AUTOMATION GENERATION

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Contact Center Pipeline

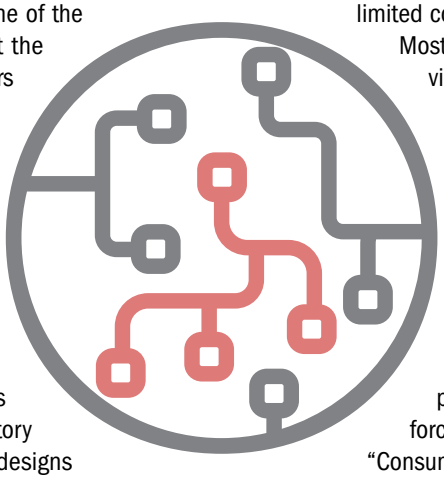
AUTOMATION GENERATION

View automation as a communications and process option, not a total solution.

BY Dick Bucci, Pelorus Associates

Are we now in the automation generation? Technology giants such as Google are already testing driverless automobiles. What's next—pilotless passenger planes? (Hope not).

Humanlike robots have long fascinated us. Who can forget the Tin Man from "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz"? Or the lovable R2-D2 of "Star Wars" fame? According to that invaluable writer's resource, *Wikipedia*, in 1928, one of the first humanoid robots was exhibited at the annual exhibition of the Model Engineers Society in London. The robot—named Eric—consisted of an aluminum suit of armor with 11 electromagnets and one motor powered by a 12-volt power source. In 1939, the humanoid robot known as Elektro appeared at the World's Fair. Weighing 265 pounds, it could walk by voice command, speak about 700 words (using a 78 rpm record player), smoke cigarettes and blow up balloons. Going back in history little further, one of the first recorded designs of a humanoid robot was made by Leonardo da Vinci around 1495.



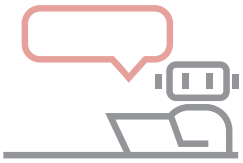
So why not automated contact center agents? In fact, contact centers have been successful incubators of automation starting with the automatic call distributor in 1973. The '80s produced the first digital recorders, automated workforce scheduling systems and predictive dialers. Subsequent years brought quality management, performance management, speech recognition, e-learning systems and other tools that automated previously manual operations. In the mid-2000s, Witness Systems (now Verint) integrated these discrete applications and launched what came to be known as workforce optimization systems (WFO).

The contact center innovations of the past 40 years have succeeded in improving agent productivity and delivering a more satisfactory service to end users, but their record for substituting automation for labor is mixed. While the population of telemarketers and collection agents has steadily declined, due to a mix of regulations and automation, the population of customer service representatives has continued to climb.

Automation Today

Forced automation, such as clumsy IVR trees and difficult web navigations with no easy escape to a live operator, have met with strong resistance from customers. The challenge today is how to develop customer-facing automation that replicates the actions of a human representative while both reducing costs and improving employee and customer satisfaction. Available options today tend to fall into three broad categories:

1. Virtual agents (chatbots)
2. Automated quality monitoring
3. Robotic process automation



VIRTUAL AGENTS

Also referred to as "chatbots," virtual agents use natural language understanding (NLU) speech recognition and artificial intelligence (AI) to respond to unstructured queries in a limited conversational and personalized manner. Most virtual agents interact with consumers via chat. The artificial intelligence engines can read the texts and reference data stores and acquired intelligence to respond to queries and execute transactions. Aspect Software has announced Aspect® Mila™, a new interactive assistant integration of Aspect® CXP and Aspect natural language understanding (NLU) technologies. Mike Bourke, senior vice president and general manager of workforce optimization at Aspect Software, said, "Consumers are quick to take advantage of the time-saving convenience bots offer and Aspect Mila is putting these same technologies and efficiencies to work in the contact center."

