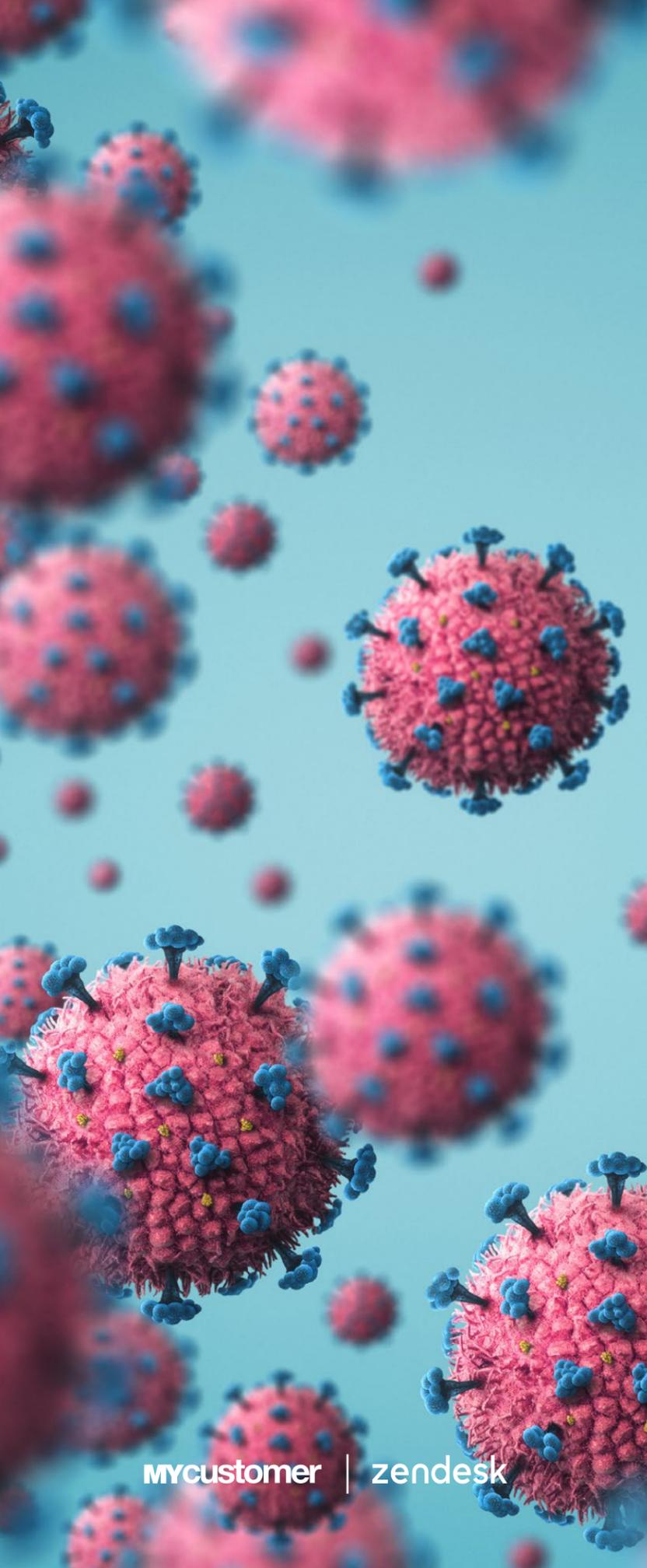


HOW TO DELIVER  
**Customer service in a  
rapidly-changing  
world**



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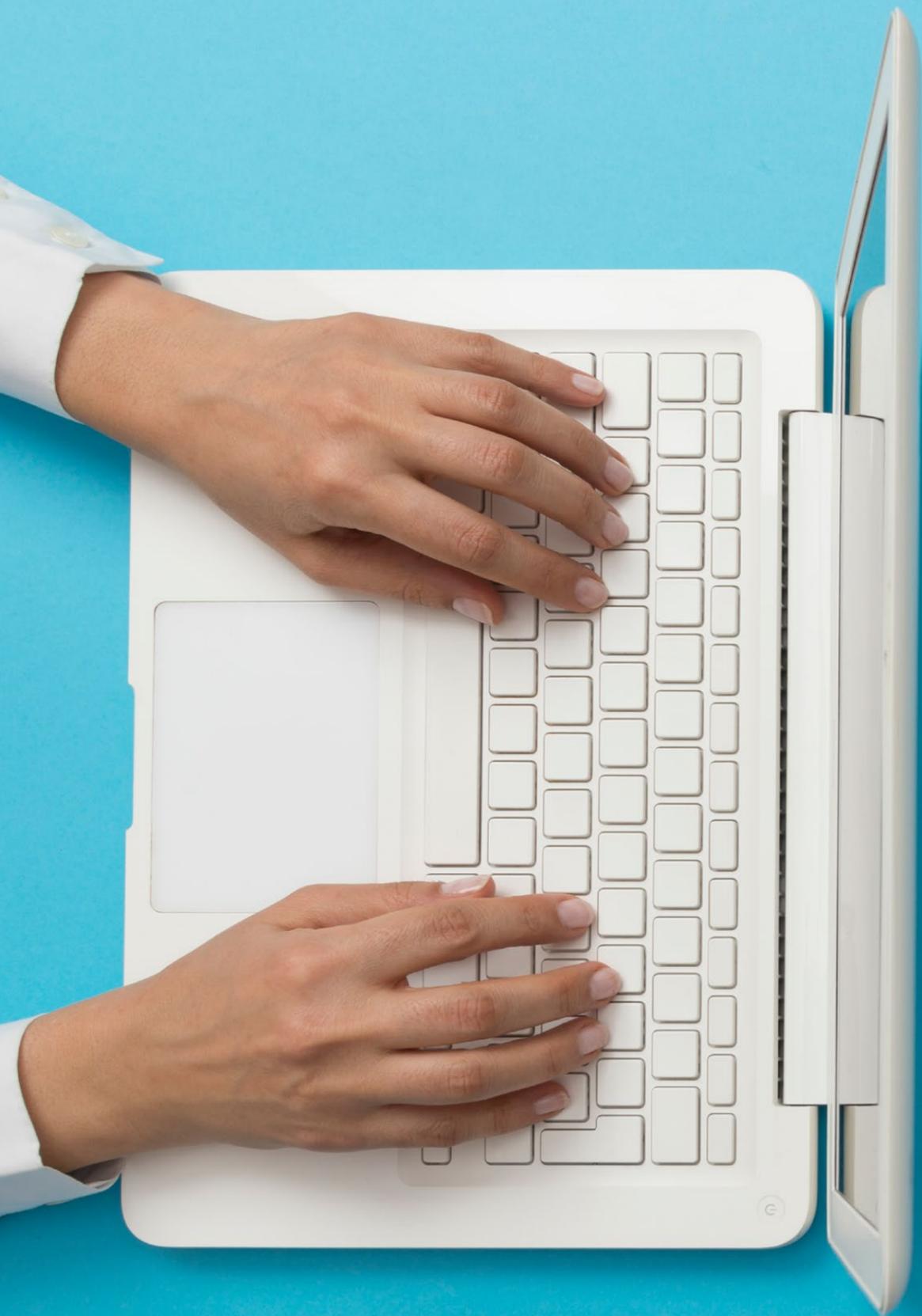
# The coronavirus pandemic has had a cataclysmic impact on people around the world, fundamentally altering lives and changing consumer behaviour forever.

In this report we focus on some of the trends that have affected customer service and support in the throes of COVID-19.

We analyse the long-term effect on businesses, highlighting some methods customer service, support and CX leaders can adopt to ensure their service function remains agile to future uncertainty and unpredictability.

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# How the customer service landscape has changed

**Ofcom stats reveal that UK adults now spend over a quarter of their waking day online.**

Given that in 2020 the population has largely had to reside indoors due to COVID-19, this may not be overly surprising.

