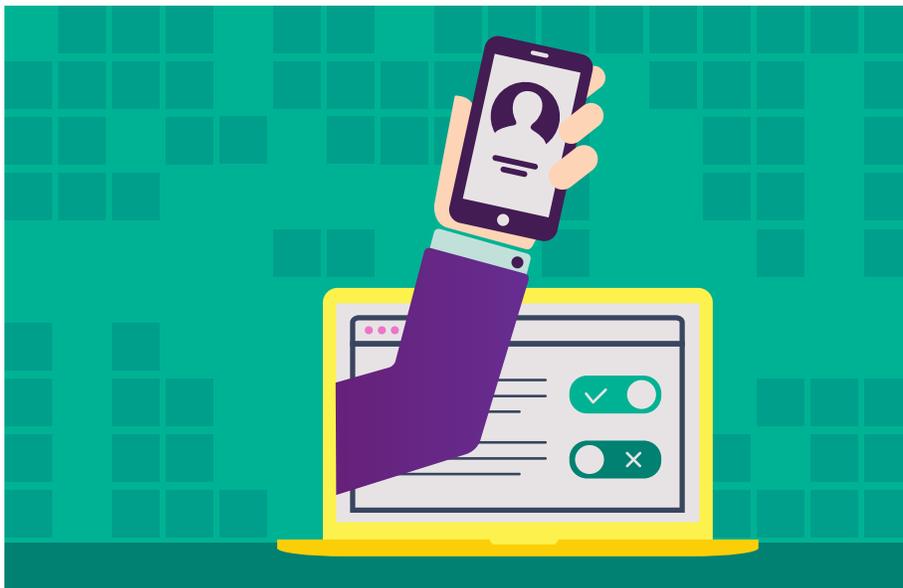


# ARE YOU READY, WILLING AND ABLE FOR DIGITAL ACCESS?

Contact types must be evaluated before they can be automated.

BY KATHLEEN M. PETERSON, POWERHOUSE CONSULTING



**R**eady, willing and able is a self-explanatory idiom that describes an enthusiastic, well-prepared and eager response to change. Changes are abundant as we continue to move from 20th century approaches to the 21st in contact center management, infrastructure and technology. All indicators are contact centers must get serious about digital readiness that supports access to services across multiple channels.

We are nearly 20 years into the 21st century and one is led to believe that contact centers are bastions of advanced technology. AI (artificial intelligence) is thrown around as if it is the second coming and works for every conceivable situation. All I see is that AI is

an IVR that talks. I say “talks” deliberately because I am not sure how well it listens. If only we could record the front end of the “virtual agent” interface, listen to interactions with “bots,” and hear callers responding to the digitized human voice with increasing frustration because they cannot be understood or identified and hence routed. Who among us hasn’t yelled at one of these interfaces? This is a voice whose cadence cannot change, who has no ability to “build rapport,” and who repeatedly flunks the self-service test.

I recently encountered such a situation after making a major technology purchase from a very advanced and well-known provider. This was a large computer, roughly

30x20 inches; it was not necessarily heavy, just awkward to carry out through the mall. The geniuses offered to bring it out the back door for me. Great, thanks! All I had to do was drive to the back of the building and call them. The fellow gave me a card with calling instructions that said, “Just say returning customer.” Well, guess what? The “botmobile” (my nickname for bots) did not recognize what I was saying and asked me if I wanted to schedule an appointment... repeatedly. Meanwhile I am standing by a loading dock at the back of a building after dark in freezing cold. I became increasingly resentful as I was left to simply wait until someone realized I had not called! After about 10 minutes, I drove back to the front, parked the car, went back into the mall, back to the store, and reported my experience. Here I was back in the store asking them to (please) go and open the door. If I do say so myself, I did this with a surprising amount of restraint. I have learned over the years that yelling about customer service disappointments does not build rapport and does not really make people want to help you.

The conclusion here is that this incident represents a failure of design, configuration and planning, all of which are critical success factors in deploying virtual agent interactions. The second conclusion is not to bother trying to influence the “botmobile” by attempting to build rapport or shout in frustration. “Botmobiles” lack emotion... the ultimate human characteristic required to respond, to influence and to persuade.

