



Readers' views on the hottest topics ■ OPINION

What's in your future?

Marketplace technology seems to be advancing with lightning speed. So, what will the contact centre of 2017 look like? **Mike Saar** thinks he knows...



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The growth of the contact centre industry over the last 25 years has been immense, with the sector now employing millions of people around the world. However, in the face of constant criticism and a number of ongoing technical and management challenges, contact centres are evolving into a very different creature. Imagine you had H. G. Wells' time machine and could take a short leap into the future: if you were sitting in a contact centre in ten years time, what would you see?

By 2017, the model of big battery farms of agents will have disappeared. Businesses will rely on agile, virtual teams of workers who are distributed across multiple physical locations. This will help simplify staff recruitment and retention and give scope for a more varied workforce, which will include more than today's twenty-something workers. Older people and young mothers will be able to work from home in a more flexible contact centre. Enabling these workers to be productive in a virtual, distributed call centre will require a re-think

for greater understanding of the fact that contact centres provide a multi-faceted role for customers — being points of sale, service and general enquiry. They define the spirit of the relationship between the customer and the business and perform a crucial role in maintaining and developing relationships. As such, the contact centre of the future will more aggressively promote add-on products and services because customer attention spans will be ever-decreasing as our world becomes more information rich. To be effective, however, contact centres of the future will need to offer more carefully targeted up-sells to customers, working from readily available customer information.

Another issue that will be addressed by 2017 is that of multiple touchpoints with customers. Businesses have already started to extend the different modes of contact, which customers can use to engage with them and will need to provide a consistent approach to servicing through all of them.

It's not uncommon to have customers handed off from one supplier to another

integration across organisations and channels. At its heart will be a single agent desktop that delivers a user interface to support — rather than inhibit — human-to-human interaction, centred on the customer's present and future needs.

Interaction types including web, voice, e-mail and video will be merged into a single environment. Every task performed by an agent in supporting a particular customer will be supported as a well-defined, easy-to-use process on the desktop, with organisations being able to easily monitor the component parts of an interaction.

The agent desktop of 2017 will dynamically configure itself around the products and services the customer has purchased from the business

of today's philosophies, challenging management, processes and technologies alike.

Demand-based outsourcing will also have become common, with outsourcers offering an alternate service provider model. It will also be possible for their agents to move between customer segments, enabling peak demand provision of services on an as-needed basis. While complete outsource contracts will still exist, a more agile set of outsourcers will offer rapid response teams at premium rates, which can be activated with just tens of minutes notice.

By 2017, the contact centre will be valued as a profit centre for the business. There will

during a call, because loosely coupled contact centre operations frequently drive an escalation to a third party partner. Yet this hand-off is usually incredibly crude, involving simple telephony transfer without any supporting data. Given growing competitive pressures, it will be important for contact centres to be able to transfer a blending of the interaction record, customer details and customer value proposition with each and every call.

The contact centre of 2017 will feature technologies which support the trends we have seen: distributed flexible workforces, personalised and targeted service, and

Indeed, the agent desktop of 2017 will dynamically configure itself around the products and services the customer has purchased from the business. This interaction will be supported by both case-based reasoning and relevant scripting of key discussion points. It will also be tightly integrated with sophisticated monitoring and compliance-enforced script control applications put in place for agents, particularly in highly-regulated environments, such as financial services.

To survive over the next decade, more companies will have to understand the changing role of the call centre. ■