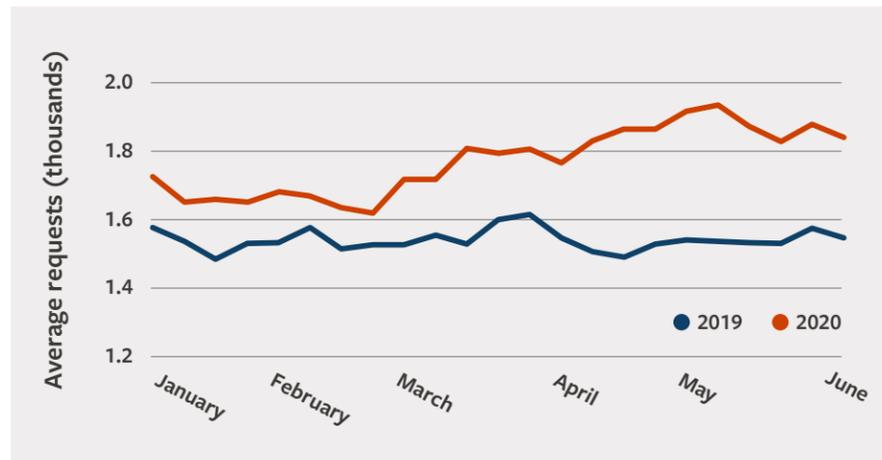
Yet even before coronavirus, the average Brit was spending three-and-a-half hours a day online.

In this context, it's also of no surprise that preference for digital customer service and support channels has increased markedly.

According to [ContactBabel research](#), 51% of contact centres have reported an increase in email use since the start of the coronavirus outbreak in March 2020, with 47% reporting increases in webchats and 37% reporting an increase in social media use.

# “Amid the COVID-19 outbreak, the customer service landscape has been more unpredictable with each passing week.”

Zendesk’s [Benchmark Snapshot: Tracking the impacts of COVID-19 on CX](#) highlights that customer support tickets have also risen rapidly since coronavirus lockdowns were enforced across the globe. Average global support requests were up 19% at the beginning of June, compared with 2019.



Source: Zendesk Benchmark Snapshot

Other, less traditional channels have seen significant surges in use in 2020 too. Zendesk’s Benchmark Snapshot identified that messaging apps have risen in popularity as a customer service and support tool, not just during lockdown but throughout the year, “signalling a longer-term shift in customer behaviour”.

WhatsApp use has risen by 148% since late February — the highest of any channel for contacting customer service. Texting and direct messaging over Facebook and Twitter have also seen greater use.

“Amid the COVID-19 outbreak, the customer service landscape has been more unpredictable with each passing week,” says Daniel Bailey, VP enterprise, EMEA at Zendesk.

“These asynchronous channels, like WhatsApp, are proving valuable to customers, but also to brands as they scale their service and agents can manage multiple requests at the same time.”

Chatbots – so often considered fallible when it came to dealing with anything beyond rudimentary requests – have had something of a renaissance, too.

The World Economic Forum has [acknowledged](#) how the COVID-19 pandemic has helped widen global usage for chatbot technology. The WHO and CDC have included chatbots on their websites to provide up-to-date information on the coronavirus and the WEF now predicts that the use of chatbots will continue to grow after the pandemic – particularly in industries such as healthcare.





# The challenge for businesses

**Many of the trends occurring in customer service and support are unlikely to be new to businesses. However, their acceleration is a major challenge.**

The coronavirus crisis has forced organisations into fast-tracking major transformation projects – particularly in relation to remote working for employees.

[ContactBabel research](#) highlights that contact centre agents working remotely on a permanent basis shot up from 13% in 2019 to 71% by mid-April, 2020.

This is expected to be a long-term shift in momentum too. In a [Dynata report](#), over 11,000 people were interviewed to establish that roughly three-quarters expected a move to permanent remote working as a result of coronavirus.

However, in numerous customer service and support examples, the mass home working experiment has not come without its technical challenges.

According to a [poll by Censuswide](#) in March, around a third of UK organisations do not have the necessary technology infrastructure in place to support large-scale remote working on a long-term basis.

Then there's the human challenge. Despite automated service channels such as chatbots and self-service picking up some of the strain ([Zendesk's research](#) found that help centre/ self-service usage was up 200% in May, having grown five times faster than customer support requests during this period), the pressure on customer service and support staff has been immense since the coronavirus hit.

In March 2020 there was a huge negative backlash towards customer service and support teams in certain sectors. Travel bore the brunt of much indignation – Los Angeles Times journalist Elliott Hester [described](#) customer service agents as a “punching bag for airline passengers”. Chattermill, which provides customer feedback analysis, has since analysed [sentiment data](#) from 15 leading travel brands to find an enormous and sudden decline in customer care sentiment related to the sector.

# “In these challenging times, it’s important to make sure that your teams feel supported and empowered to manage the busier period.”

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A [study in Harvard Business Review](#) reiterates this point further. Analysing one million customer service calls between March 11th and March 26, effort levels were scored to determine whether it was easy or difficult for customers to accomplish their goal.

