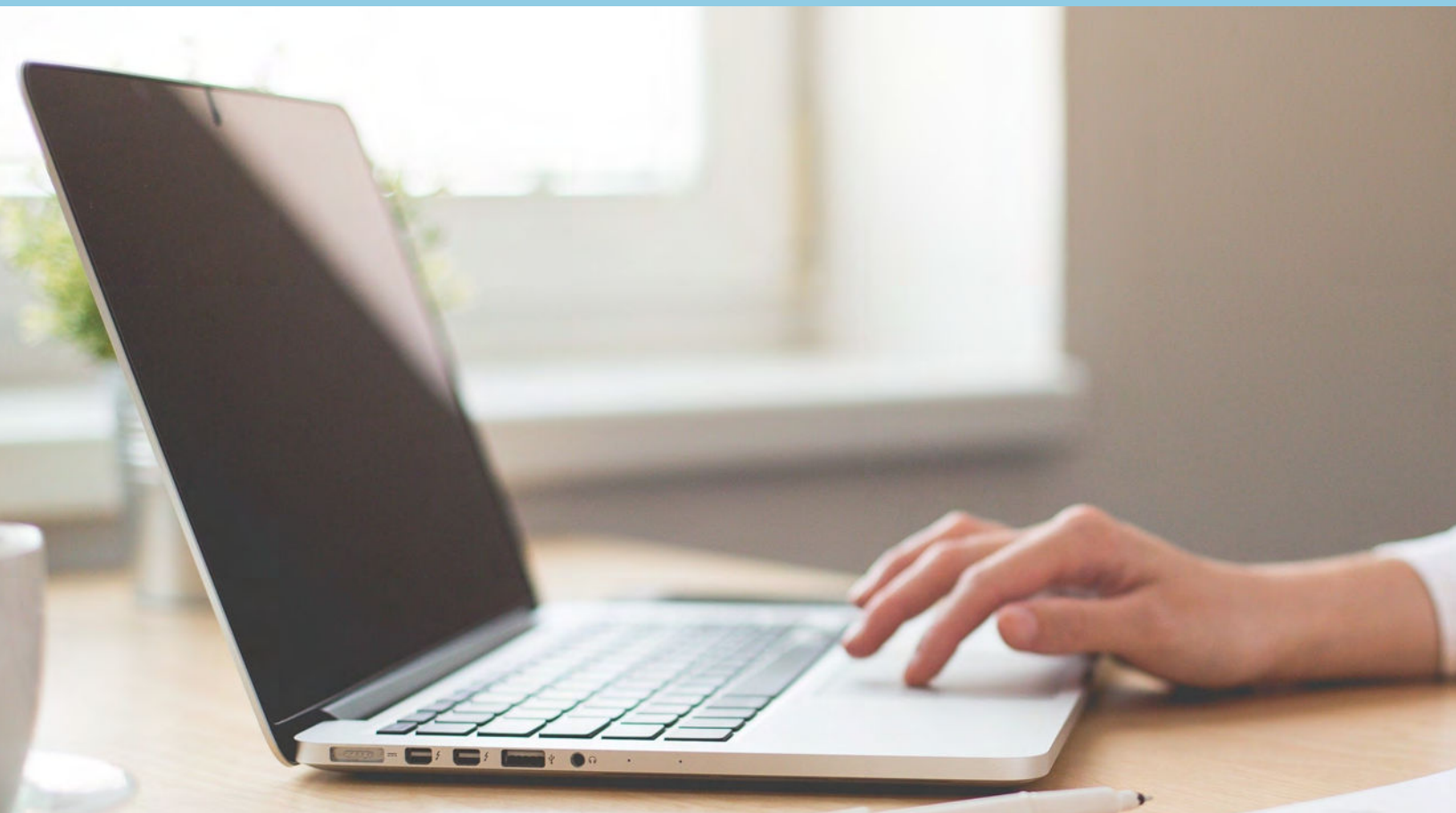## CCW CUSTOMER CONTACT WEEK DIGITAL

SPECIAL REPORT:

REMOTE AGENTS

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October 15, 2018

liveops

FEATURING INSIGHTS FROM:

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SPECIAL REPORT: REMOTE AGENTS

Engaged and empowered agents can be the gateway to an exceptional customer experience. They foster legitimate connections with customers.

