What Sets CX Leaders Apart from AI Experimenters

The hardest part of AI was never the technology.

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Executive Summary

At Contact Center Week 2026, the noise was impossible to miss.

Everywhere you looked, there was another vendor promising faster automation, smarter self-service, better advisor productivity, or a new way to cut costs from the contact center. For enterprise leaders trying to decide where to place their bets, that explosion of noise has created a new problem.

Confusion.

Too many AI initiatives fail because companies buy fragmented point solutions, trust unrealistic promises, skip the hard operating work, or measure activity instead of outcomes. The result is more activity, higher costs, and greater complexity, without enough improvement in the customer experience.

The leaders pulling ahead are taking a different path. They start with customer intent, fix the processes and data that shape the experience, decide where AI should lead or assist, and build human judgment into the moments where trust matters most.

And that is exactly why the next chapter of customer experience belongs to companies that build an AI strategy first, then work with a partner that can design, build, run, and continuously optimize it inside the realities of enterprise CX, with technology serving as the enabler rather than the solution itself.

After more than 25 years deploying AI in CX, one lesson is clear: customers don't need another fragmented point solution focused solely on self-service and automation. They need an AI-enabled customer experience strategy that works end to end, inside the realities of the business.

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Pethachi Pichappan
Vice President, Global Technology Transformation Solutions and Innovation

Shift from Task-Based Automation to Intent-Driven CX

For years, contact center transformation has been sold through a familiar promise: automate more, contain more, and reduce cost. That promise is not wrong, but it is incomplete.

Automation only helps when the experience has been designed to work.

Automation can absolutely remove friction.

Automation can certainly resolve simple interactions.

Automation can definitely help advisors work better.

BUT

A chatbot that deflects volume is not a redesigned journey.

A voice bot that handles basic authentication is not an enterprise operating model.

An advisor-assist tool that summarizes a call is not transformation.

Capabilities, no matter how useful, do not create transformation on their own. The market has spent too long confusing feature deployment with actual resolution of customer issues.

Instead of asking, *"Can we automate this contact?"* what companies need is a deeper understanding of the customer issues, including the root cause reason for the call. Only then can you fully resolve for intent (or fix your process to resolve for it). By addressing the root cause issue and reaching out to customers proactively, companies can avoid these calls in the future.

That shift matters. It moves the conversation from task-based automation to intent-driven customer journey design.

That is a different agenda. It means looking beyond isolated touchpoints. It means understanding contact drivers, avoidable demand, friction points, escalation paths, and the operational causes behind repeated interactions. It means looking at the customer journey as a system, not as a queue.

Because if the process is broken, AI will only make the problem more visible.

> The market has spent too long confusing feature deployment with progress.

Fix the Experience Before Automating the Mess

One of the clearest lessons from Contact Center Week 2026 is also one of the simplest: don't waste your time automating broken processes. That might sound obvious, but in practice, it is where many AI programs fail.

Why? Because automation is often treated as a shortcut around a much deeper understanding of how process and operations work, and the result is simply faster frustration.

> Automation is often treated as a shortcut around far more difficult operating work. The result is simply faster frustration.

Instead of redesigning processes that need it...	→	companies automate the front door.
Instead of fixing knowledge gaps...	→	companies train a bot on incomplete content.
Instead of resolving policy ambiguity...	→	companies push customers into self-service.
Instead of improving handoffs...	→	companies add another digital layer between the customer and the person who can help.

For the most part, customers care far more about the experience than whether an interaction was handled by AI or a human. Was answer accurate? Was the resolution fair? Did they have to repeat themselves? Did experience feel trustworthy? Did the company understand what they were trying to accomplish?

This is where CX leaders need to get more disciplined. Before deploying automation, they need to:

- Re-engineer legacy processes.
- Clean and organize knowledge assets.
- Ensure usable data.
- Introduce governance and security.

You need to know when AI should act, when it should assist, when it should escalate, and when it should stay out of the way. This is where transformation becomes operational and actually enhances customer experience.

