

High-tech, human touch:

Why human contact center agents
Are ai's perfect partners

Introduction

The promise (and threat) of automation

For years, the dominant narrative in customer service has been clear: AI is coming for contact center jobs. Headlines predicted bots would replace agents. Analysts projected deep workforce cuts. And to a degree, the numbers support that outlook: *AI adoption has already led to fewer hires and leaner teams.*

But is this truly the end of the human agent?

Automation alone isn't the answer

The reality is more complex and far more promising. Rather than replace human agents, AI is redefining their roles, making them more specialized, more strategic, and more critical than ever before.

The agents who remain will be the essential bridge between automated efficiency and human understanding. They'll handle the nuanced, emotionally charged, or high-stakes interactions that bots can't resolve: issues that demand empathy, creativity, and sound judgment.

For contact center leaders, the path forward is clear: invest in human agents who can work alongside AI to deliver smarter, more personalized customer experiences. In a world where CX drives loyalty and growth, it's not about how much you automate; it's how well you balance technology with human connection.

The current state of contact centers

Contact centers, rewired

Contact centers have come a long way from their origins as voice-only customer service hubs. Today's landscape spans a growing array of channels, including phone, email, chat, social media, video, and self-service tools, all shaped by rising customer expectations for speed, personalization, and seamless experiences.

At the center of this transformation is the rapid rise of automation. Over the past decade, chatbots and virtual assistants have become increasingly capable and widespread. Their strengths lie in efficiency: handling repetitive questions, completing basic transactions, and offering 24/7 availability without added labor costs. This trend is only accelerating. **Gartner** predicts that by 2027, chatbots will become the primary customer service channel for 25% of organizations. For many businesses, the appeal is clear: reduce response times, increase coverage, and lower operational costs.

Getting the balance right

However, the most forward-thinking companies aren't pursuing automation at all costs; they're building smarter strategies that pair AI with human insight.

These leaders understand that while bots are ideal for straightforward tasks, it's the human agents who create the defining moments that shape customer loyalty.

By reserving complex, emotional, or high-stakes interactions for well-trained professionals, they turn routine support into relationship-building opportunities.

And the need for human expertise isn't going away anytime soon. Despite recent AI advances, today's systems still face serious limitations. Most struggle to grasp context, pick up on emotional cues, or make nuanced decisions in ambiguous situations. Bots may be able to respond quickly, but they can't replicate the empathy, intuition, or judgment that customers rely on during more sensitive or complicated interactions.

In this collaborative environment, **success doesn't hinge on replacing agents; it depends on deploying each resource, human or machine, where it brings the most value.** Organizations that find this balance are setting a new standard for customer service where technology handles the predictable, and people shine where it matters most.



Challenging the “total replacement” ideology

Why customers still prefer humans

The assumption that AI will eventually replace human agents in contact centers mirrors a familiar pattern of overconfidence in automation. But as some high-profile cases have shown, that assumption doesn't always hold up in practice.

A telling example comes from Klarna, the Swedish fintech company. In 2022, Klarna laid off 700 employees and fully automated its customer service operations with AI. The company praised the cost savings, **claiming a \$10 million reduction in marketing expenses, and declared that:**

“AI can already do all of the jobs that we, as humans, do.”

But by 2025, Klarna had reversed course. Customer service quality had declined, brand integrity suffered, and the company began rehiring humans to restore the trust and nuance that AI couldn't replicate. Klarna's CEO publicly admitted that cost-cutting had been over-prioritized, noting that **“what you end up having is lower quality.”**

Klarna isn't alone. A recent survey found that 55% of business leaders regretted replacing humans with AI, underscoring a growing recognition: **AI is a powerful tool, but not a complete substitute for human judgment, empathy, or creativity.**

In contact centers, a similar lesson is unfolding. While automation can handle routine tasks, complete replacement of human agents remains both unlikely and unwise. While consumers are generally comfortable using chatbots for simple tasks, they consistently prefer human support for emotional, high-stakes, or complex issues.

According to Calabrio's State of the Contact Center 2025 report, 20% of contact centers say AI's challenges outweigh its benefits, and 61% of contact center managers report a rise in difficult customer interactions, the kind of conversations where a bot simply won't suffice. ***Empathy is cited as the most lacking skill among AI agents, yet it's also one of the most critical, especially when customer expectations are higher than ever.***

The high cost of over-automation

Over-automation can carry hidden costs that often surface in the form of customer dissatisfaction, missed opportunities, and eroded brand trust. When organizations rely too heavily on AI, they can experience higher escalation rates, longer handle times for complex issues, and a decline in service quality for non-routine interactions.

