From Contact Centre To Customer Engagement

A three-layer model for the AI era.

Re-imagined, not redesigned.

Stuart Fadden | Founder & Managing Director
HiSynergy Consulting Ltd

August 2026 | Thought Leadership

The Conversation Nobody Is Having

Over the past six months, I've had the same conversation many times, with CEOs, Operations Directors, technology suppliers, and systems integrators. The context changes, the industry changes, but the conversation is remarkably consistent.

Everyone is talking about AI. Everyone wants AI to make a change, and almost nobody is asking for different. The vocabulary has moved on, every supplier stage now speaks the language of different. What organisations actually ask for, fund and measure has not.

The questions being asked are: *How do we reduce handle time? How do we automate more contacts? How do we get AI to help agents respond faster?* These are legitimate questions, but they are questions about optimising something that was never designed to be great in the first place.

Nobody in those conversations has asked: *if we were designing customer engagement from scratch today, with no legacy infrastructure, no inherited processes, no technology already installed, what would we actually build?*

> **"Everyone is asking AI to make a change. Nobody is asking for different."**

This paper is an attempt to have that conversation. It is grounded in real interactions with customers, solution providers, and systems integrators, including executives and CX practitioners who challenged early versions of the argument and helped sharpen the distinction between automation and genuine customer engagement. It draws on what those conversations reveal, not just about what the industry is doing, but about what it is collectively failing to imagine.

It is written as a provocation, not a prescription. Its purpose is to create the space to think differently, and to challenge an industry that is, right now, at real risk of automating its way into irrelevance.

1. Three Conversations. One Pattern.

The contact centre industry is currently having three parallel conversations about AI. Each is happening in a different room, with different people, shaped by different incentives. None of them is asking the right question.

The Customer Conversation

Organisations deploying AI in their contact centres are, overwhelmingly, asking a version of the same question: *how do we use AI to handle more, faster, at lower cost?* The language varies, deflection, automation, self-service, agent assist, but the intent is consistent. AI as a more efficient version of what already exists.

The customer experience ambition is often present but secondary. CSAT targets, NPS improvements, and reduced customer effort scores appear in business cases, but they are benefits attached to an efficiency programme, not the starting point for a different kind of engagement model.

> **What customers are asking**
> *How do we use AI to make our contact centre cheaper and faster, with better satisfaction scores as a by-product?*

The Solution Provider Conversation

The major platforms, and the specialist AI suppliers emerging around them, are, with very few exceptions, selling AI as an enhancement to existing architecture. Smarter routing, better transcription, real-time agent guidance, automated quality management and conversational bots that sit in front of existing IVR flows.

These are valuable capabilities, but they are built on an assumption: that the underlying model, queues, contacts, agents, after-call work, is the right model, and that AI's role is to make it work better.

The supplier roadmap is, in effect, a roadmap for a more efficient version of 1990s telephony infrastructure. The architecture has not changed. The intelligence layered on top of it has.

> **What solution providers are selling**
> *AI features that enhance existing contact centre architecture, not a different architecture.*

The Systems Integrator Conversation

Systems integrators implement what has been sold. The best of them brings real expertise in making complex technology work at scale, but they are operating within a brief defined by the customer's requirements, which are themselves shaped by the solution provider's proposition.

The result is a delivery chain in which everyone is highly competent, well-intentioned, and working within a frame of reference that nobody has thought to question. The integrator implements what the supplier sells. The supplier sells what the customer asks for. The customer asks for what they know.

> **What systems integrators are delivering**
> *Skilled implementations of the brief they have been given, without anyone questioning whether the brief is right.*

> **“The industry has built a highly efficient machine for delivering the wrong answers.”**

2. The CEO Thought Experiment

Here is a question worth asking the next time you are in a room with a CEO who is considering a significant AI investment in their contact centre:

> **“If you had no existing technology, no inherited processes, and no legacy infrastructure, and you were designing your customer engagement model from scratch today, what would you build?”**

The CEO in question does not need to be a technology expert to answer this. They need only to be clear about what they want for their customers. Proactive, effortless, personalised engagement. Rare but excellent support when it is needed. A relationship that feels valued, not processed.

What they describe, when given the freedom to think without constraints, is never what the industry currently builds, and that gap, between what a clear-headed CEO would design and what the industry consistently delivers, is the most important conversation in customer engagement today.

