



In Times of Change, Employee Virtual Assistants/Attended Bots are Work-at-Home Agents, Too

How to Best Utilize Resources in Times of Business Upheaval

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INTRODUCTION

We are months into our new reality and the contact center world is starting to settle down—at home, for the most part. Seemingly overnight, businesses around the world have had to shut their doors, put business on hold, or, if lucky, keep business afloat by sending their employees to work at home. In customer care, this has meant millions of agents around the world working in and emotionally adjusting to a completely different environment than before.

In the realm of customer contact, the work-at-home agent (WAHA) model is certainly not new and has been successfully adopted for years by savvy businesses of all sizes. Yet, despite WAHA being part of strategic business continuity and disaster recovery (BCDR) models, until the COVID-19 pandemic mandated it, the majority of BCDR plans were often left untested and WAHA was viewed as a luxury or a perk to drive employee engagement or to attain specialized talent not locally available.

All of that changed overnight, and the industry quickly responded with work-at-home models, temporary complementary solutions for remote agents, and generous pricing models, even as they dealt with their own shift to work at home (WAH).

REALITY SETS IN

For years, the top challenges within customer contact have been reducing costs and improving the customer experience (CX). Recently added to the mix was the realization that the experiences of the agent and customer are deeply entwined; if your agents are empowered to positively assist customers, satisfied with the job that they do, and interested and engaged, then customers will respond in kind. Hence, the challenge of engaging the workforce and creating the tools to do so has risen steeply on the list of priorities of customer contact organizations worldwide. Workforce engagement management (WEM) is now top of mind across the industry.

So what happens when you can no longer see and engage directly with employees in person? How do you contend with the sudden change in work environment for agents? How do you get the even more critical messages and information updates to agents as they are needed? How do you maintain efficiency, service consistency and compliance in a different environment? Are agents distracted? Do they feel isolated? How do you replace that agent's ability to get up from their workstation, tap another agent for quick help, chat at the water cooler, or seek assistance from their supervisor? These are just a fraction of the myriad challenges occurring with a quickly implemented WAHA model.

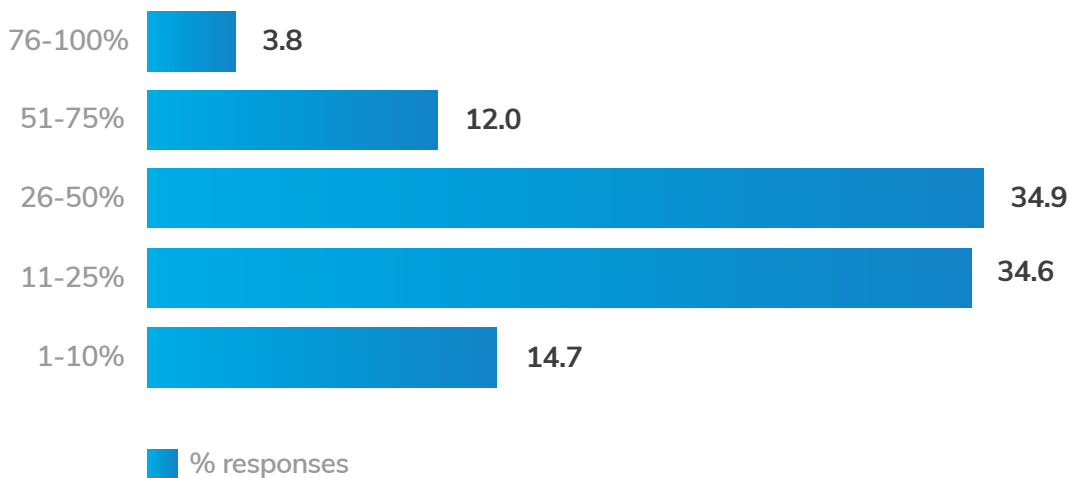
PROCESS AUTOMATION'S PLACE IN THE RESTRUCTURE

Fortunately, help is here. The reality is that implementing BCDR plans is not just about restoring productivity and maintaining performance. We have to restore business to as normal as before, but also realize that some things are going to change and stay different than the way they were before. In a number of cases, there is a silver lining among the pandemic clouds as many agents either prefer a WAHA model or will quickly adapt and see the benefits. With the proper tools in place, some agents will adapt quickly and thrive in a WAHA environment, while others will develop more slowly. Fortunately, the work the industry has been doing on behalf of employees can be adapted to help agents navigate unfamiliar work routines and new protocols.

