CCW CUSTOMER CONTACT WEEK DIGITAL

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CONTACT CENTER 2025
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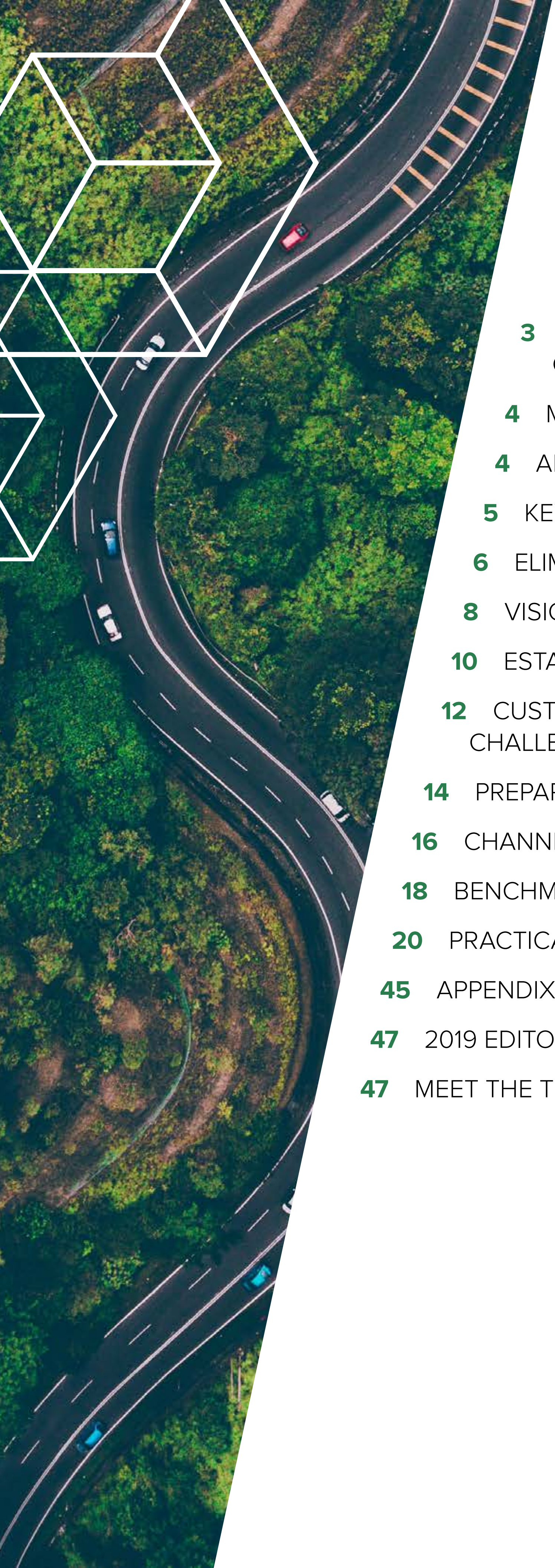


3 CCW DIGITAL MARKET STUDY: THE CONTACT CENTER OF 2025

4 METHODOLOGY & DEMOGRAPHICS

4 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

5 KEY FINDINGS

6 ELIMINATING STEREOTYPES

8 VISION FOR THE FUTURE

10 ESTABLISHING OBJECTIVES

12 CUSTOMER INTELLIGENCE CHALLENGES

14 PREPARING FOR AUTOMATION

16 CHANNELS OF THE FUTURE

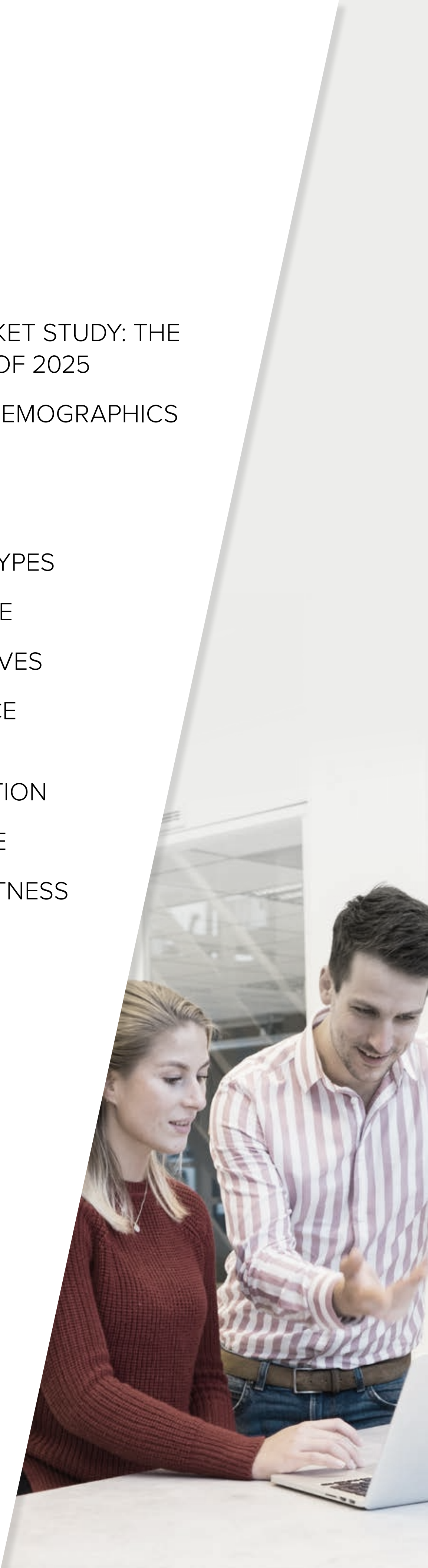
18 BENCHMARKING FOR GREATNESS

20 PRACTICALITY GUIDE

45 APPENDIX

47 2019 EDITORIAL CALENDAR

47 MEET THE TEAM



CCW DIGITAL MARKET STUDY: THE CONTACT CENTER OF 2025

If you’re not getting ahead, you’re falling behind.

We in the customer contact space know this lesson better than anyone. The majority of us play catch-up when it comes to adding contact channels, gathering customer insights, implementing new technology and empowering agents, leaving a select few to reap the rewards of customer centricity.

The proof? Just about every company in every industry trumpets the importance of the customer experience, but it is the same handful of companies — think Zappos, Apple, Amazon, Ritz-Carlton and Nordstrom — that maintain icon status.

It is time for the thousands of other hungry companies to break this cycle and break through as customer contact powerhouses. The pathway to excellence begins by preparing for the future right now.

Let this Market Study on the Contact Center of 2025 be your instrument for the future. Yes, it explores the lingering challenges and stereotypes we need to urgently address. It does not, however, dwell exclusively on the past. It also looks ahead, considering how automation, omnichannel engagement, customer data, emerging technology and cross-industry benchmarking will forever change the contact center landscape.

Use our exclusive research findings, in-depth case studies and expert commentary to pave your path to customer experience excellence.

METHODOLOGY & DEMOGRAPHICS

To collect data for this report, CCW Digital surveyed contact center, marketing, customer experience, information technology, operations and C-suite professionals from July-October 2019.

Example respondent job titles included vice president of customer service and experience, contact center manager, senior supervisor, director of client experience, group vice president of commercial operations, senior vice president of consumer marketing, executive director of sales and support, patient service consultant, associate vice president of contact center, director of global strategy and operations, head of customer care, director of user experience, chief customer officer, chief executive officer, and senior vice president of global channels.

The respondent pool encompasses organizations of all sizes and contact center dynamics.