What the CEO Would Not Build

Before considering what the greenfield model looks like, it is worth being explicit about what it would not contain, because each of these is a direct product of technological limitation, not customer-centred design:

- An interactive voice response system that forces customers to navigate a menu of options that may not reflect their actual need
- A queue that holds customers in a state of passive waiting, with no certainty about when they will be served
- An agent who must ask the customer to re-explain a situation they have already described, because context has not travelled with the interaction
- A quality management process that scores individual transactions rather than the health of the overall relationship
- A workforce management model built around forecasting contact volume, when the goal should be to reduce that volume
- A reporting framework that measures how quickly the organisation closes interactions, rather than how well it serves customers over time

None of these are features, they are constraints, artefacts of a model designed around technological limitation. The CEO would not choose any of them. They exist because, for decades, organisations had no alternative.

That constraint no longer exists, and yet the industry continues to build as if it does.

The Greenfield Model: Three Layers

When freed from legacy constraints, the customer engagement model a CEO would design has a clear structure. It is not a contact centre with better technology. It's an entirely different architecture, one in which the contact centre as we know it occupies only the smallest, most exceptional layer.

Layer	Name	Purpose
Layer 1	**Invisible Service**	AI removes friction at the start of every interaction. Where events are predictable, the organisation speaks first, before the customer notices. Where events are unpredictable, AI recognises the situation the instant the customer makes contact, gathers full context, and responds with intelligence. The customer never has to explain what an informed organisation should already understand.
Layer 2	**Effortless Resolution**	When a customer wants something, they express it naturally. AI understands intent immediately, has full relationship context, and resolves it without friction; no menus, no queues, and no re-explanation.
Layer 3	**Human Connection**	Reserved for moments that are complex, emotional, or high stakes. A person is present, fully informed, fully empowered, with the authority and context to resolve meaningfully.

Invisible Service Done Well

Openreach reported that its Trustpilot score rose from 1.6, rated "Bad", to 4.6, rated "Excellent", across approximately 360,000 reviews. A three-point movement on a five-point scale is not a marginal service improvement, it represents a substantial change in how customers experienced and judged the organisation. The improvement accompanied a wider customer engagement transformation, including the proactive management of 12 million customer journeys a year. It should therefore be treated as evidence of the programme's combined effect, rather than attributed to AI alone.

Sources: 1) Chris Herbert, Openreach Customer Service Director, at the NiCE World conference - Day 2 customer showcase, 2nd July 2026. 2) NiCE / Openreach detailed case study.

Predictable Triggers, Unpredictable Triggers

Not every customer need can be anticipated. In some industries, that is the dominant pattern. An insurer cannot know when a policyholder will be in a car accident. A home emergency provider cannot predict when a boiler will fail or a pipe will burst. A travel company cannot foresee every cancellation. The trigger is an external event, outside anyone's control.

This does not weaken the three-layer model, it sharpens it. In unpredictable industries, Layer 1 is not about predicting events, it's about recognising them the instant they surface, marshalling full context within seconds, and moving the customer into a path of effortless resolution before they have to explain themselves twice.

The discipline is the same but the trigger changes. In every industry, Layers 1 and 2 should carry the customer as far as possible, with intelligence and context, before Layer 3 is engaged. Predictable industries get more value from anticipation. Unpredictable industries get more value from speed and recognition. Both rely on the same architecture.

The Information Already Exists

The model described in this paper is sometimes objected to on the basis that it requires data organisations do not have. In most cases, the opposite is true. Few customer issues are truly novel. The same fault patterns, breakdown scenarios, service interruptions and resolution paths recur across the customer base, often thousands of times over. Established organisations have, by definition, seen the issue before. The intelligence that could resolve a customer's problem usually already exists somewhere in the organisation, embedded in service records, case notes, engineer reports, and historical claim data. That accumulated history is one of the most valuable strategic assets an established organisation holds, and it is an asset no new entrant can replicate.

The strategic question is whether the customer journey has been designed to put that accumulated intelligence in front of the customer at the start of the interaction, or whether the journey routes most contacts to a human first and applies AI to make that human faster.

Two patterns illustrate the opportunity.