Taking a look back, pre-pandemic, strong trends were driving the industry. Chief among them was the acute realization that agents' work experience directly impacts the customer, so investing equally in the employee experience (EX) and the customer experience (CX) took center stage in development plans. And a critical component of that R&D investment came from infusing agent and supervisor tools with AI-enhanced capabilities to increase performance, productivity and customer satisfaction (CSAT). Of particular significance is the work that has been done to facilitate cross-portfolio process automation.

Process automation is the technology-enabled automation of business processes and has a key role in the contact center. Process automation—attended or unattended—can range from automatic cut and paste of data from fields on agent screens and in databases to complex processes enhanced with artificial intelligence, such as loan processing or fraud detection. Adoption is on the rise. In fact, in NTT's 2020 Customer Experience Benchmarking Report, *The Connected Customer: Delivering an Effortless Experience*, wherein 1,020 executives and other customer experience stakeholders around the globe are annually surveyed, it states that one-third (34.9%) of organizations forecast that approximately 26% to 50% of their CX activity currently supported by agents will become automated in the next two years.

EXHIBIT 1: PERCENTAGE OF CX ACTIVITY CURRENTLY SUPPORTED BY AGENTS THAT WILL BECOME AUTOMATED IN THE NEXT TWO YEARS



Source: 2020 Customer Experience Benchmarking Report, NTT Ltd.

In the area of process automation, NICE shines. For years the company has been developing and offering an increasing array of process automation capabilities for the front and back office. NICE weaves artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML), natural language understanding (NLU), and other maturing technologies to automate processes in the background unattended or alongside agents and office workers assisting with tasks and processes with attended automation. NICE's Advanced Process Automation (APA) solutions provide organizations with a real-time decisioning engine that supports agent decisions on the fly during customer interactions or as they're working through complex backend processes. The engine draws on business rules and predictive models to automate and provide process guidance as employees perform mundane manual tasks. It does so through

process insights derived from analytics that are applied while interactions are taking place, for attended and unattended automation environments. This enables organizations to make the right decision during individual interactions and across a mass of interactions, which drives future next-best-action guidance through process automation.

NICE offers a complete robotic process automation (RPA) solution that includes Automation Finder, which uses unsupervised ML, and desktop analytics to pinpoint processes that are ripe for automation, safeguarding organizations against deployment failures or difficulties and uncovering solid areas of ROI. For developers, NICE RPA's design tool, Automation Studio, provides a built-in intelligence feature that offers real-time guidance to developers as they design the automation.

NEVA – PROFESSIONAL COMPANION FOR REMOTE WORKERS

I'll let you in on a little secret and a hidden gem in process automation. It's not just agents that are working at home these days. Virtual assistants have stay-at-home orders as well and don't have to obey social distancing rules. NICE Employee Virtual Attendant (NEVA) has been hard at work assisting agents in their homes, providing professional support in the physical absence of peers and their managers.



Source: NICE

A new initiative called the NEVA Starter Kit was recently introduced to address COVID-19 enterprise challenges. The Starter Kit includes complimentary 90-day licenses and pre-configured use cases so that companies could provide these virtual companions on every agent and supervisor desktop within days; this is a critical solution to support business continuity by immediately supporting remote employees to adjust to new working conditions.

NEVA offers real-time process guidance when called for or automatically when an opportunity is identified. Based on NICE's RPA platform, NEVA uses attended automation technology and intelligent decisioning to help employees efficiently execute simple to complex requests, as well as upsell or cross-sell at the most optimal time during an interaction, driving front- and back-office process effectiveness, boosting sales delivery, and ensuring compliance while increasing employee engagement and morale.