Unfortunately, modern contact centers often fail to cultivate this powerful, customer-centric class of agents. Due to limitations of the modern contact center, shortcomings of the typical outsourcing environment and challenges of the contemporary employment marketplace, organizations routinely struggle not only to successfully engage agents but to meet the overall demands of their customers.

They cannot achieve fundamental customer contact tasks:

- Attracting the right talent

- Motivating performance

- Engaging and retaining top performers

- Accommodating new customer preferences

- Supporting customers in new regions and markets

- Managing the costs of growth

Intimidating on paper, the challenges are quite surmountable in practice. By deploying a remote workforce, an organization is able to put the right talent in position to successfully engage with customers and support business growth.

Remote workforce strategies can take different forms. They can involve allowing agents to primarily work from home. They can involve giving local agents the daily option of reporting to the office or working remotely.

They can also completely *ignore* geographic barriers. This progressive vision for remote work focuses on hiring agents for their skills, experience and compatibility for the brand — regardless of location.

This special report centers on the latter approach to remote work. It reveals how the optimal remote strategy can help businesses overcome the pitfalls associated with the brick-and-mortar contact center workforce. It uncovers the trends driving the remote agent movement—and the benefits of the marketplace shift. It also details the elements of a successful remote agent strategy, before providing tips for overcoming key misconceptions and challenges.

WHY CONSIDER A NEW AGENT STRATEGY?
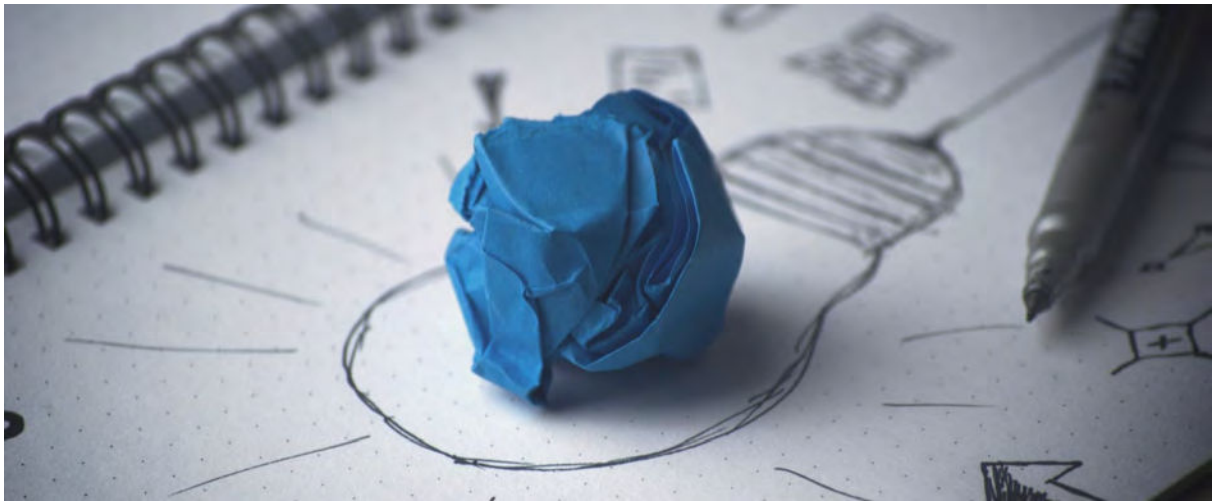
Agent engagement is a consistent gap area for organizations, and new marketplace trends are compounding the reality. They are making existing challenges more daunting, while introducing a myriad of new concerns for contact centers that have, by and large, already fallen behind.

Reflective of a new marketplace normal, these factors underscore the need for a new approach to hiring agents.