Reactive intelligence in event-driven industries. A utility provider, a home emergency cover provider, or a breakdown recovery organisation knows the fault patterns its customers experience, because those patterns have occurred many times before. It knows which faults are simple, which are complex, which are safety-critical, which can be resolved with guided self-service, and which require a person on site. A model designed around that intelligence puts the diagnostic in front of the customer the moment they make contact: a guided resolution for the simple cases, immediate routing to a human for the cases that need one, and full context handed to the human so the customer never has to explain again.

Proactive intelligence in service-delivery industries. A media delivery business, a telecoms provider, a digital services or marketing agency, or a connected-product manufacturer can often see degradation, opportunity or change in its own platform or in customer-facing performance before the customer notices. Latency, signal quality, throughput, error rates, outage patterns, performance trends, ranking and conversion shifts, all of these are observable upstream of the customer experience. A model designed around that signal contacts the customer first, acknowledges the issue, sets expectations, and offers the appropriate remedy. By the time the customer might have called, the organisation has already initiated the conversation.

The platforms to support this kind of re-imagining are no longer theoretical. Multi-model AI architectures, unified customer memory, and end-to-end agentic action are in production at enterprise scale today.

In both patterns, the data and the capabilities exist. The question is whether the customer journey has been designed around what the organisation already knows, or whether AI has been added to a journey originally shaped by the contact centre. Neither answer is wrong.

The critical observation is that the entire technology stack that the contact centre industry has built (ACD, IVR, WFM, QM, workforce scheduling, agent desktop, knowledge management and more) was designed to manage Layer 3 at scale. Because for thirty years, that was the only layer that existed.

AI is now being applied, almost universally, to make Layer 3 cheaper and faster. Almost nobody is using it to build Layer 1 and Layer 2, which is where the CEO's greenfield model would invest first, and most heavily. The capability increasingly exists, even as the operating model and strategic coherence often do not.

> **The strategic implication:**
> *The organisations competing to optimise Layer 3 are fighting over the smallest, most expensive, and least satisfying part of the model. The organisations building Layer 1 and Layer 2 are competing in a different race entirely, and most of their current competitors have not yet noticed.*

"The industry is deploying AI brilliantly to optimise a model that, in the CEO's greenfield design, would barely exist."

Greenfield Thinking, Brownfield Reality

A reasonable objection at this point is that very few organisations have the luxury of starting with a blank sheet of paper. Most contact centres are running real operations, on installed technology, under existing contracts, with workforces who depend on them. The greenfield model is not a procurement specification, it is a strategic destination.

Companies in financial services, retail, telecommunications, and utilities have proven, repeatedly, that completely different operating models can be reached from a brownfield starting point. The discipline required is not technological, it is the discipline of well-managed change, requiring clear strategic direction, sustained executive sponsorship, deliberate transition planning, and the courage to retire what no longer serves the new model.

The specific danger this paper identifies is the inverse pattern. Organisations that buy and deploy technology before deciding what they are trying to build. Technology applied to an undefined strategy produces a more sophisticated version of the existing model. Technology applied in service of a clearly articulated three-layer ambition produces something different.

Strategy first, change programme second, and technology third. In that order, the model described in this paper is achievable, in any other order it is not.

3. Why the Gap Exists and Why It Persists

Understanding the gap between the CEO's greenfield model and the industry's current direction requires understanding why smart people, with good intentions and significant budgets, consistently arrive at the wrong answer.

The reasons are structural, not individual.

The Frame of Reference Problem

Every conversation about AI in the contact centre takes place within an existing frame of reference. The customer's requirements are shaped by their current operating model. The supplier's roadmap is shaped by what customers ask for. The integrator's methodology is shaped by the supplier's technology. Nobody in the room has the incentive or the permission to question the frame of reference itself.

This is not a failure of intelligence, it is a structural feature of how industries evolve. Disruption rarely comes from within the dominant frame of reference. It comes from outside it, from someone willing to ask what a CEO starting with a blank sheet of paper would design today.

The Measurement Trap

The metrics that govern the contact centre (Average Handle Time, First Contact Resolution, cost per contact, CSAT and agent occupancy) are all measures of transactional efficiency. They were designed to manage a high-volume processing environment. They are not measures of relationship quality, customer lifetime value, or brand loyalty.

