

# The last stand of the call-centre worker

AI is poised to eliminate customer-service agents. We'll miss them when they're gone

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By Sophie Elmhirst

I was only trying to order my contact lenses. A mundane task, undertaken nose-in-phone while walking somewhere, probably late, likely crossing a road, which is my preferred, death-adjacent method for all personal administration. Why look at buildings and trees, at passing humans and oncoming vehicles, when you could be getting stuff done on your phone?

Vision Direct, one of Britain's most popular online contact-lens stores, promised I could order my lenses in a seamless and rapid process that would involve three clicks and, in its ideal form, [zero interaction with another human](#). Which was precisely what I wanted. I interact plenty. I do not need to interact when I'm ordering contact lenses.

And yet, with a certain inevitability after such a promise, the payment didn't go through. I clicked again. Nope. Then I went back to the beginning of the much-vaunted three-click process. Nope. Three clicks now felt more like a taunt. I'd done at least eight. After my fourth failed attempt, by which point I figured I'd paid quadruple the appropriate amount for my contact lenses and yet still wasn't going to receive them, I felt my chest tighten. Oh please, God, no. [I was going to have to call](#).

[I never want to call](#). Who does? People like my mother, maybe. She thinks nothing of getting straight on the phone to a company, as if there might be a

dedicated person sitting right at the source of the gas or the broadband or the mobile signal, able to resolve the problem instantly. She is stunned and infuriated when this doesn't happen, and will pass entire mornings on the phone, waiting, explaining, being transferred, explaining again, gradually discovering new dimensions to her rage.

But most of us know the truth. Call the customer-service number and you enter the underworld. Finding the number is hard enough. Dig it out of the dankest corners of a website – because God knows they don't want you to call either – and then you're on hold, in the queue, listening to the music, waiting, hearing the music loop back to the beginning, waiting a bit more. By the time the agent finally gets on the phone, your irritation can't help but spill over a little, so you apologise even though it's not your fault, just as it's not theirs, but then whose fault is it? And why do you never get to talk to whomever is actually to blame?

In the best-case scenario, your problem is resolved and you will probably have been a little curt with someone who doesn't deserve it. The worst-case scenario – interminable waiting and lack of resolution – is a day-ruiner. Recently, a friend told me she'd actually cried on the phone to her broadband company. The agent tried to make her feel better. "It's only broadband!" But it's not only broadband, is it? It's the distinct sensation of life slipping between your fingers, the feeling that you are lost in a dehumanised process enacted by a giant machine which doesn't care about either its customers or its employees. It is automated hell. Still, the customer-service industry now believes it has hit on a technological solution that will lead us serenely out of the labyrinth. Or so they say.

For centuries, all transactions were face-to-face: at the market, over the counter, in the shop. If there was a problem, you walked in and had a conversation. In the late 19th century telephone switchboards opened a new avenue of communication. As more households had their own phones, the telephone call became the main conduit between company and customer. By the 1960s the volume of calls required their own infrastructure: the call centre.

In the decades since, the numbers of people working in call centres have steadily grown. Over 800,000 in Britain, nearly 3m in the United States, approximately 17m globally. Max Ball, an analyst at Forrester, a consultancy, told me that the

call centre is usually perceived within a company as a “cost centre” – a part of the business that eats up resources without adding to the bottom line. According to a recent report by the Institute of Customer Service (ICS), customer service was costing British businesses £7.1bn a month as their employees spent, on average, over half a day a week dealing with problems.

Turnover in the customer-service sector is fast. One manager said if they kept someone for two years, they were lucky. Agents get tired of the abuse and blame from customers for things that were not their fault. A recent survey of customer-service employees by the ICS revealed that over a third had experienced hostility in the last six months, and a third of those said this happened so frequently that there was no point in reporting it to their managers.

Call centres require a large workforce, intensive training and are plagued by inefficiencies, mostly measured in time: how long a customer has to wait on hold, how long a call runs until the issue is resolved. As such, the challenge of any company with a call centre is to reduce that time. “If I shave a minute off every conversation,” said Ball, “that’s hundreds of millions of dollars every year that I’m saving.”

