From Call Centre to Cockpit

Why the frontline is where customer-centric transformation is won or lost — and how AI belongs there as a first-contact-resolution accelerator, not a replacement for the human at the controls





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$286k

annual cost of low first-contact resolution per point

SQM GROUP

~70%

first-contact resolution is the world-class bar

SQM GROUP

+14%

issues resolved per hour with an AI assist

NBER

43%

of service leaders creating specialised AI roles

SERVICENOW / GARTNER

Your contact centre is not a cost to be minimised. It is the cockpit where retention is won or lost — the last place you can still change the outcome before a customer leaves. This edition is about how to fly it, and where artificial intelligence (AI) actually belongs once you do.

In the last edition, we caught the contact centre wasting itself — roughly **nine minutes** of every call spent on search, context-gathering and paperwork that never touches the customer, and a third of agents ready to quit because the tools fight them. Accenture puts **65%** of agent hours on tasks AI can automate or augment; McKinsey, 60-**70%** of employee time.[14] [15] We called it automating the wrong end: the industry aimed AI at the customer's front door when the real waste sat behind the agent. And the analysts agree on the fix — Gartner, surveying 321 service leaders, finds only **20%** cut agent headcount because of AI while most held staffing stable, and Forrester expects the human to become the exception layer that resolves what automation cannot.[16] [17] Clear the busywork and you have bought back the agent's time. This edition is about what to do with it.

That room is where customers arrive when everything else has failed: the self-service page didn't answer, the app wouldn't let them, the invoice was wrong. For most companies it is still filed under "cost to be minimised" — the single most expensive mistake in customer experience (CX) today, because it optimises for cheapness the one moment you can still win.

What actually makes it a cockpit, not a call centre

We use the word cockpit deliberately, and it has to be earned — otherwise it is just a nicer label for the same room. A cockpit is not a call centre with better software. It is the opposite of one on the three things that matter.

Start with the reason the metaphor holds at all. The contact centre is the last controllable moment in the journey. Everywhere else — marketing, product, billing — the customer's experience is set before they feel it. Here, and only here, a customer who was about to leave can be kept, or a happy one lost, inside a single

interaction. That is what a cockpit is: not the place you watch the flight from, but the place you still fly it from. Treating it as a cost to minimise is optimising the controls for fuel economy while the aircraft loses altitude.

So a contact centre becomes a cockpit when three conditions are true at once — and a call centre is defined by the absence of all three:

- **One instrument reading that tells you if you are flying level — First Contact Resolution.** A call centre watches handle time and answers *how fast did we get rid of the call.* A cockpit watches FCR and answers *did the customer actually land.*
- **A capable human at the controls, with AI as an instrument — not the pilot.** A call centre puts a scripted operator in front of fragmented screens, or worse, a bot on the runway. A cockpit keeps a skilled human flying and gives them instruments that make them better.
- **One live picture instead of five dead screens.** A call centre makes the agent hunt across systems to reconstruct the past. A cockpit shows cost, resolution, repeat contacts and sentiment together, in time to change the outcome.

The rest of this edition is those three conditions, in the order you build them.

Condition one: fly by First Contact Resolution

Most cost-versus-experience debates get stuck because the executive team believes the two pull in opposite directions: cut the contact centre and experience suffers; protect experience and cost balloons. First Contact Resolution — FCR from here on — dissolves that trade-off. It measures one thing: the share of customers whose issue is fully resolved on their first contact, so they never call back about the same problem, judged by the customer's verdict, not the agent's.

Why make it *the* instrument? Because of what a single point of it is worth. The industry average sits at roughly **70%**, and only about **5%** of centres reach the **80%**-plus world-class level.[1] SQM Group has studied contact-centre resolution for three decades, and its benchmarking shows a clean, linear relationship. Every **one-point** improvement in FCR delivers a **one-percent** cut in operating cost *and* a **one-point** rise in satisfaction — from the same action. For an average midsize centre, that **one point** is worth roughly **$286,000 a year**.[1] Cost falls because customers stop calling back. Satisfaction rises because the problem is actually fixed. The two stop being a trade-off and become the same lever. This is what we mean when we say friction is a profit-and-loss line: a failed first contact shows on the customer's face and on the finance director's spreadsheet at once.

The altimeter also tells you where to look first. Before you accelerate resolution, you attack the demand that should never have reached the cockpit. In telecom and utilities it has predictable names: billing shocks, activation failures, move-in issues, renewal confusion — each a broken journey manufacturing repeat contacts. And the stakes are not abstract. SQM finds about **95%** of customers keep doing business after a

resolved first contact, while roughly **40%** defect within a year of a *failed* one.[1] Zendesk's research corroborates the pressure: **62%** of experience leaders already feel behind on the prompt service customers expect.[2] The frontline is not where experience is measured after the fact. It is where retention is decided in the moment.