More than 50% employ over 2500 individuals, but 10% have fewer than 250 staff members. More than 45% say they have at least 4 contact center sites, but 27% have only one.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Brian Cantor is the principal analyst and director for CCW Digital, the global online community and research hub for customer contact professionals. In his role, Brian leads all customer experience, contact center, technology and employee engagement research initiatives for CCW Digital's series of reports. CCW Digital's articles, special reports, commentaries, infographics, executive interviews, webinars and online events reach a community of over 150,000.

A passionate advocate for customer centricity, Brian regularly speaks on major CX conference agendas. He also advises organizations on customer experience and business development strategies.

KEY FINDINGS

1. The notion that they do not value customer feedback is the stereotype contact centers most hope to eliminate by 2025.
2. Other stereotypes they wish to combat include the idea that agents lack context about customers and the expectation that customers will have to endure lengthy waiting before speaking to a live agent.
3. By 2025, the majority of contact centers believe they will use “intelligent routing” to enhance the customer experience.
4. Other visions for the future include a 360-degree view of customers and an emphasis on design thinking.
5. Reducing effort will be the #1 objective for the contact center of 2025.
6. Other key performance goals will be delivering consistency across all touch points and proactively addressing customer needs.
7. Only 1% of contact centers believe their intelligence strategy is perfect. The others cite problems like data being scattered across systems, not collecting enough customer insights and not using data to personalize the experience.
8. To prepare for the impact of automation, many contact centers are beginning to train agents on “human” skills, ready agents to use new, AI-friendly systems, and adapt to changes in back-office workflow.
9. Phone calls will remain a fixture of the contact center of 2025, but other options like bots, agent-assisted messaging, live chat and social media will also factor heavily into the experience.
10. As they build their contact centers of 2025, the majority of organizations will simultaneously benchmark against direct competitors and famously customer-centric brands from other industries.

ELIMINATING STEREOTYPES

Prognosticators once predicted the demise of the contact center. Few maintain that bleak outlook.

No longer viewing the contact center as an endangered species, thought leaders and executives recognize that it will remain a fixture of the business world in 2025 — and beyond.

They do not, however, dismiss the importance of evolution. They do not believe the same shortcomings and challenges that plague the current contact center need to affect the customer engagement landscape five years from now.

To ensure contact center of 2025 is a better, more valuable component of their businesses, leaders will work to debunk several common myths and stereotypes. **Most notably, they will eradicate the concern that the contact center function does not care about customer feedback.**

CCW Digital's 2019 Consumer Preferences Survey revealed that only 11% of customers believe businesses take their feedback very seriously. Hearing that message loud and clear, **53% say it is crucial to debunk the stereotype by 2025.**

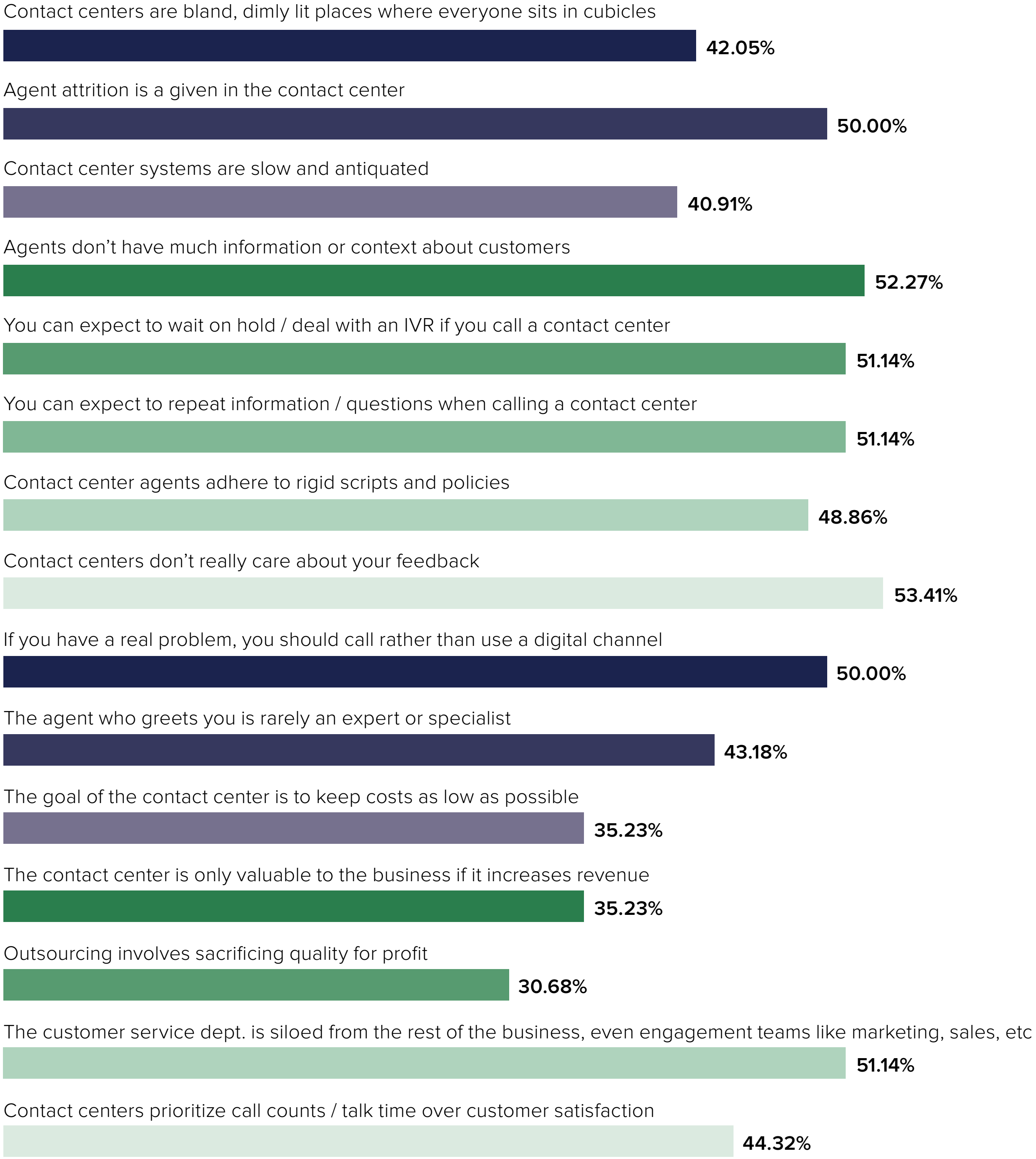
Other stereotypes and shortcomings they wish to nullify include the notion that **agents typically lack context about customers (52%)**, the **expectation that customers will wait or hit an IVR before talking to a live agent (51%)**, the **expectation that customers will need to repeat information (51%)**, the **concept of customer service being "siloed" from other departments (51%)**, the **inevitability of agent attrition (50%)** and the **idea that those with serious issues have to call (50%)**.

For all the buzz over automation, self-service and low-touch engagement, today's businesses are not ready to declare the demises of live agents or human connections. By reducing hold times and providing agents with more context (which will, in turn, prevent customers from having to repeat themselves), brands are committing to more productive, engaging conversations. They believe the contact center of 2025 will emphasize connections and not just transactions.

In rejecting the inevitability of agent attrition, half of contact centers acknowledge the value of improving the agent experience. If their belief turns into action, they will produce happier, more productive agents who can make even stronger connections with customers.

Granted, they are not dismissing the importance of the digital transformation. In declaring an aversion to the idea that digital channels are for simple issues and phone calls are for complex ones, businesses are professing their desire to make digital channels better and more comfortable for customers.

Which “contact center stereotypes” do you believe are most important to eliminate come 2025?



VISION FOR THE FUTURE

By identifying the stereotypes they plan to eliminate, businesses are saying what the contact center will *not* be in 2025.

But what *will* it be?

