study that is live and ongoing on the Ecosystem platform.

Situation Overview

Prior to COVID-19, managing calls and driving an omnichannel experience have been challenging - the challenges have only compounded in the current socio-economic situation.

Some organisations are now witnessing the same volume of inbound calls in a week that they would normally witness over the course of months. With a dispersed Contact Centre workforce, it has been extremely challenging for agents and supervisors to collaborate. These are some of the challenges facing organisations in their Contact Centre operations in the Asia Pacific region (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Challenges of Running a Contact Centre in a Crisis



Agents are pressured to meet the daily KPIs and are equally pressured to take the next call. Inbound calls often require an immediate response or action - which means that agents also have to access back-end systems. So, Contact Centre operations teams are being challenged both in ensuring that every complaint or query is attended to and a regular flow of communication from the front-line agent to the back-end team.

Ecosystem research finds that before March 2020, 90% of Contact Centres in Asia Pacific had less than 20% of agents working remotely. The challenges around the

Navigating the Contact Centre in a Crisis

COVID-19 response have forced companies to adopt remote working arrangements for agents. For many organisations this has resulted in the breakdown of processes and tools designed for in-house Contact Centres and outsourced customer support. Managing the speed and scale of this move has not been easy for them.

While organisations continue to handle the usual challenges, new challenges have surfaced in their Contact Centre operations:

- 1** The sudden lack of face-to-face interactions between agents, and agents and team leaders
- 2** Increased expectations and volumes of inbound customer enquiries
- 3** Increased pressure from the business to respond to customers
- 4** Team leaders' lack of visibility on business decisions that impact their teams
- 5** Executives cascading customer-facing decisions to the in-house and outsourced agents
- 6** Customers reaching out through multiple channels as call waits expand

Not only are agents having to cope with the new parameters of working from home, they are in many cases dealing with higher stress levels. Remote agents also do not have the option of raising their hands to ask questions or alerting the team leader that they are struggling while on a call. Therefore, having apps and collaboration platforms where agents can post problems and get immediate response from the relevant teams is highly critical.

All these challenges, and more, have led Contact Centre leaders to re-evaluate ways to maintain the communication flow to the front-line (Figure 2).

This is an important time to think through the best way to manage agents and keep them motivated and engaged. While technology is playing an important role in addressing some of the challenges, it is important to also re-think some of the non-technology aspects of work. Here are some best practices on how to keep remote agents engaged, motivated and manage their emotional well-being.

Figure 2

Navigating the Contact Centre in a Crisis - Immediate Measures

SUPPORT FOR AGENTS <i>As the first consideration, CX leaders need to provide support for the agents to stay productive while working remotely</i>	SUPPORT FOR TEAM LEADERS AND DECISION MAKERS <i>Team leaders and CX decision makers themselves will need to consider additional elements to ensure the smooth day-to-day running of Contact Centre operations</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A reliable network connection• The right physical set-up (including a quiet environment, noise cancelling headsets, ergonomic chairs and other workplace tools)• A regular flow of updates on customer responses and offers• Access to team leaders for escalations and tougher customer cases• Understanding priorities and what autonomy they have to resolve customer issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Access to call recordings from a centralised location• Continual training and coaching initiatives• All forms of security measures including device, data, and customer information security• Access to real-time collaboration technologies to keep agents engaged and informed (including continuing to provide help in difficult situations during live calls, sending regular notifications and keeping them in the loop on all changes)

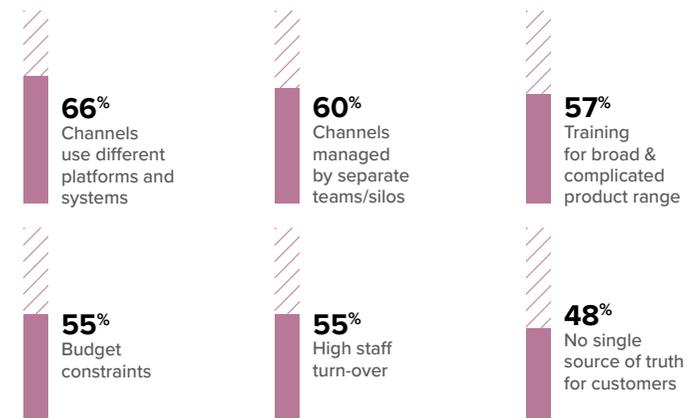
BEST PRACTICES FOR MANAGING Communication and Collaboration IN A CRISIS

#1 SYNCHRONISE THE DATA

“ More than 60% of Asia Pacific organisations with Contact Centres are challenged by data residing on different platforms and within silos

Even before the crisis, organisations faced unique challenges in managing Contact Centres. According to the Ecosystem CX study, the leading challenges of driving a consistent CX are largely due to how data resides within an organisation (Figure 3). Different channels often use different platforms and are managed by separate teams and silos.

