

Contact Center Predictions for 2023 and Beyond

Introduction

Since the start of the decade, customer experience (CX) and employee experience (EX) have done a collective 180°. Organizations with a cloud-first, digital-first mindset have quickly leaped ahead, but adaptation and innovation are swift and ongoing.

This is especially true when it comes to the contact center. For example, leaders are now thinking about how to best use artificial intelligence and machine learning to increase their global competitiveness and how they'll deliver service and engagement as part of the customer experience in the metaverse.

Meanwhile, they're facing an inflection point where EX has become just as critical as CX. With almost half of workers saying that they'll quit if their employer doesn't permanently offer the flexibility to work remotely, contact centers are being reimagined for the next generation of work and workers.

These considerations and others have led to our curation of seven predictions for the contact center. With predictions for 2023 through 2030, read on to see what industry analysts and subject matter experts say should be top of mind when thinking about the future of customer service and engagement.

By 2023, employee experience will overtake customer experience, at least temporarily, as the leading "experience" focus and investment.

Janice Rapp, VP, Product Marketing,
Contact Center, 8x8

As events such as the Great Resignation and Great Reprioritization continue to impact employee recruitment, retention, and engagement, contact center leaders, like leaders in so many other industries, will need to turn their attention to employee experience (EX) over customer experience (CX), at least temporarily.

Though more and more return-to-office plans will actually start to materialize, contact center leaders will need to address the fact that many employees will refuse to accept anything but remote or flexible work. Out of 1,000 workers polled in a recent [Morning Consult survey](#), 39% said they'd consider quitting if their employers didn't give them the flexibility to work from home. That increased to 49% when it came to millennial and Gen Z workers surveyed.

As a result, companies that have the right communication and collaboration tools, training, and leadership to support work from anywhere will be in a better position to attract and retain the type of talent they need to deliver differentiated customer experiences. If organizations can't offer work from anywhere as an option, then they'll not only lose out on the ability to recruit from the widest and best talent pool possible, but they'll also miss out on the next generation of talent. To some extent, competitors who offer this flexibility will win by default.

49%

Almost half of millennial and Gen Z workers say they'll quit if an organization doesn't give them flexibility to work remote.

With the ability to hire the best and the best-fit agents, the challenge becomes how to keep them happy and productive. A recent survey shows that **40% blame burnout** as the reason why they quit jobs within a year of starting. Without modern cloud communications and engagement tools, agents will become frustrated. They'll feel isolated. And even though they don't want to return to in-office work, they'll miss the connection with their peers, the ongoing feedback, and live coaching. Organizations will need to invest in the tools that engage employees and promote a culture of connectedness, teamwork, and performance recognition.