The findings were stark — the average company saw the percentage of calls scored as “difficult” double from 10% to more than 20%. Issues directly attributed to the pandemic were rife — from travel cancellations to appeals for bill payment extensions — increasing customer emotion and anxiety on the calls, leading to more instances of escalation, which furthered the complexity and efficiency of resolving queries.

This anxiety and heightened emotion is not a feature reserved for customers though. A critical challenge for organisations is the heightened anxiety among staff, too.

Phil Taylor, Professor of Work and Employment Studies, University of Strathclyde, [surveyed over 2,500 UK contact centre professionals](#) for Workers’ Memorial Day in April, discovering that many found the challenge of coping with heightened customer anxiety more tense as a result of the pressure coronavirus placed on their own personal lives.

Those that continued to work from call centres feared for their health and longed to work remotely, whilst those working remotely found themselves experiencing isolation and confusion around how to best meet performance requirements from the business, whilst at home.

Even taking coronavirus out of the equation, it’s long been known that the amount of emotional labour demanded of customer service and support employees to handle customers satisfactorily can leave them feeling drained; sometimes dreading the thought of going back to work the next day. [A study](#) published in the October 2019 edition of the *Journal of Service Theory and Practice* found out that dysfunctional customer behaviour affects employees in a profound way.

With dysfunctional customer behaviour exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, many businesses are also exploring how they can better equip their staff with the skills and technology required to better manage customer service and support interactions; keeping customers satisfied but also ensuring employees are engaged, motivated and healthy.

“In these challenging times, it’s important to make sure that your teams feel supported and empowered to manage the busier period,” adds Bailey.

“This means making sure that there are internal support channels set up in which staff can flag concerns and queries in real-time, whilst also regularly checking in on teams to see how it’s going. For maximum success, support agents need to feel equipped to provide the best customer experience, whether working remotely or not.”



# The human-digital balance

**The obvious response to increased pressure on customer service and support staff is to find ways of automating some of the processes causing staff the most pain.**

This is not a new revelation. Indeed, Gartner [once prophesised](#) that by the end of 2020 “customers will manage 85% of their relationships with businesses without interacting with a human”.

However, putting aside helpdesk/ self-service and chatbot use, many of the digital channels that have seen spikes in numbers during the coronavirus lockdown are predominantly manual, human-controlled channels – email, web chat, social media and messaging.

And looking ahead beyond coronavirus, customer preference trends appear to suggest that human-controlled service and support channels will remain favourable to many people, despite the convenience automated channels bring.

[A survey from ResponseTap](#) highlights that, despite the behaviours driven by lockdown, consumers still rely on human interaction during specific stages of the customer service journey.

Only 15% of people don't think human interaction was important at all.

Indeed, the requirements for more specialist customer support from service agents is on the rise, and regardless of age range.

46% of 16-24-year olds believe speaking to a specialist is important. The group where this mattered most was 35-44-year olds, where 67% believe it makes a difference.

In the book *[What to do when Machines do Everything: How to Get Ahead in a World of AI, Algorithms, BOTs and Big Data](#)*, authors Malcolm Frank, Benjamin Pring and Paul Roehrig describe this phenomenon as the human-digital balance, explaining how – contrary to the view that increasing use of technology will sacrifice the human touch – technology and digital channels will actually enforce businesses to double-down on being more human.

# “By empowering customers to find the answers to their own questions, it becomes possible to reduce the strain on service agents.”

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“In an enhanced world of more pervasive technology, activities that humans do well will become even more important in the future,” the authors explain, in a [byline for MyCustomer.com](#).

“Analytical, communication, and learning skills as well as the ability to relate to other people have always been and will remain vital for business success. In our study of 2,000 global business leaders, respondents said that in the coming years, these very human traits - things we do naturally but that computers can hardly accomplish - will become even more essential in our personal and work lives and for our businesses.”

This is good news for the ongoing motivation and health of customer service and support workers. According to the [Agent Experience Index](#) (conducted long before coronavirus further emphasised many of the trends its work identified), upskilling opportunities and having access to appropriate technology were key to employee motivation and engagement.

81% of agents said their skills improve when they are tasked with handling more complex questions and tasks.