CHANGING WORKFORCE

Customer contact leaders repeatedly stress the connection between "happy agents" and "happy customers."

Up until recently, they have neglected one important reality: agent happiness can be a moving target.

Indeed, the demands, expectations, and proclivities of today's workforce have changed greatly in recent years. These new preferences are actually incompatible with the conventional call center environment.

Today's highly skilled workers demand diversity in their day-to-day workflow. The idea of processing the same, repetitive transaction every five minutes is unappealing; they live for nuance, unpredictability, and opportunities for outside-the-box thinking.

They also carry an aversion toward cubicle environments and rigid shifts and instead desire autonomy. These individuals are determined, spontaneous and self-motivated, and they seek a work environment that can accommodate their independence.

> " We spend so much of our time focused on those numbers rather than focusing on the people who are producing those numbers," adds Kendal Jolly of Toll Brothers. "

MARKETPLACE CONDITIONS

Success drives growth, but it also creates challenges.

To support demand, a growing organization needs to expand its customer contact operation. Marketplace factors, unfortunately, inhibit this endeavor.

For starters, the contact center sector is saturated within many target markets. Suitable contact center real estate is not practically attainable, if even available.

"Geographically speaking, there are zero markets left in the US where brick and mortar call centers can scale," notes Hanover.

Organizations will also face a challenge securing the talent needed to support their growth plans. With unemployment so low and lucrative career options so abundant, few highly skilled agents are even available for a new contact center position. The skilled agents who are available, meanwhile, have the luxury of seeking work in a seller's market. Organizations will have to compete to attract and retain their services.

CUSTOMER NEEDS

Subscribing to notions like "customer centricity" and "competing on the customer experience," today's organizations are viewing the customer experience with renewed significance.

They are also embracing technologies that change the way they interact with customers.

Collectively, these forces create a demand for a higher caliber contact center agent.

Thanks to the breadth of information online and the rise of robust self-service tools, customers are becoming less reliant on agents for simple, transactional matters. When they seek agent assistance, it will be for unique, complex matters.

In order to meet this demand, organizations require agents who possess better training, more experience and greater industry knowledge.

And insofar as they want to deliver exceptional customer experiences, these organizations also require agents who can expertly represent the brand while creating meaningful connections. Organizations win the customer experience competition not simply by providing support but by making connections.

UNDENIABLE DILEMMAS

The marketplace is in an unquestionable state of change, and these developments create several undeniable dilemmas.

- Your customer contact operation requires talent with profiles and competencies that may not currently exist in your call center. Even if you employ some of these high caliber agents, it will be difficult to scale their abilities to support growing business needs.

- You need a multi-regional workforce, but you cannot create contact centers in every location. Even if you could, you would also face the challenge of maintaining brand ownership and cultural consistency across all such sites.

- You need high-caliber, professional, ambitious agents, who have habitually written off the traditional call center environment

- Your customers are more empowered and thus demand high-quality support from agents.

WHY CONSIDER REMOTE AGENTS?

Illustrated by the aforementioned dilemmas, the conventional agent hiring model is insufficient for the realities of today's marketplace. It will take an evolved approach to identify, attract and satisfy the highly skilled agents capable of connecting with today's empowered customers.

When designed and implemented correctly, a remote agent strategy represents the ideal option. It directly confronts the key marketplace challenges, and in turn grants organizations access to the agents they need and their customers deserve.

"

By removing barriers such as physical location and strict preset schedules, call centers can tap into the underutilized talent pool to meet agent staffing needs and address call volume and quality on both quantitative and qualitative levels," declares Hanover. "Going remote means you can source higher quality, more motivated agents when you provide flexibility and open your talent pool nationwide.

"

OVERCOME THE BRICK-AND-MORTAR HIRING CHALLENGE

This may be the digital age, but the physical world still places limitations on growth and success.

Since remote agents do not have to regularly report to a physical center, organizations can greatly expand their hiring radii. This, in turn, grants them access to a wider, more talented, and potentially more cost-effective talent pool.