When AI investments are evaluated against these metrics, the inevitable conclusion is that AI should be applied to reduce handle time, increase automation, and lower cost. The metrics make Layer 3 optimisation look like the right answer, because those are the only outcomes the metrics can see.

The CEO's greenfield model would not be measured by these metrics alone. Alongside the measures the operation already trusts, it would be measured on containment rate, proactive resolution volume, customer lifetime value, and the proportion of interactions that required human involvement at all. Different metrics produce different investments.

Legacy Contact Centre Metrics	Greenfield Engagement Metrics
Average Handle Time	Containment rate
First Contact Resolution	Proactive resolution rate
Cost per contact	Customer lifetime value
Agent occupancy	Human contact as % of total engagements
CSAT score	Relationship health index
Queue abandonment rate	Self-determination success rate

These measures extend the existing framework rather than replace it. CSAT and containment remain essential, and they remain measurable. Operations teams adopt new measures when they can be tracked and proven, not when they are asked to abandon the measures they trust. The shift is in what the organisation chooses to optimise, not in what it is able to see.

The Technology Retrofit Problem

Perhaps the most damaging pattern in the industry is the tendency to retrofit AI onto existing technology rather than re-imagining the journey around AI's capabilities. The result is a series of AI features that operate within the constraints of legacy architecture, rather than an engagement model built from first principles.

A conversational AI bot placed in front of an IVR does not replace the IVR. It adds a layer of intelligence to a process that the CEO would never have designed in the first place. The outcome is a slightly more palatable version of the wrong model.

Real transformation requires the willingness to retire the legacy model, not to enhance it. That is a harder conversation to have with a board. It is a harder business case to build, and it requires a very different kind of partnership between the organisation, its technology suppliers, and its advisers.

Technology Maturity Is No Longer the Constraint

The argument so far might be read as a critique of the current generation of contact centre AI, but it’s not. The technology is more capable now than at any previous point. Multi-model orchestration, hybrid deterministic and LLM workflows, agentic action across enterprise systems, and outcome-based commercial models are all in production at scale.

The market is also broad. There are many established and emerging AI suppliers, many distinct customer needs across industries and segments, and many credible ways to deliver against any given ambition. There are also orchestration platforms that consolidate multiple AI capabilities into a single operational layer. None of this complexity is the problem.

The problem is the order in which the questions are answered. Without strategic clarity, more options compound the wrong outcome. A richer choice of AI suppliers, a wider set of integration patterns, a more sophisticated orchestration layer, each of these accelerates whatever strategy is already in motion. If the strategy is to optimise the existing contact centre, more capable AI optimises it faster. If the strategy is to re-imagine customer engagement, the same capabilities deliver it.

The technology is not the variable, the strategy is. Strategy first, change programme second, and technology third. Every other decision in customer engagement, AI included, derives its value from that order.

4. Elevated Human Contact: AI in Service of People

None of the arguments in this paper should be read as a case for reducing human engagement, the opposite is true. The greenfield model is, at its core, a model that elevates human contact, by making it essential, more meaningful, and more effective. The gap is not only technological.

The Handover Gap

Capgemini Research Institute's 2026 report found that just 23% of organisations had a unified customer experience strategy across channels, falling to 9% in the public sector. The effect is visible at the point where automation should hand over to people: 83% of executives said their organisation failed to provide seamless transitions between channels, while 63% of consumers said they often had to explain their issue again after moving from a chatbot to a human agent.

Source: Capgemini Research Institute, "Reimagining customer experience: Human-led, AI-powered (2026)".

Human connection is not the absence of AI, it's the point at which AI must make the human better informed, better prepared and more able to resolve what matters.

Rethinking the Agent Role

The contact centre agent role has been promised a transformation for twenty years. Agents would become relationship managers, freed from process to focus on human connection. It has not happened, because the process has never truly been removed. It has been assisted, sometimes significantly, but never eliminated.

AI now makes it possible to carry 100% of process, compliance, knowledge retrieval, real-time transcription, wrap-up, and administrative burden. If AI absorbs everything that is not a human decision, what remains is human judgement, empathy, and relationship.

This is not an iteration of the current agent role, it is a new profession, requiring a different job design, different competency framework, different performance measures, and different remuneration. Organisations that treat this as a training initiative rather than a workforce transformation will fail to realise it.