80% of respondents said having up-to-date customer service software and the ability to communicate with customers across different channels is critical to their engagement. The caveat? Only 35% of agents say these tools are currently available to them.

“Businesses have had to ensure that employees are equipped to do their jobs to the best of their abilities; supplying equipment such as headsets for customer calls, providing collaborative software like Slack or Zoom to keep employees connected and training in the best security practices, including how to connect to a VPN remotely,” explains Bailey.

“While staff on the frontline work hard to manage inbound queries from customers, the managerial teams can be focused on thinking about how to triage incoming questions. One of the best ways to do this is by implementing self-service help centres. By empowering customers to find the answers to their own questions, it becomes possible to reduce the strain on service agents. In fact, some of our customers at Zendesk have brought on third-party support for this busy period, to quickly upload a bank of FAQs that both support customers and service agents.”



## Delivering agile customer service and support

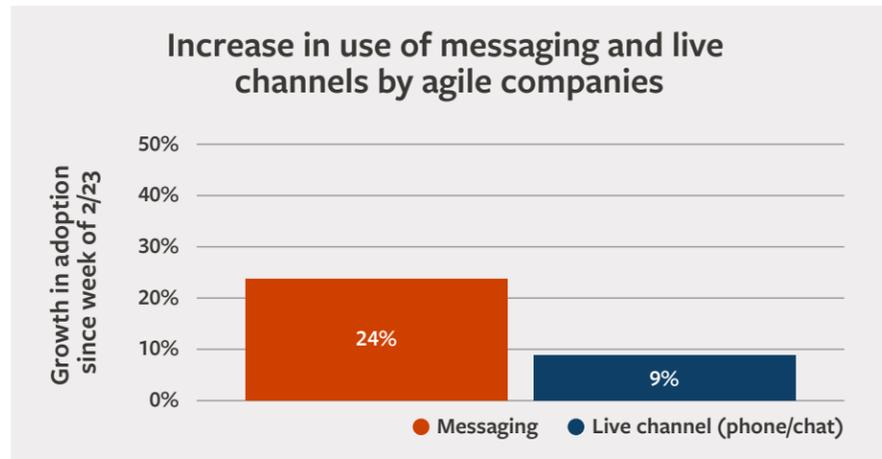
**Agility is a vital requirement for organisations looking to get ahead of the trends currently driving customer service, and meeting the necessary human-digital balance of both their customers and their employees.**

Whilst agility is as much about empowering service and support staff to be able to act instinctively in the most suitable way to meet a customer's needs, agility is primarily rooted in being able to move quickly with adapting technology and tools to match changes in customer behaviour.

Indeed, the coronavirus crisis has highlighted how fundamental this point is - [Zendesk's Benchmark Snapshot](#) found roughly 3,600 companies in its dataset that maintained "stable service resolution times" during the coronavirus crisis - because they were agile and able to "rapidly add messaging and live channels to better support their customers".

# “If the pandemic has taught us anything, it’s to expect the unexpected.”

Adoption of messaging in this group jumped 24% in the initial month of the pandemic, with phone and chat adoption also up 9%.



Source: Zendesk Benchmark Snapshot

“If the pandemic has taught us anything, it’s to expect the unexpected,” says Daniel Bailey. “As some businesses struggled from the lack of footfall in physical stores, others were overwhelmed with demand that could not have been foreseen before lockdown.

“The ability to grow and pivot your business, or even just elements of your service delivery, are going to be crucial in recovering from the coronavirus pandemic, and in planning for future unexpected events. This agility and flexibility is key in your customer service propositions too, as disruption

brings either swathes of customer enquiries, or a renewed need to reach out to existing customers and maintain loyalty while your doors are closed.”

At the heart of agility is cloud technology. ContactBabel’s coronavirus research found that 60% of all contact centres are now either already relying on the power of cloud-based technology, or plan to implement cloud within the next three months. This figure is 77% among large contact centres.

Without cloud, the switch to remote working was nigh-on impossible, and even going back to 2018, ContactBabel’s Decision-Makers report was highlighting how interwoven cloud platforms were to businesses being agile and flexible, and capable of adapting quickly to customer expectations:

“Without a solid and scalable platform, separate applications, hardware and locations will remain isolated, or cost so much time and money to integrate that it would be better to leave them alone. Using a single open platform, this investment becomes much lower, and leaves the way open for businesses to add locations, channels and applications as needed.