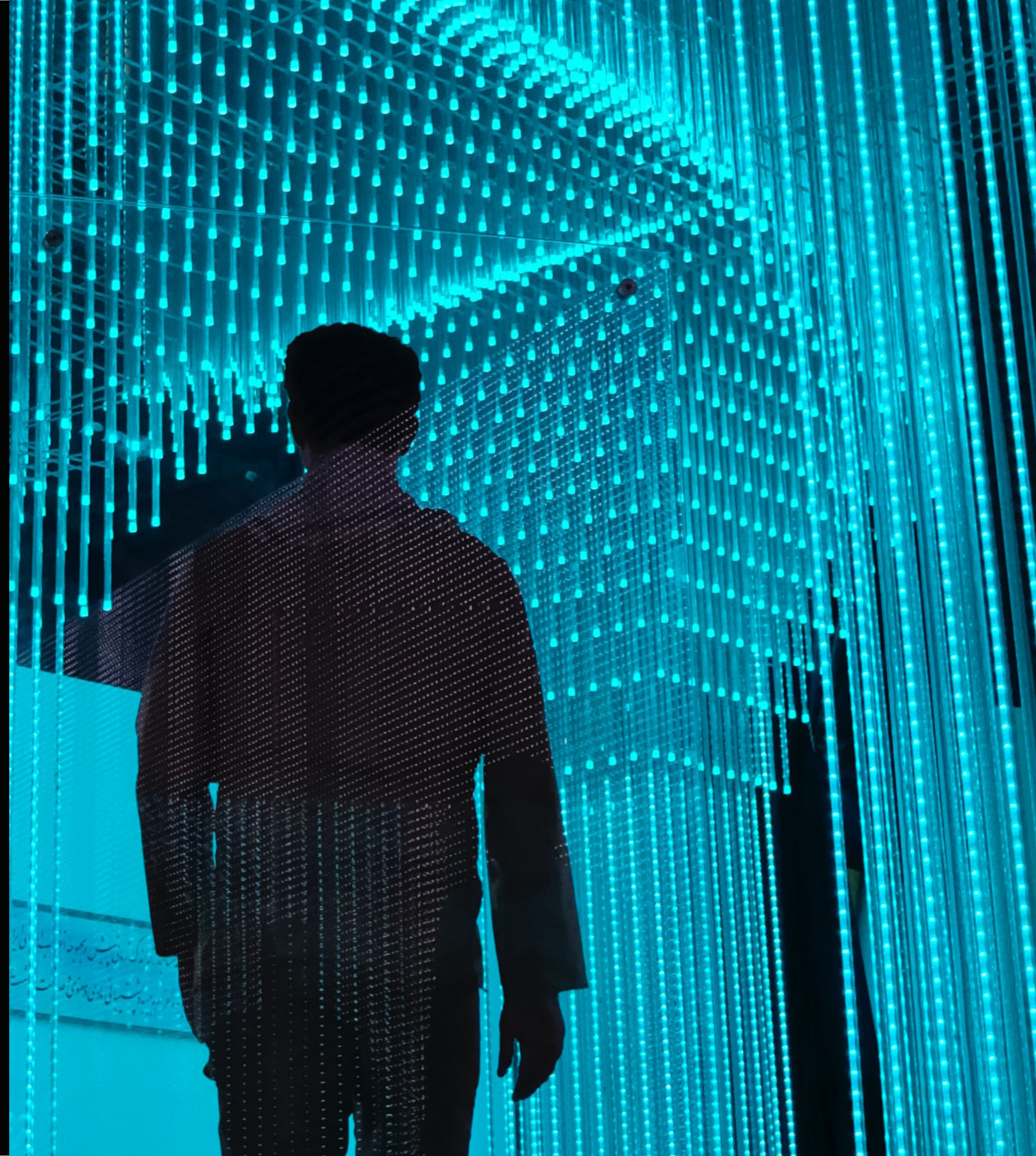
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If we learned anything from the events that disrupted work at the start of this decade, it's that a patchwork, band-aid approach to communications and collaboration doesn't work for long. So today, and into the future, employee experience needs to be fully optimized, backed by resilient and secure communications and intuitive, fully integrated, easy-to-use applications.

From there, it's up to managers to leverage advanced quality and analytics tools to monitor performance and provide positive, fact-based, and highly personalized training and engagement that makes agents feel empowered and, most of all, valued and connected. Equal or greater investment in employees will become the hallmark of leading CX-focused companies.

By 2023, one-quarter of organizations will look to UCaaS and CCaaS technology to collaborate in the enterprise and with customers more effectively.

Keith Dawson, VP, Research Director,
Ventana Research



Editor's note: the following is an excerpt from the Ventana Research report "Why Unifying UCaaS and CCaaS Makes Sense."

Ventana Research asserts that by 2023, one-quarter of organizations will look to UCaaS and CCaaS technology to collaborate in the enterprise and with customers more effectively. Around the same time, it will become apparent that the two platforms are really different flavors of the same basic toolkit, and organizations will begin to push for simpler, combined products.

The rationale for an integrated UCaaS/CCaaS platform starts with what makes the cloud useful in the first place: ease of deployment and maintenance. When a single communication platform is used across the organization, administrators manage just a single directory and can mix and match functions based on any given user's role, which can change. A single global directory and real-time presence make it easy to create ad-hoc teams to solve specific problems or to find a particular person with the needed expertise and hand it off with context. Unifying the platforms allows greater flexibility for the workforce and encourages collaboration across and within teams. This type of collaboration and rapid identification of experts enables faster issue resolution.

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Integrated communications also supply a common platform for reporting, analysis and integrations to business applications. All interactions that occur can be reported and analyzed. The important quality control functions like recording, coaching and evaluation can be applied across departments and teams, providing a clearer picture of whether the entire organization is working collectively to provide good customer experiences.

Some of the most important technology advances are coming at the platform level of the tech stack, where artificial intelligence and machine learning (AI/ML) and workflow automation can be spread across multiple applications and use cases like intelligent self-service and agent assistance. This means that in a combined UCaaS/CCaaS system, those advances can be deployed to more users with different functions.

