Five Ways Contact Centers Already Mitigate The Great Resignation

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THE BUSINESS WORLD HAS A LOT TO LEARN FROM THE PEOPLE WHO MANAGE CONTACT CENTER PERSONNEL AND OPERATIONS. IN THIS DOCUMENT OPUS RESEARCH DESCRIBES THE FIVE LESSONS LEARNED OVER DECADES THAT APPLY DIRECTLY TO ISSUES THAT PLAGUE ALL ORGANIZATIONS IN THE MIDST OF MASS RESIGNATIONS AND EMPLOYEE TURNOVER.

In the pandemic's early days, the phenomenon achieved its obligatory "meme status" as The Great Resignation (TGR). More recently (as self-furloughed workers return to work with different companies), the three-letter abbreviation has morphed into The Great Reshuffling. Either way, people are telling their employers, "My job no longer fits into my plans." The sentiment is shaped by considerations that include money, mental well-being and a desire for a life outside of work. In response, employers have been forced to pay higher wages, which, in turn, drives them to outsource work to lower-wage regions or automate those jobs out of existence.

Still, workers want their jobs to be interesting and fulfilling. Thoughtful deployments of automation and artificial intelligence can deflect mundane tasks from the call center and allow agents to focus on high value, consultative conversations with customers. It's a well-established contact center axiom: The more interesting the work, the more satisfied the agent—and the happier the customer.

Agents Quit, CX Suffers, More Agents Quit, Repeat

TGR is a world-wide phenomenon that is decidedly not confined to the Contact Center. The pandemic surfaced and accelerated well-documented employment trends that were well underway within two critical dimensions: customer experience and brand reputation. Specifically:

Customer Experience - Mass agent resignations and layoffs coincided with increased call volumes. Customers initiated millions of calls often addressing unfamiliar topics (e.g. "Will the omicron variant or supply chain issues affect my shipping time?") that customer care resources were not prepared to address. This led to frustrating hold times followed by interactions with over-worked and inexperienced agents. Customers found these experiences unpleasant, inconsistent and, ultimately, unsatisfying. Customer acquisition costs are always higher than the routine expenses associated with quality customer service and customer retention.

Brand Reputation - A single, poor customer experience can cause permanent damage to a brand's reputation. Loyal customers are a valuable asset that no brand can afford to lose. The best of them are advocates for a brand's products or services and excellent references. Dissatisfied customers, on the other hand, can negatively influence others—and even put a company out of business.

5 Ways Contact Centers Mitigate TGR's Impact

What feels like a new phenomenon for many enterprises is old hat to Contact Center administrators. One could say that, given high historic attrition rates, Contact Centers have been meeting TGR head-on for decades. Several vertical industries are suffering the ill effects of TGR for the very first time. By contrast, Contact Centers have repeatedly been strained to the breaking point by changing customer demands and increasing agent attrition.
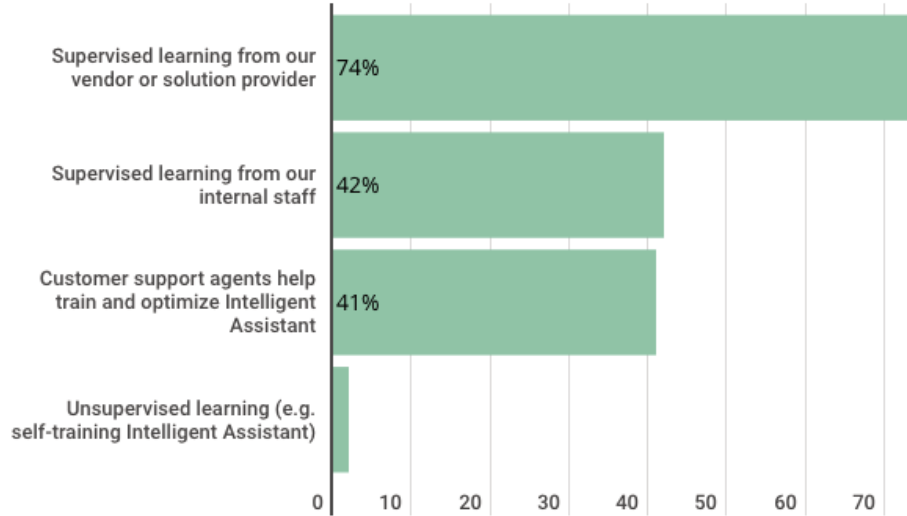
As an old saying has evolved: "That which doesn't kill you… then mutates and returns to try to kill you again."

