

The Impacts of Covid in the Contact Center

The Covid-19 pandemic the world is experiencing is like nothing we have ever seen. It has left both individuals and businesses scrambling to adapt to “the new normal.”

Covid has challenged businesses in many industries, including Customer Service and technology. Many of these challenges have been across the board, but EDCi did find some unique challenges and impacts to specific industries, via a small internal study. Let’s take a look at the four main areas of impact – business, people, technology/cloud and financial.

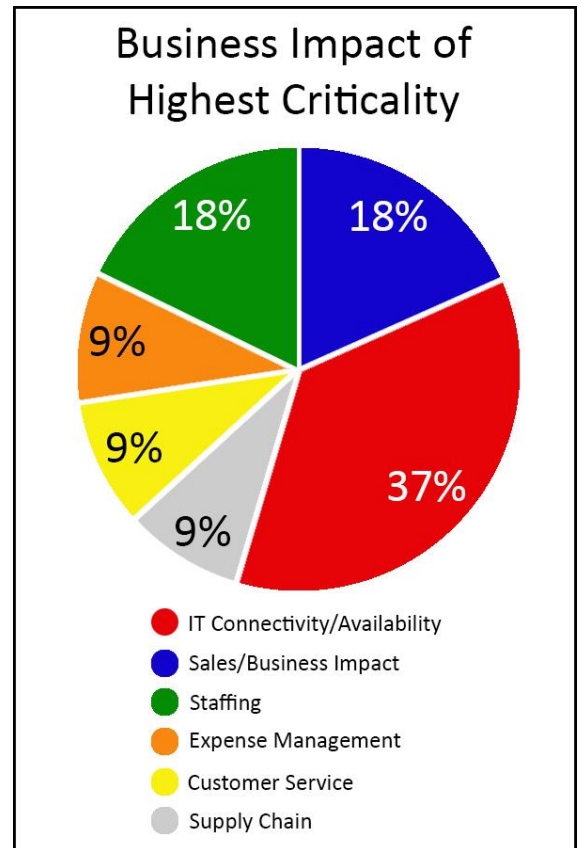
Can you identify with some of the challenges we uncovered? Is your business reacting in a similar manner?

Industry-specific Business Impacts

Covid has affected different industries in different ways. Grocery is booming while hospitality is struggling. I recently went into a bicycle shop to get a tune-up and was shocked that they had almost no inventory. Biking is seeing market demand like never before. Not all industries are as lucky.

Our analysis showed that the manufacturing and retail industries had the most significant sales challenges. Many other industries are facing business uncertainty, but certainly not all. The uncertainty came in different varieties, some of which were based on the impact of the supply chain for the organization. Because businesses are connected, having a supply chain issue can painfully prevent productivity. Nearly 20% of the businesses we talked to were struggling with sales decline.

Given the CDC requirements with Covid, businesses may have the opportunity to rethink their value propositions. Depending on your industry, this is an opportunity for full-service transactions. Home-based or contactless transactions are appealing to consumers. As an example, EDCi and many other others are re-imagining our customer seminars. These are typically high touch learning and collaborating events. We’re taking a virtual approach, thinking through how to provide a collaborative experience with new software and tools that are on the market. For example, the upcoming UWEBC event that we sponsor each year will be completely virtual. We will have a virtual booth so customers can engage with us, chat and download materials and literature.



Does your business provide you an opportunity to rethink your customer engagement? Might a high-touch approach be appealing to your customers?

Staffing/Employee Impacts and Work-from-Home

Organizations have been reeling from the shortage of candidates for some time. However, the challenges introduced by Covid brought new issues that organizations need to address. Filling positions continues to be difficult, but now some organizations are seeing an increase in absenteeism from existing employees. In addition, organizations are learning they have to work harder to stay connected with their employees and respond to safety measures.

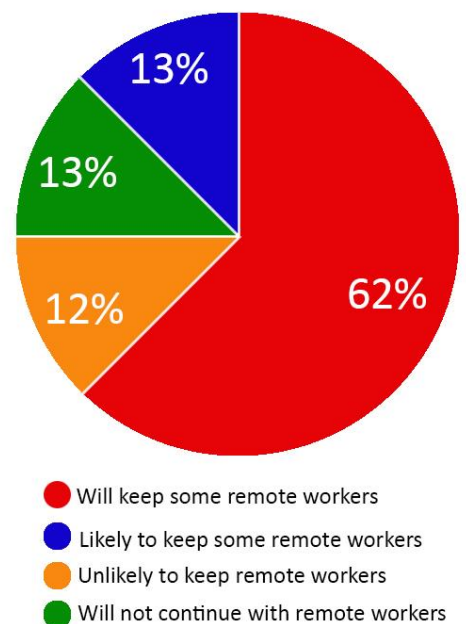
Not all employee issues were related to staffing, communication or safety—some were related to keeping employees productive while working remotely. Almost 40% of respondents indicated that they needed to implement or upgrade their remote access systems so employees could work from home, as businesses shut down their offices due to the pandemic. That included not only remote access systems, but also communication bandwidth considerations so that work-from-home traffic could efficiently be processed in company data centers.

Although some contact centers didn't have work-from-home options in place, they quickly responded to keep their businesses operating. EDCi was contacted by an organization that was in need of a remote access system. They were against a deadline they couldn't control and, like other solutions providers, we were able to deliver a system in less than 2 weeks. Organizations are now effectively working from these remote systems, bringing up new questions about continuing to leverage them even after the pandemic.

As we evaluated contact center staff working remotely, responses ranged from some to none of the agents were working remotely before Covid hit. When safer-at-home orders went into effect, most organizations said that most or all of their contact center agents were working remotely once remote access systems were in place.