When they evaluate technology, consider best practices, assess trendy initiatives and pursue opportunities, contact center leaders are essentially answering this question. They are revealing what capabilities and philosophies they view as essential in the years and decades ahead.

For the greatest number of businesses, the ability to "intelligently route" customers is one such essential capability.

A whopping **60% believe the statement "we intelligently route customers based on factors like skills, urgency, lifetime value or personality" will be true for their contact center in 2025**.

Other visions for the future include a **360-degree view of customers (57%), heavy investment into design thinking (53%), high agent retention (52%)** and **completely unified contact center systems (52%)**.

Unsurprisingly, these goals for the future directly correspond with the stereotypes contact centers wish to combat.

By intelligently routing customers to loyal agents who can easily access a 360-degree view, contact centers will drive more productive conversations. The *right agents* will have the tools and insights they need to quickly and meaningfully address issues and connect with customers. Instead of asking customers to wait on hold or transfer to a specialist, the agent who picks up the phone or opens the chat will be able to solve the problem.

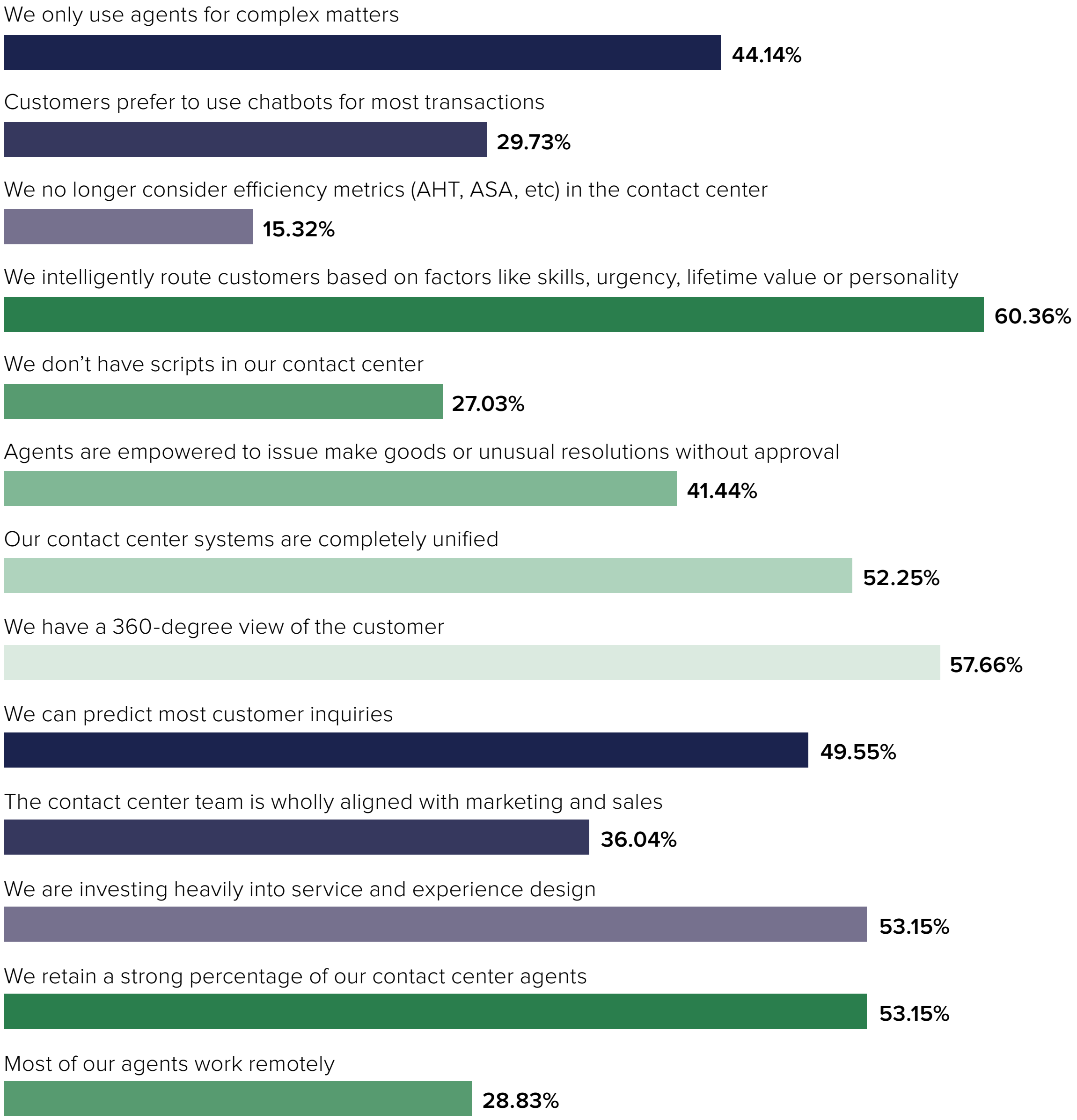
Corresponding with findings from **CCW Digital's Trends in CX Design & Strategy report,** the emphasis on design thinking is increasingly popular among contact center leaders. The emphasis makes sense.

The contact center has historically been reactive. It has responded to problems. It has adopted technology *after* recognizing issues. It has established policy and protocol from the inside-out and then adjusted only once sentiment became alarmingly negative. It has learned about agent and customer pain points *after* subjecting them to immense frustration.

This approach has yielded many of the inefficiencies and stereotypes so commonly associated with the contact center.

Design thinking directly addresses this challenge by putting purpose behind all contact center strategies and investments. When organizations build journeys that allow agents and customers to achieve what they are trying to achieve, it creates experiences that are more personal, efficient and valuable.

Which of these statements do you feel will be true of your contact center / CX function five years from now?



ESTABLISHING OBJECTIVES

Customer centricity may involve thinking beyond specific business transactions, but it does not require contact center leaders to sacrifice results. At the end of the day, their contact center teams still have to perform. They still have to deliver as much value for their customers, agents and business stakeholders as possible. They still have to achieve their objectives.

As the barometer of success, these objectives will ultimately determine how contact center leaders will invest their time, money and effort. They will dictate the best practices contact centers will embrace, the processes they will change and the technologies they will implement. They will impact whether organizations will actually debunk the aforementioned stereotypes and embrace the aforementioned vision.

For 2025, the biggest contact center objective will be **reducing effort**. Businesses rate its importance at **4.56** on a scale of 0-5, with 0 being very unimportant and 5 being very important.

Other paramount contact center objectives include **consistency across touch points (4.47), proactively resolving customer needs (4.45), collecting great insights (4.33)** and **increasing self-service usage (4.20)**.

Not simply aligned with key contact center trends — the FP3 experience, omnichannel, self-service, customer centricity — the leading objectives align with each other.

