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a dynamic world

AI Readiness: Next Actions for CX and Service Leaders

Whitepaper

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It's hard to believe that the latest wave of AI only became a headline topic in 2022. This time, anyone can gain firsthand experience. All you need are the skills of everyday language instead of expert programming.

For the first time, AI gained mass market appeal thanks to the arrival of Generative AI (GenAI) and Large Language models (LLM). It has sparked our collective imagination guaranteeing ongoing topicality.

Passionate debate about AI continues to flow across social platforms often ending up as polarised opinion. Is AI about to become sentient? Will it make most roles redundant? Can we ever trust it if we don't understand how it works? What about privacy, bias, intellectual property, massive hikes in energy consumption and so on?

It's tough for decision makers to sort fiction from fact.

Meanwhile, multi-billion-dollar investments from market leaders ensure a pipeline of rapid releases as the core capabilities of Generative AI quickly mature. These fuel a growing range of proof-of-concept trials as organisations try to figure out the truth for themselves and answer a core question:

How great a threat or opportunity is today's AI for our organisation?

The answer sits somewhere between two contrasting points of view which frame the current market debate.

Some see AI as a disrupter that fundamentally changes how things get done. In this world view, GenAI is destined to become the single interface to everything. Others see it as simply more software that will settle into becoming just another feature of our digital working lives.

The jury's still out.

One thing is for sure. Contact centres have emerged as front runners to test real world benefits. In part because the vendor community has been quick to define the use cases and embed new functionality into their solutions.

As a result, early adopters have now emerged. Even if others have yet to green light any proof-of-concept, they are still aware of new GenAI capabilities through the ongoing release cycle of their SaaS solutions highlighting latest features. For the rest of us, it has been impossible to avoid the GenAI story that has dominated industry conferences and events since 2022.

However, an aware market does not inevitably translate into a competent market able to extract the value being promised. The reason is simple and

something that happens within every significant phase of disruption.

We are simply not ready to act.

This whitepaper aims to help. Pointing out what is needed to move from where you are now to fully integrated, AI powered contact centres.

What Is AI readiness?

AI readiness means having a practical, thoughtful approach to AI. Grounded in understanding the problems you're trying to solve and having a clear strategy rather than just jumping on the GenAI bandwagon.

It begins by answering this question at the heart of the AI readiness challenge.

Do we have the right data, infrastructure, skills, and processes in place to effectively deploy AI across our contact centre operations?

If you feel confident that you are already well on your way to building this capability, then rechallenge yourself and extend that question to your entire customer engagement lifecycle.

The plan that emerges from your assessment should also prioritise common concerns and misconceptions about AI. This will align stakeholders around a common level of understanding and generate the required confidence to act. As mentioned, fact and fiction are hard to separate while real-world experience remains limited.

In fact, a lack of decision maker confidence and AI readiness are why many organisations remain stuck in proof-of-concept mode; unable to advance into full production.

This is a growing issue as reported by McKinsey, Accenture and Deloitte in their most recent reviews of the state of Enterprise AI deployment.

Contact centre leaders should take note by carefully matching their proof of concepts with operational needs that can be easily baselined, tracked and turned into clear cut business cases.

They should also invest the time building a broad base of informed understanding around today's generation of AI capabilities, scope, limitations and challenges. The payback is that stakeholder alignment will then enable rapid, sustainable progress.

Otherwise:

- Front line fears about being replaced will compromise ROI.
- Executive hesitation or desire to 'just do something' will send the wrong signals on a critically important leadership decision.

- Project teams will end up with unsuccessful pilots without the know-how to select the right AI model for their pilots or understand the cost implications of their chosen LLM (large language model).

AI Readiness is about getting you there faster. That said, is it clear to everyone where you are even trying to get to?

Defining your North Star

Even before the GenAI hype cycle, contact centres struggled with the grand all-in-one solutions being served up as the 'best way' forward. Most agreed that the combination of point solutions, functional silos, and complex service journeys got in the way of delivering customer outcomes cost effectively. But extracting value from complex, pre-integrated solutions such as CCaaS has proved much tougher than expected.

As we know, technology only enables. This leaves organisations with the responsibility of turning implied outcomes and benefits into reality. Something that does not happen by accident but through informed design and expert effort. GenAI is now adding another functional layer to an implementation backlog.

How can service leaders do a better job this time in terms of realising benefits faster and more fully?

It begins, and is sustained by, a common understanding of what the end goal looks like. Not as a flat one-line description but something that can be realistically imagined and desired.

People connect with compelling stories. Especially when told through the experiences of characters they can relate to. Defining your North Star is the creative process of translating the functionality of your future AI powered contact centre into better 'days in the life' of customers and colleagues.

Importantly, the design process of translating software features into user experiences requires you to think deeply about their current and future needs. This makes it your North Star, not a generalised industry perspective.

By keeping their evolving needs and expectations as your point of reference, you are future proofing your customer and colleague strategy ensuring AI investment is relevant and benefits stakeholders.