A remote agent program also frees organizations of the physical costs associated with brick-and-mortar call centers. Organizations will not have to add or expand physical call center sites, freeing them of the hard costs associated with the real estate, maintenance and management.

Not simply costly from a capital perspective, these brick-and-mortar locations also have an adverse impact on agent retention. Even if they do not outright repel agents, they surely place a ceiling on agent satisfaction. Unsatisfied agents are less likely to perform and more likely to depart, saddling organizations with the costs of low-quality experiences and high levels of agent attrition.

Inherently agent-centric, the remote agent model helps organizations avoid these costs.

ATTRACT SPECIALIZED TALENT

Great agents are the key to a great customer experience. The remote agent model empowers organizations to cultivate these great agents.

By removing physical barriers, the organization can recruit for factors like skill, industry experience, education or brand affinity. More importantly, the organization can actually *attract, satisfy and retain* the agents who possess these advantages.

By offering access to personalized online training, flexible scheduling and the comfort to work remotely, the organization offers legitimate value to members of today's more demanding, more selective workforce.

It directly appeals to those inhibited by the conventional, rigid, cubicle-driven call center environment. This includes talented, self-motivated entrepreneurs and independent contractors who would never typically consider work as a contact center agent.

> **"**
> We try to empower our agents, we have a culture of coaching and feedback and recognition," says Laurie Simpter of Pier 1 Imports. "Work/life balance is very, very important to the organization. Over 85% of our agents are currently working from home.
> **"**

DELIVER A MORE CUSTOMER-CENTRIC EXPERIENCE

By eliminating hiring barriers, the remote agent model empowers organizations to find agents who fit into the brand dynamic.

It, more importantly, allows organizations to hire agents who align with the preferences of its customers.

In addition to valuing knowledge and experience, customers gravitate toward agents with particular personality types and communication styles. These customer-centric agents are not necessarily available to brick-and-mortar contact centers, but they are *always* accessible to those leveraging a remote work program.

Capable of efficiently delivering the experience customers want in the channel they prefer, these agents are predisposed to delivering a better experience. They help turn the promise of customer centricity into a reality.

INCREASE AGILITY, SCALABILITY AND EFFICIENCY

Not simply unappealing to agents and restrictive to the operation, the brick-and-mortar contact center model is costly. It subjects the business to heavy capital expenditures.

A remote agent program helps organizations transition to an operating expense (OPEX) model. The organization can hire, train and release agents based on business need, yielding a dramatically more efficient operation. The contact center will only be hiring—and paying—for the work it needs.

With the money it saves, the organization can pursue higher-caliber talent, more valuable technology or better overall customer journeys. It will be investing in the customer experience rather than in a building.

Along with boosting cost efficiency, the remote agent model increases agility and scalability. Since remote agents have specialized skills and do not need to drive into the office and get situated at a desk, the organization can quickly expand its workforce to accommodate surges related to particular issues, channels or customer bases.
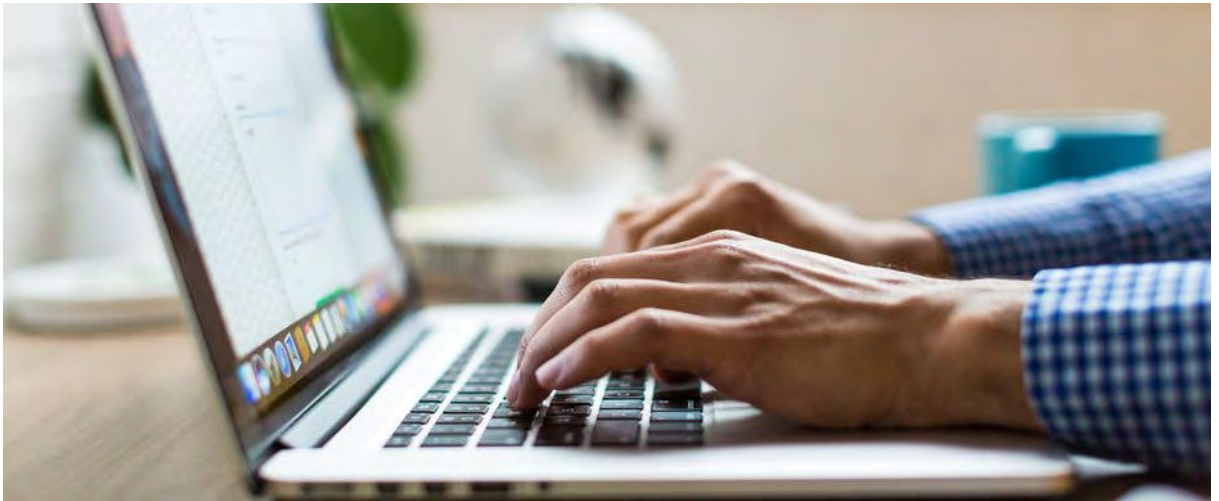
REMOTE AGENTS ARE REAL ASSETS