The Future Is Orchestrated by Design

The AI market loves the idea of autonomy, but customers are more pragmatic.

In enterprise CX, full autonomy remains limited in practical deployment. What matters more is orchestration—AI, workflows, data, and human advisors working together by design—where success depends on intentional design and careful choices about what is visible or invisible to the customer.

AI can (and should) lead when the intent is low-risk, repeatable, and well-bounded. It should assist and support advisors or be supported by those advisors in complex service environments when context, judgment, or history matter. It should monitor quality issues, intent drift, process failures, and patterns leaders cannot see at the interaction level.

And, when trust is on the line, AI should hand off quickly to a human being with the full context intact. This last part is critical. The future is human + AI, orchestrated around the moments that matter.

The best CX organizations design the system so human judgment is available exactly where it creates the most value: complex problem-solving, sensitive situations, emotionally charged moments, exceptions, high-risk decisions, and interactions where trust is on the line.

> The future is human + AI, orchestrated around the moments that matter.

Stop Asking

~~"Can AI replace advisors?"~~

~~"Can we automate every contact?"~~

~~"Can we contain more volume?"~~

Start Asking

"Where does intelligence belong in the journey?"

"How do we balance the role of AI and humans to resolve customer issues or queries?"

Voice Is Being Reimagined

There is another reality CX leaders should not ignore: voice still matters.

Voice still carries the moments when customers need reassurance, resolution, compassion, or trust. The anxious customer who worries about what will happen if they delete that file or install that update. The family who just lost everything to a devastating wildfire and needs to cancel their services. The customer whose friend's account just got hacked and who is reluctant to update their credit card information.

Putting their needs at the forefront creates a meaningful shift in how enterprises should think about global service models.

> Voice still carries the moments when customers need reassurance, resolution, compassion, or trust.

Real-time voice translation, accent neutralization, and AI + Human support:

- Can expand multilingual service models.
- Give advisors more confidence and more context.
- Make customers feel more comfortable and better understood.

Customer Voice → Routing → Advisor + AI Support →
Knowledge → Escalation → Quality and Analytics

The lesson is to design the model first, and then deploy the tool.

Voice AI only creates value when it is integrated into the broader operating system: routing, knowledge, workforce planning, quality monitoring, escalation, compliance, training, and journey analytics. Otherwise, it becomes another impressive feature that fails to change the customer experience.

Executive Takeaway

Contact-center data is not merely reporting data. It is evidence of where journeys, products, policies, and processes are failing.

Data Is the Operating Layer and the Core Enabler

AI needs clean, connected, secure data and clear operating rules. Without them, customers get inconsistent answers and advisors work from a partial view of the truth. Many organizations still struggle with data fragmentation and analytics maturity, though, because they underestimate the work required.

Customers expect organizations to know who they are, what has already happened, what they are trying to accomplish, and what will resolve the issue. Both advisors and AI need the same context, but in many enterprises, the truth is scattered across CCaaS and CRM systems, knowledge bases, billing platforms, product systems, policy documents, case notes, interaction histories, and channel-specific tools.

That fragmentation is not just inefficient. It is the reason AI produces inconsistent outcomes. This is why the most mature CX organizations must stop treating the contact center as a cost center and recognize it as one of the richest sources of enterprise intelligence a company has.

Every complaint, repeat call, escalation, abandoned journey, failed self-service attempt, and advisor workaround is a signal. Buried inside those signals are the patterns that show where products confuse customers, where policies create avoidable demand, where digital journeys fall short, where knowledge is incomplete, and where the operating model needs to change.

AI can help find those patterns, but leaders have to be willing to act on them.

The Transformation Challenge Is Human

One of the strongest themes at Contact Center Week 2026 was that the biggest barrier to transformation is organizational change, not technology. Successful organizations invest as much effort in change management, knowledge management, and workforce readiness as they do in AI capabilities.

Not doing so is where many transformation programs lose momentum.

