D is for Digital CX, not Deflection

Why Digital

Around 20 years ago, the "call center" became the "contact center." The shift in terminology was necessary as an increasing percentage of interactions were shifting to nonvoice interactions such as email and webchat. The name change, however, did not represent a significant change in approach. Modern contact centers have remained optimized for voice interactions.

While voice remains essential, many customers now prefer alternative channels. That's partially self-inflicted as contact centers have made voice difficult. Layers of deflection have created a general aversion to calling for service. Customers increasingly expect and value alternatives and increasingly prefer digital alternatives to telephony. Digital channels are perceived to be more efficient.

What are digital channels? There are many definitions, but it is as simple as the tip of your finger. Voice or telephony involves speech or, for simplicity, comes from the mouth. Digital communication requires text and comes from one's digits. Today's consumers enjoy many digital options, including chat, email, text, messaging apps, websites, and social networks.

Digital CX helps organizations meet expanded customer expectations and provide a favorable impression. Digital channels can stand alongside voice or are sometimes implemented without voice. In addition to meeting customer demand, digital CX solutions can offer the contact center provider many benefits:

- Digital channels appeal to younger people, sometimes referred to as digital-native customers. Millennials and Gen Zers are digital-native generations and spend many hours of the day using digital devices.
- Digital channels are more cost-effective than traditional voice. They are relatively inexpensive to build and naturally asynchronous, allowing agents to process multiple interactions simultaneously.

- Digital channels are natural for self-service. They can be integrated with a brand's knowledge base, FAQs, and virtual agents. Additionally, self-service and digital channels can be available 24x7.

- Digital interactions are more scalable in adding additional channels and managing spikes.

- Customer interactions can occur over multiple digital channels, including voice. The customer may initiate digital interactions at a website, but the conversation can change modalities. For example, the interaction could escalate to voice, or the text chat might result in a link to a survey or form.

- Digital channels align more with modern data management. Traditional customer service methods require manual data collection efforts that take time and are prone to errors. Digital customer service tools are inherently aligned with documentation, increasingly in fully automated ways.

Why Digital Fails

It is easy to underestimate the digital opportunity. For decades, we have been bolting digital channels onto a voice-centric model, and that's simply not very effective. We must rethink the customer's journey and objectives and simplify reaching the desired outcomes. This often involves redesigning the engagement.

Consider this example: A frequent flyer calls the airline and is prompted to indicate whether they are calling about a specific upcoming trip. A simple confirmation routes the caller and passes information about the call to the agent. Context is mainly derived from a caller ID lookup.

The airline wants to support digital, so it offers an option to use text after connecting. However, the text option doesn't have caller ID. Additional steps are necessary to authenticate the caller, determine why they are calling, and obtain their confirmation number. These extra steps act as a digital tax or punish the customer for using digital.

Digital interactions don't need to be taxed. While they may not offer caller ID, they can offer different and more meaningful contextual clues. Digital channels allow the contact center to do things differently. This often-overlooked capability is often invisible to voice-centric designers.

That is to say, it's not enough to make your tools and interfaces digital. The experience has to be optimized for digital. This brings us to understanding the customer's intent and providing an efficient route to achieve an objective. After all, the customer aims to accomplish a specific goal, not just conduct a digital interaction.

The customer's goal can be identified in several ways — from a simple menu, an icon in an app, or the web page the session was initiated from, to name a few. The digital environment offers numerous opportunities for contextual clues unavailable through traditional voice channels.

Three Imperatives for Modern CX

The priorities for delivering exceptional customer experiences evolve. Not long ago, it was about automatic call distribution (ACD). More recently, the emphasis shifted to workforce engagement. As technology evolves, the table stakes increase, and new imperatives emerge. Today, there are three key imperatives for exceptional customer experiences: digital, AI and automation, and analytics.

The Digital Imperative Today

In the contemporary landscape, digital channels have become the cornerstone of customer interactions. Embracing digital transformation entails more than just establishing an online presence; it involves crafting seamless and engaging experiences across various digital touchpoints. This imperative necessitates a robust digital strategy encompassing responsive websites, mobile apps, social media engagement, and other emerging platforms. By prioritizing digital initiatives, businesses can cater to the evolving preferences of tech-savvy consumers and enhance overall CX.

