



Gyst Blog Post

Avoiding the hype when you digitally transform your contact centers



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Daniel O'Sullivan
Innovation Oriented | Executive Focused | Results Driven

May 9, 2023

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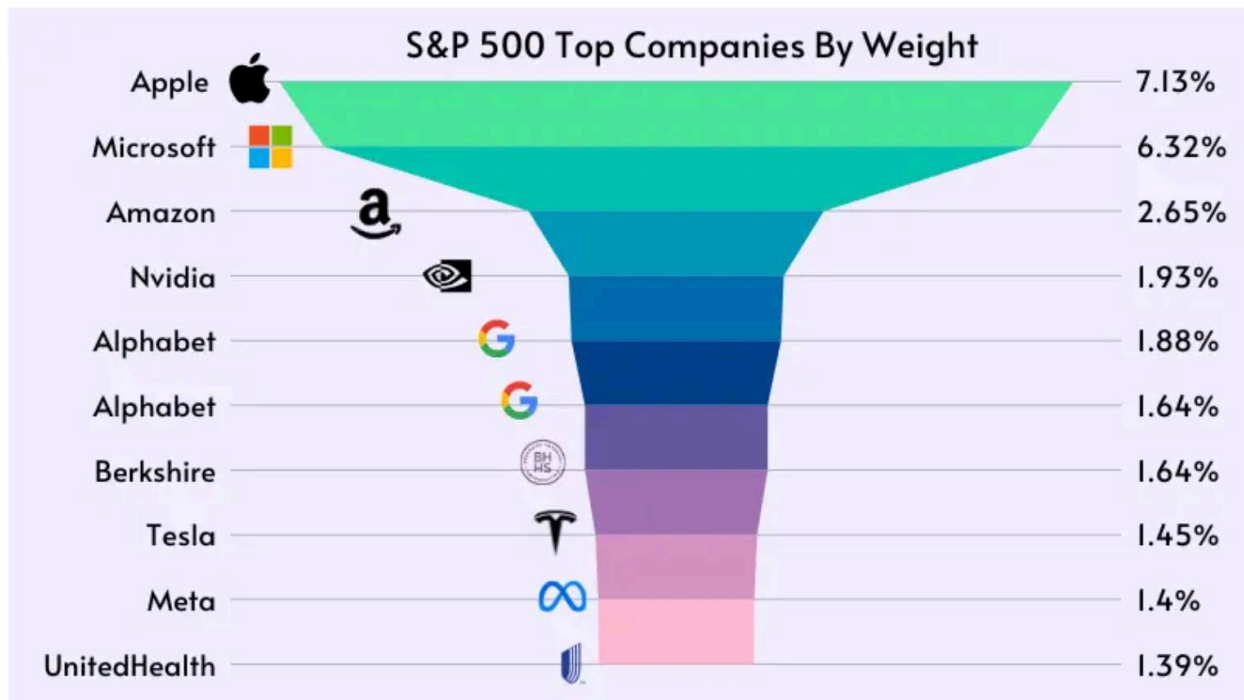
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To illustrate the importance of getting this right, consider that in 1958, according to the American Enterprise Foundation, U.S. corporations remained on the S&P index for an average of 61 years. By 2011, that number was down to only 18 years. Today, companies are being replaced on the S&P about every two weeks. For the most part, technology has driven this shift. Companies that want to succeed in today's business climate need to understand how to apply a solid strategy to harness the rapid pace of technological change.



Unfortunately, for many bold new explorations and challenges, we are often keen to "just get on with it". We tend to fear we are going to be left to wither on the vine like so many other corporate giants that did not see the writing on the wall until it was too late, if we don't just get a move on right now.

But before you rush off into the digital abyss with unbound enthusiasm and respect for all of those shiny new gadgets and services just dying to sign you up (or shake you down), take a moment to consider those early steps more carefully. I think it will serve you well in the long run. Let me illustrate what can happen if you don't by means of an example I've had direct experience with.