Whether an organization prefers the notion of "happy agents yielding happy customers" or "productive agents yielding satisfied customers," it can turn adage into reality with remote agents.

- With a remote agent model, the organization can tap into a larger talent pool. It can also prioritize factors like skill, brand fitness, motivation level, and customer centricity.

- Not simply powerful during the hiring phase, the remote model avoids the long-term pitfalls associated with the traditional contact center environment. Agent satisfaction rises, and attrition falls. The organization no longer loses its best talent, let alone the time managers spend recruiting, onboarding and training new agents.

- It also increases the profitability of the contact center, while increasing its ability to swiftly accommodate new channels, regions and customer bases.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES, DEBUNKING MYTHS

The remote agent can help an organization overcome some of the most debilitating, notorious contact center issues. It is not, however, without its own set of challenges.

Some of these are legitimate, others are the product of unwarranted fear due to a lack of agility on this industry's part.

All, however, can be addressed with the right strategies and mindsets.

⚠️ CONCERN: TROUBLE CREATING A SINGULAR CULTURE

One of the foremost customer experience priorities involves creating a singular culture within the contact center. The aim is to unite all agents around the brand's mission and commitment to customer centricity.

As cultivating such a culture is a trying ordeal even when all agents sit within the same contact center, it may seem particularly challenging for an organization that leverages remote work.

In reality, the remote approach actually *contributes* to a singular culture of customer centricity.

By expanding the talent pool, a remote agent program empowers an organization to hire the agent profile it truly wants. With brand-centric, customer-centric agents already in place, the organization gets to avoid the challenge of instilling a singular culture in each of its many on-site agents.

⚠️ CONCERN: TROUBLE ENGAGING WITH AGENTS

As remote agents do not sit within the physical contact center, managers do not have the luxury of communicating with these individuals at their desks. Indeed, there is little to no opportunity for regular in-person communication.

Some naturally fear that reality. If they cannot physically interact with their agents, can they meaningfully engage with them? Can they provide guidance, training, coaching and support?

The answer is a resounding yes. Thanks to video conferencing and messaging tools, leaders can communicate with their peers in real-time. As it happens via the agent's workstation, these conversations are far more efficient and convenient than in-person interactions, which require setting meetings and taking agents away from their desks.

In addition to empowering interactions between managers and agents, conferencing technology allows remote agents to communicate with their lateral peers. They can instantly connect to other remote agents—or those within the physical call center—for assistance, advice or merely for the joy of human interaction.

Technology helps organizations gain particularly valuable "face time" with their remote agents. But they are not obligated to rely on digital communication. If it makes sense for their operation, they *can* still organize company meetings and retreats to facilitate in-person engagement.

⚠️ CONCERN: MANAGING REMOTE PERFORMANCE

If organizations are worried about engaging with remote agents, they are surely concerned about conditioning and motivating them to perform.

That concern is also overblown.

For starters, the remote model grants organizations access to a higher caliber, more motivated workforce. These agents are more competent; insofar as they are more comfortable in their environments, they are also more content. That satisfaction typically translates into better customer service delivery.