New technology arrives.

BUT

employees continue using old processes.

knowledge remains trapped across disconnected systems.

frontline teams are unclear about new ways of working.

leaders struggle to build confidence in unfamiliar operating models.

The technology may be live, but the organization has not truly transformed. That gap matters because AI is only as effective as the people and processes surrounding it.

The organizations making progress treat change management as a strategic capability. They identify internal champions, explain why the work matters, define governance, train teams, and keep feedback loops open as AI capabilities evolve.

Knowledge management has become equally critical.

Employees who have access to the right knowledge, the right tools, and the right AI support are better equipped to solve customer problems quickly and confidently. When advisors spend less time searching for answers and more time resolving customer intent, service quality improves. Trust increases. Loyalty strengthens.

In other words, the path to better customer experiences often starts with a better employee experience.

The technology may be live, but the organization has not truly transformed.

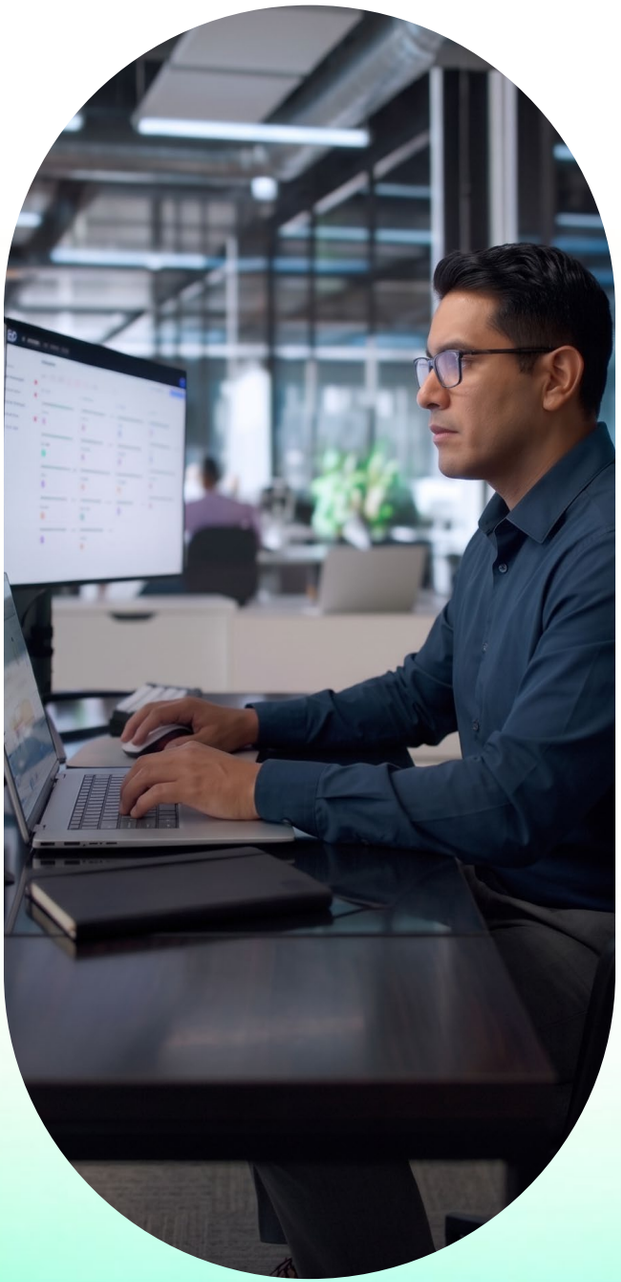
- Shorter is not always better.
- Contained is not always resolved.
- Deflected is not always successful.
- Abandoned is not solved.

New Metrics for New Realities

Traditional contact center metrics still matter. Don't let AI convince you they don't. However, they no longer tell the full story.

Average handle time, repeat calls, containment, and post-call CSAT can all provide operational signals, but they can also bias teams toward the wrong outcomes:

- A shorter call is not always a better experience.
- A contained interaction is not always a resolved one.
- A deflected contact is not always a success.
- A customer who stops trying is not the same as a customer whose problem was solved.