This isn't just theory:

64% of customers say they would prefer companies not use AI for customer service, according to Gartner. A separate study from Acquire BPO found that 70% of consumers consider switching brands after just one bad experience with an AI chatbot, and consumers are 2.5 times more positive about their experience with human agents than with bots. Half of consumers surveyed expressed negative feelings about companies leaning more heavily on AI, citing the lack of a personal touch, reduced accuracy, and longer resolution times as major concerns.

Redefining the agent role, not replacing it

As McKinsey notes, contact centers are now at a crossroads: companies are rethinking how they deploy AI, shifting away from an automation-first mindset and toward a more deliberate blend of digital tools and human expertise. **This collaborative approach focuses on optimizing service outcomes, not just reducing costs,** by assigning the right resources to the right moments in the customer journey. Rather than trying to replace agents, leading organizations are investing in technologies and training that elevate their human teams to deliver higher-value, emotionally intelligent service.

Ultimately, the real opportunity lies not in replacing agents but in reimagining how they create value. As Klarna and others have learned, removing humans from the equation can erode quality, trust, and brand loyalty. The agents who remain are not becoming obsolete; they are becoming more essential. In the collaborative model, they take on complex, emotionally nuanced work, using AI as a tool rather than a substitute to deliver the kind of service that builds lasting customer relationships.



The new value proposition of human agents

Emotional intelligence is the new competitive advantage

As automation takes over routine transactions, the role of the human agent is undergoing a transformation. No longer defined by scripts and speed, **agents are becoming the emotional core of the customer experience**, delivering the kind of high-touch, high-empathy service that machines still can't match.

Emotional intelligence has emerged as a critical skill in this new era. While AI can simulate politeness, it struggles to perceive tone, interpret emotion, or respond with genuine care. Human agents, by contrast, can pick up on subtle cues, adapt their communication in real time, and recognize needs that go unspoken. They can deescalate tense moments, offer empathy, and create a sense of connection that builds lasting loyalty. According to Salesforce, 73% of customers expect companies to understand their unique needs and expectations, a level of understanding that requires not just data, but human intuition and presence.

Human agents also excel in situations where creativity, judgment, and flexibility are required. Rather than just following workflows, they think critically and tailor responses to complex issues. In sectors like healthcare, finance, and telecommunications, where nuance and ambiguity are part of daily operations, this ability to navigate gray areas is indispensable.

Agents as value drivers

In an age where authenticity drives loyalty, agents have become powerful brand ambassadors. They represent company values, convey genuine enthusiasm, and leave customers with memorable, human-centered experiences. **The emotional bonds agents create drive measurable outcomes: emotionally connected customers have a 306% higher lifetime value compared to those who are merely satisfied.**

All of this reflects a deeper shift:

the agent role is no longer a cost to be minimized but a value driver to be cultivated. Today's most effective agents combine emotional intelligence, technical fluency, and business awareness.

They're essential in not just solving problems, but retaining customers, deepening relationships, and shaping the brand experience in ways AI alone cannot. Organizations that recognize and invest in this evolving skill set don't just boost daily performance; they extend Employee Lifetime Value. The longer and more meaningfully an agent contributes, the more value they create across the entire customer journey.

The specialized future of contact center roles

New roles for a new era

As contact centers evolve, so too do the roles within them. The shift toward AI-augmented service is giving rise to specialized positions designed to meet new challenges and unlock greater value. Experience Consultants now guide complex, multi-touch customer journeys. AI Supervisors (human roles focused on overseeing automation) monitor and fine-tune automated systems. Solution Designers craft personalized support paths, while Relationship Managers and Brand Ambassadors ensure every interaction reflects the company's values and voice.

This transformation is already underway. According to McKinsey, many organizations have begun reskilling parts of their workforce as part of their AI deployments, and most expect to expand these efforts in the years ahead. This reflects a growing understanding that AI adoption isn't just about technology; it's about people, too.

Tomorrow's "augmented agent" must be more than efficient; they must be emotionally intelligent, tech-savvy, and strategically minded.

These professionals blend advanced communication skills with critical thinking and digital literacy. They apply business acumen in real time, making judgment calls that balance customer satisfaction with operational goals.

As AI takes over routine tasks and data retrieval, it frees up agents to focus on edge cases, emotional moments, and complex problem-solving. Human supervisors are more essential than ever in this new model. While AI can deliver real-time suggestions or flag performance trends, it is the human supervisors who provide the context, coaching, and strategic insight that turn data into development.