Attempts to time-shave and cost-save, both infrastructural and technological, have been numerous. There was Interactive Voice Response, a system that asks callers to choose between options on their keypad. In the 1990s speech recognition, whereby a computer program responds to a customer’s request, was supposed to reduce the need for agents. But a human was still required to mop up the mess after a customer had spent five minutes shouting into their phone at an uncomprehending machine. Outsourcing – largely to India and the Philippines – was another cost-reducer. The Philippines is now the call-centre capital of the world, with over 1.5m people employed in the industry. Since the pandemic, like call-centre employees everywhere, they mostly work from home.

Now the sector faces its next fundamental shift, one which looms over every industry – the advent of generative AI, particularly chatbots built on large-language models which can communicate almost with the fluency of humans. Of the various views, which run from the utopian to the panicked, about the ways in which generative AI will transform the world and work, there is broad consensus that customer service is among the first in line for an overhaul.

Gartner, a consultancy, recently predicted that, by 2026, investment in generative AI will have reduced the number of customer-service agents by 20-30%.

It's already happening. Most large customer-facing companies have some kind of chatbot enhancing what the wider industry calls *cx*, or customer experience, a broader notion than customer service. These days, being a customer involves far more than a simple transaction. We expect to connect with brands through social-media channels, the internet, chatbots, on the phone, over email. The company, in turn, has to become a vast sponge: porous to every possibility of interaction with a customer, on any medium, at any time of day or night.

I won't lie: sometimes I'm profoundly grateful for a well-trained bot. That kind of divine, efficient interaction, in which an issue is resolved in seconds without the need for the phone or a catastrophic loss of patience. But often it doesn't go quite that smoothly. Recently, for example, I tried to resolve an issue my mother was having with her broadband. An engineer – a human man – had come round and installed in her two-bedroom flat the sort of elaborate, multi-room, extremely costly Wi-Fi set-up that might suit a rapidly expanding small-to-medium enterprise. I went online, and worked my way through the chatbot (“Sorry, I didn't understand that. Can we try again?”) which soon reached the limits of its abilities and transferred me to a person, who soon reached their limit of their abilities (“Since billing is my core competence, my view is very limited”) and gave me a number to call, which I called, and spoke to someone who transferred me to someone else, who was trained in apologising to someone whose life force was almost entirely drained by their efforts to help their 79-year-old mother who was paying too much for her broadband.

If the core function of customer service is identifying the customer's desire – what the industry likes to call their “intent” – and satisfying it, then chatbots often fall at the first hurdle, unable even to understand what you want. Shep Hyken, possibly the world's leading, or at least most prolific, customer-service guru (he has written eight books on the subject), told me how he'd recently tried to buy a docking station for his laptop. He asked the chatbot if the station would charge the laptop. “Which computer do you want to buy?” replied the chatbot. He tried a different way: do I need a charging cable with the station? “Which computer do you want to buy?” replied the chatbot, stuck in its fixation.

But it won't be like that for long. Ball says that "in another five years of generative AI, I'll be able to do a hundred times more in self-service than I can do today." The developments are happening faster than either the public or regulators can keep up with. In September 2023 Meta announced a suite of new chatbots on its platforms and OpenAI, the company that created ChatGPT, revealed that its latest iteration could now see, listen and speak. As the tech advances, the fear faced in customer service is the one that has accompanied every phase of automation since the Industrial Revolution: once the machine can do what people can do, surely you won't need people any more.

"Hello! And welcome to Vision Direct!"

It was the usual beginning: the voice of a machine. I chose option three.

"Good afternoon, you're through to Gary, how can I help you today?"

I explained the contact-lens situation. The multi-clicking, the failed payments.

"Don't worry!" said Gary. "I can see it. Don't panic!" He sounded delighted by the challenge. I could hear him tapping at a computer keyboard. "Yeah, you tried four times, but don't worry, they're all rejected."

My incompetence, fortunately, had been total. Gary took flight. He sorted out the order, and had an idea. "Let's see if I can knock a bit of money off for you," he said. Seconds later: "I've knocked you £9.60 off! It's better than a kick in the teeth isn't it, I was going to say, but you can't really say that on these calls, can you, it's an old saying..."

I found myself laughing, but Gary was moving on, talking me through the transaction as if we were engaged in some kind of high-stakes joint project, like the defusing of a small but lethal explosive in a shopping centre.

"Are we OK to try and place this?" he said solemnly. "I've got my fingers crossed here, Sophie."

I gave my assent.

"I'm giving it all the power of positive thinking," said Gary. "I'm all down with manifesting and all that."

I was laughing again.

“Here we go, here we go...”

We both seemed to hold our breath.