There are also benefits from synchronizing user interfaces, like reducing the amount of training users need and the disruption of having to switch among applications. We see that, for example, in the way UCaaS/CCaaS combinations are starting to leverage integrations into systems like Microsoft Teams, so that both contact center agents and business users have access to presence status, video calling, team chatting, and other basic functions. The idea that the two sets of employees should have separate communications platforms is absurd when you consider the cost, time, and IT resources required to bridge the gap. We also see the positive impact of a micro front-end approach to interface design, resulting in a configurable agent desktop.

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There are other reasons to consider unification: having a single vendor for a security/privacy framework, for example, or being able to expand a platform globally (and beyond a basic PSTN platform). In years to come, we expect the boundaries between UCaaS and CCaaS platforms to blur and eventually make way for a common, prepackaged set of applications unified into a single underlying base layer. That combination will handle high volume voice and data alongside internal collaboration, video, and digital communications.

By 2025, proactive customer engagement interactions will outnumber reactive customer engagement interactions.

Jessica Smith, Senior Manager,
Product Marketing, Contact Center, 8x8

Proactively communicating with customers is certainly not a new thought. Rethinking proactive engagement, and how this has the potential to decrease reactive customer service and appeal to changing customer demands, is a notion increasingly on the rise.

Digital channel preferences are driving opportunities for proactive outreach

Proactive engagement has a major role to play in providing optimal experiences for today's digital consumers and their increasingly high expectations. With consumer preferences towards digital channels on the rise, the thought of proactively engaging on their channel of choice seems obvious. However, this needs to be done with greater intention, leveraging emerging toolsets that will make this kind of outreach highly appealing to consumers.

Future proactive engagement cannot simply be blanket communications to your entire customer base. This has already proven somewhat ineffective, and in many cases, unappreciated by customers.

In its [Strategic Roadmap for Customer Service and Support](#), Gartner recently found that moving to proactive engagement will be the number one priority of customer service leaders as they rethink the business model around customer assistant modes. With this being the case, organizations need to consider having a dynamic, highly personalized approach when building a strategy around this kind of outreach. Without taking an intelligent, unique approach to this kind of outreach, it will be difficult to move the needle on decreasing any kind of inbound or reactive inquiries.

AI and automation will be essential to highly effective proactive engagement

AI and automation are making it possible for organizations to craft stronger outreach initiatives that can scale to a level of service that's often not possible due to prioritization of inbound inquiries or staffing and cost constraints. Just as organizations will increase their digital footprint, the use of AI, machine learning, and automation will influence, and make possible, the creation of rich proactive engagement paradigms.

In its [Market Guide for Digital Customer Service and Support Technologies](#), Gartner validates much of this thinking in that they predict by 2023, 30% of customer service organizations will deliver proactive customer service using artificial intelligence, process orchestration, and continuous intelligence.

30%

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SMS will likely lead the charge of proactive outreach given our mobile preferences. Therefore, we also predict that by 2025, more than 50% of all brands will use SMS as a proactive customer support and engagement channel, amplifying the competitive focus around brand trust.

50%

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Agents need to be empowered to take part in proactive communications

In addition to AI and automation playing a major role in structuring proactive outreach, the agent will also have a key role in the transition to more proactive engagement. Increasingly, customer-centric agent desktops will give agents context of the customer journey across channels, enabling even more personalized and right-time proactive outreach to increase customer satisfaction. As the agent has deep insights into previous customer interactions, context across channels, and historical sentiment, this can be applied to individualized outreach initiatives. This type of right-time proactive engagement could lead to strong upsell and cross-sell opportunities while certainly having a positive impact on customer retention and satisfaction.

By 2025, 25% of retail employees will double as contact center agents as e-commerce and digital customer engagement eclipse face-to-face interactions.

Janice Rapp, VP,
Product Marketing, Contact Center, 8x8



We have all witnessed the shape-shifting of customer service.

- Buy online with curbside pickup.
- Contact-free delivery.
- More apps, more chatbots, and less human interaction.

And as a result, more customer friction and frustration as most of us—especially older generations—are forced to interact in new ways, replacing in-person conversations with digital self-service.

At the same time, digital natives (Millennials) and digital immigrants (Gen Z) expect frictionless and personalized experiences because great brands have already taught them that it's possible.