With that in mind, Contact Center administrators have persevered thanks to customer self-service paths and Conversational AI integrations. These resources inform chatbots or voicebots to improve each customer's experience while providing more rewarding agent engagements. Opus Research would like to share these hard-learned lessons:

1. **Embrace conversational AI and automation** – AI-powered chatbots do not get sick, they don't take time off and they can put in the extra hours on nights or weekends. But you're not shrinking the workforce or replacing agents, you are applying Conversational AI to make existing agents more productive and more satisfied, and to provide a richer customer experience.

2. **Engage agents as subject matter experts to train AI** – Nearly three-quarters of executives that Opus Research surveyed at the end of 2021 indicated that they saw impact in deploying conversational AI to provide in-conversation assistance to live agents, but a significant number also indicated that they were employing agents to analyze and remediate interactions between bots and customers (see Figure 1, below).

3. **Support true customer self-service** – Self-service had been synonymous with automated handling of inbound calls through an IVR or, more recently, a bot. Today it means putting customers in control of how they want to be served (chat, voice, email), enabling them to use their own words to instruct automated systems or live agents.

4. **Provide consistent answers across all channels** – With customers in control of their channel of choice and device of choice, it is important that both live agents and automated assistants provide identical information and support completion of desired tasks.

5. **AI must support both employee satisfaction and customer loyalty** – Some companies refer to TGR as "The Great Reshuffling" or even "The Great Promotion" because AI-powered conversational bots can perform redundant and tiring tasks while freeing up live agents to engage with customers in more complex and opportunistic discussions.

Figure 1. What methods does your organization use to train and optimize your Enterprise Intelligent Assistant?

Method	Percentage
Supervised learning from our vendor or solution provider	74%
Supervised learning from our internal staff	42%
Customer support agents help train and optimize Intelligent Assistant	41%
Unsupervised learning (e.g. self-training Intelligent Assistant)	

SOURCE: Respondents to Opus Research, Global Enterprise Intelligent Assistants Survey, 2022

Of all items on the list, Lesson 5 is the culmination. It speaks to the power of AI-infused resources to take on predictable, time-consuming and exhausting tasks that customer care representatives consider the bane of their existence. Bots can provide services directly to customers and AI "agent coaches" can train live agents to perform the next best action, consistently. It takes the stress off agents who try to do too much while, at the same time, providing a consistently delightful experience to customers.

AI-POWERED CHATBOTS DO NOT GET SICK, THEY DON'T TAKE TIME OFF AND THEY CAN PUT IN THE EXTRA HOURS ON NIGHTS OR WEEKENDS…THANKS TO MACHINE LEARNING ALGORITHMS, THEIR PERFORMANCE CONSTANTLY IMPROVES BECAUSE THEY LEARN ON THE FLY TO IMPROVE THEIR RESPONSES BASED ON SUCCESSFUL RESOLUTION OF CUSTOMER ISSUES.

Case Study: Addressing the Airline Industry's Worst-Case Scenario

The experience of Southwest Airlines and other airlines in late summer 2021 provides a vivid example of the impact of TGR on one of the largest and best regarded airlines. Thousands of flights were canceled due to weather and staffing shortages. Airlines saw a spike in demand for customer care at a time when their own employees were opting to leave in droves. Southwest Airlines, alone, saw nearly 400 customer care representatives take voluntary separation packages. Emirates Airlines reduced its customer care workforce by 31 percent and Delta reported that call center staffing was down 50 percent.

