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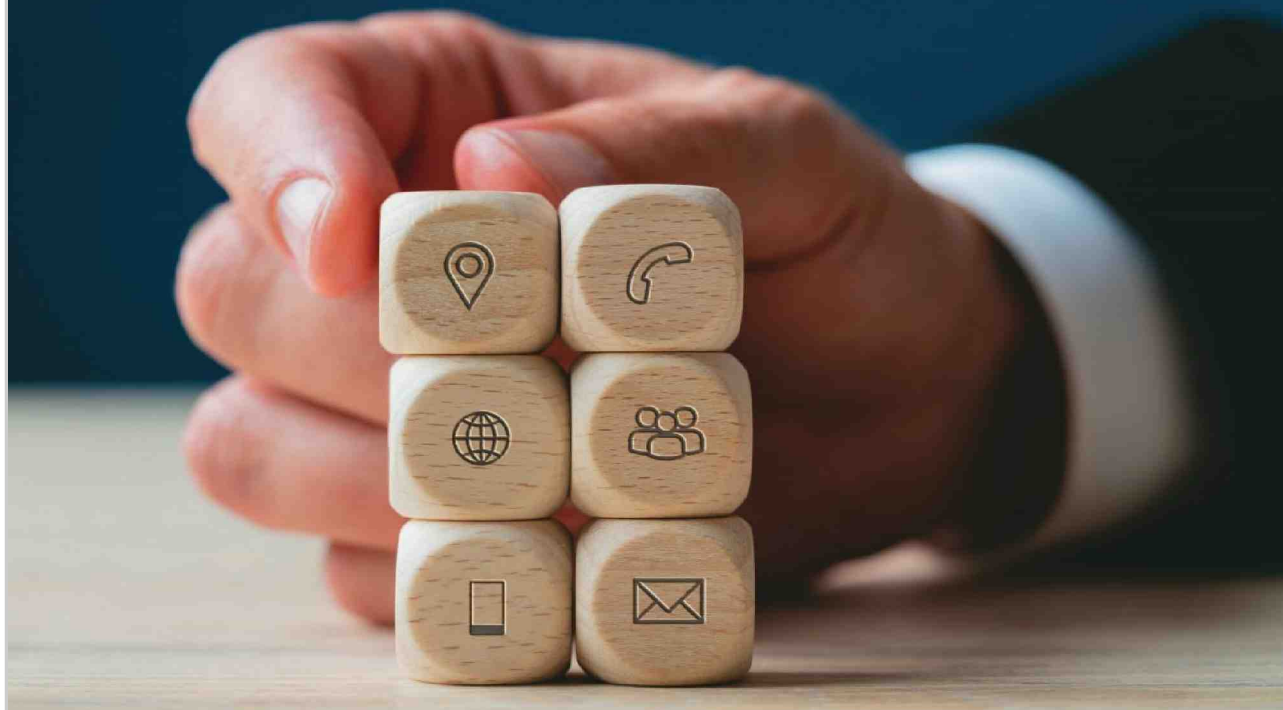
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CONTACT CENTER The New Frontline Channel



CONTACT CENTER

The New Frontline Channel



Contact centers have a changed role in the pandemic times. Heads of operations and contact centers of 5 BFSI institutions discuss how their institutions managed to make their contact centers rise to the occasion and deliver services that more than met the customer expectations:

Banking Frontiers in bringing this cover story that discusses how contact centers have changed to be in line with the expectations of the customers during the pandemic.

During the lockdown, most customers could not visit the branches and resorted to digital channels. The contact center became the frontline channel as call

volumes rose. Since the staff had to work from home, this created serious challenges. How have BFSI institutions overcome the challenges related to changes in staffing at contact centers during the lockdown? What solutions enabled WFH and what were the changes in incoming and outgoing call volumes? What is the role played by chatbots and the changes in call

volumes associated with various products and customer segments? And what is the shape that technology has taken to make the contact centers productive meeting the challenges?

We are discussing the topic in 3 sections - Focus on People, Customer Engagement & Calls and Adoption of the Latest Technologies.

Part 1

Focus on People

Covid & WFH have brought in changes in the way staff is managed in the contact centers:

Equitas Small Finance Bank has around 70 executives in the department that handles customer experience, which comprises not only the contact center but other functions that drive customer care. Dheeraj Mohan, Head, Strategy & IR, BI & CE at the bank, says at the contact center, the bank has around 50 employees across voice and non-voice channels. "During the last 12 months, we have not scaled up the team despite customer acquisition rates doubling at the bank, but we are investing in automation solutions to ensure the scale-up is more tech-driven than manpower-led."

He adds further: "We have been focusing on technology-led initiatives that empower our customers to service themselves efficiently and quickly."

