

How to prepare your contact centre for an AI-driven future

 By [Wynand Smit](#)

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There can be no doubt that every business and operational team has to get ready for a future in which Artificial Intelligence (AI) plays a key role. Already, certain aspects of AI such as machine learning are transforming the ways in which some business functions are fulfilled.

In response, South Africa appears to be staying abreast of the global shift towards AI as a business driver: at least 46% of South African companies are actively piloting AI within their organisations, according to the 2019 AI Maturity Report in South Africa commissioned by Microsoft and conducted by Ernst & Young (EY).

The study found that local companies are experimenting with a range of different technologies, including chatbots, Robotic Process Automation (RPA) and Advanced Analytics.



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Indeed, South Africa's overall investment in AI is significant - with \$1.6 billion (R24 billion) invested over the past decade. Yet despite this investment, many businesses and operational teams are not yet able to fully maximise the benefits and capabilities of AI platforms.

In contact centres, for example, there is often a strong desire to incorporate AI technologies but, in many cases, the appropriate groundwork has not been done.

With this in mind, where should business leaders and decision-makers begin when it comes to the exciting world of AI?

Automation: the low hanging fruit

Arguably, the first step is to make sure that you understand the difference between AI and automation. Today, most people equate automation with AI, which is a fundamental mistake.

Put simply, automation involves using hardware or software that is capable of doing things automatically...without human intervention. On the other hand, AI is all about trying to make machines or software mimic (and eventually supersede) human behaviour and intelligence.

That said, automation isn't necessarily based on AI. Within contact centres, it is important to understand this difference – because many of the current challenges that managers and agents face can be solved or mitigated by the automation of key processes.

For example, many contact centres are not providing an engaging and efficient customer experience because they cannot immediately identify the customer calling in. Additionally, call centre agents have little to no relevant information about the customer, including his/her past interactions with the business or brand.

Here, automation can play a role by helping businesses identify a customer irrespective of the channel of contact (calls, email, chats, etc.) and once identified, use known customer information (for example, language), their business profile and interaction history to not only simplify but personalise and enhance the experience.



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Moreover, by achieving automation and thereby driving aspects such as data capture and data analytics, contact centres can prepare themselves (and their employees) for future integration of AI applications, tools and platforms.

Finding your (AI) footing

The next step is to identify specific use cases where AI can make an immediate impact on both cost efficiencies and customer experience. All too often, businesses look to incorporate AI without understanding where – or how – it can benefit the business and its customers.

Today, one of the most powerful (and attainable) use cases for contact centres is the concept of a chatbot and natural language processing.

Short for chat robot, a chatbot is basically a computer program that simulates human conversation, or chat, through AI. A chatbot is programmed to work independently from a human operator and is thus used as a tool to free up costly human resources.

As technology develops and evolves, more and more businesses are incorporating chatbots in some form.

According to the Salesforce State of Service research report for 2019, 53% of service organisations expect to use chatbots within 18 months - a 136% growth rate that “foreshadows a big role for the technology in the near future.”

The report also revealed that 64% of agents with AI chatbots are able to spend most of their time solving complex problems, versus 50% of agents without AI chatbots.

When looking to incorporate chatbots into the customer experience journey, contact centres need to ensure that:

- The level of service and breadth of offering is similar to, or better than other channels (not worse).
- The chatbot is equipped to resolve queries during the chat session, rather than redirect customers to other channels for resolution.
- There is an option for the customer to transfer the chat to a live agent if needed. Once the transfer occurs, the agent should have immediate access to the transcript to understand the context and provide the best possible CX.
- Chatbots are continuously monitored and evaluated. Just like an agent, chatbots require ongoing training to drive performance improvements.

While mastering the integration of chatbots into the contact centre environment is one way for businesses to prepare for additional AI applications and use cases, introducing automation is a good starting point for many organisations.

Ultimately though, decision-makers need to ensure that any investment into technology (such as AI) produces immediate and tangible benefits for the business and its customers.

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