helpshift

How Customer Service Leaders Can Thrive Alongside Artificial Intelligence

Table of Contents

Introduction:
How The Role Of The Customer Service Leader Has Evolved — 3

Part 1:
What Automation Is Taking Over — 4
Intelligent Triage
Ticket Deflection
Suggested Agent Responses
Real-Time Insights

Part 2:
New Strategy to Excel as a Team Leader — 6
Reviewing Analytics and Making Data-Driven Improvements
Effective Team Management and New Hire Onboarding
Improving Knowledge Base To Encourage Ticket Deflection
Managing Backlog and Reassigning Based on Ticket Load

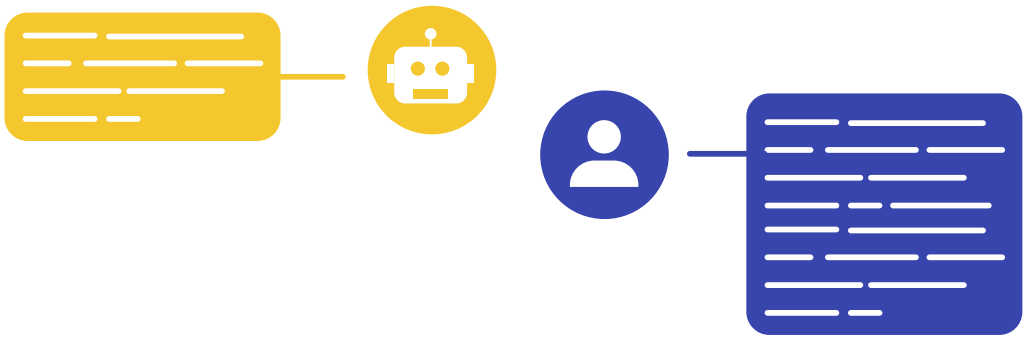
Part 3:
Tools for the AI Era of Customer Service — 9
Information Collection Chatbots
Ticket Deflection Through Chatbots
AI-Powered Intelligent Triage

Conclusion:
Restructuring is Inevitable, but also an Exciting Opportunity — 10
Consumers are Ready for a New Era of Automation
Support Team Leaders & AI: The Beginning of A Beautiful Friendship

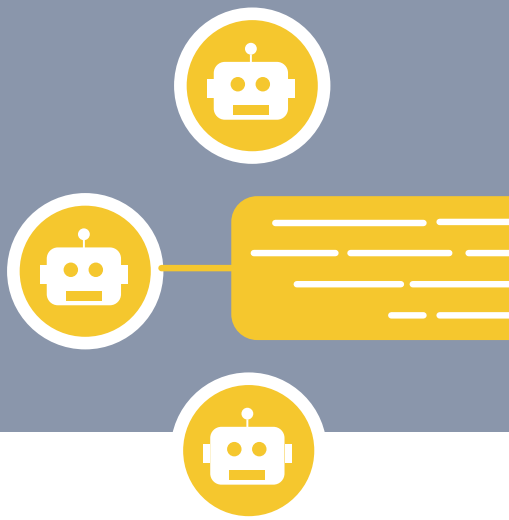
Introduction:
How The Role Of The Customer Service Leader Has Evolved

Automation is already transforming the customer service industry, and it's here to stay. As processes become increasingly bot and AI driven, we will see the future of customer service unfold similarly to the way the Ford Model T assembly line transformed the labor market more than a century ago. Less skilled positions will be handed over to robots, while technology-savvy agents will perform high-touch tasks and machine oversight. We will see what economists term "labor switching" come to fruition: when automation takes jobs from one area, and gives jobs to another. The outsourced call center will fade, while stateside, automation-driven customer service centers will expand.

At the forefront of this evolution lies the support team leader. As automated processes begin to increasingly free up leaders' time, the role will morph into a higher-level, strategic position. Chatbots and AI will take over the mundane aspects of the role so that they can truly focus on optimizing and empowering their teams. This is a huge opportunity to both broaden and deepen expertise in this space, and make the role more engaging as a result.



Part 1:
What Automation Is Taking Over



According to a recent report by Gartner, customers will manage 85 percent of their relationships with businesses without ever talking to a human by 2020. In the customer service industry, much of this non-human communication will take place through self-service and chatbots. In fact, a recent Helpshift survey found that over 40 percent of Americans already prefer to receive help from a chatbot rather than wait three minutes or more for a human.

Support teams need to adopt automation in order to meet these consumer expectations of instant service. Today, this means that automation will take over some simple, time consuming tasks including:

1. Intelligent Triage

The days of manually assigning tickets to agents are over. Artificial intelligence can intelligently route issues to the correct agent, based on factors like skill, agent capacity, team capacity, and ticket urgency. These capabilities ensure that each ticket is rapidly routed to the agent who is best equipped to handle the customer's problem.

2. Ticket Deflection

Chatbots can suggest knowledge base articles that allow customers to self-serve — thereby eliminating the need for many tickets to ever be routed to agents. Some chatbots suggest articles based on keywords in the customer's inquiry, while others offer articles based on a decision-tree structure in which the customer is led down menu options until the chatbot suggests the appropriate self-service route. This lowers ticket volume and increases the likelihood that agents will only receive complex problems.