Kotak Mahindra Bank has a total of 4 call centers – 3 in-house and one outsourced. Nearly 2000 employees manage the inbound and outbound calls at these centers. Puneet Kapoor, President - Products, Alternate Channels & Customer Experience Delivery at the bank says: "We are guided by the positivity rate of covid in each city. Depending on the positivity rate, about 10-20% of the total staff works from home."

India Post Payments Bank contact center operates with a strong workforce of around 140 employees. Easwaran Venkateswaran, COO at India Post Payments Bank says: "During the last 12 months, there has been a 30% increase in the total workforce at our contact centers besides the addition of a new site."

Aviva Life Insurance has 16 people handling inbound calls and 2 people handling outbound calls at its contact center. The team is supplemented by its chatbot 'ALISHA' to help its potential customers. Kunal Anand, Chief Operations and Customer Service Officer at Aviva Life Insurance, says there have been no changes in the number of employees handling



Puneet Kapoor sees WhatsApp complementing contact center calls, resulting in a boost in NPS

outbound calls whereas the number of employees for inbound calls was 19 till April 2021. He adds that over a period, the company has seen a shift as customers prefer digital contact over calls now.

CONTACT CENTER STAFF ON WFH

Nearly 80% of the contact center staff at Bajaj Allianz General Insurance is working from home, and the rest from the office as they voluntarily opted for it. They are all vaccinated too. The company is conducting vaccination drives and hoping that once all its staff members are fully vaccinated, the percentage of staff working from the office would increase. KV Dipu, Head - Operations & Customer Service at the company says: "We will consider the same only if it is safe for the employees and the WFH option will be enabled as and when required."

According to Kunal of Aviva Life Insurance, lockdowns have caused the entire

working model to change, and being a people-first organization, safety of the employees is the topmost priority for the bank. "Since the lockdown was announced last year, our entire contact center staff is working from home. A decision whether to continue with the 100% WFH model or to move to a hybrid model in the next 6 months cannot be taken right now because of the unpredictable nature of the lockdown situation. We will take a proactive decision depending upon changing environment and lockdown relaxations, keeping both the customer and employee interests at heart," says he.

At Equitas Small Finance Bank, 100% of the contact center staff is worked from home. The bank had seamlessly shifted to WFH mode as a basic infrastructure for such a shift was ready. It opened offices for employees who wished to get back to the office when the first covid subsided as better internet connectivity, bandwidth and office infrastructure helped improve the team's productivity.

Dheeraj explains that the second wave saw the bank return to WFH for about 3 months and now about 50% of the team is back in the office. The bank is looking at a hybrid model as a long-term solution as it helps the bank to engage with the 'gig talent pool' and improve its capacity across regional languages. "In general, the overall headcount is set to increase by over 30% as we are witnessing a strong business momentum in terms of customer acquisition. We are also reasonably clear that WFH is not as efficient as working from office," he says.

REMOTE MANAGEMENT

Adapting to the prevailing scenario required changes such as managers being provided with an admin account with the required floor management access. Kunal says additionally, managers are using the dashboard to do the routine floor management enabling them to manage

work efficiently even when teams are working remotely.

Easwaran of India Post Payments Bank says while workflow management processes were made more rigorous, managers across locations synergized the overall operations in the bank.

Equitas Small Finance Bank uses various collaboration tools like video conferencing solutions, chat messenger, remote folder access, and dashboard to view team and call

performance. Apart from these, the bank's entire training module moved online to ensure the staff was continuously trained on new product launchers and service enhancements. Dheeraj says the bank heavily relied on creating online workgroups to ensure unhampered collaboration and instant resolution.

KV Dipu says online collaborations tools were enabled at Bajaj Allianz General Insurance to help drive better governance and

engagement with employees. Additionally, online learning tools and SOPs were designed to manage skill-based refreshers, says he.

Puneet of Kotak Mahindra Bank shares: "Our 'home agents' were authenticated and authorized to handle interactions and were remotely supervised by team leaders and managers. The automated supervision of home agents ensures strict adherence to company policies."

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Part 2

Customer Engagement & Calls

Rise in call volumes indicates customers preferred digital banking in the peak of the pandemic:

Several studies show that during the pandemic, more and more customers of BFSI institutions have adapted digital channels and have turned to mobile/net banking. Kotak Mahindra Bank's customer experience center did see an over 10% reduction in the total number of calls. However, the number of calls has now stabilized to pre-covid levels.

KV Dipu of Bajaj Allianz General Insurance says: "During the lockdown, we noticed a drop in call volume. Call volumes have stabilized at approximately 50-60% of earlier volumes."