Condition two: a human at the controls, AI as the instrument

Here is where most 2026 customer-experience conversations go wrong. They put AI in front of the customer as an autonomous agent and call it transformation. The evidence says the real value is quieter and sits *behind* the human — helping them resolve the issue the first time. This is the direct sequel to the busywork tax: the same AI that clears the **nine minutes** of search and admin, redirected, becomes an FCR accelerator.

The foundational proof is a study by the U.S. National Bureau of Economic Research covering **5,179** support agents: a generative-AI assistant raised issues resolved per hour by **14%** on average — but 34-**35%** for novices, while veterans gained close to nothing.[3] AI did not replace expertise; it manufactured it, and agents with AI access left **8.6%** less often.[4] The detail that defines the model: agents followed the AI only about **38%** of the time.[5] The human stayed at the controls — that is not a flaw to engineer away, it is the design. A Harvard Business School field experiment — **138 agents**, **256,934** real chats — reached the same place: AI suggestions cut response time **22%** overall and **70%** for less-experienced agents.[6] And when redesign is paired with AI rather than bolted onto a broken workflow, results compound. McKinsey documents a telecom where FCR rose **10-20 points**, handling time fell over **25%** and volume dropped **30%**.[7] A separate 697-company study found the firms getting AI right cut attrition **28.8%** and lifted satisfaction **39.2%**.[8]

But the same Harvard study also mapped the instrument's limits. AI helped a customer wanting to cancel, because it surfaced retention offers — yet it was measurably *worse* on repeat and recurring complaints, the emotionally-loaded situations where human judgement matters most, and abrupt AI-to-human handoffs left customers more confused.[6] Your own market confirms the pattern. In Belgium, **73%** of consumers say chatbots have not met their expectations and **92%** report hitting a barrier.[9] And the distrust is calibrated to stakes: only 7-**12%** would never trust a chatbot with a low-stakes errand like tracking a parcel, but **43%** would *never* trust one to dispute a suspicious transaction.[9] And from **2 August 2026** the European Union's AI Act requires every customer-facing chatbot to disclose it is an AI at first contact, with a heavier burden for high-risk domains like creditworthiness and insurance.[10] Put a bot in the pilot's seat and you manufacture the very friction — and now the legal exposure — you meant to remove. AI's job in the cockpit is to help a human land the first contact. That is an experience outcome, not a technology outcome.

Condition three: one live picture, and the operating model behind it

The third condition is the instrument panel — the "single pane of glass" that unifies voice, chat, customer-record history and AI guidance so the agent never breaks the interaction to hunt across systems.[11] But a panel is not an aircraft, and it earns its keep only if the guidance stays ambient and the human stays in control.[12] [13] That is why a cockpit is an operating-model change, not a screen you buy — and it runs through two VALORICE dimensions. Dimension 04, Operations & Journeys, is where you remove the friction that causes failed resolutions: SQM Group traces **49%** of resolution failures to policy and procedure, not agent error,[1] and you cannot automate your way out of a broken policy. Dimension 05, People & Enablement, is where you build capability — human *and* AI — so the assist lands as an accelerator for your newer agents, not a straitjacket for your best ones. This is the honest answer when your board asks how to cut contact-centre cost without breaking the experience: cost falls because resolution rises, not because you deflected customers into a chatbot that sent them straight back into the queue.

The fix, sequenced

A cockpit is built in one order — you clear the airspace before you fly it. Four moves, each with a result you can hold a team to:

- **1. Run the demand audit.** Pull 90 days of contact reasons, cluster them, and quantify what share is *avoidable*. You cannot fly a cockpit you can't see. *Output: a ranked top-five of demand drivers and the broken journey behind each.*
- **2. Fix the journeys that manufacture the calls (Dimension 04).** Redesign the top two or three avoidable drivers upstream so the contact never needs to happen — volume removed before any technology is touched. *Output: repeat-contact rate down on those drivers within a quarter.*
- **3. Make FCR the altimeter (measured by the customer).** Retire handle time as the headline metric; put customer-verdict FCR on the wall, reviewed weekly, owned by one named person. *Output: a single number the board reads the same way every month.*
- **4. Give the pilot instruments, calibrated to skill and stakes (Dimension 05).** Deploy AI assist behind the agent, aimed at newer agents where the **34%** gain lives, kept ambient, and hard-blocked from emotional or high-stakes cases; unify the desktop so the agent never leaves the interaction. *Output: novices resolving at senior-agent rates, and no autonomous bot on high-trust journeys.*

The companies that win the next phase of customer experience will not be the ones that automated fastest. They will be the ones that stopped calling the contact centre a cost centre, put a capable human in the cockpit, and gave that human an instrument good enough to land every first contact. Last edition we stopped

automating the wrong end. This edition we fly the right one.



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