They understand individual agents' strengths, communication styles, and growth areas in a way AI cannot. They guide training programs, offer tailored feedback, and help agents navigate complex scenarios that fall outside scripted workflows.

Just as importantly, they act as cultural stewards, reinforcing the values, tone, and empathy that define a brand's customer experience. In a contact center powered by both technology and human judgment, it is the supervisors who ensure that the people behind the platforms continue to grow, adapt, and thrive.



Rethinking metrics for relationship success

As these roles evolve, so do the metrics used to measure success. The industry's leading organizations are shifting away from legacy KPIs like average handle time and first contact resolution. Instead, they are prioritizing relationship-focused outcomes. According to Zendesk, the top customer experience KPIs in 2025 are net promoter score, customer satisfaction, and churn rate, all indicators of long-term trust and emotional connection, not just operational efficiency.

This shift in metrics is mirrored by a shift in how contact center talent is developed and rewarded. Career paths in the contact center now extend far beyond traditional supervisor tracks. Agents are branching into roles focused on experience design, AI oversight, customer retention, and success management. Compensation structures are evolving, rewarding agents for outcomes that reflect deeper business value: loyalty, retention, and brand advocacy.

In this context, Employee Lifetime Value is emerging as a powerful leading indicator. While metrics like NPS and churn help you understand what has happened, ELTV signals how well you are positioned for future performance. When organizations invest in agent growth, satisfaction, and retention, they don't just reduce turnover; they unlock stronger service continuity, deeper customer relationships, and ultimately, higher Customer Lifetime Value.

This shift represents more than just a change in performance metrics. It's a redefinition of customer service itself.

No longer seen as a cost center, the contact center is fast becoming a strategic asset, powered by human expertise and enhanced by intelligent systems.



The future-ready contact center playbook

As the role of the contact center agents evolves, organizations must move with intention, balancing automation with human insight, and upgrading both technology and talent in tandem. The most successful teams aren't just reacting to change; they're architecting it.

This playbook outlines the core steps every forward-thinking contact center should take to build a future-ready operation centered on meaningful, efficient, and emotionally intelligent service.

Step 1: Map and analyze the customer journey	Understanding where human empathy adds value and where automation can accelerate results is the foundation of a modern CX strategy. • Identify high-impact emotional touchpoints where human agents drive loyalty. • Evaluate routine interactions for automation opportunities. • Segment customer journeys by complexity and preferred communication channel. The goal is not to automate everything, but to optimize every moment.
Step 2: Upskill for the collaborative era	Tomorrow's agents will need more than product knowledge. They'll need emotional intelligence, AI fluency, and business savvy. • Develop training programs that build advanced communication, problem-solving, and technical literacy. • Teach agents how to interpret AI-generated insights and apply them with human judgment. • Reinforce adaptability and resilience as core competencies.
Step 3: Evolve hiring to match the new role	Modern agents are problem-solvers, not script followers. Recruitment must reflect that. • Prioritize candidates with high learning agility, empathy, and critical thinking. • Test for collaborative skills and comfort with digital tools during the hiring process. • Align your recruitment messaging with the elevated expectations of the role. The best agents aren't just good with people; they're also curious, flexible, and tech-aware.
Step 4: Invest in human-centric technology	AI should support, not replace, the human workforce. • Deploy AI assistants to provide real-time guidance during live conversations. • Use smart knowledge management to streamline access to resources. • Leverage predictive analytics to anticipate needs and surface insights. • Invest in coaching and collaboration tools that accelerate development and improve team performance.
Step 5: Lead with intentional change management	Technology alone doesn't drive transformation; people do. That means change must be intentional, inclusive, and well-communicated. • Involve agents in workflow and tool design to ensure usability and buy-in. • Communicate a clear, compelling vision of the future. • Celebrate early wins, provide continuous support, and update success metrics to match the new priorities.
Step 6: Empower supervisors as change leaders	Supervisors sit at the center of transformation. They coach agents, interpret insights, enforce quality, and carry culture forward. The success of any technology or training initiative often depends on their leadership. • Involve supervisors early in strategy and system design. • Train them to coach with AI insights while preserving human nuance. • Give them tools to monitor both agent performance and emotional health. • Recognize and reward supervisory leadership as a core driver of employee and customer success.

Measuring success in the human-bot collaborative model

The CX success scorecard for the human + AI era

As contact centers shift from traditional models to collaborative ecosystems, performance metrics must evolve alongside them. It's no longer enough to track speed and volume. True success in this new paradigm is measured by the quality of the customer relationship and the long-term impact of every interaction.

This scorecard outlines the five core dimensions leaders should measure to capture the full value of human-AI collaboration.