“And guess what?” said Gary. “The powers have worked. That’s your order placed.”

I felt like there should have been cheering.

“I told you!” he cried. “You got through to one of the big guns.”

Well, that did it. This is going to sound weird, I said to him. But I’m actually writing an article about customer service. Can I come and talk to you?

“Twenty years,” said Gary.

Twenty years on the phones?

“Twenty years,” he confirmed, and then paused, as if he was suddenly seeing the carousel of his experience turn in his mind, two decades of marshalling people through phone calls, of trying to turn annoyance into satisfaction, of attempting to inject joy into an experience famed for its joylessness. “It’s all about the weight of the words.”

**G**ary, it turned out, was talking to me from the 20th floor of a tower block in central Manchester, the home of the Vision Direct call centre. I turned up on a cloudless June day and took the lift to his floor where the views stretched to the dark ridges of the Peak District. Gary was at his desk, his eyes flicking between two computer screens on which he was handling three customer webchats at once. “It’s like doing that,” he said, rubbing his tummy and patting his head at the same time.

If I’d suspected that the chirpy-phone Gary was a façade, and that actual Gary would be a ground-down grouch, the smile disappearing from his face as soon as a caller clicked off, I was soon corrected. Laughter bubbles like an underground stream beneath everything he says. He has the conversational range and energy of a stand-up comedian, but a stand-up with genuine vulnerabilities rather than

those manufactured for likeability. “To be honest,” he told me, “my forte is talking.”

Within about ten minutes, barely prompted, I’d learned the timings of his shifts, that he carries a crystal in his pocket given by his ten-year-old daughter, and that he’d had the rug pulled out from under him when his elder brother died while he was a student. He’d started off at art school, played in a band, but had never quite found the confidence to make his living in that line of work even if he still looks the part – he has the black t-shirt and shaggy hair of a guitar hero. Instead, he got a factory job making sleeves for car parts, married and had kids. He needed something steadier then and found himself in an HSBC call centre, setting up bank accounts for people moving overseas. One day, a manager said the whole operation was shifting to India and Gary was moved to overdraft charges. “I got a real bad vibe that I didn’t believe in what I was working for,” said Gary. “I’ve got morals.”

After he left HSBC, he spent seven years on the phones for Bupa, a health insurer, followed by a stint in the spray-paint business, doing windows, but that didn’t last long: he was scared of heights and had to spend all day up ladders. So he went back to call centres, working for the universal-credit hotline during the pandemic, one of the worst experiences of his life. The job “really made people ill”, he said. The stress and relentlessness, the frustration and desperation of people calling up, the sense of helplessness when all he could do was palm them off on another department. (At HSBC, Gary had once hand-delivered some paperwork to a customer as they needed it within 24 hours. He’s someone who likes to get things done.)

After that, Gary moved to Vision Direct. Here he felt he could actually help people. The atmosphere was friendly and the service offered was practical. He could be the kind of agent he wanted to be. At Bupa, he’d made a conscious decision to learn his craft. He noticed he could change the dynamic of a call with the tone of his voice, by saying the right things at the right moment. If he was compassionate, and genuine in his compassion, the conversation seemed to go better. A manager, however, had pulled him into an office and told him that the customers were not his friends: he wasn’t there for a chat, or a good time. He was there to resolve a problem as quickly as possible. “It always stuck in my head, that,” said Gary. “It sort of halted my character coming through.”

At Vision Direct, he felt they didn't mind him joking with customers, or going down more eccentric avenues on calls, such as talking about his penchant for manifesting. His manager told me that a successful call centre was all about a balance of personalities: Gary was a natural but you couldn't have a room full of Garys: "You're not going to get a lot done because everyone is going to be laughing all the time."

Gary knows there's a line. He knows when a customer is in a hurry and doesn't want the patter. Like with the manifesting: "I wouldn't say that to everyone." He told me how, over the years, he's developed an ability to sense how the customer wanted a call to go. He can hear it almost immediately, whether they're in a rush or frustrated. It's not in the words, necessarily, but in the tiniest of inflections, in the texture of a sigh or the emphasis in a sentence. "It's sort of precognitive, second nature," he said. "Beyond the senses." Gary stopped himself. "I'm going off on a spiritual tangent."