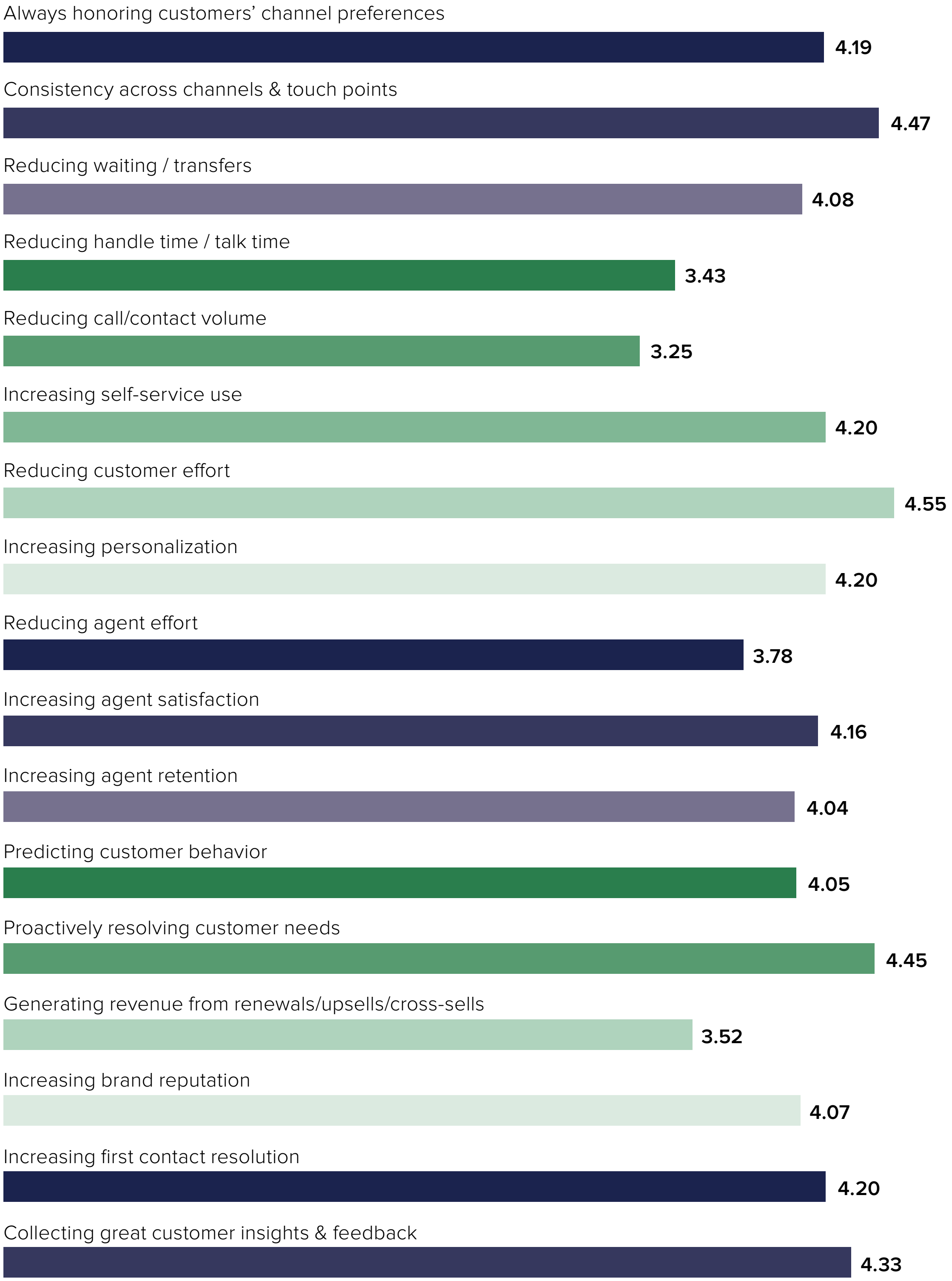
By proactively reaching out to customers, making the omnichannel experience more consistent, learning more about customers and offering self-service options, organizations will naturally reduce customer effort. This synergy is refreshing from an operational standpoint, as it means organizations will not have to choose between key objectives. Their tide of contact center investment can lift all boats.

Comparatively unimportant contact center objectives include reducing call volume (3.25), reducing handle time (3.43), and generating revenue from renewals, cross-sells or up-sells (3.52).

But while these may not rank as top *objectives*, they will very likely be realities in the contact center of 2025. If they increase proactive engagement and offer more self-service options, contact centers should expect a reduction in call volume. If they commit to reducing effort and using more customer data, they should see a decrease in AHT. Empowering agents with more customer data should also lead to more sales.

The key is that contact centers will not be *prioritizing* these outcomes. Rather than conditioning agents to focus intently on talk times and revenue, they are empowering agents to focus on the best possible experience for the customer. If that means a quick call with an upgrade offer at the end, great. If it means a lengthy call with an exclusive emphasis on service, great as well.

How important will the following contact center objectives be five years from now?



CUSTOMER INTELLIGENCE CHALLENGES

A brand cannot be customer-centric if it does not know its customers.

Customers are not confident brands have this knowledge; after all, only 11% believe organizations are taking their feedback seriously.

Organizations may not agree with an outlook so damning. They do, however, acknowledge the need to improve their customer intelligence efforts.

They identify "the contact center does not really care about feedback" as the most important stereotype to debunk in the next five years. They say "collecting great insights" will be a leading contact center objective in 2025. Only 1% of organizations, moreover, believe their customer intelligence strategy is perfect. The others acknowledge a myriad of weaknesses in how they collect, analyze and use customer data.

A problem for **47%** of organizations, **data being scattered across systems** represents the biggest intelligence challenge. As they do for so many aspects of the contact center operation, siloed and misaligned systems inhibit a successful customer data strategy.

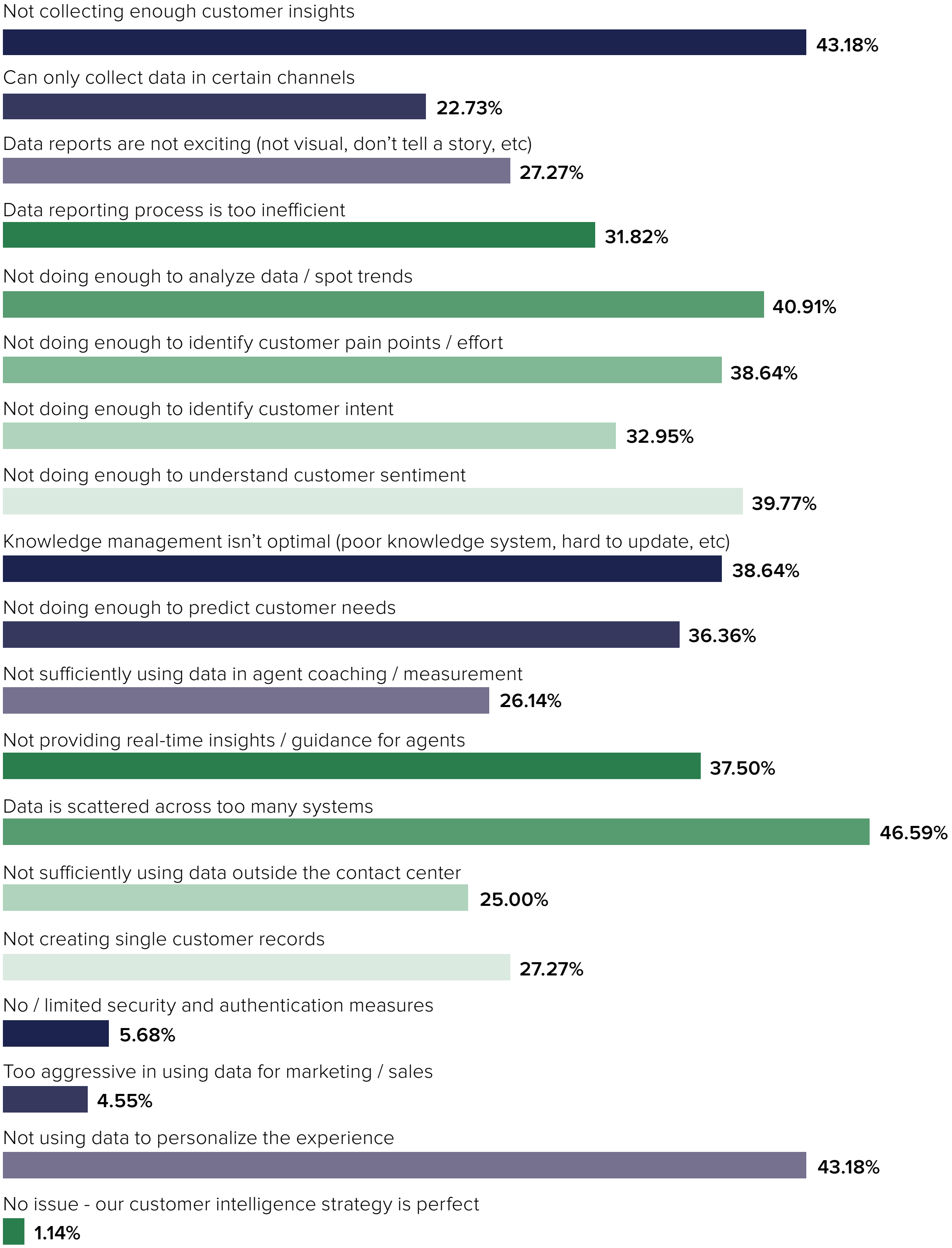
Other common customer intelligence issues include **not collecting enough data (43%), not using data to personalize the experience (43%), not doing enough data analysis (41%), not doing enough to understand customer sentiment (40%), not doing enough to identify customer pain points and effort (39%)** and **insufficient knowledge management (39%)**.