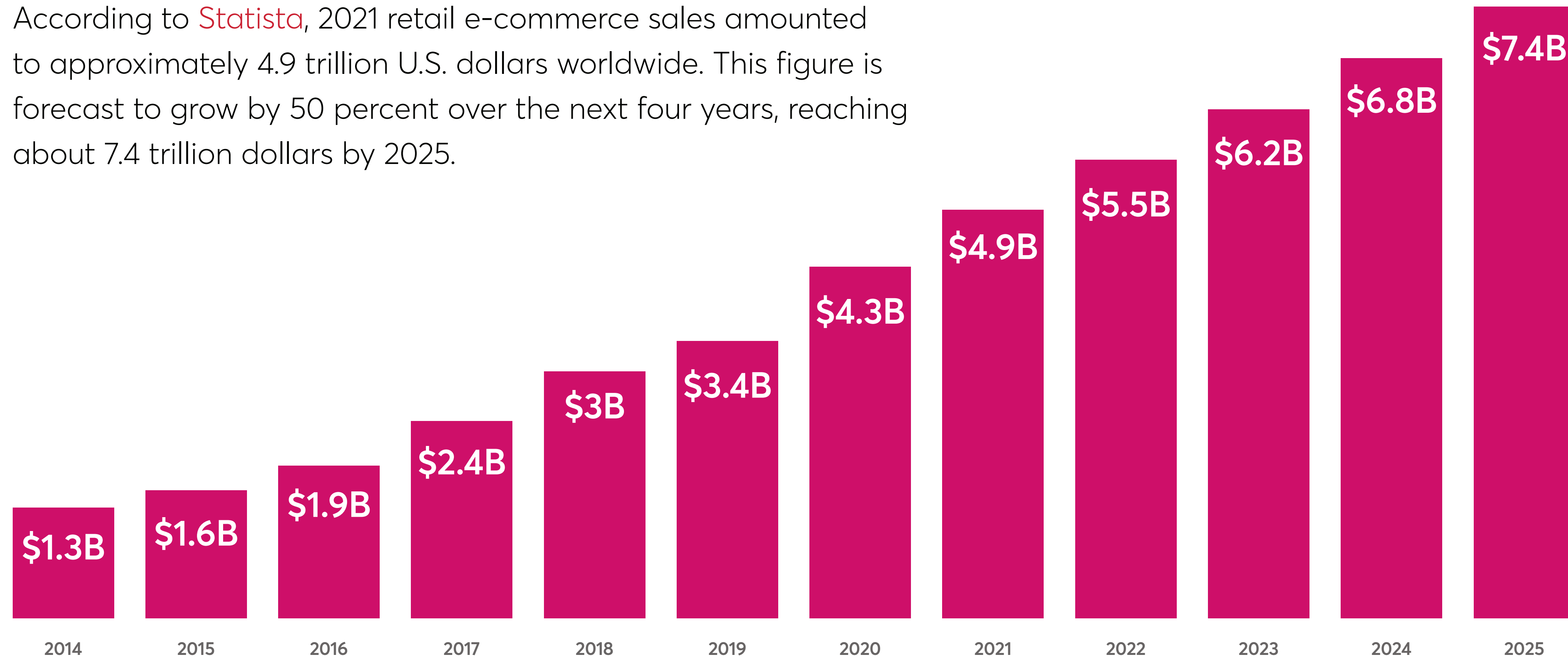
\$7.4T

Global retail sales are set to reach \$7.4 trillion by 2025.

Retail e-commerce sales worldwide from 2014 to 2025

(in billion U.S. dollars)

According to [Statista](#), 2021 retail e-commerce sales amounted to approximately 4.9 trillion U.S. dollars worldwide. This figure is forecast to grow by 50 percent over the next four years, reaching about 7.4 trillion dollars by 2025.



It's not conjecture to state that as e-commerce continues to increase, the retail footprint will continue its associated decline. As a result, retailers will need to make constant adjustments to support the rapid evolution of their industry. In 2021, there were seminal case studies and articles written about brick-and-mortar retail store employees being set up to respond to customer inquiries and interactions via voice and digital channels. It's an interesting, visionary approach, and I believe we will see more of this customer engagement model in the coming years because it solves for a number of issues.

First, it addresses the pandemic-driven rise in digital-first consumers and the corresponding decline in retail foot traffic, while at the same time balancing the cost/benefit equation. Secondly, it addresses the staffing issues associated with events such as The Great Resignation

and the enormous pressure that employers are facing in attracting and retaining talent, including contact center agents. Lastly, by sharing ownership of the customer experience with a broader base of employees, organizations can solve issues faster, offer wider channel availability and support, and deliver more consistent customer experiences.