"AI should make human contact harder to need and impossible to regret."

The Emotional Dimension

Emotional anticipation is the opportunity almost nobody in the contact centre industry is talking about. Current AI thinking in the contact centre is largely reactive, detecting distress and escalating faster. This is better than not detecting it, but if you are detecting distress in real time, you have already failed.

AI systems capable of building continuous models of customer relationship health, across months, not moments, give organisations the intelligence to intervene before a customer reaches the point of frustration. Service design informed by AI-predicted breaking points creates fewer breaking points. That is a wholly different ambition to real-time sentiment detection.

Personalisation at the Individual Level

The CEO’s greenfield model would not design a single service architecture and apply it uniformly. It would design a model that adapts meaningfully to each individual customer. No segments, no personas, individuals who define, through their behaviour and explicit preferences, how they want to be engaged. They define which channel, how much autonomy, whether they value speed or depth, how they communicate under pressure.

AI makes this operationally feasible for the first time. No two customers need to experience the same engagement model, whilst operating within a consistent brand and policy framework. That is a level of personalisation that no amount of segmentation strategy has ever achieved.

HISYNERGY

5. What It Takes to Ask for Different

The barriers to building the CEO's greenfield model are not technological. The technology to deliver every element described in this paper exists today, distributed across major platforms and emerging specialist suppliers. The question is not whether it is available, the question is whether organisations have the will to use it differently.

Strategic Clarity

Organisations must be willing to define their customer engagement ambition in terms of outcomes, not technology features. *What proportion of customer needs should be met without any human involvement? What does exceptional human contact look and feel like? What would it mean to build a customer relationship customers actually value?*

These are not technology questions, they are leadership decisions, and they must be answered before any technology investment is made, not reverse-engineered from a supplier's roadmap.

Organisational Courage

Asking for different is harder than asking for change. It requires the willingness to retire investments, retire processes, and retire metrics that the organisation has built identity and capability around. It requires telling a board that the last technology programme, however recently completed, was not the destination, it was the last iteration of the wrong model.

That is a difficult conversation. It is also the most important one available to customer engagement leaders right now.

A Different Kind of Partnership

Building the greenfield model requires a different kind of relationship with technology suppliers and advisers. Not a relationship defined by platform selection and feature deployment, but a relationship defined by shared ambition for a different outcome.

This means working with partners who are willing to question the brief, not just fulfil it. Who will challenge the measurement framework, not just optimise against it. Who will bring an independent perspective on what is possible, rather than a vested interest in a particular platform or delivery methodology.

There is a further shift that makes this kind of partnership more urgent. The traditional operating split, in which the business defines requirements and a technology function delivers against them, is itself an artefact of the old model. When engagement is designed conversationally, the people who understand the customer conversation are the people shaping the solution, so definition and delivery become a single act. Organisations that keep the two apart will find the friction sits in their operating model, not their technology.

Are you accepting change, or asking for different?

6. Conclusion: The Blank Sheet of Paper

The contact centre industry has reached an inflection point. AI has created the conditions for an entirely different model of customer engagement, one that the CEO's greenfield design would recognise immediately, and that the industry's current direction barely resembles.

The organisations that will lead the next decade of customer engagement are not those deploying AI most aggressively within the existing model. They are those willing to set the existing model aside and ask one question: *what would we build if we were starting today?*

That question is not comfortable. It invalidates investments, disrupts operating models, and challenges the frame of reference that every room full of smart people has been working within, but it is the only question that leads somewhere new.

> ***"Two strategies are emerging. One uses AI to optimise the existing model. The other uses AI to augment and redefine customer engagement entirely."***

HiSynergy Consulting exists to have that conversation with customers who are ready to ask for different, with solution providers willing to look beyond their current roadmap, and with systems integrators prepared to challenge the brief, not just deliver it.

If that is the conversation you want to have, it starts here.

About HiSynergy Consulting

HiSynergy Consulting Ltd is a UK-based consultancy specialising in contact centre transformation, unified communications, and technology strategy. Working with enterprise organisations across procurement, solution architecture, programme governance, and benefits realisation, HiSynergy brings independent expertise to the most complex customer engagement challenges in the market.

Independent. Experienced. Asking for different.

www.HiSynergy.co.uk