

Digital workers, AI will not lead to job replacement in SA's call centre market

 By [Ryan Falkenberg](#)

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In an economy that's often struggled to create jobs, the South African contact centre industry has long stood out. Over the past financial year, contact centres attracted more than R4bn in investment and it's expected that the sector will create more than half a million jobs over the next decade. There are good reasons for that, including South Africa's favourable time zone, a generally neutral accent, and growing levels of connectivity.



Ryan Falkenberg, Co-CEO of Clevva | image supplied

There are, however, fears that technology will replace jobs in this crucial sector. That's something the country can hardly afford, especially considering the jobs bloodbath in tourism, retail, and other critical sectors in the wake of Covid-19.

But those fears are largely unwarranted. In fact, emerging technologies such as digital workers could help the local contact centre grow and create jobs. Moreover, these technologies can help the industry future-proof itself and become more resilient to future shocks.

Beyond the status quo

In order to understand the positive impact digital workers could have, it's important to have an idea of how contact centre agents work at present.

Currently, the role of a contact centre agent is to follow a clear script and perform clear system actions with the aim of selling a set of known products and/or servicing a set of known queries. Everything they do is based on a prescribed formula. To do this job you need to be trained on this formula and then tested to see that you can apply it correctly. The bottom line is that the job is all about saying and doing things in line with clear rules.

As a result, the global outsourced contact centre market has traditionally competed on who can supply people to do this job at a lower cost. Some countries have had the advantage because they could access people with degrees at low cost - simply because there are no other jobs. These agents are more equipped to learn about complicated products, policies and procedures.

The down-side to these agents was often that these people struggled with the cultural, language and emotional sides of customer service. But, because they could get it right at a lower cost, we initially tolerated the rich accents and dead emotional connections – as long as we got our query resolved.

South Africa's population doesn't have the same education levels, meaning we can't compete on expertise. But our natural levels of EQ, softer accents, and ability to handle multiple languages and cultures, mean that we can compete on customer experience. That is, even if the query isn't resolved as quickly as it might be with an agent from India or Eastern Europe, customers prefer dealing with South African agents because the overall experience is better.

The power of digital workers

But what if it was possible to combine that customer experience strength with the necessary expertise? And what if it was possible to do so without retraining contact centre workers?

That's where digital workers come in. They are designed to navigate the agent through every known call, plus performing all the required system actions so that the agent simply focuses on customer engagement. Without being 'content experts', agents can answer any call without having to know how to answer it or action it. Their digital co-workers take care of this for them. Their job is to offer an amazing customer experience.

Suddenly the role of the contact centre agent becomes accessible to people who have not finished matric, but who have developed a natural EQ and 'personality' Suddenly, you are hiring people for their internal characteristics, not their ability to learn your content.



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If South African contact centres actively 'employed' digital workers to handle the call journey and the system execution work, and simply offered agents a single screen navigated them through all known call journeys, they could offer global clients consistent, compliant and context-relevant sales and support plus offer customers a truly differentiated engagement experience.

Automation is accelerating our shift towards the experience economy, and digital workers are critical enablers of this reality. They take the job of ensuring the right questions get asked, the right answers get given and the right actions get taken. And as a result, they give the agent the freedom to focus on creating an emotional connection that shapes the ultimate customer experience.

The bottom line is this: if we choose to accentuate our people's strengths (EQ), rather than mitigate their weaknesses - learning and replicating complex CX rules, we can grow our contact centre industry even further and become world leaders. To do this, we have to embrace a blended human and digital workforce.

ABOUT RYAN FALKENBERG

Ryan Falkenberg is co-founder and CEO of software company Qlevva.

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