It, more importantly, contributes to greater agent retention. The organization gets to keep its best-performing agents while avoiding the costs of recruiting, training and re-training.

> "
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> Once a person reports to a call center for their shift they have to stay there," explains Hanover. "Eventually, they get worn down/ drained. They can't get away to rejuvenate. In a virtual environment people build their schedule with time allocated to allow for time to refocus. This can positively impact quality, motivation and attitude.
>
> "

The "contract" nature of remote work also encourages a meritocracy. Although the remote model still accommodates a "human" element, it eliminates the hazard of human excuses. There are no brownie points for contributing to the workplace environment; agents are objectively judged based on performance.

These agents, moreover, have little exposure to "worst practices" within the office. As they do not see their deskmates getting away with poor, complacent performance, they have no incentive to partake in a "race to the bottom." They only know one reality: they must perform.

A remote model also encourages organizations to be efficient with communication, particularly as it relates to training. By conducting through automated, trigger-based e-learning or simple messaging conversations, the organization avoids the inefficacy of group training and inefficiency of in-person coaching.

> **"**
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> Higher caliber agents—the kinds enterprises want to attract—are motivated to learn and keep getting better," says Hanover. "Especially if they are a remote agent/independent contractor whose call volume is determined by quality.
>
> **"**

⚠ CONCERN: ADDRESSING SECURITY AND QUALITY ISSUES

By allowing customer interactions to take place outside the walls of the contact center environment, an organization undoubtedly triggers potential security and compliance issues.

No such issue is insurmountable. Remote agents most certainly can handle sensitive customer data.

By leveraging extensive background checks (and intuitive requirement in the realm of remote work), an organization can first and foremost ensure it is putting its customer interactions in trustworthy hands. Security audits and strict system requirements ensure these trustworthy agents are capable of meeting the brand's compliance standards.

> **"**
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> While it's essential to use top technology to secure agent workspaces and equipment, vetting agents is the most important security measure," says Paul Leavens of Liveops. "When hiring for a remote position the background checks (criminal and financial) can go beyond what is traditionally done in the B&M space. This is not because B&M doesn't have the same risks but because B&M agent turnover is so high—you can't invest the same amount of resources.
>
> **"**

Monitoring and messaging platforms empower supervisors and managers to be as watchful of remote agents as they desire, leading to a further "check" into the security of all interactions.

> "
> [Contact centers have] multiple generations working in the same roles across geography," notes Jolly. "It does make it more challenging, but I would encourage you as leaders to know what your people are doing wherever they may be.
> "

In addition to providing a layer of security, these measures empower the organization to properly monitor interaction quality. Robust interaction analytics—a key component of the best contact center solutions and a key offering from the best outsourcing partners—give the organization further insight into how remote agents are performing.

Real-time, automated training brings the operation full circle, creating justifiable confidence in the remote team's ability to honor the brand's commitment to data protection and overall customer centricity.

> "
> What I've learned specifically in the last five years about training, curriculum design and the development of content for our agents is it's really critical to have a central hub where our policies and processes are established," advises Cory Kreeck of BeachBody. [This helps us] ensure that as we roll that out across geographies, those policies and processes are consistently delivered to every locale so that the customer experience is the same no matter where they are contacting or with whom they are talking.
> "

CREATING A CULTURE OF EMPOWERMENT

A popular adage argues that the contact center must perform for its agents before they can perform for customers. A remote workforce strategy embodies the notion of performing for agents.

It offers the flexibility they crave, the autonomy they desire and the support framework they require. Working on their own terms in a more favorable environment, these highly skilled agents are motivated to wow customers.

They are motivated to become a true gateway to customer centricity.