Figure 3
Challenges of Driving a Consistent CX - Asia Pacific



Source: Ecosystem, 2020
N=441

This clearly explains why agents are sometimes confused or ask customers to repeat themselves even though the customer has contacted the organisation before. The relevant data should be centralised and made available to the agents so that they can have one consistent go-to platform for all customer information and updates. These challenges are not unique to this current crisis. But in an environment where agents are working in the isolation of their homes, not being able to offer better CX because of inadequate or inconsistent data, will add to their frustration. Moreover, it also hampers the company's image. The first step to ensure that your organisation can collaborate and communicate better, is to have a unified customer data repository.

#2 UPDATE YOUR KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS REGULARLY

“ 57% of Contact Centres in Asia Pacific have improving knowledge systems and FAQs as a key CX priority

One of the strategies currently being used by organisations to combat the crisis, is to deflect as many calls as possible to non-voice channels. These channels include mobile apps, virtual assistants, FAQs and the organisation websites. Improving customer knowledge systems and FAQs are an important means to improving CX. In a situation, where organisations are trying to encourage customer self-service, it becomes even more significant. For example, government agencies across the region are making the latest information on the COVID-19 situation available through messages that leverage their knowledge systems and website. These also need to be included in the latest FAQs to reduce the number of citizen enquiries and to keep the messaging consistent. Very often, government agencies have to collaborate with multiple public and private organisations to provide the information that citizens want. The more accurate and recent the information is, the lower the burden on the Contact Centre. This requires organisations to collaborate and communicate in a centralised manner to ensure that both customers and agents have access to one single source of truth.

#3 CREATE TOPIC-BASED CHANNELS FOR YOUR AGENTS

“ 62% of Contact Centres in Asia Pacific provide continuous training and coaching to agents to drive better employee and customer experience

Providing ongoing training is a key activity in running Contact Centres. However, in times of crisis, it becomes difficult to provide regular coaching in areas where agents do not have the sufficient skills or knowledge. It also rules out the option of long and detailed training sessions. Organisations find that timely, bite-sized content updates work well especially when equipping agents on how to handle a set of key issues that they are commonly presented with.

These are often areas that have been brought on by the crisis and agents may not yet have received coaching in. Contact Centre AI/analytics systems can identify these common problems, often used phrases and issues that are being discussed on voice and non-voice interactions.

Common topics across industries include:

- 1 Refund and cancellation policies
- 2 Enquiries about government assistance and subsidies and how to apply
- 3 Ways to reduce the mortgage payment, evaluating options for fixed and variable interest rates
- 4 COVID-19 related queries including testing locations
- 5 Queries on international money transfers, including expected delays

The topics that your agents have to deal with, can change on a daily or weekly basis. While a robust knowledge management system is immensely beneficial, the current situation might need a faster way to keep agents and supervisors updated. Incorporating internal channels on common topics will help agents to not only access them faster but also ask for clarifications before they encounter the queries. Not only can your collaboration solution be used to offer continual training, it can be a means for agents to proactively seek assistance in areas where they have doubts.



#4 EVALUATE WORKFORCE & CAPACITY MANAGEMENT EVERY DAY - AND COMMUNICATE IT TO THE FRONTLINE

“ 69% of Contact Centres in Asia Pacific have invested in or are planning to invest in workforce optimisation solutions

Even when a Contact Centre is running smoothly, workforce optimisation can be a challenge. In these uncommon times, HR issues can make workforce management exponentially more challenging. In-house Contact Centres and outsourced providers must deal with agents falling sick, quitting, taking personal time out and being in isolation. All these scenarios have a huge impact on the day-to-day operations of the Contact Centre and impact the overall capacity planning for the day. The agents should be able to communicate their status easily to their supervisors, using an official channel of communication, where it can still be documented easily without

the need for a formal process. Also, now that teams are not working on the same floor, the changes in the teams should be communicated easily to prepare the agents for any extra workload. The communication process should be integrated with the workforce management system and must include processes for:

- 1 Bi-directional feedback loop between agents and their team leaders, including alerts
- 2 Communication about last-minute staffing changes to all Contact Centre leaders
- 3 Real-time view of when agents are off-line (working from home means that they take their breaks differently to accommodate their personal needs)

There are several regional examples of how organisations are allowing greater flexibility in agent schedules, including a large banking organisation in Australia. This is to cater for personal issues agents might have to handle, while working from home. While organisations will use workforce management solutions to manage Contact Centre agent workloads, they will have to realise the benefits of building greater flexibility and trust into the equation.



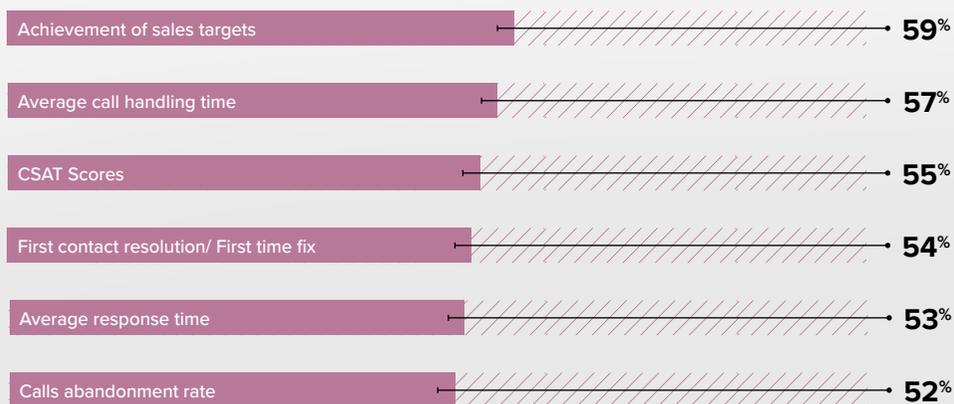
#5 DEVISE WAYS TO COMMUNICATE THE METRICS

“ 52% of Contact Centres in Asia Pacific use KPI-driven rewards to improve Employee Experience (EX)

It is common for Contact Centre agents to see KPIs displayed on the walls usually through large digital signage screens and other dashboards. These dashboards display metrics that agents are measured on and also provides updates on common queries that agents can see as they are speaking to a customer. Ecosystem research finds out the key metrics that agents have a visibility of, while on the floor (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Visibility of Common Agent Metrics - Asia Pacific



Source: Ecosystem, 2020
N=262

These views act as a guide to the agents on their performance and the performance of the team as a whole, and helps them take immediate action to bridge the necessary gaps. Since the dynamics have changed completely with agents working mostly from home due to COVID-19, organisations must think of how best to display these Contact Centre metrics. Organisations are realising that agents do not have the time to read emails or check a common app. While they are on the phone, their main interface is through the screen in front of them. Very often, your collaboration solution will allow you to stream customer satisfaction (CSAT) to the agents in real time. In many Contact Centres, the Average Call Handle Time or Average Response Time are now being displayed through the agent console or as a pop-up on the screen if there is immediate action needed.

As organisations look for creative ways to display the metrics on the screen they will leverage their collaboration applications. Agents can also see their team leaders flagging issues such as when they have been on a call too long or when the first call resolution looks unsatisfactory. This continual feedback is what agents are used to and what an effective communication and collaboration platform can provide.



#6 FOCUS ON TECHNOLOGIES THAT ENABLE A BETTER EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

“ 52% of organisations in Asia Pacific focus on Employee Experience as a means of improving CX

Agents are the most important assets in Contact Centres. One of the challenges facing organisations is high agent attrition. This is a common problem given the sheer pressure agents go through daily. Investments in Employee Experience (EX) solutions will help increase motivation levels and alleviate some of the challenges agents face. Organisations with robust investments in EX solutions are more likely to handle this crisis better. The importance of a workforce optimisation solution and a knowledge management system has already been discussed. In addition, Contact

Centre leaders leverage quality monitoring and coaching solutions to give timely feedback to their agents. Gamification to provide training and engage agents is also being evaluated by several Contact Centre leaders (Figure 5).