These issues confirm weakness across the entire customer intelligence process. By failing to sufficiently leverage surveys, analytics, social monitoring, behavioral data, market research and other resources, organizations are not gaining enough about their customers. More than 40% worry they do not have enough data needed to understand their customers.

Making matters worse, many lack the ability to *learn* from their data. A substantial number of organizations are blanketly struggling to analyze customer intelligence; many feel unable to assess key factors like customer sentiment and effort.

Additionally, organizations are not doing enough to make their data actionable. Customer insights empower personalization, yet many brands are not seizing that opportunity. By subjecting agents and customers to a poor knowledge management experience, roughly 40% of organizations are making it *difficult* to access relevant data during interactions.

Which would you say are the biggest WEAKNESSES about how your contact center manages customer data?



PREPARING FOR AUTOMATION

Business leaders do not question *whether* automation will impact the contact center in the coming years. They focus on *how* automation will transform the customer contact landscape.

With 2025 approaching, leaders are no longer settling for empty platitudes like "automate simple tasks so agents can focus on complex ones." They know they need to more granularly define these simple and complex tasks. More importantly, they know they need to prepare their contact centers and employees for the new, automation-driven normal.

A whopping **95% of organizations recognize the impending impact of automation**. A healthy **81% have already begun preparing their teams for the automation age**.

The most common action involves **coaching agents for more complex or "human" issues**. More than **59%** of organizations are taking this step, confirming their belief that as customers turn to self-service for simple, they will primarily seek agent support for unique or complex matters. Many agents will require new training to not only handle these more challenging issues but demonstrate more empathy and relatability.

When it comes to re-training, organizations are not simply focusing on deeper conversations. Nearly **56% say they are implementing and training agents on new systems that can better accommodate AI and automation**. Many of the most exciting engagement, desktop, CRM, routing and knowledge tools are designed to work with agent guidance; training ensures agents are making the most of the systems.

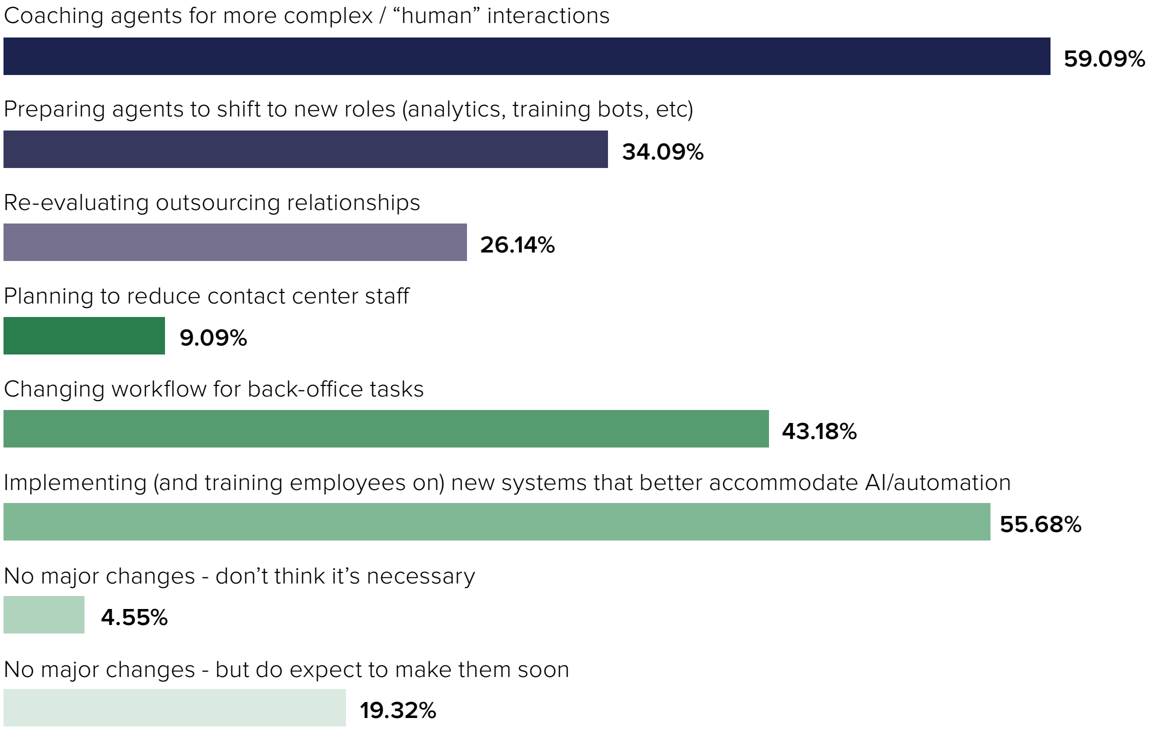
Other less common (but still widespread) forms of preparation include **changing workflow for back-office tasks (43%), preparing agents for new roles (34%)** and **re-evaluating outsourcing relationships (26%)**.

In addition to "transactional calls," many organizations strive to eliminate "non-engagement tasks" from their agents' plates. As they turn to technology for back-office work, they will want to consider which operational tasks to automate *and* what it will mean for employees' day-to-day workflow.

Organizations expect customers to increasingly solve simple tasks on their own, reserving agents for more complex interactions. It is important, however, to remember that the volume of complex tasks is comparatively small. As a result, organizations — especially ones not anticipating massive growth — may not need as many frontline agents in 2025. **Only 9%, however, are actively planning to reduce staff.**

Shifting agents to new functions, such as experience design, analytics or "bot management," is one way for contact centers to have their cake and eat it too. Re-evaluating outsourcing relationships also ties into this ambition; companies, as an example, may choose to exclusively outsource digital engagement while keeping phone support (and as many phone agents as possible) in-house.

How are you preparing your contact center/CX team for the rise of automation?



CHANNELS OF THE FUTURE

Years ago, the industry adopted the “contact center” term to acknowledge that customer engagement is not restricted to the phone. In practice, however, phone remains the cornerstone of the contact center. It is the most popular contact channel — and one of the only media in which most brands offer a “complete” support experience.

The phone will not disappear in 2025; some organizations, in fact, believe live voice interactions will become *more* important. Many contact centers do nonetheless expect the promise of a “digital transformation” to come to fruition.

AI is leading the charge; **84% of businesses believe chat and messaging bots will become more important in five years**. Only 3% believe this form of communication will become less important.

Agent-assisted digital interactions are also on the rise. Nearly **81% expect messaging to become more important** (only 4% expect it to become less important), and **76% say the same of live chat** (with merely 6% anticipating a dip in relevance).