Call volumes, in general, have spiked as more customers wanted to be serviced remotely. Dheeraj of Equitas Small Finance Bank says the bank has seen an increase of over 130% during the last 12 months and currently the trend has not changed. "The lockdowns and restrictions have significantly moved a segment of our customers to rely on remote assistance to carry out their banking transactions. Additionally, our customer acquisition only gained traction which has also resulted in more inbound calls. Previously we used to receive about 30,000 calls a month."

During the 4 phases of the nationwide lockdown from 25 March till 31 May 2020, India Post Payments Bank witnessed an exponential increase in call volumes.



KV Dipu favors online collaborations tools to drive better governance

Compared to the first wave of pandemics, there was a reduction in call volumes during the lockdowns in the second wave. Volumes stabilized with the easing of lockdown restrictions and better accessibility to banks.

Aviva Life Insurance had shut down its branch offices temporarily when the lockdown was announced. The company saw an increase in inbound calls when the branch touchpoints were not available to

the customers. Kunal elaborates: "There have been no changes in the outgoing calls. However, the ongoing pandemic has accentuated the importance of life insurance among consumers leading to increased incoming calls for queries. On an average, we are receiving 450 calls per day. The volume of calls has not stabilized as the number of branches operating differs from day to day."

POPULAR PRODUCTS

Bajaj Allianz General Insurance saw an increase in the number of queries for health insurance products. KV Dipu says: "The queries related to travel insurance products have seen a decreasing trend due to travel restrictions in place because of the pandemic."

Kunal says over the past year, the Indian insurance industry has seen several changes in consumer behaviour and attitude towards insurance. For instance, young people are considering life insurance not simply for protection but to achieve their life goals. "We have seen marginally higher call volumes enquiring about traditional products," says he.

CUSTOMER SEGMENTS

Higher call volumes are generally seen in the digitally sourced accounts. These customers generally call up to fix and follow up on their full KYC conversion.

Dheeraj says apart from this, there are also NRIs customers, who are actively engaging with virtual RMs and phone bankers. He shares the details: "Customers with a vintage of more than 6 months tend to migrate to our do-it-yourself menus on the internet and mobile applications and as a result we see a drop in calls from these customers."

He adds: "We are noticing that high-value customers are using call center/

phone banking services more than relying on the branches.

Aviva Life Insurance has seen that 60% of the calls come from middle- and the lower-income groups, whose annual income is up to ₹400,000 while 50% of the calls came from the age group of 25-45 years.

DIFFERENT GEOGRAPHIES

Bajaj Allianz General Insurance receives

most of the calls from the west and north India. Aviva Life Insurance gets calls from across age groups and geographies, but maximum calls have been coming from the north, specifically Delhi NCR. Kunal adds: "Historically also this region has a higher number of calls but in comparison to our metro cities like Mumbai, these few months we have seen higher Delhi client calls."

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Part 3

Adopting the Latest Technologies

BFSI companies have focused on adopting latest technologies in their contact centres to overcome the pandemic challenges:

The pandemic and the lockdowns announced by the central and state governments and restrictions like social distancing have created major challenges for organizations, especially for customer-centric functions that required employees and their managers to be in close proximity. Easwaran of India Post Payments Bank says: "For us, it was largely related to upskilling the workforce for the work-from-home model as well as educating customers about accessing our self-service channel. The entire pandemic period till date has been a learning journey for our workforce as well as customers."

To ensure that employees work in a secured environment without affecting their productivity levels, Aviva Life Insurance provided infrastructure support such as laptops and VPN connections. Kunal provides details of the new solutions introduced by the company: "We have enabled a slew of solutions such as cloud telephony for the entire team. For callers to be able to operate on their mobile phones, admin activates all callers at the beginning of a shift, post which the calls start getting diverted to the caller's number registered on the application."

Dheeraj says: "WFH required VPN connectivity, desktops to be changed to laptops, stronger Wi-Fi connections for homes and moving some of our call center solutions on personal phones. Being a



Kunal Anand believes 'video bots' to drive the future of customer service

bank, all solutions needed to get clearance from info-security given that the team has access to customer data. Recently, we have invested in solutions that improve supervisor control, audit and intervention to ensure that we deliver the same standards of service during these difficult times."

KV Dipu adds: "Firstly, the desktops were delivered to our employees at their home, VPN access was extended along with dongles for internet facility to

work efficiently from outside the office environment. These steps ensured seamless work experience for our employees."

SECURITY MEASURES

Even before the onset of the pandemic, Kotak Mahindra Bank already had a business continuity plan in place. Its contact centers easily transitioned into a work-from-home mode without compromising on the security of the customers' data and accessibility of services. The bank achieved a seamless extension of 'on-premises contact center officers into 'home agents' using new surveillance software.