The new customer experience scorecard needs to measure what actually matters, and that means measuring speed, quality, trust, effort, accuracy, escalation, retention, revenue, and operational learning together:

- Customer effort (required to perform an intent).
- Speed of escalation to human advisors.
- Time spent per interaction (AI + human).
- Intent resolution effectiveness.
- Revenue per interaction.
- Cost of a poor contact center experience.

The goal is not simply to prove the AI worked. The goal is to prove the customer outcome improved, and that means understanding whether automation is reducing demand, improving resolution, and strengthening loyalty, or simply moving customers into cheaper channels where problems still go unsolved.

Efficiency is still table stakes. Experience is the real prize.

The goal is not simply to prove the AI worked. The goal is to prove the customer outcome improved.

Cost Reduction Follows Better CX Design

AI can reduce costs. It should. But cost reduction cannot be the primary objective of CX transformation.

When AI is deployed mainly to reduce operating expense, it tends to optimize for containment, deflection, and labor substitution. That can generate short-term savings, but it can also damage the exact things customer experience exists to protect: trust, loyalty, retention, advocacy, and growth.

The stronger move is to design CX around better outcomes and then capture efficiency as a by-product of doing the work properly. What this achieves is:

- Fewer avoidable contacts because upstream issues are fixed.
- Proactive outreach to customers, anticipating their needs.
- Faster resolutions because knowledge is clean and context travels with the customer.
- Better advisor performance because AI removes friction and improves decision quality.
- More loyal customers because complex moments get the human judgment they deserve.
- Better commercial performance because customer interactions become sources of insight, retention, and revenue growth.

Using AI solely for cost reduction is a narrow strategy. Using AI as part of an operating model transformation is strategic.

What CX Leaders Should Do Now

For enterprise leaders, the path forward is not to stop experimenting. Pilots have a role. They help organizations test use cases, validate assumptions, identify risks, and build confidence.

The problem is pilot activity that never becomes operational performance.

The work now is to build the bridge from experimentation to enterprise reality:

1 **Start with intent.**

Look at why customers contact you, where journeys fail, which interactions repeat, and what upstream changes could eliminate avoidable demand.

2 **Fix the foundations.**

Clean knowledge. Connect data. Clarify ownership. Define governance. Build observability. Ensure content is accurate, current, and usable.

3 **Redesign the process.**

Use AI as the forcing function to simplify, re-engineer, and improve how work gets done.

4 **Orchestrate human + AI.**

Decide where AI leads, assists, observes, escalates, learns, and hands off. Make human judgment part of the system.

5 **Measure outcomes.**

Build a scorecard around resolution, effort, trust, escalation quality, revenue impact, retention, and operating learning.

6 **Choose the right partner.**

Virtually everyone has access to powerful AI. The differentiator will be who can make intelligence work inside the complexity of real enterprises, across people, processes, platforms, data, governance, and customer journeys.

Real Starts When AI Works in the Operation

The market does not need more AI promises. It needs measurable business outcomes. And for that, it needs intelligence that performs in the real world.

The real lesson from Contact Center Week 2026 is simple: AI only matters when it works inside the operation.

The companies that forge ahead will resolve customer intent end to end. They will connect data, build trust into the system, orchestrate people and AI by design, and measure the outcomes customers and boards can feel.

For CX leaders, the mandate is clear:

Stop automating tasks → **Start resolving intent**

Stop counting pilots → **Start proving performance**

Stop accumulating isolated tools → **Start building the operating system**

Everyone has access to powerful AI. The advantage comes from making it work across real journeys, real workflows, real governance, real advisors, and real customer moments.

These are the new realities. And the companies that win will be the ones that build for them.

Ready to move from AI pilots to CX performance? See how Concentrix designs, builds, and runs human + AI operations that work in the real world. Real starts here.

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