Being able to articulate your AI powered contact centre North Star brings you closer to AI readiness. Everyone starts to understand the 'why' and can connect with the vision of how you collectively intend to fix those persistent, high impact issues such as.

- Finding faster paths to better customer outcomes
- Reducing customer churn and increasing customer value

- Improving colleague productivity as well as their resilience
- Enabling greater job satisfaction and faster skill development
- Reducing colleague attrition and better onboarding

Also, decision makers can see how investment decisions correlate with quantifiable business benefits. Colleagues can be reassured about how you are envisaging the use of AI. Other teams can start to figure out how they can benefit from your AI adoption.

Making change happen

A North Star also makes your change agenda much more obvious. It becomes clear that AI powered contact centres are significantly more responsive. They adapt faster using real time insight. They can deliver personalised experiences at scale: eventually at individual level for every customer and colleague. The implications are transformative and wide reaching.

This naturally raises curiosity about how to get there. It becomes clear that your current operating model will undoubtedly need to change. Here are two questions to help you kick start that conversation:

- What's the first cycle of change we need to go through in our current operating model?
- How many evolutionary leaps do we need before reaching our North Star operating model?

Before diving headlong into this debate remember your purpose. AI Readiness is about understanding current versus required competencies and the milestones involved. It is not about detailed implementation plans, and associated decisions. Those need to be captured as tasks to be done on your high-level change map.

For instance, it is common knowledge that AI enabled automation, and self-service can significantly change a contact centre's channel mix. This has positive implications for how a limited pool of live assistance can be better utilised given demand for a human touchpoint remains a high customer priority.

This is topical in many organisations and something senior leaders are pushing for. Being AI ready helps everyone recognise that this requires more than just selecting the latest LLM powered bot.

Let's assume an optimised channel mix becomes the focus for your 'first cycle of change'. Are you ready for a quick win kick off? In terms of current capabilities in people, process and technology you decide yes. Then you look further out. What's needed to expand into more sophisticated self-service and automation use cases in terms of AI Readiness?

Answers to that second question might surface the need for intent based routing and a significant uplift in the current state of knowledge management to power self-service.

That line of questioning might then lead into a more comprehensive assessment as to whether your APIs, CRM, CCaaS, and telephony stack can effectively incorporate AI features and how these needs mesh into existing IT priorities and roadmap. Bear in mind other teams will be asking equivalent questions so cross reference your wish lists.

Other implications start to surface. What happens when the human touchpoint is mainly used for complex, emotive and urgent customer needs? How can AI help support skills development, customised coaching, resilience and well-being management as the use of front teams evolves?

How will current service journeys evolve?

What are the redesign implications in terms of in-house skills to do this?

What's the impact on workflows, processes and policies to enable the end-to-end self-service capability as captured in your North Star?

These outstanding questions about key AI enablers get packaged up into jobs to be done on your change map. Together with other decisions that need making around how the North Star journey is resourced, your recommended overall approach to testing-optimising-embedding new capability, and whatever else you recognise is needed for effective change management.

AI readiness is about scanning the horizon and understanding implications before you start. This broader perspective reminds everyone of what's really needed to turn a technology promise into operational benefits.

It's always been about the data

GenAI brings opportunities and challenges in equal measure. The transformer architecture that sits at the heart of how LLMs function has significantly boosted the value of Natural Language used in customer engagement over the last decade.

On the positive side, LLMs require less training before being ready to deploy. Their conversational abilities are smarter in terms of personalised language and contextual understanding than previous generation of natural language used to power last generation IVRs and chatbots.

Auto summarising conversations, knowledge articles and follow-up communications are equally impressive. Their ability to operate in real-time and understand topics and sentiment in a conversation open a whole

new world of possibility in how customers and colleagues can be supported.

Of course, all these features and more should be captured in your North Star story. But there are downsides as well which have consequences for your AI readiness assessment.

At their core, LLMs are simply predictive engines. It takes additional human engineering to moderate the quality of their output. Is it accurate, biased, or complete?

LLMs cannot intelligently self-regulate. A correct and incorrect answer will be offered with the same level of confidence. This can fool us. And clearly is not great service. Quite apart from the risk of reputational damage and liability.

All this remains work in progress within the AI community and given the design of transformer architecture might never be fully resolved. How this risk is mitigated needs clear policy coordination and ongoing discussion with your LLM providers. At an operational level some form of human in the loop quality assurance is needed. Maybe as an extension of existing quality management practices.

Here's another strategic challenge relating to data

The way in which data has been sourced for the foundation LLM models on which most current contact centre GenAI services are built is becoming a source of growing controversy.

Litigations about perceived intellectual property violations are coming to court. While this could potentially take years to resolve, we have already seen media amplified flare-ups on the topic that had contact centres dragged into the public debate.

The message here is to be prepared with a pre-agreed organisational position ready for any local media or customer questions that might be suddenly triggered.