Puneet shares details: "The single sign-on facility over VPN or desktop virtualization ensures security and compliance, in which our 'home agents' have full access to the existing contact center technology and business processes. In addition to this, we have upgraded our call recording systems to ensure good quality of audio recordings."

Apart from a VPN connection to access the bank's software, Equitas Small Finance Bank had strengthened the remote surveillance of its technology assets. Says Eswaran: "Our WFH operations model was based on utilization of the office IT infrastructure (included the movement of systems) and henceforth had all the security controls enabled in office IT infrastructure."

Kunal believes in safeguarding information as an important aspect for insurance organizations to deal with customer data. He says: "Keeping that in mind, we have implemented multiple measures for contact center staff as they are working from home, including VPN, multi-factor authentication and a compliance manager to keep a check on the security posture of contact center team's hardened devices."

DEPLOYMENT OF CHATBOTS

Chatbots are mainly deployed for making outgoing calls to intimate customers on their upcoming dues, pre-approved offers, and for taking in confirmation of various facilities that the bank offers. Dheeraj says: "We are currently testing chatbots to handle incoming calls and for providing an FAQ on digitally sourced accounts that required conversion to a full KYC account. We are aiming to have bots in 7 languages as the bank has a significant presence in non-metro locations and economically weaker sections."

Aviva Life Insurance uses a mix of technology solutions for faster and effective resolution of customer engagement. For example, chatbots replicate the behaviour of a human representative, while ensuring the accuracy and efficiency of an advanced machine system. Kunal adds: "Our state-of-the-art CRM system is fully integrated with a customer portal, mobile application and website, IVR and cloud telephony. This helps us get a unified view of the customer's journey with us."

Aviva Life Insurance chatbot, ALISHA (an acronym for Aviva Life Insurance Self Help Assistant) is amongst India's first few NLP (Natural Language Processor) powered conversational computing solutions. It allows existing and prospective customers of the company to have easy access to information about various insurance policies and 24x7 and round the clock instant response to their queries. It also promotes financial literacy across all ages and geographies, with Insurance Made Simple, a skill taught to Alexa's voice bot. With Alexa, Aviva is de-jargonizing complex insurance terms through the latest digital innovation.

"In a day inbound handles 350-400 cases and outbound around 100-125 cases. We are catering to Hindi and English at a



Dheeraj Mohan stresses technology-led initiatives to empower its customers

call center and for the regional language, we route the customers to the branches. For outbound regional calling, we connect with the branch resource and take customers on the conference", says Kunal.

Bajaj Allianz General Insurance has a multilingual chatbot 'BOING' which is currently available in 3 languages - English, Hindi, and Marathi. It offers 24x7 customer assistance and instantly responds to customer queries. BOING is capable of handling major queries and requests related to policy servicing, claim assistance, policy renewal and new policy purchase. BOING is also integrated with WhatsApp to be available at every touchpoint and address customer queries instantly.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Equitas Small Finance Bank's video banking services were launched to provide customers with in-person, personalized remote servicing of requests. Dheeraj explains: "Through video banking, we eliminated the need to visit the branches to submit proofs for making account level changes. The service has gained significant traction during the lockdown as it was easy to use and was provided for all customer segments."

He adds: "We intend to scale up video banking capabilities to cut across all requests that are traditionally managed by

the branch. This will help us to standardize our service levels and make it very convenient for customers."

India Post Payments Bank revamped its training content for recruits along with a feedback mechanism.

In 2020 post lockdown, Aviva Life Insurance placed one SPOC number on its website to handle escalated calls since WFH was not immediately up. Few callers were diverted to live chat volume handling and email desk as customers were using these two mediums to connect with the bank. Additionally, a hybrid model of managing relaxation and grace period from home as well as office was also implemented to ensure 100% availability to customers to provide a seamless experience.

Puneet says: "Over 40% of calls received at the contact center were complemented by WhatsApp communications, due to which the Net Promoter Score, a common barometer for gauging customers' satisfaction, rose by 9-11 points. Customers can also make loan-related inquiries via Keya voice bot."

FUTURE TECHNOLOGIES

Dheeraj predicts that AI-based technologies will be in use to improve call center supervision like real-time custom sentiment analysis, omnichannel chatbots to ensure the customer can start a conversation in a social media handle and complete the transaction or service chat on messenger.

Easwaran reveals details about the importance of the role of AI: "As part of our overall digital transformation journey, the focus is on utilizing the technologies to strengthen our self-service channels. Additionally, the role of AI is not ruled out in optimizing the utilization of contact centers as a channel."

Kunal believes the future of customer service will be with video bots. According to him, while text and audio services have brought about awesome changes in the industry, the new wave is set to come through video solutions and video collaboration tools. "Since the chatbot and audio bot got picked up in the times of lockdown, it gives me higher hopes for video bots," he says.

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