> "
>
> We try to keep that agent experience at the forefront of everything we do, and I think our agents can feel that," says Simpter. "Our agents are the first line of contact with our customers, and it's such a critical role to the success of our organization so we try to take every opportunity we can to show our appreciation whether that be through appreciation day or through the tools that we provide them.
>
> "

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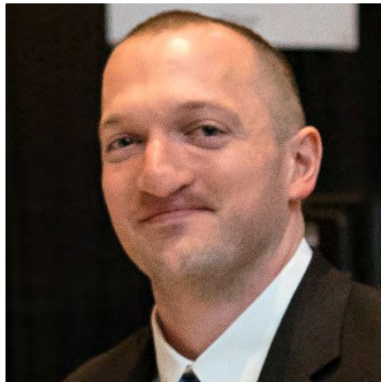
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Brian Cantor is the principal analyst and director for CCW Digital, the global online community and research hub for customer contact professionals. In his role, Brian leads all customer experience, contact center, technology and employee engagement research initiatives for CCW Digital's series of reports. CCW Digital's articles, special reports, commentaries, infographics, executive interviews, webinars and online events reach a community of over 150,000.

A passionate advocate for customer centricity, Brian regularly speaks on major CX conference agendas. He also advises organizations on customer experience and business development strategies.

2018 Special Reports Calendar

Special Reports Calendar is subject to change.
Updated as of 10/15/18

Publish Date	Report Topic	Sponsorship Deadline
Aug. 1	Actionable Analytics	Jul. 19, 2018
Aug. 15	Contact Center Security, Authentication & Fraud Prevention	Aug. 1, 2018
Sep. 4	The Digital CX	Aug. 21, 2018
Sep. 17	The State of Chatbots	Sep. 3, 2018
Oct. 1	Empowering Customer-Centric Engagement	Sep. 18, 2018
Oct. 15	Remote Agents	Oct. 2, 2018
Nov. 1	Future Workspaces	Oct. 18, 2018
Nov. 15	Knowledge Management	Nov. 2, 2018
Dec. 3	Live Chat	Nov. 16, 2018
Dec. 17	CX Automation Pt. 2	Dec. 3, 2018

2019 Special Reports Calendar

Special Reports Calendar is subject to change.
Updated as of 10/15/18

Publish Date	Report Topic	Sponsorship Deadline
Jan. 2	2019 Predictions	Dec. 7, 2018
Jan. 15	Disruptive Technology Review	Dec. 21, 2018
Feb. 1	Design Thinking for CX	Jan. 15, 2019
Feb. 15	Sentiment Analytics	Jan. 30, 2019
Mar. 4	CX Automation	Feb. 13, 2019
Mar. 15	Actionable Analytics	Feb. 27, 2019
Apr. 1	Chatbots	Mar. 14, 2019
Apr. 15	Service Delivery Optimization	Mar. 28, 2019
May 1	Intelligent Routing	Apr. 15, 2019
May 15	Customer Journey Mapping	Apr. 29, 2019
Jun. 3	Self-Service	May 16, 2019
Jun. 17	CX For Startups	May 20, 2019
Jul. 1	Choosing an AI Partner	Jun. 13, 2019
Jul. 15	User Experience & Interaction Design	Jun. 27, 2019
Aug. 1	CX Automation Pt. 2	Jul. 16, 2019
Aug. 15	Contact Center Security & Fraud Prevention	Jul. 30, 2019
Sep. 3	Remote Agents	Aug. 16, 2019
Sep. 16	Digital CX	Aug. 29, 2019
Oct. 1	Sentiment Analytics	Sep. 13, 2019
Oct. 15	Social Media for CX	Sep. 27, 2019
Nov. 1	Workforce Optimization	Oct. 16, 2019
Nov. 15	Retail CX	Oct. 30, 2019
Dec. 1	Live Chat	Nov. 14, 2019
Dec. 16	Future Contact Channels	Nov. 28, 2019

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www.experiencedesignweek.iqpc.com

CCW Executive Exchange
March 31-April2, 2019
Miami, FL
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Design Thinking
April 22-24, 2019
Austin, TX
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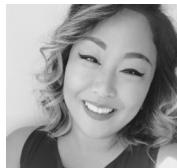Experience Design Series

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