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# COVID-19 response checklist for contact centers

The COVID-19 crisis has affected communities, business, and economies all over the world. While the top priority is to save lives and support victims and their families, we must also act to protect the livelihoods of our community members.

Our checklist offers practical solutions to help contact centers protect frontline employees, adapt operations to the evolving situation, address customers' concerns, and manage high call volumes despite increasingly limited capacity.

This checklist focuses on the first three of five stages along the crisis-response cycle: Resolve, Resilience, and Return.

## Resolve and Resilience

*Resolve:* During the early stages of the crisis, the immediate priority for contact centers is to keep all employees safe and informed while ensuring business continuity.

*Resilience:* Once immediate needs have been met, businesses can focus on adapting to shifts in operating models, managing resources, preparing for the medium and long terms, and building resilience.

As COVID-19 continues to disrupt business activity, leaders may wish to consider the following actions.

# 1 Ensure frontline safety and engagement

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- Create a healthy working environment; minimize risk through improved call-center layout and increased sanitization
- Understand what employees are experiencing; provide empathetic support and put policies in place to protect employees
- Keep remote employees engaged through technology and management practices; maximize the use of virtual meeting and coaching tools

# 2 Set up customer-service control room/corporate nerve center

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- Stand up a minimally viable customer-service control room to manage the crisis with customer servicing in mind
- Establish a cross-functional team and employ transparency and agile principles to move quickly
- Exercise clear decision making, based on the judgment of senior leaders and informed hypotheses about the future, with no more than two to three core decision makers
- Identify a response leader for each nerve center and ensure that leaders have the resources to execute their respective nerve-center workstreams
- Engage human resources as a strategic partner in the nerve-center crisis response team and in any plan-ahead teams working to get ahead of the next stage of the crisis

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- Establish the corporate nerve center as the single source of truth and integrator regarding crisis initiatives
- Ensure that leadership is modeling the right behaviors, including creating accountability, being action oriented, and communicating across functions

## 3 Address customer concerns

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- Adopt new tools, dashboards, and metrics to build transparency and help manage through disruption
- Send thoughtful, authentic messages from leadership in channels where customers are looking for information
- Proactively advise customers that while there may be disruption in live support, digital channels are immediately available
- Make rapid tweaks to digital self-service offerings to maximize containment for current inquiries and prioritize critical demand; conduct rapid iteration and experimentation

## 4 Protect workers from infection risks

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- Follow all guidelines issued by local health authorities; communicate changes to workforce daily
- Strengthen physical-distancing measures (eg, reduce in-person meetings to a minimum, remove communal tools, stagger lunch times, adapt shift patterns to reduce same-time arrivals, and establish physical barriers between work spaces)
- Train workers on how to prevent the virus from spreading and provide visible reminders of those principles throughout the workspace
- Engage on-site health personnel to monitor and support the physical and mental health of employees (eg, temperature checks and counseling options)
- Provide personal protective equipment such as masks, gloves, and hand sanitizer
- Regularly sanitize buildings to secure safety of operations (eg, install antiviral filters and increase cleaning frequency)

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# 5 Manage volume increases

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- Expand workforce capacity by tapping into newly available workers with customer-service experience; for example, repurpose workers from other parts of the organization (such as branches or retail stores) who already know the business, or bring on newly available employees from other companies (such as airport check-in counters)
- Work with business process outsourcing partners to maintain and expand capacity as volume spikes
- Scale remote working with clear policies and expectations
- Ensure that agents have the necessary tools and resources to take customer calls from home and keep service going

## Return

*Return:* Getting back to business as usual will be a slow, delicate process. The following actions can help businesses mobilize and get back to scale quickly.

# 1 Optimize labor and shift management

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- Plan for absenteeism, split teams to support contingencies, and determine the best long-term mix of remote and on-site employees
- Enable employees in noncritical roles to work from home and encourage or mandate this behavior
- Develop support and incentives for employees to keep working during the crisis, assuming operations are safe to continue and/or resume
- Boost morale with initiatives that fit company culture (eg, offer free counseling)
- Provide formal relief programs to enable workers with sick relatives to take time off

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## 2 Adopt more agile ways of working

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- Develop a plan to bring people back to the office in phases
- Establish a clear cadence of virtual meetings that replicate in-person sessions for high-quality interactions
- Reinforce accountability by providing teams with clear objectives and key results

## 3 Adapt communication and leadership methods

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- Develop a change story and continuous two-way communication channel to rally workers, convey important updates, and provide opportunities for employees to ask questions and offer recommendations
- Build leadership capabilities to enable effective remote management

## 4 Provide complete transparency

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- Strengthen communications by candidly sharing which workforce decisions have been made and which are still up in the air
- Adopt a formal communication cadence to ensure that employees have the latest information
- Continue to improve communication channels to better reach employees and ensure that their feedback is being heard and acted upon