

Rage against the machine or embrace it

Unpacking the implications and opportunities that digital tech and AI bring to South Africa's BPO Industry

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/EINPresswire.com/ -- As digital and AI customer service channels become more sophisticated and widely used and accepted in contact centers, questions increasingly arise around whether machines will replace the human contact center agent, and what the role of people will be in the [BPO](#) provider of the future.



Clinton Cohen, CEO of iContact BPO

It's a particularly pertinent question for South Africa's BPO industry which has risen to the top of the world charts as the most preferred offshoring destination, and one which is favored precisely

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iContact BPO*

because of its ‘humanness’ in terms of the empathy, sincerity and skills quality of the people working in it. South Africa's BPO sector is pipped to create 500 000 new jobs in the next five years, but will AI and digital tech prove to be a spanner in the works of these job creation ambitions?

“History has proven that the fears of humans being replaced by machines is a paradox. It's a paradox because

these seemingly contradictory activities have been operating together and alongside each other for decades already. For years, machine learning has been automating certain jobs and functions, including in the call center. The skills demands - and here I include technical and so-called soft skills - of the 4th Industrial Revolution may be radically different to what they were 10 or 20 years ago – but if anything the need for human EQ and IQ is now heightened. Many, if not most job roles, have been made fundamentally better, more efficient, and meaningful thanks to technology. This is an irrefutable fact in the drive for business operational efficiencies and progress. The pessimism that AI agents, chatbots and digital platforms will make more jobs redundant in the BPO sector and signal the end of human agents is misplaced. If anything,

technological advances in the BPO sector have created more jobs and massively improved customer experience by facilitating better human connections and more meaningful depth of engagements between customers and agents,” explains Clinton Cohen, CEO of [iContact BPO](#).

iContact BPO specializes in inbound and outbound customer service and support, predominantly for international business clients based in the US, Canada, UK, Europe and Australia. iContact BPO is part of the Alefbet Holdings group which owns numerous collections and customer service BPO providers.

“South Africa’s BPO sector has been growing exponentially and over the last ten years, it has become the top offshoring destination for the UK and US markets notably in retail, telecoms, utility and medical industries. A big driver in the decision to outsource to South Africa is the interplay between our technology and telecommunications infrastructure, and the quality of people in our call centers – in terms of education levels, language proficiency, empathy, EQ, cultural affinity, listening skills, the size of our skills pool and finally, the labor arbitrage. All of these factors combined make South Africa a true value destination for outsourcing. Technology may be one of the considerations in the outsourcing buying process, but it is by no means the deciding factor,” adds Cohen.

Technology can be overused and misplaced

As one example, chatbots have become the flavour when it comes to customer queries in high volume environments, but for a long time, they were also prone to overuse. While a certain level of automation and filtering is useful, especially on routine, repetitive or informational queries, meaning, and translation are easily lost in a bot’s linear machine reasoning process. If a customer finds themselves stranded in a bot process and unable to get through to a human agent, the door is wide open for an aggravating, lousy experience and irate customer.

“On more complex needs, even the most intelligent chatbot is not going to deliver on your customer needs and experience as effectively as a well-trained agent. Chatbots are very much intended to fulfill a supportive role and to streamline processes in simple transactional and informational conversations where it makes sense to do so and can help guide customers in the right direction, but they are not a replacement for the EQ of an agent.



BPO providers will be challenged to strike the balance between technology and people, allowing both to do what they do best.

“The challenge is in striking the balance between both worlds. Purpose and the point of the customer interaction should be well considered. In many instances, when a customer comes through to a contact center, they may already be agitated – think of someone who has a complaint, or cannot access their account details, is following up on a delayed order, or needs to log an insurance claim as just a few examples. In such scenarios, empathy and EQ are key – and simply cannot be expressed by a machine. If a customer is getting through to a chatbot already in an agitated state, and the bot fails to interpret their queries and needs appropriately, the situation is bound to rapidly deteriorate and CX is going to suffer. When it comes to deploying technology in a customer service journey, timing and purpose are everything,” says Cohen.

Lessons learned from the rapid digitization brought about by the pandemic

The pandemic triggered major shifts in customer expectations driven by the instant gratification that came with the rapid digitization of virtually every process and transaction in a marketplace under lockdown. These expectations have not reverted to pre-pandemic times. Consumers expect immediate responses so the importance of managing their expectations is vital – whether that contact is through e-mail, whatsapp, chatbots, AI or a service agent.

“This means that offering multichannel, AI-driven client service platforms is here to stay and essential, but should not be a replacement for a service agent. Chatbots, Whatsapp, live chat/webchat, and other self-service platforms are invaluable in providing scale and resolving simple transactional and repetitive informational queries to reduce volumes, however, they are not an effective replacement for human engagement, EQ and empathy when it comes to complex queries.

“Furthermore, adding more tech and more self-service channels comes with unintended consequences, with meteoric increases in duplicate customer support logs across multiple service channels. BPO providers will need to be clear about managing customer expectations in terms of turnaround times and deploy sophisticated data analytics capabilities to deduplicate multiple logs and avoid wastage of efforts and resources,” explains Cohen.

BPO providers will be challenged to strike the balance between technology and people, allowing both to do what they do best. It’s not an either/or scenario, but rather a both/and decision that at its core, is about doing what’s best for the customers you serve.

“Ultimately, it’s about fully understanding every touchpoint in your customer’s journey, deploying the right interventions, the right technology and the right agents at the right time. Multichannel customer service using both technology and people is here to stay, and we need to harness the operational efficiencies and service excellence that this puts within our reach,” concludes Cohen.

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