85% of customers will manage relationships with businesses without ever talking to a human by 2020

40% of Americans already prefer to receive help from a chatbot rather than wait three minutes or more for a human.

3. Suggested Agent Responses

Occasionally, a customer will make it through the ticket deflection process even if it's a fairly common question. AI-powered systems can offer knowledge base articles to agents as well, and suggest pre-populated responses that can be easily personalized. This decreases time to first response and ticket resolution time.

4. Real-Time Insights

Team leaders are no longer limited to retroactive data on backlog, agent performance, and team capacity. Instead, they can see agent and team performance in real-time and make informed decisions accordingly. This capability allows for more effective workforce management and helps improve the day-to-day experience for agents.

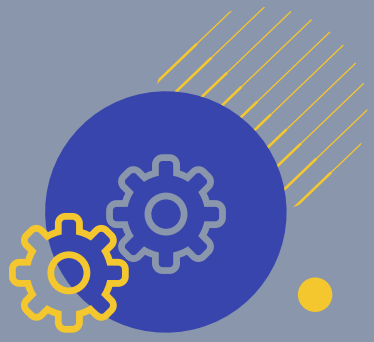
These automated technologies also improve the day-to-day experience for agents.

73% of customer service agents find managing time and workload to be their biggest challenge.

These newly automated tasks give team leaders new responsibilities and opportunities to optimize strategic aspects of customer service processes. Because they can oversee ticket volume, backlog, and agent capacity in real time, they can adjust processes accordingly — both in the moment and long term. They can use this information to improve time to first response, ticket deflection rates, and CSAT scores. They also have access to both holistic and granular views into their team's performance — and have the ability to effectively and efficiently manage because of it.

These automated technologies also improve the day-to-day experience for agents. Currently, 73 percent of customer service agents find managing time and workload to be their biggest challenge. These new technologies allow team leaders to solve this problem, which helps attract talent and makes it easier to develop and retain a high-performing team.

Part 2:
New Strategy to Excel as a Team Leader



While AI and chatbots are certainly improving overall efficiency, these technologies are still in their relative infancy. That means that things will go wrong, and when they do, the customer service leader will need to be the one to fix the problem. That said, investment in industrial robots is expected to grow ten percent per year in the 25 biggest export nations through 2025 — and as investment in automation grows, so too will the efficacy of these technologies. So while monitoring machine mistakes will be a significant aspect of this leadership role for the next few years, it is likely to become increasingly insignificant as automation improves.

As automation becomes more and more sophisticated, the customer service leader will instead focus largely on creating exceptional service that sets the company apart by improving both the customer and agent experiences. They will do so through:

1. Monitoring Analytics and Making Data-Driven Improvements

Customer service supervisors can improve rules that determine how tickets are triaged, which knowledge articles are presented to customers, and how agent/team capacity is determined.
For example, they can see which articles are proving useful and relevant for tickets that are categorized a certain way, and can iterate on those that are not. In other words, the supervisor can finesse automated processes to improve both the customer and agent experience based on actionable insights.

↑ 10%

Investment in industrial robots is expected to grow ten percent per year in the 25 biggest export nations through 2025.

2. Managing and Onboarding High-Touch Teams

One key impact of automation in customer service is that agents will need to have a stronger educational and technical background as automation takes the place of lower-skilled positions. As this trend grows, jobs will be more concentrated in the states—with fewer, high-skilled workers overall. As customer service moves away from outsourcing and returns stateside, managing highly-educated teams and onboarding new hires will become a more involved process. Retaining top talent will become increasingly important, and team leaders will need to emphasize a positive work environment and seamless onboarding.

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3. Improving Knowledge Base To Encourage Ticket Deflection

While chatbots can send a customer to the correct knowledge base article, it's up to the team leader to ensure that the knowledge base is up-to-date, easy to follow, and effective at getting customers to self-serve.

Customer service leaders will be responsible for optimizing the paths through which automated technologies direct customers.

4. Tracking Backlog and Ticket Distribution

Because the team leader can have visibility into real-time data that shows which agents are at capacity, which teams are at capacity, and how much of a backlog there is, they can also manually reroute tickets based on this information when necessary. Supervisors can message with agents to ensure that nobody is overwhelmed, and therefore enhance the customer experience by having happy agents. This system allows agents to tag a manager and hand-off issue information behind the scenes when necessary too.

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5. Communicating ROI

As customer service leaders start focusing on high-level strategy to a greater degree, a key component of the position will be ensuring and communicating a positive return on investment. Leaders will need to implement efficient processes that result in cost savings. In doing so, they will elevate the position of the customer service team within the company — thereby encouraging greater investment into cutting-edge customer service technologies.