I heard him at it, soon enough. The calls were coming through, as usual, in a continuous flow. Gary had to meet his target: seven minutes for a call to be fully wrapped up, noted and an email sent to the customer to confirm the next step. Here was one: a woman who wanted to take up a free sunglasses offer, but had missed it by two days. Well, there was nothing Gary could do about that, but he processed the order and gave her a discount. He refunded another customer who'd never got his order because the product had been discontinued. In both cases, he explained what he was doing as he went along, apologising, and saying, more than anything else, don't worry, don't worry, even if they weren't expressing concern. The message was clear: he'd take care of you. "You've got the little old dear who likes having a little chat, and being taken care of," he said. "Who wouldn't like to be taken care of?"

During a pause in the calls, I mentioned AI to Gary, and the likelihood of it upending his job. He blanched. They don't use chatbots at Vision Direct, so he didn't have much experience with the technology. He was, at the age of 46, part of the "old school", against the idea of AI. "There's no personality, no nothing," he said. And then a look passed across his face, as if realising that AI wasn't really something he could really be against given that it was starting to permeate all parts of society. "I don't know," he said. "I'm saying it from my point of view. If it were just a sterile environment, is there any use for me?"



A few weeks after meeting Gary, the future of customer service was represented by the image of a curling ocean wave on a vast screen at a conference centre in Tobacco Dock in London. In front of the wave stood Barak Eilam, chief executive of NICE, a multinational customer-experience company. The metaphor of waves permeated Eilam's presentation to NICE's annual conference. "An exciting new tech wave is always in our midst, and it's about to crash against our cx shores with full force," he announced. Sometimes the metaphor lost its way. ("Once a new tech wave rolls over you, if you're not part of the steamroller you're part of the road.") But mostly Eilam encouraged the conference attendees, a mixed tribe of customer-service managers at corporate and public-sector organisations, to emulate a surfer: select the right wave at the right time and ride it.

The wave, needless to say, was generative AI. "A long-awaited alchemist," said Eilam as the screen graphic switched to a robot with electricity sparking between its hands. (It is hard to illustrate AI.) It would, promised Eilam, conjure "a completely new world and possibilities of how tech and customer service can be melded together".

He proceeded to give a demonstration of Enlighten Actions: one of NICE's new AI-powered products designed to act like a "co-pilot" to the customer-service agent. Everyone selling AI customer-service tools has a "co-pilot" now: there's the Microsoft 365 Copilot, the Salesforce Einstein Copilot, the Kore.ai Smart Co-Pilot. A co-pilot, after all, seems unthreatening. It's a helper, a team-mate, rather than a robot coming to steal your job.

The Enlighten co-pilot, Eilam revealed, had been fed by 1m historic customer "intents" – a customer's desire and reason for contacting a brand – drawn from the 8bn customer interactions that they claim NICE handles every year. Fattened by this knowledge, the AI could help an agent identify a customer's intent, note their sentiment, suggest responses, help to summarise the interaction, notice where a mistake might have been made and then suggest a training module so the agent could learn how to do it all better next time. The co-pilot "acts as your best and most trusted employee", said Eilam. Between agent and co-pilot, there would be "symbiotic trust".

The room, at this point, went quiet. Sure, he wasn't proposing replacing the agent, but he was proposing that each agent would have a sort of inexhaustible, automated co-worker and spy-manager, monitoring every conversation, every decision and then relentlessly suggesting improvements. Yes, calls have always been recorded for training purposes – words we know like a previous generation knew the Lord's Prayer – but this surveillance lived, inescapably, on your desktop, and was focused entirely on you. It did not need to sleep or eat. It never went for coffee, or asked you what film you watched last night. It had no marital problems that you could chew over on a break. It just indefatigably and dispassionately existed to watch you and make you better.

A little later, I chatted to Eilam in a large dark room in the converted dock. He seemed relaxed, given the looming wave. "I remember 20 years ago people told me, 'Oh you know, agents are going to disappear from customer service in a few years.'" Speech recognition was supposed to change everything and do away with agents completely, but it didn't. He reminded me how not long ago we used to ring up our banks and ask a person to tell us how much money we had in our account, which, admittedly, seems laughable now. Similarly, AI will be able to resolve many of the more menial customer queries, passing only the most complex over to a human agent. The human agent would thus become "superhuman", said Eilam, handling the most knotty, fraught and emotional calls.

I was reminded of a call Max Ball from Forrester had told me about. An agent in an insurance company's call centre had to tell a customer who'd lost his legs in an accident that his claim had been denied. "You're never going to automate that," said Ball. Or at least, he qualified, not for a while. "Until generative AI gets so good and emotionally intelligent – and so empathetic that they're better than agents, which I can't fathom – you still have to have people."