Training, Quality Monitoring and Coaching are critical elements in a Contact Centre and given the current situation, training will have to be integrated with videoconferencing and collaboration platforms. The agents will need to see their supervisors, ask questions, and should be asked to talk about the challenges they are facing. Similarly, gamification is an important way to keep agents engaged, as it allows friendly competition, fosters teamwork, and provides an easy way to incorporate rewards and recognition. Managing remote agents can be arduous and therefore fostering the right culture for engagement and communication will be key to improving EX.

Contact Centres play a crucial role in communicating your brand image to the external world. Much the same way as organisations engage with their customers, they must focus on internal collaboration and communication. A motivated and engaged agent would mean a happy customer.

Figure 5

Adoption of Employee Experience Technologies - Asia Pacific



Source: Ecosystem, 2020

N=262

About the Author



Audrey William

PRINCIPAL ADVISOR -
Enterprise Communications, Contact
Centre, Customer Experience
Ecosystem

To learn more about the best practices on remote working and Contact Centre technology adoption, and to benchmark your organisations against your peers, visit the [Ecosystem platform](#). Here are links to some content that you might find useful:

- Blog: [Building a Business Continuity Plan in the Contact Centre Industry](#)
- Blog: [Understanding your Customer's Journey](#)
- Blog: [Customer Priorities - Mature vs Emerging Economies](#)
- Blog: [The Top 5 Customer Experience Trends for 2020](#)
- Report: [Make Remote Working Successful](#)

¹ [Three Hours on Hold? Banks Inundated With Nervous Callers](#)

One of the foremost multi-disciplinary analysts in the APAC region, Audrey boasts an eclectic set of expertise, in segments as diverse as enterprise collaboration, unified communications-as-a-service (UCaaS), video, contact center, CX, outsourcing as well as artificial intelligence, enterprise mobility and digital transformation.

Audrey has a proven track record both as an analyst and a business leader, having spent close to two decades in various analyst roles at Frost & Sullivan, providing counsel to C-level executives on go-to-market strategies – most recently as Head of Research and Senior Fellow at the firm's ICT practice in Australia and New Zealand. As one of the pioneers of the firm in the region, Audrey played a pivotal role in its regional expansion, including building and mentoring a team of analysts across various markets in Asia-Pacific, including Malaysia, Singapore and Australia.

Beyond her involvement as an analyst, Audrey is also a prominent keynote speaker, having delivered over 150 speaking engagements addressing various technology segments. She is regularly quoted in the media for her insights into ongoing technology trends and news.

Audrey is an honours graduate from the Institute of Chartered Secretaries and Administration (ICSA) in the UK. She also holds Diplomas in Management Accounting and Financial Accounting from the London Chamber of Commerce Institute (LCCI). In her free time, she loves to read literary fiction and is a jazz enthusiast.

About



Slack has transformed business communication. It's the leading channel-based messaging platform, used by millions to align their teams, unify their systems, and drive their businesses forward. Only Slack offers a secure, enterprise-grade environment that can scale with the largest companies in the world. It is a new layer of the business technology stack where people can work together more effectively, connect all their other software tools and services, and find the information they need to do their best work. Slack is where work happens.

About



Ecosystem is a private equity backed Digital Research and Advisory Platform with global headquarters in Singapore.

As a global first, Ecosystem brings together tech buyers, tech vendors and analysts into one integrated platform to enable the best decision making in the evolving digital economy. The firm moves away from the highly inefficient business models of traditional research firms and instead focuses on research democratisation, with an emphasis on accessibility, transparency and autonomy.

Ecosystem's research originates from its custom designed "Peer-2-Peer" platform which allows Tech Buyers to benchmark their organisation in "real-time" against their industry or market.

This bold new research paradigm enables Ecosystem to provide Tech Vendors access to ongoing and real time Market Insights in an affordable "as-a-Service" subscription model.



This white paper is sponsored by Slack. It is based on the analyst's subject matter expertise on the area of coverage in addition to specific research based on interactions with technology buyers from multiple industries and technology vendors, industry events, and secondary research.

The data findings mentioned in all Ecosystem reports are drawn from Ecosystem's live and on-going studies on the Ecosystem research platform. This document refers to data from the global Ecosystem CX Study, based on participant inputs that include decisionmakers from IT and other Lines of Business, from small, medium and large enterprises.

For more information about Ecosystem studies visit www.ecosystem360.com