It's important to remember that while automation indeed makes some skills obsolete, it also requires adapting existing skills to handle a larger scope of responsibilities — take airport kiosks or self-checkout at grocery stores as an example. Managers in these roles have to oversee larger customer bases and ensure that the technology is meeting customer needs. One airline representative can suddenly be in charge of monitoring the entire self check-in customer queue, while customers who wait in line for full-service require a 1-1 interaction. Self check-in consequently allows 15-30 percent more customers to be helped, and significantly decreases wait time in the process (self-tagging alone increases time savings by more than 55 percent.) In other words, representatives helping full-service customers can only help one at a time, while the self-service line manager oversees many customers at once. The same is true in customer service.

Self check-in allows 15-30% more customers to be helped

Self-tagging alone increases time savings by more than 55%

Part 3:
Tools for the AI Era Of Customer Service

Currently, 94 percent of Americans "dread" contacting customer support, and over half of Americans rate U.S. customer service as being below a "B". Customer service has reached a crisis point, and the extent to which companies utilize automation and AI will determine how successfully they navigate this. The industry is ready for a massive shift, and companies who don't embrace automation and highly-skilled American workers will be at a competitive disadvantage.

The new era of customer service will be highly dependent on:

Information-Collecting Chatbots

Rather than agents spending precious time asking basic questions about a customer's problem, chatbots can now do all the initial legwork. This improves time-to-first-response and also creates a repository of data around the issue to ensure that agents are fully informed from the minute they begin chatting with the customer

Ticket Deflection Through Chatbots

Once a chatbot collects initial information about the ticket, the bot can then offer up knowledge articles to try and address the customer's problem without involving an agent. This decreases ticket volume and improves the user experience.

AI-Powered Workflow Optimization

If chatbots cannot resolve the issue alone and the ticket needs to be routed—it should be routed automatically and intelligently to the right agent. This tool is massively important for customer service team leaders in particular, as they have been historically tasked with this job and will be responsible for ensuring its success.

94% of Americans "dread" contacting customer support.

These technologies, combined with back-end management and real-time analytics will allow for rapid response times and more effective management of ticket backlog.

Conclusion: Restructuring is Inevitable, but also an Exciting Opportunity

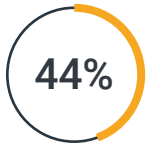
Consumers are Ready for a New Era of Automation

Not only have automated processes advanced to the point where they are all but necessary for support team operations, but consumers are also prepared to interact with AI and chatbots to a much greater degree. According to a November 2017 survey by Helpshift, 30 percent of consumers feel that AI is already improving their lives, while 44 percent of consumers think that AI has potential but isn't quite living up to it. Over 55 percent of consumers say they would welcome the idea of chatbots being integrated into customer service. As AI and chatbots become more accurate and familiar within the customer service process, we will see higher approval levels, and increased customer satisfaction as a result.

On a larger scale, this level of automation will also shift the customer service job market. According to a recent policy report from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, automation eliminates the need for many low-paying offshore jobs, allows companies to reshore labor and production, and increases the need for high-skilled activities. As mentioned previously, the customer service industry will increase the percentage of stateside customer service reps but lower the number of overall reps needed to handle the same ticket volume. This will create a new job market in the U.S. for skilled customer service agents.

Consequently, customer service will become an increasingly technical field in which agents and managers who are knowledgeable about emerging technologies will have a competitive advantage as candidates for hire. As only the most unique and technical questions ever make it to an agent, the role of both agent and supervisor will become much more focused on overseeing technology and improving processes.

30% of consumers feel that AI is already improving their lives



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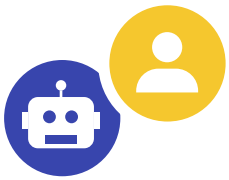
Support Team Leaders & AI: The Beginning of A Beautiful Friendship

Automation is not just eliminating jobs — oftentimes it's changing them for the better. Despite increased levels of automation over the past 70 years, employment rates in the U.S. have remained steady since 1950. While automation does take from some areas (manufacturing, for instance, has lost over five million jobs since 2000), it is clearly adding jobs elsewhere — otherwise we would have seen a massive unemployment spike over the past 100, 50, and even ten years.

That being said, the economy certainly will shift to accommodate increased automation. Labor-intensive positions will diminish, and the remaining jobs will require more skills and higher levels of critical thinking. We've seen suggestions and predictions for addressing this shift including Bill Gates' taxing robots and Elon Musk's universal basic income. While these types of proposals are only that — proposals — there is certainly a need to prepare for job movement out of traditional labor-intensive markets into the discussed leadership and management roles that will be so critical to the success of these emerging technologies.

The advent of AI and other forms of automation in the customer service industry has cleared the way for customer service leaders to engage in high-level workforce management, while machines take care of the day-to-day mundanities. Currently, there are just 1.75 robots for every 1,000 workers — and while this ratio is sure to change dramatically — where automation takes from one area, it gives to another. Customer service leaders have an incredible opportunity to push the boundaries of customer service innovation, and improve the lives of both customers and agents. Those who take advantage of increased automation to improve efficiency will be able to build teams of highly-skilled agents who work in tandem with automated technologies. These leaders will find themselves in a new, exciting, and highly valued position.

Manufacturing has lost over five million jobs since 2000



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