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Contact center employees attributed their desire to leave to low wages and long working hours. Their jobs, they said, used to have a modicum of prestige, but that was no longer the case.

The Problem: Too few agents; Too many "special' situations.
- ➤ Layoffs were followed by steep spike in demand
- ➤ Passengers prohibited from re-booking through self-service
- ➤ Live agents were burnt out
- ➤ New hires unavailable (partially due to TGR)

The Solution: Self-help and "Agent on Demand"
- ➤ AI-infused bots enable self-service for itinerary changes
- ➤ Text, talk, video chat from mobile or kiosk to resolve issues
- ➤ AI assistance across contact center and ticket counter personnel
- ➤ Application of EQ during self-help, rebooking
- ➤ Prompt attention to schedule changes and refunds

Results:
- ➤ Flyers could talk, text or type to initiate queries/complaints
- ➤ Queries distributed to subject matter experts to initiate queries or complaints
- ➤ Asynchronous conversations carried out over time until resolved
- ➤ Higher resolution rates and reduced customer frustration

Confronted with higher demand for predictable, recurring issues (such as rebooking, hotel accommodation vouchers, refunds), airlines perceived an opportunity to apply conversational artificial intelligence to handle the crush of customer queries without burning out their agents or subjecting customers to intolerable wait times. Thanks to machine learning algorithms, agent performance constantly improves because they learn on the fly to improve their responses based on successful resolution customer issues.

Just as passengers were having trouble finding and booking new flights, airlines were having a difficult time finding, hiring or re-hiring agents and bringing them up to speed on the latest challenges. Automated resources served as a hedge against pandemic-induced labor shortages. However, in the longer run, the deployment of bots in a time of dire need has exposed the fact that automated assistants have an important role to play in providing a better customer experience in the context of heightened, fast changing demand as well as self- imposed labor shortages.

Conversational AI was used to inform chatbots or voicebots as they helped customers figure out alternatives and, because most airlines do not permit their customers to rebook flights without human intervention, conversational bots engaged flyers in conversations that served as triage before transferring the call (and related context) to a super agent with the ability to resolve the flyer's issues.

Rather than waiting on hold or scheduling a call-back, flyers opted to deal with chatbots. At first, the airline's experience was considered abysmal because hundreds of flights were canceled and passengers were offered little or no recourse. Over time, bots stepped up to perform important roles in the link between airlines and their customers. They resolved what they could and learned from their experience. In an ideal framing, the bots did the dirty work and agents were upleveled to help flyers complete the tasks they had set out to do: rebooking, getting a refund or "other."

Case Study: A Learning Experience for Customer Care Bots

The registrar at a large university, with over 30,000 enrollees, learned conversational automation can step in to answer thousands of questions that would otherwise go unanswered (leading to disgruntled enrollees), or create an insurmountable burden for registrars, who have a limited amount of time during application processing periods.

The front desk staff struggled to manage emails and phone calls from students. The goal was to develop an easy-to-manage search tool to make sure students get answers to their questions quickly. An automated FAQ solution was able to respond to more than 300 questions, averaging 5,500 queries a month answered online and dramatically reducing the inbound queries.

The Contact Center Conclusion: Use AI to Produce Loyal Employees and Customers

Success breeds success. What works in Contact Centers in airlines and universities has great promise across many industries and throughout organizations. AI-infused bots are an inexhaustible resource with the ability to relieve other employees from drudgery and provide customers with gratifying experiences. At a time when "pandemic epiphanies" convince millions of individuals that they have bigger aspirations than taking an entry-level service job, AI-infused intelligent assistants stand ready to make customer experience more pleasant and agent experience more rewarding.

About Opus Research

Opus Research is a diversified advisory and analysis firm providing critical insight on software and services that support digital transformation. Opus Research is focused on the merging of intelligent assistance, NLU, machine learning, conversational AI, conversational intelligence, intelligent authentication, service automation and digital commerce.

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