“The single open platform should be a concept which is always in the minds of people making decisions about the future of their multisite, multi-platform operations, with the cloud now featuring in many businesses’ decisions.”





With the correct platform at the centre of your operations, Zendesk's Daniel Bailey says there are several steps businesses can take to ensure their service and support functions remain agile and flexible enough to deal with future uncertainty:

### **1 Consider the tools your staff need to be effective and agile in their roles**

Are staff equipped with tools that allow them to work in an agile way, remotely? Do these tools empower them to work flexibly so that they can manage work and personal commitments? And do you have a culture of sharing best practice and the latest advice? These don't require lengthy or expensive transformations, and having these basics nailed will not only help you attract and retain great agents, they'll empower those agents to show up more meaningfully for your customers, and quickly pivot their focus to areas in demand.

### **2 Anticipating demands**

Pre-empting demands before they become hard to manage requires insight. That insight comes from the data that you already have, buried in previous customer interactions. Tools that connect data across teams help build a more nuanced perspective of where your business needs to scale, and how you assign agents to different sections of the business. For example, if you notice from your live data that deliveries are being delayed because of an issue with your courier and the most common query relates to this, you may need more help answering phone and email enquiries from customers chasing orders so that you can proactively reach out to those affected.

Alternatively, if product demand spikes, you may need more agent support in product enquiries and order fulfilment, and therefore need to pivot agent efforts to updating helpdesk articles with frequently asked questions and web chat questions from customers browsing online. The flexibility in staff working that you've embraced as a first step really delivers on its value in situations like these too.

### 3 Get the human-digital balance right

It's important to look at that intersection point where customers are escalated from automated service to an agent - how easy are you making this transfer for the customer? Having a connected platform means that you can have the agent pick up the conversation where automated tools left off, minimising the need for customers to repeat themselves and get frustrated. This can also help identify where your automated tools could work harder - with the right data insights, you can see where the gaps may be to try and improve your self-service and bots to give more accurate and helpful information from the outset so that an escalation may not even be required.

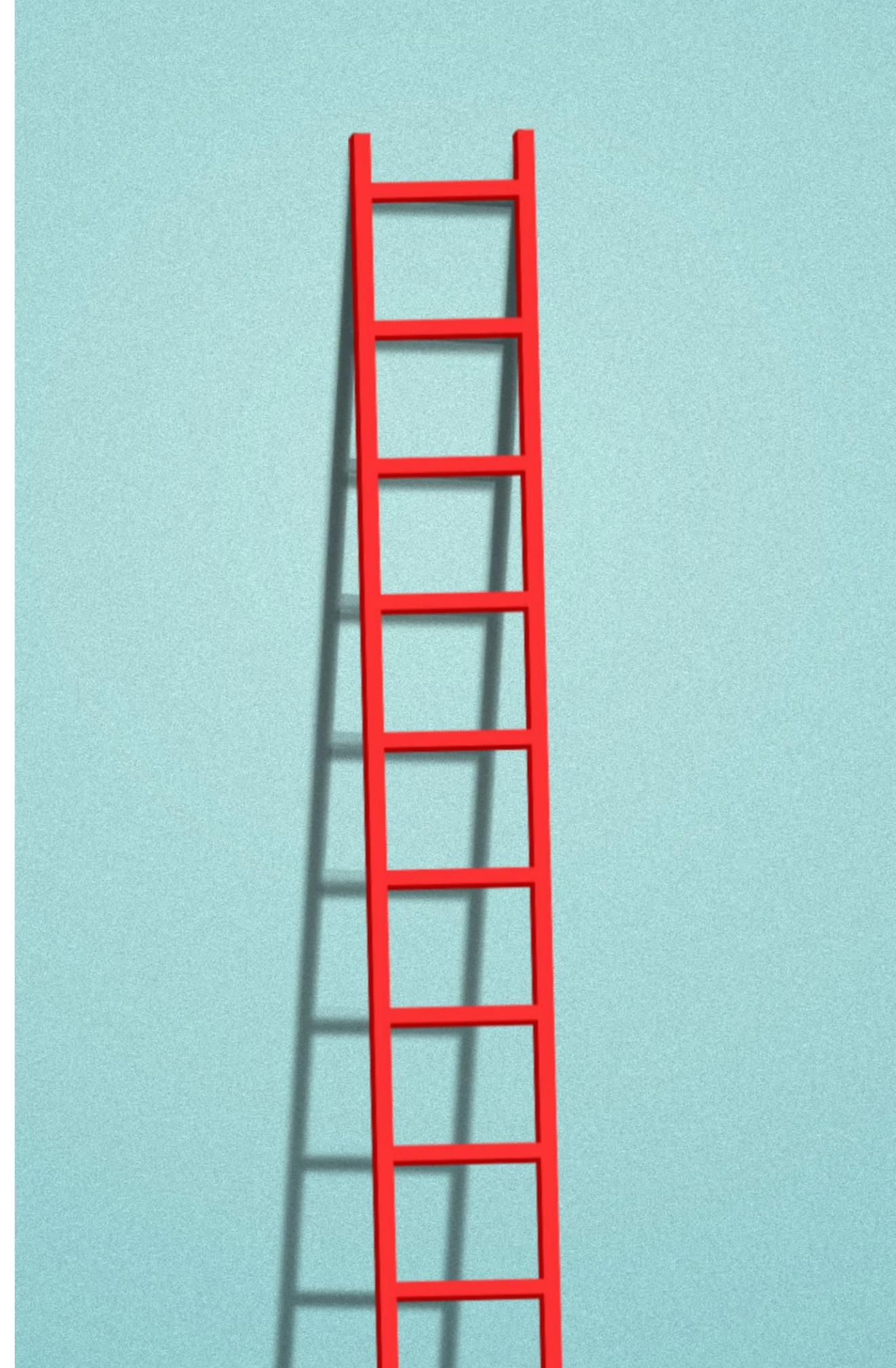
### 4 Provide your agents with up-to-date information