Of more immediate concern is to establish with your LLM providers whether the use of their services carry any risk around privacy and security issues in terms of the use of customer data consumed by an AI service.

Established and draft legislation in the EU and US is attempting to define boundaries for acceptable use of AI. Expect this to remain a fast-moving space. New laws are being tested and fresh legislation is being drafted as AI becomes more powerful and negative use cases expand. In the case of contact centres this will probably centre around AI powered fraud.

In all these instances, regular check-ins with in-house legal counsel are advisable. In some instances, this will

be no more than staying up to speed. However, the EU AI Act is likely to impact customer contact as much as GDPR has done. So, make sure the topic appears early on in your change map and start to recruit the team.

One of the implications of all this is the need for specific AI governance to ensure responsible and ethical use of AI, mitigate risks and maintain compliance. This is already work in progress in many organisations.

As early adopters, contact centres will have a voice in shaping and managing this. So, make sure you have a seat at the table rather than a delegated presence if you think it is important to influence this debate.

On a final point about data, an AI model is only as good as the training data it was shaped by. Equally, the deployed model is only operationally useful with an ongoing supply of quality data. The greatest opportunity for contact centre is the ability to personalise. This extends from matching customer needs/profile with colleague skills/profile to cross sell/upsell recommendations generated on the advisor desktop in real-time. But only if the data that drives these insights is adequate.

The implications are that standards around data capture and curation need to significantly improve. Technology can help but it will remain a human driven competency that needs to be widely adopted as another hallmark of being AI ready.

Concluding thoughts

Becoming an AI powered contact centre is an exciting proposition. It can deliver something long desired in our industry: the ability to work smarter rather than just harder. Today's generation of AI will take away significant levels of drudgery and enable better outcomes for everyone: from customers to colleagues.

But it's a fast-changing market with minimum expertise in effective deployment. There are many dependencies which can frustrate deployment and plenty of challenges that need mitigating.

However, those experienced in leading complex change will be familiar with what needs to be done. Hopefully this exploration of AI readiness will help anyone better prepare for success.

For those who like checklists and bare bone summaries, here's a final checklist to ensure you have everything covered on your journey to become AI ready.

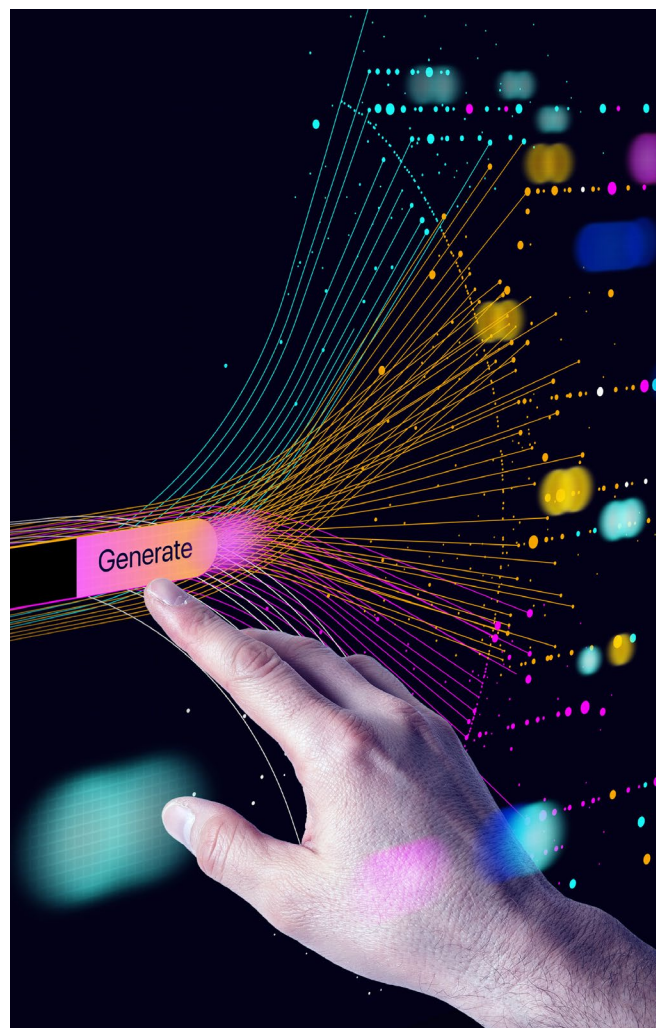
risk - governance - north star - strategy - operating model - policy - culture - capability - skills - mindset - roles - accountabilities - change management - customers - colleagues - partners - internal collaboration - infrastructure - workflow - data - metrics - reporting

Good luck!

About Maintel

Maintel provides managed cloud communications services for both the public and private sectors, our people becoming trusted advisors for our customers, creating value by helping them improve their business through digital transformation.

We help them to make their people more effective and productive with digital workplace technology. We help them to acquire, develop and retain their own customers with customer experience technology. And we ensure they can always connect to their applications and their data through security and connectivity.



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