NEVA has particular talents in:

- Quickly gathering vital information for each call and providing real-time contextual guidance on the agent desktop.
- Leveraging desktop analytics and ML algorithms to accurately source which processes to automate with a built-in OCR engine.
- Handling unstructured data to eliminate the need for paper-based systems and manual processing.
- Facilitating rapid adaptation to new policies and guidelines by using NICE's automation design tool (Automation Studio) to create new automation and guidance flows to be pushed directly to the agent's desktop.
- Automating the handling of process errors and exceptions.
- Facilitating quick call wrap-up by automating post-call notes and after-call tasks.
- Making use of the output from real-time speech analytics to make course corrections in customer interactions.

EXPANDING AI HORIZONS

Virtual assistants and process automation are changing the face of the contact center, and their use has been accelerating, even before the pandemic. For quite some time, the industry had in place conversational interactive voice response systems, customer-facing virtual assistants and chatbots as self-service channels for customers. Over time, as technologies under the umbrella of AI matured, these channels have become increasingly more sophisticated—even learning—based on ongoing customer interactions.

However, these technologies are just a subset of the infusion of AI, which is occurring across the customer contact landscape that is fast gaining attention because of the upheaval the world is in. For instance, in these uncertain times, concerns have changed and the interactions agents have can be very different than before. People are stressed, worried and fatigued. Tempers are short. During these times, agents have to deal with a lot of unknowns, let alone their own emotions. While performance statistics can tell us that average handle time (AHT) is going up, it doesn't tell the whole picture. Speech analytics used to monitor all interactions can let us know why. Are agents calming customers' fears? Are they exchanging lockdown stories or quips about their pets? Is an increase in AHT due to poor training, or does it reflect a change in CSAT as agents bond with customers?

Speech analytics can also be used with attended automation to further refine and sharpen the real-time guidance that the attended bot gives to the employee during a live customer interaction. This is especially relevant during these uncertain and difficult times when emotions are heightened. Employees can benefit greatly from guidance that assesses not only what the customer is saying but also the customer's sentiment.

Finally, all of the resulting data culled from interactions, processes, customer feedback and other sources can be fed back for continuous improvement of knowledge databases, CRM systems, and workforce and performance management systems to further improve the tools and information available to agents to make an impact on CX.

DON'T BE LEFT BEHIND

We will always have events that trigger a rapid response and the need to put “Plan B” in place. If it’s not COVID-19, it will be something else. However, the scale of this event supercharged the response. The adage of look for silver linings in the clouds holds true because, for the contact center industry, there were many silver linings beyond getting rid of the stagnant thinking that hampered WAHA adoption. This particular event also added fuel to trends we were already seeing within customer contact. Increasing employee engagement, providing better work/life balance for employees, providing tools that empower workers, and rethinking the way we measure and manage performance are just a few of them.

While flipping to a WAHA model sent the industry on a slight detour, the reality is that nothing else has changed. EX still impacts CX, so making agents more empowered, efficient and content is as important as ever. And with workforce reductions, there is an even more urgent need to provide agents with the right tools to help them work more efficiently but also take a load off their work by automating some tasks that can be performed without human involvement, thus achieving “more with less.”

As we have shown, there are key technologies that can be employed to address and exceed expectations for addressing these trends and others. Process automation on desktops, in the back office, as a front door to business in self-service applications, and working alongside agents is an exceptional tool that should be employed as we address a new way of doing business.

Will your business be left behind? For more information on NEVA or NICE RPA, [speak to a NICE automation expert.](#)

NEXT STEPS

- **Schedule a meeting with our global team** to experience our thought leadership and to integrate your ideas, opportunities and challenges into the discussion.
- Interested in learning more about the topics covered in this white paper? Call us at 877.GoFrost and reference the paper you're interested in. We'll have an analyst get in touch with you.
- Visit our **Digital Transformation** web page.
- Attend one of our **Growth Innovation & Leadership (GIL)** events to unearth hidden growth opportunities.

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