Longer-term, we need to consider further advances in AI, including predictive and proactive outbound communications (as we highlighted in the previous prediction), the Internet of Things (IoT), and robotics, to name a few. Shared ownership of the customer will cross every stage of the buyer journey, and experiences will be fueled by an organization-wide commitment to fulfilling a customer's unique requirements at each stage of that journey.

Even in a virtual world, visionary retailers will embrace every opportunity to think about what customers need, before they need it. Instead of becoming less human, leaders in every category will have access to data to guide consumers throughout their journey. Voice interactions may not be with a live human, but voice interactions (and authentication) will feel nothing but natural. And if a voice interaction escalates beyond the voicebot, a live agent/brand/company advisor/expert will take over and have instant access and understanding of the context.

Where and how those employees are presented and supported will be the issue. Composed experiences, permissions, and access will be needed to address the customer journey, which will be forever changing. An open, extensible, and tightly integrated approach to communications and collaboration will be foundational. With the introduction of customer data platforms (or looking ahead, global customer data/account profiles), customer journeys will be visible to every employee across the organization. And the right communications will be key to the future of secure, hyper-individualized, proactive, and dynamic customer engagement.

“By sharing ownership of the customer experience with a broader base of employees, organizations can solve issues faster, offer wider channel availability and support, and deliver more consistent customer experiences.”

By 2025, 25% of agents will be gig-economy workers, as events such as the Great Resignation and Great Reprioritization continue to change the face of the contact center.

Patrick Russell, Director,
Product Management, WFM, 8x8



As workforce shortages continue, the improved flexibility provided by remote and fractional employment coupled with modern schedule and location flexibility, will see delays in retirement or even retirees boomerang back into the workforce to help solve some of the shortage. Gig-economy workers will also become commonplace in the contact center.

Increasingly, front-line digital workers will work in conjunction with advanced technology. Whereas the technology will handle much of the effort through self-service interaction channels, bots will also provide oversight of information

management between customers and workers. Additionally, machines will provide workers with emotion detection and response guidance to heighten workers' emotional intelligence in real-time.

The technology interfaces for this workforce will continue to be refined and simplified and will require little to no training time. Virtual assistance will also provide real-time guidance, ensuring that all parts of customer requests and information inputs are accurate, and acting as an "auto-correct" for all actions taken and responses given.

By 2027, the "alternative workforce" of freelancers, gig workers, and crowd workers is expected to become the majority of the US workforce, according to Edelman Intelligence.

With the volume of jobs increasingly moving from face-to-face to virtual interactions, those requiring human involvement will increasingly be comprised of complicated scenarios or highly emotional situations that still require a human touch. The continued advancement of self-service capabilities that can handle a higher percentage of digital interactions means that human effort will only be needed for escalation when the bots fail to handle a customer's needs. Voice interaction bots will continue to capture a significant portion of triage or tier-one level voice interactions and administer post-interaction surveys, but when someone needs answers to a more complex question or issue, human-to-human voice interactions will remain a common and preferred communication channel.