The importance of digital interactions today cannot be emphasized enough. The trend has existed for some time, but a true transition from voice is now underway, accelerated by two significant phenomena.

- **The pandemic:** The pandemic changed the way brands and consumers interact, and it wasn't temporary. Consumers turned to online channels to obtain services when stores, branches, and offices closed. At first, it was awkward, but the world quickly adapted and then questioned past practices of making so many routine trips. A simple example is a bank deposit, which, for centuries, meant a trip to the bank. Now, we simply take a photo with our app-enabled smartphones. The transition was practically overnight but enabled by significant changes to banking systems and cellular phones that, fortunately, had already occurred. Now, deposits are routinely made online, and related customer service is also frequently conducted over online channels.

- **Generative AI:** Generative AI is a relatively new branch of artificial intelligence that creates more human-like interaction with machines. It utilizes advanced neural networks and natural language processing (NLP) to render natural, highly contextual responses. Generative AI is a game changer, and not just for customer service. The tech is still immature but rapidly evolving.

With changing demand and expectations, it's no surprise that a clear shift is occurring. Interactions are moving away from voice. The call center/contact center has always assumed the caller was using an analog phone line. It's time to disconnect that thought. Today, the customer is most likely initiating an interaction from a smartphone and probably not using it to call. If not a smartphone, then it's another

connected device (tablet, PC, watch, laptop, ebook, etc.) being utilized to engage over non-voice channels. Many household brands, such as Amazon, don't advertise telephone numbers and instead encourage digital-first interactions.

Each year, NTT publishes detailed findings among contact centers. The NTT 2023 Global Customer Experience Report indicates that those under 40 are open to various contact channels. The report also suggested that the number of channels used by any single company to interact with customers is also rising.

Recently, in the Q3-23 earnings report, NICE CEO Barak Eilam reported that the company's digital engagement bookings grew 78% year over year and said that "digital engagement and CX AI are the fastest-growing segments of our pipeline, increasing sevenfold year over year and representing a significant part of our new business pipeline."

The conditions are set for digital. It's a more effective tool that customers and providers prefer, yet contact centers tend to underutilize these channels. The imperative now is to embrace and leverage digital channels for improved experiences and loyalty. Digital interactions provide new opportunities to reimagine the customer experience. We can leverage digital channels to better:

- Understand intent
- Deliver faster or automated outcomes
- Improve documentation and processes
- Address the needs of a younger generation

AI and Automation

Artificial intelligence (AI) and automation technologies have revolutionized how businesses engage with customers. Leveraging AI-powered chatbots, virtual assistants, and predictive analytics enables organizations to deliver personalized and proactive support round-the-clock. AI can also be used for quality management, coaching, and agent assistance. By automating routine tasks and harnessing data-driven insights, companies can streamline processes, reduce response times, and foster meaningful interactions. Embracing AI and automation is crucial for staying competitive in a fast-paced digital landscape while ensuring consistent and efficient CX across touchpoints.

Analytics

In the age of big data, leveraging analytics is paramount for understanding customer behavior and preferences. By harnessing advanced analytics tools and techniques, businesses can glean actionable insights from vast datasets to drive outcomes. Whether analyzing customer feedback, tracking website metrics, or monitoring social media sentiment, a data-driven approach empowers organizations to optimize CX initiatives and identify areas for improvement. By continuously measuring and analyzing key performance indicators (KPIs), businesses can iterate and refine their CX strategies to meet evolving customer expectations.

NICE Enlighten

The migration to digital can be overwhelming because there are so many variables. For this reason, it's recommended to start with experience — that is, align with a provider with a track record in digital. NICE is a leading contact center provider, and NICE Enlighten is a toolset that connects with other systems to facilitate digital experiences. NICE introduced Enlighten in 2001 and has consistently improved it since, including adding new AI capabilities. Enlighten is the machine learning foundation of NICE's CXone platform.