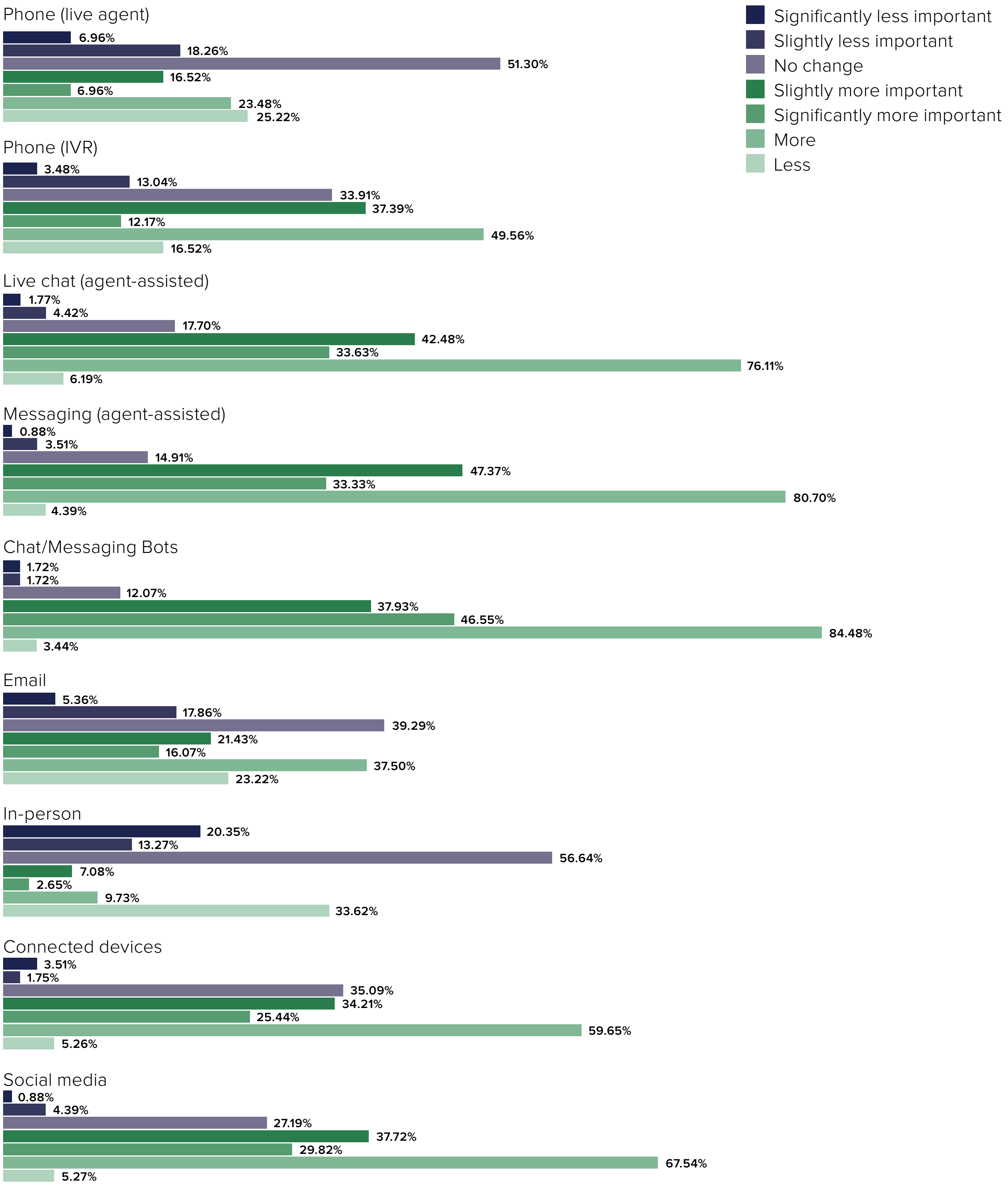
Social media (68% say more important, 5% say less important) and **connected devices (60% say more important**, 5% say less important) are also on the rise.

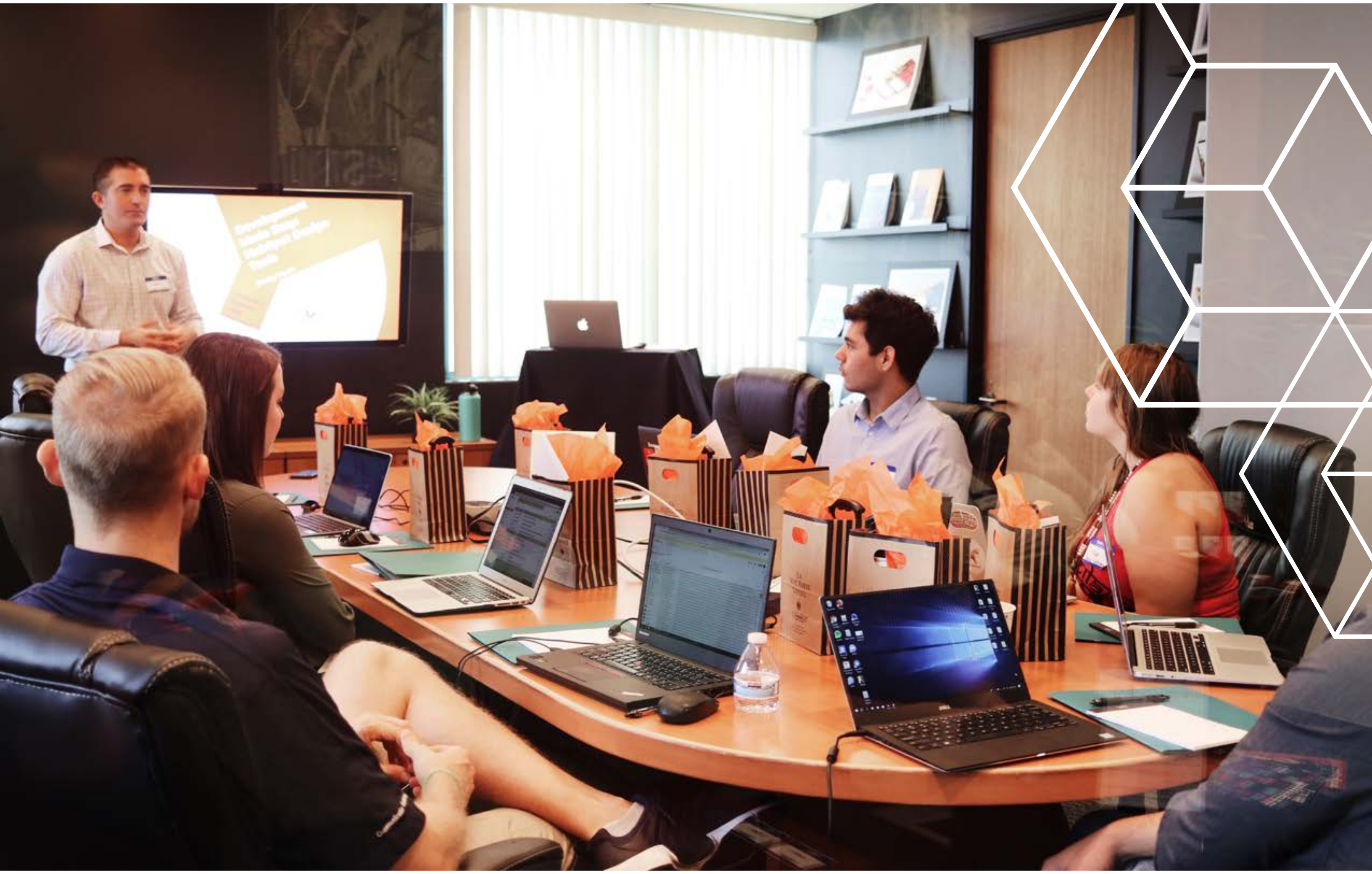
So what about phone? As a general contact option, it will remain viable. Interest is, however, beginning to skew toward *automated* voice interactions. Nearly **50% of companies, in fact, say the IVR will become more important** over the next few years. Only 17% expect its relevance to decline.