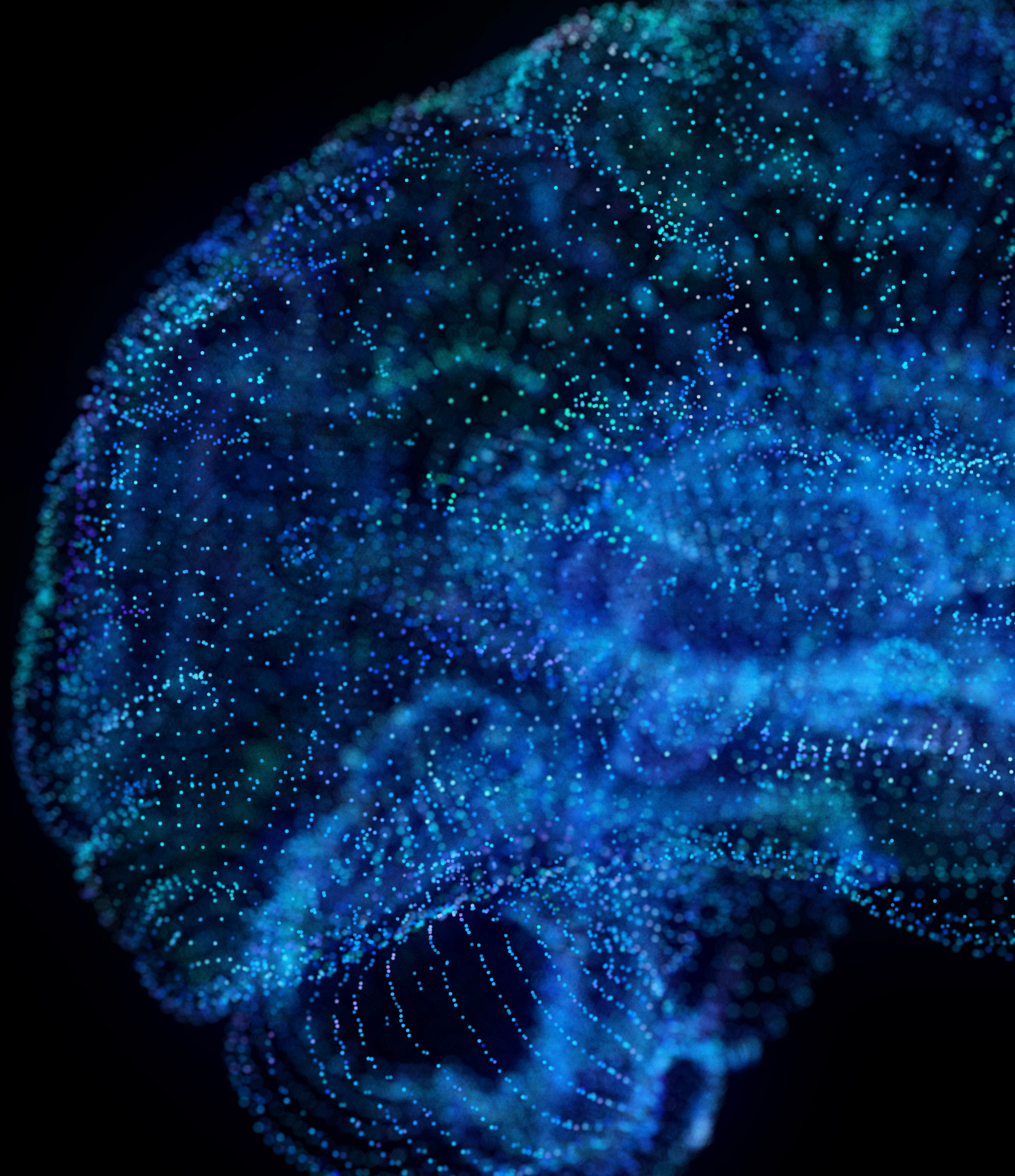
To meet the full labor requirements using a more fractional workforce will require a higher number of workers, working fewer hours per week, on average. Recruiting, training, coaching, scheduling, and quality management will all go through a transformation including a greater degree of automation and verifiable worker performance data.

All of these advancements will ultimately reduce effort and increase the speed at which customers will reach resolutions. Meanwhile, workers will have tremendous control over their time and when they decide to work, and for what companies or projects.

Customers will realize better experiences, workers will enjoy greater flexibility and greater control over their income, and businesses will operate with smaller workforces working hand in hand with intelligent software that provides robotic and intelligent automation.

By 2025, VR will be used in at least 65% of contact centers as brands enter the metaverse and customers look to engage with or as avatars in virtual spaces.

Jessica Smith, Senior Manager,
Product Marketing, Contact Center, 8x8



It would be almost impossible to have a prediction piece that didn't acknowledge the impact that the metaverse will have on businesses moving forward. What will this impact have on contact centers in particular? It will greatly change the way businesses engage with customers and build experiences or environments that deliver intelligent, immersive personalization.

Interacting in the metaverse

Picture this: your customers are interacting with your brand online only to find themselves needing assistance. Perhaps they begin chatting with a bot that leads to an escalation potential or the need to communicate with a live agent. Your customer then has the option to have a more interactive session with a live agent—one in

which both parties choose an avatar to then meet in a virtual setting—the virtual setting of course being up to your design entirely. In fact, the setting may be one that changes depending on the nature of the interaction, the customer's preferences, their tenure as a loyal customer, the workings of the business, or just an overall appealing aesthetic. The possibilities of metaverse meetups will be limitless.

We've already seen examples of this with [Microsoft's unveiling of Mesh for Microsoft Teams](#). While Mesh is primarily focused on employee-to-employee interactions, the future will likely mean extending these experiences to include customer interactions, providing a new sense of liberation for both your customers and your employees.