That means being able to share what's happening on the frontline of customer service too. When an unexpected query comes in, access to a team that can band together can help alleviate stress for your agents, while also reducing the time needed to resolve the customer enquiry. It's also vital that if a customer needs to be passed to another department, they don't end up repeating themselves and feeling frustrated - your customers want a connected experience, which starts from the inside of the business.

#### A rapidly changing world

The coronavirus has shown that no businesses can stand still, and trends in customer service and support can change in the blink of an eye.

Businesses must embrace this change and adapt, ensuring that they have the right 'online, cloud-based' tools and strategies in place to meet growing customer expectations as they evolve, whilst meeting their employees' expectations too.



# About Zendesk

**Zendesk is a service-first CRM company that builds software designed to improve customer relationships.**

As employees, we encourage each other to grow and innovate. As a company, we roll up our sleeves to plant roots in the communities we call home.

Our support, sales and customer engagement software is quick to implement and easily scales to meet the changing needs of companies of all sizes. Even yours.

[www.zendesk.co.uk](http://www.zendesk.co.uk)



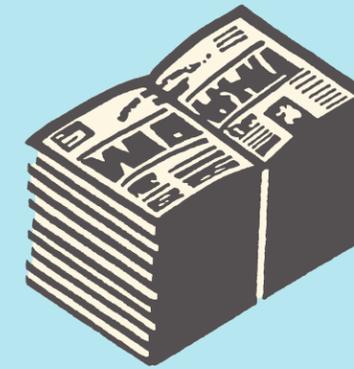
# About **MY**customer

**MyCustomer.com is Europe's leading online resource for customer-focused professionals, with over 100,000 members.**

Sharing news, advice and resources on topics ranging from customer engagement to CRM and the contact centre, MyCustomer is a vital hub for business leaders aiming to enhance every facet of the customer experience they deliver.

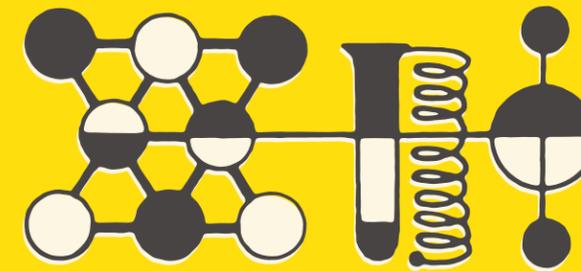
With a network of expert contributors from around the globe and a focus on strategy, technology and in-depth research, members of the MyCustomer community are able to tap into a wealth of knowledge and receive the most comprehensive view of the trends affecting and influencing the world of customer management.

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The latest opinion and analysis from a roster of expert contributors.



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OF THE YEAR**



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