Given that most contact centers are now operating remotely, organizations have paused to consider if this model can continue into the future. Over 65% of the respondents indicated they will continue to have at least some of their contact center staff working remotely. At least one organization stated that they are considering keeping their entire contact center remote. This is a growing trend. We've seen stories in the news about businesses embracing work from home. For example,

Companies Planning to Keep Contact Center Staff Remote



[Google is allowing employees to work from home](#) and providing money for them to improve their home offices.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) indicates that contact center agents working from home get a 13% productivity boost, in addition to reduced costs for the company. Given the diminished need for office space, organizations are evaluating if this is a sustainable model. However, some time back, MIT did a work at home trial which resulted in about half of the contact center agents returning to the office after nine months. Employees felt too isolated at home, and felt social interaction was crucial. Although there are many collaboration technologies that can help fill the void, will they provide enough employee engagement to ensure employee retention rates aren't impacted?

EDCi associates have been working remotely since mid-March. We've provided employees with opportunities to collaborate virtually in the form of both afterhours social time and virtual coffee mornings. Although these have helped fill the gap, it doesn't replace in-person collaboration.

The Wall Street Journal recently published an article indicating that organizations are finding some tasks are ineffective when performed remotely. Employee on-boarding is especially challenging, according to the WSJ article. We've on-boarded some new employees at EDCi since March—something as simple as walking a new employee around the office and introducing them to co-workers becomes a logistical challenge when working remote.

Although there are known productivity improvements and significant operating savings by having contact centers remote, will there be a balance found somewhere in the middle? Contact centers may have a business model that requires seasonal help...which could provide a significant challenge when it comes to remote workers. How might your business manage these challenges? How do you maintain your company culture and ensure employees don't lose their sense of connection with their co-workers and the organization?

Cloud Contact Center

Many businesses are taking this opportunity to look further at cloud options for their contact center solutions. This is a means to offload some daily management of the platform and address business continuity concerns for the longer term. Depending on how the IT systems are architected, it may also free up some capacity on your internal systems.

Is the timing right for you to evaluate a cloud contact center? Adoption has steadily been growing, specifically with new or upgraded contact center software migrations. Some businesses are satisfied with their on-premise platforms and can leverage new, innovative software solutions in an on-premise/cloud hybrid model. A migration project is still an expense and if your platform lacks some of the features you're looking for, you have options.

EDCi has been working with businesses in both camps. We've completed many successful contact center cloud implementations. Other businesses are satisfied with their investment in on-premise and want to continue to leverage that. In other cases, we're looking to extend systems with Artificial Intelligence (AI). Have you evaluated how you can get more out of your existing systems and provide a better customer experience through tools such as chatbots?

Financial Impacts

Certainly with the economy feeling an impact from the virus, many businesses put a hold on all non-essential business expenses. This is causing organizations to take a closer look at technologies that can reduce expenses and streamline procedures, such as artificial intelligence. There is an opportunity for businesses to provide self-service technologies to customers, reducing the impact on their staff, thus lowering expenses. Here are a few thoughts on self-service technologies:

- Contact center solutions can provide self-service technologies. The value has been demonstrated and can deliver real results.
- Businesses are evaluating how chatbots, combined with AI, can be leveraged to provide a wide, deep and personalized experience to a customer. AI tools can self-learn and provide a smoother journey which might present an opportunity to personify your brand. Consider if this is the time to take a [next-generation self-service leap](#).
- Although there is an investment in self-service technologies, they deliver real ROI that can make them feasible opportunities for businesses.

Contact center systems are providing AI-driven software to improve customer experience. In some cases, businesses are looking for more atypical solutions which can be delivered with AI solutions, such as IBM Watson. If you're looking to evaluate the opportunities that AI can provide to your business, there are partners, like EDCi, who can help you assess your options.

Finally, an economic downturn doesn't just affect businesses, it effects *people*. Each of us make our businesses function day in and day out. If employees get laid off or furloughed, one of their first worries may be their financial commitments – and that means a discussion with the bank. A sharp increase in calls to banks in challenging job markets is typical and this pandemic has been no exception. Because the pandemic took businesses by surprise, it forced them to quickly focus on their remote access/work from home capabilities. For most, this took some time to work through. Once remote access was resolved, businesses returned to a revised plan for the year, which included lean processes, cautious spending and leaders being asked to solve problems with less funding. As businesses recover with the economy, the lessons learned through the pandemic will prepare them for challenging situations in the future. Having technology in place to improve communications with customers and employees alike will strengthen businesses and make them more prepared for whatever comes our way next.

Where Do I Go From Here?

As businesses look to close out the calendar year, now is the time to look back on the adjustments you made to weather the storm. Many of those may have been in the heat of the battle, like what businesses experienced with standing up work-from-home systems. Now might be a time for you to pause and determine what opportunities you have to strengthen your business as we enter 2021. That might come in different forms that are relevant to your business—introducing full-service transactions, leveraging the power of AI to reach customers in a new manner or evaluating if cloud contact center provides business value.

Moreover, we have to ensure we're keeping in mind how to best retain our people and provide them the best tools for productivity and connection in a time when many staff are working from home. At EDCi we are evaluating the impacts of what MIT found after nine months—that 50% of staff wanted to return to the office. How can we keep employees engaged in a virtual setting? What success looks like to us may be different for your business. The culture of your business will guide you—however the last thing you want is to lose staff in a business climate like this.

Businesses have many assets, but their customers and their staff are the most important. There's an opportunity now to shape the future as we continue to learn how to operate in a pandemic economy.

How will you respond? ■