AUTOMATED QUALITY MONITORING

No contact center has the time or manpower to evaluate a true statistically significant random sample of monthly agent interactions. The Eureka AutoQM tool offered by CallMiner dramatically cuts quality management costs while improving the agent evaluation process. The software interrogates 100% of an agent's interactions and objectively scores the agent on specific call quality attributes. A Filipino outsourcer with 1,800 agents reduced its hours devoted to quality monitoring by 50% and received a one-year payback on its investment.

ROBOTIC PROCESS AUTOMATION

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that, in May 2016, organizations employed 2.7 million customer service representatives. By contrast, U.S. enterprises employed 2.9 million office clerks! In total, there are 5.4 million jobs in fields as varied as payroll processing clerks and insurance claims that could benefit from automation. Organizations have a greater opportunity for cost saving by automating routine business processes than by further automating the contact center. Verint Robotic Process Automation allows managers to move forward with custom robotic processes—and without need for IT intervention. Using the authoring studio, a business user can record the steps to the process and program the robot. The authoring tool can also help create and edit guided scripts that pop up to help employees do their work. A "Show Me" function animates the sequence of steps required to complete the process. Verint's solution is highly scalable allowing organizations to add more robots as needed to respond to unanticipated peaks in work volume without significant lag time.

WHERE AUTOMATION HELPS AND WHERE IT DOESN'T

Proponents of automation point to many advantages compared with the more labor-intensive approaches to customer care and back-office operations:

ENABLES EMPLOYEES TO HANDLE MORE CHALLENGING TASKS

According to the "2017 Agent Experience Survey" sponsored by Aspect Software, 50% of millennial agents feel they would enjoy a greater sense of commitment and satisfaction if they were given more complex questions to handle. The simple boredom of handing tedious tasks drains agent morale and leads to high turnover.

ABILITY TO RESPOND TO MULTIPLE REQUESTS

Skilled agents can conduct simultaneous chat sessions, resulting in faster response to consumers and increased productivity. Improves compliance—In contact center environments, robots always correctly recite mandatory disclosures and make sure the transactions are properly completed. For back offices, robotic automation assures that all forms are properly completed in compliance with regulations and internal business rules.

ENHANCES ONLINE EXPERIENCES

Borrowing from artificial intelligence technology, online robots can remember what sizes you wear and how many people are in your family. They can guide decision-making and proactively initiate a chat session you are having difficulty navigating the website or spending a lot of time on one item. According to the "2016 Microsoft State of Global Customer Service" report, 55% of customer queries originate online.

On the other hand, skeptics will point out that:

ROBOTS HAVE DIFFICULTY WITH COMPLEX REQUESTS

The robot can only do what it is programmed to do and what it learns from limited experiences. When things get complicated, when consumers change topics midstream, the robot gets confused and doesn't know what to do.

ROBOTS LACK SOFT SKILLS

Don't expect empathy and understanding when you talk to your favorite robot. It doesn't even have a name.

ROBOTIC INTERACTIONS DON'T SUSTAIN BRAND LOYALTY

A massive survey of 24,000 consumers 1,000 businesses sponsored by Verint Systems revealed that 84% of consumers who experienced a positive human experience either strengthened their impression of the firm or took a positive action such as signing up for loyalty program. By contrast, 57% of those who communicated exclusively over digital channels either took no action or did not change their perception of the company.

Where to From Here?

There's no question that automation in the contact center and back-office environments will continue to proliferate. NICE Systems reports they already have 500,000 robots installed around the world. Popular interactive audio interfaces such as Apple's Siri, Google's Alexa and Microsoft's Cortana have made the public comfortable interacting with devices. Facebook's Messenger service has already climbed to 1 billion users, and in just one month almost 5,000 businesses have used chatbots to send order confirmations and automated alerts through Messenger.

However, businesses and organizations of all types should continue to view automation as a communications and process option, not a 100% solution. Numerous studies have shown that personalized interactions; primarily by telephone and in-store visits but also via text, are widely preferred for complex or even moderately complex interactions. We are all social beings and that will never change.

Dick Bucci is the Founder and Chief Analyst at Pelorus Associates, which provides market research and consulting services to the contact center industry.

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