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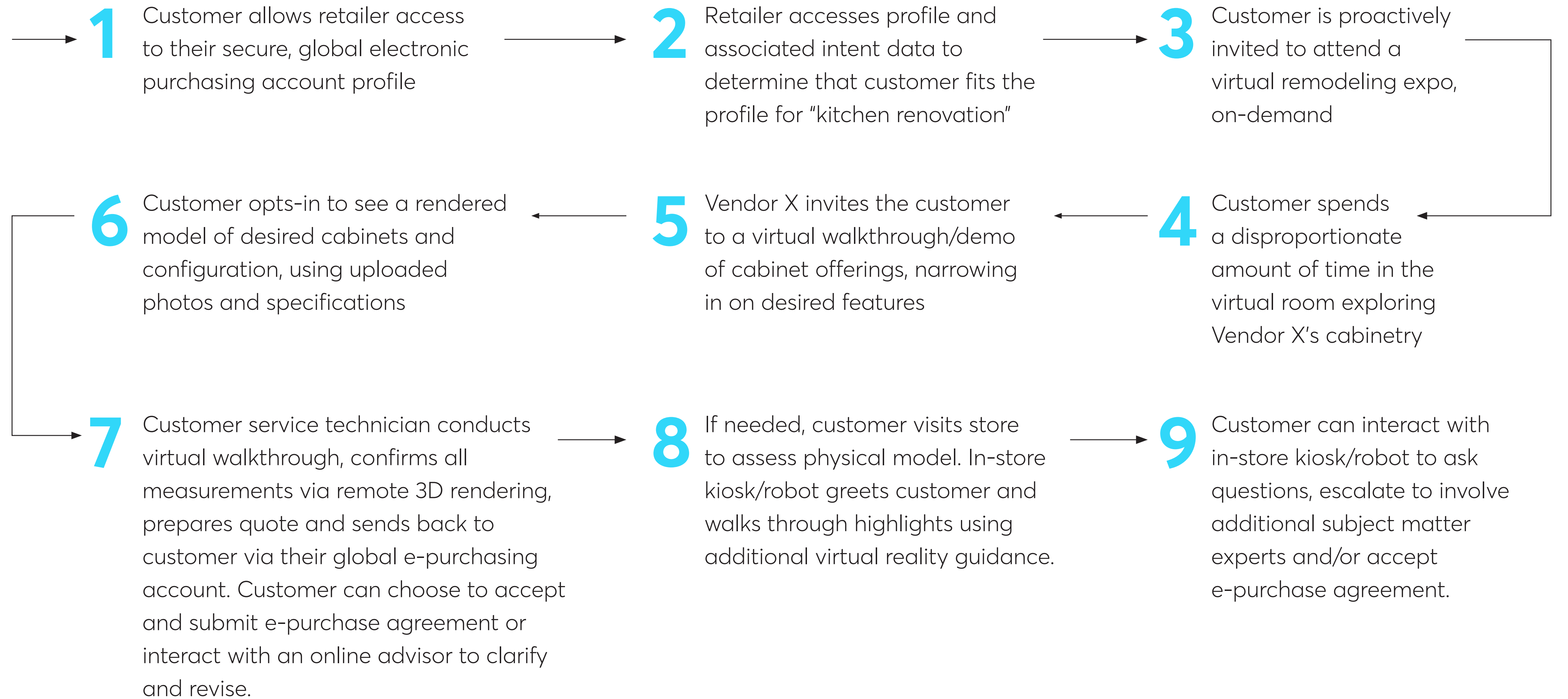
The global metaverse revenue opportunity could equal \$800 billion in 2024, according to Bloomberg Intelligence.

Customers interacting in the metaverse

As consumers begin to interact with businesses in the metaverse, expectations will yet again change. The bar will be raised as constraints related to immersive experiences lift, and consumer desires take new shape.

Customer Data Platforms (CDPs) will have a major role to play in being able to deliver on customer preferences, which are necessary to understand, in order to optimize these new types of interactions. The collecting, analyzing, segmenting, and application of customer data will create an avenue to deliver extreme personalization for metaverse meetups.

Let's look at a hypothetical home improvement buyer journey for the year 2030:



The notion that these experiences will have a heightened level of personalization is almost the tip of the iceberg. It's the level of immersion that can be created and adjusted that will change the future of buying across myriad products and services.

Agents interacting in the metaverse

Moving the interaction to virtual reality creates an optimal situation for your agents working anywhere in the world who may not always be camera-ready. This is, of course, a reality we're faced with today in that not every home environment may be one in which you'd be pleased to have representing the face of your company. In many cases, contact centers have shied away from the use of video as a channel for precisely this reason.