In understanding this lack of emotional response capability, we may need to add a new definition when categorizing contact types around frequency and complexity. We must be able to identify contacts that benefit from or require emotional and human response. These are contacts where rapport—whose features include empathy, influence and persuasion—will not likely be good candidates for the “botmobile” to handle.

## Digital Readiness

Leaders of 21st century contact centers must stay up to date on all advances in the various automation tools that are emerging in the market. This is especially true if you want to grow with the changing environment and be included in the journey. The ability

to dissect your contact types is an important contribution to digital readiness. Many put digital readiness on the backs of the IT department. While IT plays an important role, its expertise must be married to the contact center's operational infrastructure. If not, the ability to optimize investments in 21st century tools, such as virtual agents (driven by AI), will be stymied.

Contact centers today must have insight into all they do and how work is done. Leaders must know where processes and tools are strong, where they are weak, and most importantly, how these strengths and weaknesses impact frequency, complexity and digital readiness. Keep an eye toward any processes that require "human integration." This means a hand-off or transfer from one agent to another agent level or skill or to another department. These obstacles to digital access need to be evaluated before they can be automated.

### **HIGH FREQUENCY, LOW COMPLEXITY**

High-frequency, low-complexity contacts are often the most ripe for automation. Keep in mind that some contacts one might identify as low complexity are "complicated" by poor systems, processes or integration. Take the case of a credit union that handles what seems like a low-complexity contact such as "change my address." The contact becomes complicated when the change must be entered into up to five various systems to impact the flow of all communication and record-keeping. Changing an address is not allowed via any channel other than voice due to security concerns. That places the contact in a non-automation channel. Improved

integration would automate the flow of information across the multiple systems, reduce errors, and lessen the need for additional calls/contacts into the contact center for resolution.

### **HIGH FREQUENCY, HIGH COMPLEXITY**

High-frequency, high-complexity contacts require human handling, even if the only complexity is the emotional requisite. I do not think that 911 will be eliminating voice calls any time soon.

### **Elimination Is Infinitely More Powerful Than Automation**

We must be on the lookout for automation opportunities. However, keep in mind that if certain things DIDN'T happen, there would be no need for either human agents or "botmobiles." Here are some examples:

- My bill is wrong—*fix the billing system.*
- I received the wrong item—*fix the distribution issues.*
- Where's my order?—*fix the expectations.*
- I don't understand this letter I received—*fix the communication.*
- My point balance is wrong—*fix the loyalty program.*
- The mobile app won't take my promo code—*fix the app.*

You get the idea. As you organize your contact types by frequency and complexity, carefully examine the nature of those contacts. If you discover contacts that are driven by other departments in the enterprise with what appear to be "fixable" problems, those contacts don't need to be automated if they are corrected. They need to be eliminated.

### **Be Proactive!**

Inventory your contacts and categorize them by frequency and complexity. Report on obstacles to digital access across the enterprise. Get involved in any automation discussions by being informed. Study, read, go to conferences and learn by whatever means is available to you. Nurture a relationship with those in your peer group and with executives who are most interested in supporting the 21st century customer experience. Share what you know to be opportunities and obstacles. These actions will get you invited to the table and recognized as the "domain expert."

A word of caution... When listening to vendors promise that their automation solutions will provide your organization with "botmobiles" to solve all of your problems, reduce your costs and improve the customer experience, remember that these outcomes are much more related to your infrastructure than to their product. Determine what is required on the contact center's side. Make your discussions specific to your current state.

Do not dismiss the "botmobile." Consumers are becoming increasingly comfortable with virtual assistance by Apple, Siri, Amazon, Echo, etc. Heck, I can tell my TV what I want to watch! So do not view these options through the 20th century lens. This is happening and the future is here. Get on board and guide the right contact to the right channel! ☛



Kathleen M. Peterson is the Chief Vision Officer of PowerHouse Consulting, a call center and telecommunications consulting firm. ([www.powerhouse1.com](http://www.powerhouse1.com))

 @PowerHouse603