In today's dynamic and intricate operational landscape, organizations are tasked with navigating constant change and complexity. A primary goal for many is to meet consumers' increasingly high expectations, a challenge compounded by the necessity of engaging with customers across diverse digital channels at all times. Additionally, organizations must equip their workforce with dynamic tools that foster productivity and facilitate engagement from any location.

A common point of failure is to rely on intuition to make decisions. Faced with a seemingly endless array of options, it is easy for organizations to disregard the key initial challenge of obtaining better visibility into organizational data. Businesses require solutions that dispel uncertainty and provide a path to digital CX grounded in data. The failure of AI projects often stems from the absence of three essential components:

- A vast historical CX dataset
- Extensive domain expertise to construct purpose-built AI models
- A top-tier cloud platform and application suite to operationalize insights

Investments in new technology should demonstrate a clear return on investment (ROI) and possess the scalability to adapt to future requirements. Crucially, deriving clarity through data insights is paramount to successfully navigating modern, digital CX.

NICE Enlighten comprises a suite of purpose-built AI solutions that get smarter and better with use. It leverages its own data to enhance and process intelligent digital CX. The suite eliminates the dead-ends caused by multiple siloed point solutions. By analyzing every interaction across various touchpoints, Enlighten provides invaluable insights and metrics crucial for scalable and effective decision-making. Insights are integrated across NICE's CX solution portfolio, including enhanced customer experiences, workforce engagement, and automation.

Enlighten harnesses a vast array of over 1,000 models to optimize workflows and enhance outcomes across diverse use cases. The cornerstone components of the Enlighten suite include Autopilot, Copilot, and Actions, prioritizing self-service, employee assistance, and operational excellence, respectively. Supplementary tools like Enlighten AutoSummary and Enlighten CSAT provide specialized functionalities that are adaptable to various contexts. NICE Enlighten stands as an AI toolkit tailored for customer experiences, delivering accelerated results and improved efficiencies.

Enlighten Autopilot:
Through virtual AI agents, Autopilot provides efficient self-service capabilities that are naturally conversational. Autopilot's virtual agents are designed to understand, analyze, and respond to human input and constantly evolve to enhance their abilities. These bots leverage a decade-plus of experience that quickly and reliably understands customer intents. Autopilot is designed to integrate multiple channels, applications, and workflows to give customers the correct responses to their requests. When that isn't practical, Autopilot will escalate to human agents appropriately and efficiently with a contextual summarization. This is one of the many advantages of a comprehensive platform.

Enlighten Copilot: Although the name has become tightly associated with Microsoft, the term is a helpful metaphor for how generative AI can simplify and automate interactions, even when they involve human agents. Enlighten Copilot is a collaborative AI partner for agents and supervisors that promotes efficiency and customer service by monitoring the interaction and providing the agent with helpful, on-demand guidance. This also allows newer agents a faster onboarding ramp. Enlighten Copilot ensures that agents and supervisors are never alone. Enlighten Copilot offers AI-driven coaching, training, and real-time insights. In addition to reducing average handling time, Copilot assists with interaction documentation.
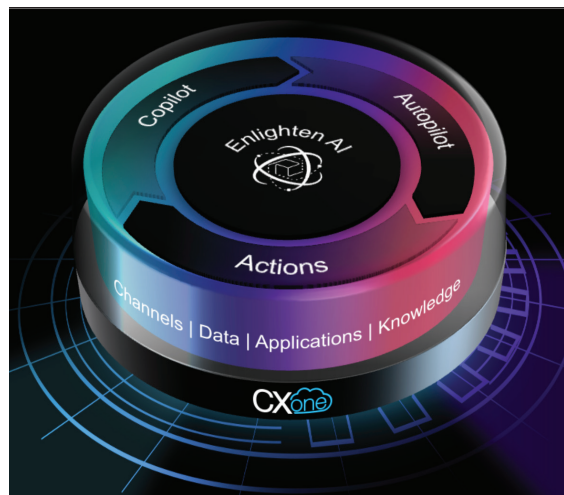
Enlighten Actions: This tool-set brings generative AI to the operations side of the contact center. The component analyzes overall performance and interaction activity and then suggests and implements appropriate changes to improve operations. Enlighten Actions generates administrative suggestions that will streamline operations and eliminate ineffective menus, routes, and queues. By freeing up valuable operational resources, Enlighten Actions accelerates time to value for automation initiatives and improves self-service effectiveness.