Category	Why it matters	Key metrics	What it reveals
Journey Effort: How Easy Is It to Get Help?	Measure how smoothly and efficiently customers can move through support experiences across all channels.	- Customer Effort Score (CES) - Channel Containment Rate - Resolution Time by Channel Type - Bot Deflection vs. Escalation Rate	Whether automation is improving or complicating support flows, and how supervisors are identifying journey friction points and coaching agents through high-impact touchpoints.
Resolution Quality: Is the Problem Actually Solved?	Fast answers mean little if they aren't the right answers.	- First Contact Resolution (FCR) - Repeat Contact Rate - Agent/AI Collaboration Rate - Issue Reclassification/Transfer Frequency	The strength of the human-AI handoff, agent decision-making, and the supervisor's ability to reinforce resolution quality through targeted coaching and escalation oversight.
Emotional Impact: How Do Customers Feel?	Customer perception has a direct influence on loyalty, retention, and word-of-mouth.	- Net Promoter Score (NPS) - Customer Satisfaction (CSAT) - Sentiment Analysis (via voice/text AI) - Complaint-to-Compliment Ratio	Whether agents and bots are creating emotionally resonant experiences, and how supervisors shape tone, empathy, and response strategy through real-time feedback and mentoring.
Relationship Value: Are We Building Long-Term Loyalty?	Sustainable success depends on deep, lasting connections, not just quick fixes.	- Customer Churn Rate - Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) - Retention After Support Interaction - Cross-sell/Upsell Conversion	How service quality translates to sustained customer value, and how supervisors support agents in fostering trust, deepening engagement, and personalizing interactions.
Workforce Performance: Are Agents Thriving in Their Evolving Roles?	Employee experience is directly linked to customer experience.	- Agent Engagement & Retention - Coaching Time per Month - AI Tool Adoption Rate - Development Progression (skills matrix)	Whether your workforce is equipped to succeed in a hybrid model, and how supervisors drive engagement, adoption, and growth through consistent leadership and coaching. Higher agent engagement and development directly impact Employee Lifetime Value, making workforce performance a strategic lever, not just a support function.

Rethinking ROI in the collaborative model

Traditional contact center ROI focused narrowly on reducing cost per contact. But in a collaborative model, value comes from efficiency and effectiveness.

Superior human-bot collaboration drives:

- Higher NPS and loyalty
- Increased lifetime value
- Reduced support costs from better first-contact resolution
- Greater employee retention and development

Leaders who embrace a multidimensional approach to measurement will be best positioned to continuously refine their strategy and create a truly differentiated customer experience.

Conclusion: Building the future around human connection

Throughout this exploration, one truth has become clear:

The future of contact centers doesn't lie in choosing between humans and bots; it lies in orchestrating the best of both.

Automation will continue to drive speed and scale, but it's the human moments that define customer loyalty, brand trust, and long-term value.

The organizations that lead in this new era will be those that:

- Use automation to handle the routine and reserve humans for meaningful interactions
- Invest deeply in developing agents' emotional intelligence, creativity, and critical thinking
- Redefine performance metrics to measure relationships, not just resolution times
- Foster cultures where empathy, adaptability, and customer advocacy thrive
- View service not as a cost center, but as a strategic differentiator

For contact center leaders, the opportunity is now. Begin by auditing your current experience, aligning technology with human strengths, and crafting a roadmap that empowers your people while scaling your capabilities.

The contact center of the future will be built around augmented human agents: professionals equipped with intelligent tools and elevated by purpose. Their ability to understand, adapt, and connect won't just enhance support; it will set new standards for customer experience.

In a world increasingly driven by algorithms, human connection is your most irreplaceable asset. The companies that embrace this will not only stand apart, but stand ahead.

Ready to future-proof your contact center?

The most valuable technology investment you can make isn't just in automation; it's in the people who power it. By focusing on Employee Lifetime Value (ELTV), you turn retained agents into strategic assets who drive loyalty, efficiency, and long-term growth.

Contact us to learn how we help organizations like yours build high-impact, future-ready agent teams.

About Elvee

Elvee is a revolutionary employee experience platform transforming contact centers into hubs of growth, engagement, and success. By merging artificial intelligence (AI) with emotional intelligence (EQ), **Elvee** empowers managers with tools and insights to elevate employee motivation and performance. Achieving over 90% accuracy in predicting workforce risks, **Elvee** helps reduce attrition and fosters stronger connections and team dynamics. This enables organizations to enhance Employee Lifetime Value (ELTV), drive Customer Lifetime Value (CLTV), and achieve sustainable success through effective leadership.



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