A metaverse meetup changes the game and liberates agents from how they or their physical surroundings have to look to have a "face-to-face" meetup with your customers. Agents will be able to engage with that customer in a virtual setting, with an avatar of their choosing. Suddenly the burden of home offices, distractions, or having that camera-ready look fades away.

"A metaverse meetup changes the game and liberates agents from how they or their physical surroundings have to look to have a "face-to-face" meetup with your customers."

The security implications and advantages

Meeting in the metaverse may also provide heightened security or an additional sense of privacy for both agents and customers.

Avatars and virtual meetup spaces are essentially helping to mask one's identity and create a safe space to interact with a stranger. Not only does this neutral setting help eliminate some of the intimidation or uncomfortable nature in meeting with a stranger, but many customers will feel safer by meeting in such a way. Being able to provide this level of interaction, while also guaranteeing your agents' and customers' privacy will remain intact, is truly an ideal situation for your customers and the business.

CPaaS services have made it easy for businesses today to allow customers and delivery drivers to easily communicate without ever sharing personal contact information. The two parties can engage with the confidence and comfort of knowing their personal information is protected. Imagine just how much further you can take this in a virtual setting. Personal or private details beyond just standard contact information can be maintained in a virtual setting by masking certain variables, attributes, or data between the agent and customer through the security of the platform.

Overall, as accessibility to the metaverse increases and grows in popularity, this will change the way in which your organization interacts with your customers and creates extremely personalized, highly secure, immersive experiences.

By 2030, AI will drive the verticalization of customer experience and journey orchestration.

Peter Milligan, Director,
Product Marketing, Contact Center, 8x8

"Don't care how! I want it now!" No matter which version of Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory you most enjoy, Veruca Salt famously shouts these words at the end of her musical number that begins with a simple request. She wants one of Willy Wonka's golden geese. Yes, it's a simple request, but it's also a very specific one, and she wants it now.

Consumers today are not that over the top. Well, most of them aren't, anyway. However, they have come to expect a certain level of speed and accuracy when it comes to their customer service experiences, and that makes sense. It is extremely important for a company to know its customers. Today, **84%** of customers say they are frustrated when an agent doesn't have their information at hand.

So, how are companies going to arm their agents with everything they need to help all their customers, even the demanding ones? There is lots of talk that if you inject some artificial intelligence (AI) into your contact center, everything will be great. This results in agents outfitted with all the information and answers they need to help your customers and customer satisfaction scores going up and to the right. Right? Well, maybe.

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of customers say they are frustrated when an agent doesn't have their information at hand.

AI, as well as machine learning (ML) and natural language processing (NLP), are powerful tools that are starting to make an impact in the contact center—and this is a good thing. Well thought out and executed solutions based on these technologies promise to be a powerful combination. However, painting your contact center with a broad stroke of AI may not be the answer. AI needs to be applied in a specific way where companies like yours can see real value, quickly.

To gain that quick value, we predict that by 2030 (possibly sooner), AI will drive verticalization in the contact center industry to pinpoint each customer's needs in a certain sector and then effectively carry them on a personalized journey with every brand.

Think about this for just a minute. The type of service and experience you receive while shopping for tires at

a national tire store is going to be completely different than shopping for a new party dress at that high-end department store. And it should be. However, one size does not fit all. As we know from today's customers, they want an experience that is unique to them.

With AI, ML, and NLP combined, it can be. Customizing each experience based on millions, or even billions, of past customer interactions across a variety of verticals, each customer will experience your brand in a way that is truly unique to them.

As AI drives the verticalization of the customer experience and journey orchestration, along with unique experiences to align contact center resources to meet the specific needs of each customer, Veruca may get her golden goose yet.

Taking the next step

Regardless of your business, markets are becoming increasingly competitive, customers are becoming more demanding, and budgets are tighter than ever before. To compete in this demanding environment, 8x8 can help you deploy a complete, cloud-based, contact center solution to provide unbeatable customer experiences that differentiate you from the competition every day.

The 8x8 Contact Center allows you to optimize operations and experiences through a comprehensive feature set, high availability, real-time dashboards, seamless integrations, and most importantly by empowering agents.

Contact us today to learn more about 8x8's complete contact center solution on the most secure and reliable platform.

About 8x8

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The logo for 8x8, consisting of the text "8x8" in white on a red square background.

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