Enlighten XO: NICE has built a set of AI models focused to improve the effectiveness of self-service. Enlighten XO, or Experience Optimization, helps contact center managers analyze historical conversational data. It will identify conversations with the best outcomes, such as CSAT or first-call resolution. Once identified, these outcome-selected sample conversations are ideal for training (human and AI) agents. Enlighten XO extracts knowledge from successful interactions and accelerates self-service success.

The comprehensive Enlighten suite simplifies and accelerates the implementation of digital channels and self-service. However, ongoing success requires ongoing improvements, and that's the real value-add of this integrated suite. Whether the customer journey involves multiple channels or a mixture of self-service and agent assistance, Enlighten sees it all. For example, if customers are becoming frustrated with their experience, Enlighten will notice and make suggestions (and optional changes) to resolve the situation. This could involve new recordings, new routes, and even new channels.

As the goal is outcomes, let's review the outcomes that NICE Enlighten can deliver:

- **Enhanced Efficiency:** AI agents perform tasks with impeccable speed and accuracy, effortlessly surpassing humans. They're the masters of repetitive tasks, allowing humans to focus on complex problem-solving.
- **Unmatched Scalability:** Virtual agents boast adaptability, seamlessly scaling their operations to meet the surge during peak seasons or unexpected demand spikes, empowering businesses with unparalleled flexibility.
- **Reduced Costs:** By automating routine tasks, AI agents are a tool that slashes business labor costs. Moreover, they handle numerous customer inquiries simultaneously, reducing the need for additional staff.
- **Always On:** These tireless digital agents operate around the clock, offering 24/7 customer service: no overtime, no weekend shifts, just unwavering availability.
- **Tailored Personalization:** AI agents instantly integrate data analytics to curate personalized customer solutions and recommendations.

The Enlighten suite provides contact center staff with an established path to digitalization, AI, and self-service. Artificial intelligence is indispensable in today's contact centers, but you cannot simply download and install it. NICE Enlighten can streamline processes, eliminate guesswork, and leverage existing know-how. This is the proven approach to enhancing customer service outcomes.

Final Thoughts

As organizations seek to embrace digital, it is crucial to keep the following considerations in mind:

- Digital communications are not add-ons to voice. Every channel, including voice, has its place in the modern contact center and should be optimized appropriately. While every channel has its independent capabilities, conversations and interactions occur across multiple channels.
- The goal of digital channels is not the implementation of new channels but an orchestrated approach that keeps outcomes in focus. When implementing new digital channels, it is essential to architect workflows toward outcomes by leveraging each channel's capabilities to better ascertain context and intent.

- Generative AI is a game changer. We know it will create more natural human-machine interactions and significant efficiency gains from automating tasks, coaching agents, and improving the success of self-service options.

- For decades, the contact center was all about data, which drove integrations with external systems such as CRM and ERP. While that's still true, generative AI is making unparalleled use of data generated by the contact center itself. AI learns from conversations that occur across channels and modalities. The correct answers are in the contact center; now, those existing answers can be used to respond to customers faster than ever. The contact center is ground zero for successful interactions, reinforcing and evolving AI capabilities.

- A unified platform simplifies the design, implementation, and operation of digital interactions — that's obvious. What's becoming clear now is that a unified platform is critical for ongoing improvements. The right platform empowers brands to understand and meet their customers' needs.

Enlighten and CXone are a powerful combination, redefining the landscape of CX innovation. This collaboration paves the way for proactive, contextually aware digital experiences, allowing organizations to not just respond to customer needs but anticipate them. This groundbreaking shift from reactive to predictive customer journeys optimizes every interaction point, setting a new standard of service.

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