Inevitably, automating empathy is in the works. At the NICE conference, I met Danica Damljanovic, a computer scientist who worked on Apple's Siri and now runs a company called Sentient Machines, specialising in AI-driven voice analytics. Her AI product could be used to analyse interactions and train customer-service bots (both in speech and writing) or human agents. Typical AIs only work with written text, and the result, Damljanovic told me, was often an oversimplification of interactions: they were graded simply as positive or negative based on the language used and therefore missed most of the nuance. Her

product, however, had been trained to identify what she called “acoustic features” in what customers were saying, rather than writing: hesitation, uncertainty, sadness, even sarcasm. A bot would therefore be able to pick up on unspoken emotion, respond accordingly or recommend to an agent how to respond. (ChatGPT, by the way, recently scored more highly on standardised emotional awareness tests than the general population, according to a paper in *Frontiers in Psychology*.)

“The holy grail”, Eilam told me, “is to have a dedicated employee in each of the brands serving us, who works only for you and is always available.” With a well-trained, emotionally literate chatbot, this doesn’t seem so far off. And although a human agent might be on hand if necessary, the hope was that the customer would no longer feel the difference between bot and human, “even if you tell them”. They’d move smoothly between the two intelligences without knowing the difference.

The idea of “man-computer symbiosis” is an old one. In a paper published in 1960, the computer scientist and early AI pioneer J.C.R. Licklider foresaw an “intimate association” between man and computer, which he compared to that between the fig tree and the insect, *Blastophaga grossorun*. The fig tree depends on the insect to pollinate, and the larva of the insect lives in the tree from where it gets its food.

The hybrid, the co-pilot, symbiosis, partnership, relationship. This is the typical language of generative AI, especially from those selling AI-powered products. We will cross-pollinate with AIs: mutually supportive, collaborative, filling in each other’s gaps. At root, customer service will remain the same as it ever was, said Shep Hyken: the customer has a question, and they want an answer. It’s just how they are answered that will shift. “It’s moving from human to not all-the-way digital but a hybrid of digital and human,” he said. Ideally, that hybrid will be informed by human ethics and values. “But as long as we have a symbiotic trust,” said Eilam, “these are going to be positive relationships.”

After the NICE conference, I emailed Gary, and told him a little about what they’d proposed. Hey, it’s not that they want to get rid of you, the bot will be your partner, your helper. It’ll be able to deal with the boring stuff and leave you to handle the meaty conversations. Gary still wasn’t convinced. “Customers can tell

that there is no emotion in it,” he wrote back. And emotion counted. The AI was optimising, learning, improving all the time, ironing out the kinks in the process, speeding it up. But to Gary, the kinks were what made an interaction good. “Why is it all of a sudden everything has to be 100% beautifully perfected responses?” he wrote. “It reminds me of processed cheese, Sophie.”

Gary had been working in the field for 22 years. He felt he had experience that it would be impossible for a machine to replicate or understand, even if it had ingested all the data from those 22 years of calls. Because experience, in his view, amounted to more than just an accumulation of data. “You know what works and what doesn’t,” he wrote. “That chemical connection through words, pitch, tone, nuances, even the silences.”

Even the silences. After I’d read Gary’s email, I started becoming more aware of the silences; how, in any human interaction, there is as much communication around the edges of the words as through them. Not just in body language, or facial expression, but in the air between the words, in the layers above and below the language, in the cultural reference and emotional echo resident in a single phrase that is born of a lifetime of being a human.

The day I was in the Manchester call centre, I heard, more than once, Gary and his colleagues drift into other topics, led by the customer. The guy next door to Gary spent five minutes on the phone analysing a cricket match. At the end, he said: “Sometimes you just want to pick a customer up, put them next to you and speak to them all day, don’t you?” He had detected a hunger for an off-topic chat, a digression born of some kind of need for connection, or just from the chance discovery of a shared interest. Unprogrammed interactions are limitless in their possibilities. Gary told me how much he enjoyed hearing his colleagues have those moments. “I’ll always be the first one to say, ‘Lovely, that.’” He paused, trying to think of what it was, precisely, that he was appreciating. “It’s something about being aware of the glimmers,” he said, feeling the weight of the word. “The nice things that people do.”

**ENDS**