Roughly (23%) of organizations expect live agent phone calls to become more important; 25% anticipate a decrease in importance.

Granted, the numbers *hardly* spell the end of the agent-assisted phone call. Phone is by far the most important channel in the status quo, and 75% of companies ultimately expect it to maintain or gain significance in the years ahead. Interest in the channel may be cooling, but it is not disappearing. Phone calls will factor heavily into the contact center of 2025.

Over the next five years, will these channels become more or less important to your customer experience process?





BENCHMARKING FOR GREATNESS

Do you benchmark against your closest competitors or the broader marketplace? The question will be an important one going into 2025.

On the one hand, brands understand the importance of "competing on the customer experience." They know that customers are comparing their offering to their *last great experience*, even if that experience took place with a vastly different company in a vastly different industry.

On the other hand, brands understand the importance of tailoring experiences to their own customers and issues. They know the risk in attempting to apply generic "best practices" to their specific industry.

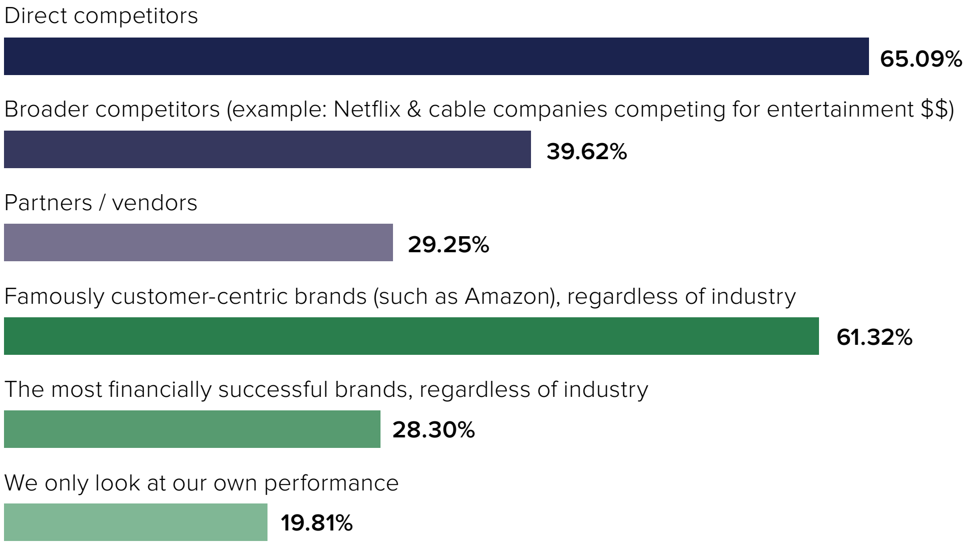
Seeing the merit in both approaches, the majority of businesses are unwilling to choose.

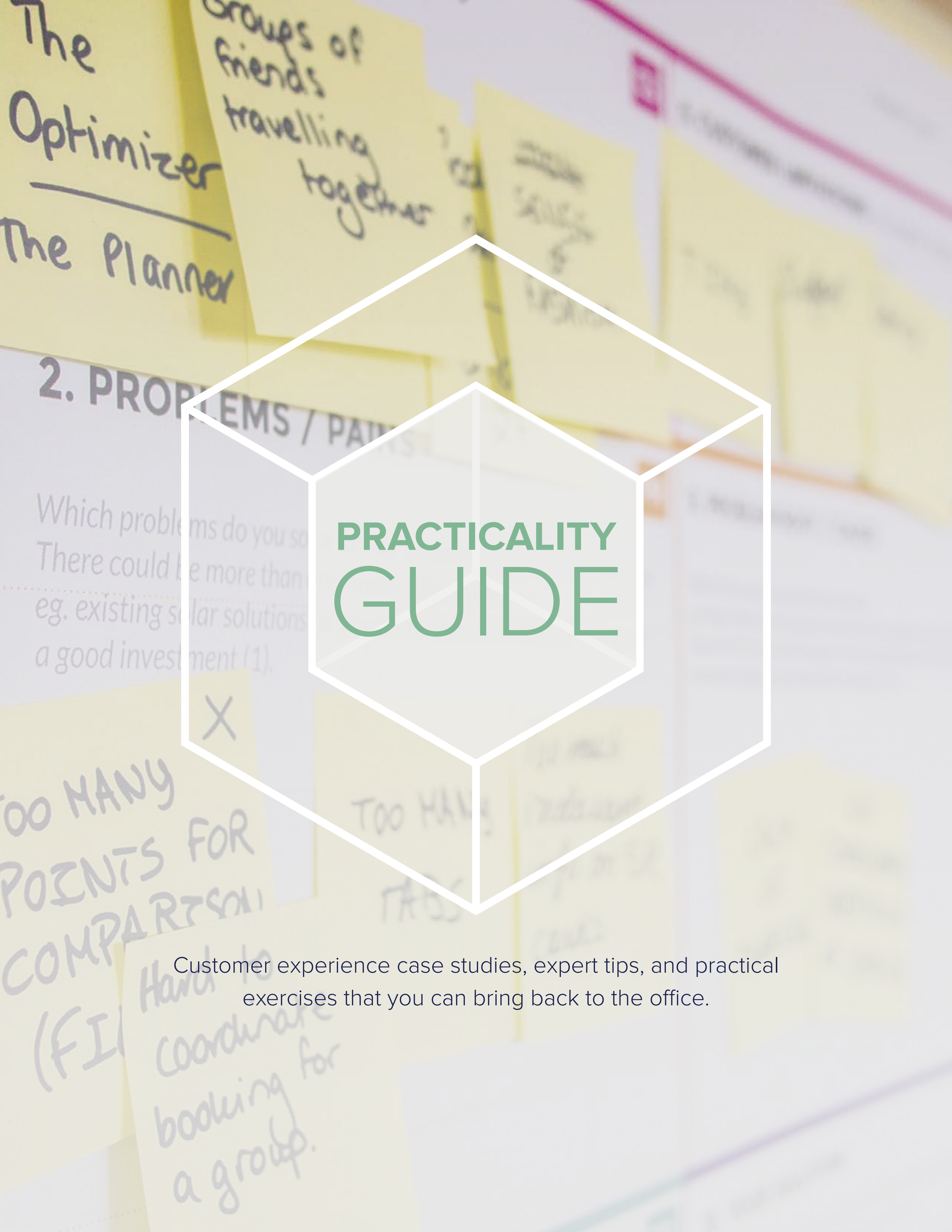
Just over **65% of businesses benchmark their customer experience against direct competitors**. More than **61%, meanwhile, benchmark against famously customer-centric brands from any industry**.

Broader competitors (such as Netflix and cable companies competing for entertainment dollars) are **a benchmarking option for 39% of companies. More than 29% benchmark against partners**.

Granted, not *everyone* looks beyond their organization's walls. Nearly 20% of contact centers *only* focus on their own performance.

When benchmarking your contact center/CX performance, which of the following do you SERIOUSLY consider?




The Optimizer
The Planner
Groups of friends travelling together
2. PROBLEMS / PAINS
Which problems do you so
There could be more than
eg. existing solar solutions
a good investment (1).
TOO MANY POINTS FOR COMPARISON
Hard to coordinate booking for a group.
TOO MANY TABS

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Customer experience case studies, expert tips, and practical exercises that you can bring back to the office.

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4 CONTACT CENTER A.I. MYTHS THAT NEED BUSTING

Contact centers have come a long way from where they were just a few decades ago. What began as local branches fielding local calls has transformed on a global scale. National and international teams now field multichannel requests through a combination of agent interaction and automation. With the space innovating and accelerating, what advancements will there be in a few years' time, by 2025?

The answer: breakthroughs in artificial intelligence, specifically conversational AI. Gartner predicts that conversational AI will become the most important, high-level imperative for businesses over the next 10 years. Conversational AI addresses business objectives—Forrester predicts it will save businesses $8 billion by 2022. Conversational AI also meets customer experience objectives. Over 70 percent of customer experience interactions will involve technology like machine learning applications, chatbots or mobile messaging by 2022.

Many contact centers already have artificial intelligence in place with chatbots or virtual assistants. And those solutions work—in today's world. But are these solutions conversational and able to serve the customer and the company of tomorrow? To build tomorrow's contact center, companies need to reevaluate the solutions they have in place today.

Here are four common myths about existing AI solutions—and takeaways on if they are future-ready or a relic of the past.

1. I'VE GOT AI—CHECK OUT MY CHATBOT.

"Chat" is at the heart of what chatbots should do: carry out a conversation with customers. But think about it—whenever you have a conversation with someone, do they provide three different answers and let you pick your favorite one? Of course not. Your conversation partner understands what you are saying and then responds accordingly.

Over two-thirds of companies already use chatbots. But unintelligent chatbots don't make smart use of artificial intelligence. They weren't designed to carry out real, human conversations. These bots have limited scope, whether it's their intent, language understanding or depth of knowledge base. And unintelligent chatbots end up frustrating customers—almost half of users think they give too many unhelpful responses. Customers get trapped in directed dialogues, hoping they can pick the perfect combination of alternate responses so they can finally get their problem solved.

The takeaway: Chatbots absolutely have a place in customer service—one-third of customers prefer chatbots for customer service, according to CCW. But execution matters—dumb bots in place today won't set your business up for success tomorrow. Conversational AI is a smarter way to implement chatbots. It integrates with knowledge bases, understands context and intent through Natural Language Understanding (NLU), and can handle multiple requests at once while personalizing each response. Chatbots can also be used in a sales context to support buyers at any stage of their journey. Letting customers naturally respond to a sales promotion or a friendly "We're here to help!" message on the website provides a more seamless experience and routes customers to the appropriate prompt or agent.

2. VOICE ISN'T RELEVANT FOR AI.

With the advent of digital channels, you might think voice is going out of fashion and not part of the contact center of the future. But the channel is still prevalent in many contact centers. In fact, voice was the number one channel for investment focus in 2018, per CCW. And conversational AI is already being used in voice interactions with customers—look no further than the virtual assistants on customers' smartphones or the smart speakers in customers' living rooms.

Voice is an essential part of delivering a good conversational AI experience—it lets the customer feel like they're having a conversation. According to Capgemini, 37 percent of customers prefer voice assistants because it feels like a more natural way to interact. In addition, 35 percent prefer voice assistants because it feels more like speaking to a real person. Voice delivers on business objectives, too—some recent studies show that on average, a brand would improve by 19 percentage points when they provide a personal voice assistant.

The takeaway: Voice is back and with conversational AI, it's better than ever. Using voice as a channel for conversational AI contact center interactions provides the emotional connection that customers are looking for. It's technology that customers don't have to learn, because the conversational AI is learning from them. Because voice is still so popular, conversational AI can learn from a massive data set of spoken customer interactions, then integrate with the digital channels customers regularly use. Plus, conversational AI can understand multiple languages and dialects, as well as intent and context.

3. AI IS EXPENSIVE AND TIME-CONSUMING TO IMPLEMENT.

According to IDC, worldwide spending on cognitive and AI systems will surpass $77 billion by 2022. While that level of investment could cause some sticker shock, consider the ROI conversational AI can deliver.

Because conversational AI is channel-agnostic, the logic used to build an interaction in one channel can be repurposed in another channel, with little to no additional development costs. For example, if you build conversational AI into your IVR, you can convert the voice prompts into text prompts without having to start from scratch. These efficiencies drive cost savings and rapid ROI.

A conversational AI platform also puts you in control of the AI engine, letting you adapt to changing requirements. For example, if you introduce a new bill pay option in your IVR, you might glean from the conversation data that customers are still escalating to a live agent because they have questions about adding a new payment method. You can then train the AI to respond to mentions of payments or payment terms by explaining how to add a new payment method within the IVR. Conversational AI could also predict that if you introduced that new bill pay option and there's a high volume of calls being routed to the contact center, it's most likely because of customer confusion.

The takeaway: Don't be intimidated by the apparent high price tag of AI. Contact centers can build upon the logic they already have in today's IVRs and chatbots, and expand upon it in a conversational AI platform.

4. AI EXPERTISE IN CONTACT CENTERS IS HARD TO COME BY.

Contact center executives all agree transforming contact centers and adding technology is a must. But choosing how to adapt is challenging with the confusing terms and huge variety of vendor solutions. Forty percent of senior business and technology decision-makers believe a clear, strategic commitment to AI from senior management is an important factor for success. In addition, 15 percent of decision-makers believe bringing in the right partners and supplies is animportant **success factor**.

To get started with conversational AI, choose strong initial use cases and partners that know how to implement them. While expectations for AI can be sky-high, bring them back down to earth by solving today's problems to create quick wins, like call deflection.

For example, 35 percent of consumers say they woulduse **chatbots** to get detailed answers or explanations. If customers commonly call your contact center for help about installing their set-top box, find a platform that lets you easily adapt the conversational AI voice flow for a text bot. Pivot customers to the text channel and send them a link to a quick-start installation guide. You can do this without losing thecontext of the conversation.

The smart virtual assistant understands multiple intents and phrasing (i.e. "I need help with my set-top box" or "My set-top box isn't working") and still routes to the same prompt. Conversational AI also provides a natural and humanlike conversation style. Instead of a set of options, customers can respond as they normally would in a conversation.

The takeaway: Strong platforms that leverage existing investments, plus the right technology, help you overcome any AI talent gap. Platform capabilities like APIs and integrations ensure ease of deployment in use cases like this. Because conversational AI can integrate with multiple channels and data sources, there's no intensive development required to get started with AI.

CONVERSATIONAL AI IN ACTION

So, what does conversational AI done well look like? Let's take an example. One global consumer electronics company found that many of the calls into its speech-enabled IVR were increasingly being transferred to live agents. This frustrated both business and consumer customers. There had to be a better way, and there was, with conversational AI.

The company embarked on a pilot to implement a cloud-based conversational AI platform. Delivered in under 12 weeks, the conversational AI was able to provide more convenient and predictive conversational self-service. Customers could freely speak instead of having to answer from a set of prompts. Based on customers' responses, whether it was about bill pay or tech support, the conversational AI understood their intent and resolved their queries quickly with limited escalations to live agents.

The results: The company dramatically improved its call deflection and improved customer experiences. At thesame time, it ramped other projects that harnessed these customer insights to further automate and personalize.

CONCLUSION

Many contact centers already have artificial intelligence in place. But to be future-ready, AI will need to be conversational, adaptable, and seamless across channels. Get smart for 2025, and make sure your contact center can deliver an experience worth talking about with conversational AI.

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November 4, 2019

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CONTACT CENTER 2025
A ROADMAP

DECEMBER

CCW Online: Contact Center 2025 – A Roadmap
December 3-4, 2019

Register for FREE ▸

MEET THE TEAM

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