You may recall using speech technologies back in the late 2000s and early 2010s - phone based voice applications for providing customer service and general inquiries in particular. If you did, you probably experienced the frustrations of many as they tried (often in vain) to get the system to understand what it was they were trying to accomplish. This was true in both the older Directed Dialogue ("what would you like to do today, make a reservation, check flight schedules or check airfares?") and the newer Natural Language Understanding ones ("how may I help you today?"). I remember many of my friends, colleagues, and even family members expressing a strong desire to just revert to the plain old touch-tone form of input modality ("Press 1 for...."), uncool and all that it was at the time.

But hey, at least it worked, as many a frustrated bank, hotel, airline, or retail customer would tell you. The problems with speech as a means of caller input back then became so prevalent that many organizations were forced to offer speech as an option, with a fall back option for touch-tone. Or worse, touch-tone with an option to speak (if you must). Offering speech was great for your occasional, tech savvy and more adventurous customers seeking to make an airline reservation or obtain a bank balance, but not always worth the significant cost and resources an enterprise spent chasing a technology that simply was not ready at the time.

Consider also, that banks and financial institutions, to take just one market vertical, were regularly achieving 82 - 86 percent automation (self-service) rates with plain old touch-tone at this time. Great results for any technology, new or old.

The problem with "speech" was of course, as anyone familiar with the science behind aural human communication will tell you, not so much in the accuracy of the recognition of speech utterances by the caller (though that in itself was quite a challenge), but in trying to get the software algorithms of the time to understand the callers intent - the real purpose of their phone call.

Only by fully understanding that can you begin to find a solution to their problem. After all, a good customer service agent could, with appropriate empathy, always tell if your dog's barking in the background was distracting your attention, if you were fading in and out due to poor mobile phone service, or if you simply did not "get it" when it came to understanding why your bank balance was low because the out of state check you deposited had not yet cleared...



It's the cognitive challenges associated with human conversation that's the really challenging part. It's Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning, in other words. And these were the days before Amazon, Google, and Apple started investing their considerable resources to thankfully, help rekindle research in that technology, and thus, help solve that problem on behalf of speech technology.

At the end of the day, your voice self-service channels can recognize all the words you want, right up to 99.99+ percent, but if you don't have algorithms to interpret them as intended by the caller (or speaker, in the case of voice enabled Intelligent Agents), it has very limited practical applications from a business perspective.

I've always been platform agnostic in my approach to technology, and the startups I founded around speech technologies were no different. This put me in a somewhat unique position of trust when execs from enterprise IT and Customer Service teams would ask me from time to time what I thought of one particular interactive voice response (IVR) system vendor over another, or whether or not I thought speech technology was indeed a fit for their organization. I remember all too well the arguments for wanting to expedite the death of old fashioned touch-tone and get on with the "natural interface" of human speech - the shiny new object of the day. It all seemed so plausible to them in hindsight. Why should anyone be forced to use dumb

old touch-tone buttons to communicate when you could use a means much more natural to humans like speech and natural language itself. Speech recognition accuracy rates were well over 90 percent at the time, and climbing with each new release of a particular speech recognition engine. And, the thinking went, it's only a matter of time until it approximates human capabilities. All valid assumptions at the time.

Many were keen to sign on to the relatively new technology that was speech, unaware of the importance of context sensitivity and caller intent as they experimented with these systems using their valuable customers. Precious and expensive resources were used fine tuning (and re-tuning) speech grammars and restructuring call dialogues and in many cases, to little avail. And in some cases, the cost included a deterioration in customer service that dragged on for years. Then came the damage to the brand and a spiral that was hard to stop.

Now I'm not advocating we all stay in the dark ages and never move on. Not by a long shot. But do tread carefully when you take on significant undertakings and address technology shifts like the ones we are seeing today. I think it's well worth remembering that no step is better than a step in the wrong direction - especially when you still have dozens of steps in front of you that depend on that first step to some extent. Study and think carefully on what's out there and learn to discern signal from noise, hype from real, and the more challenging "highly effective" from "marginally effective" or "does not at all apply to my customers" to "could be put to work to gain loyalty and acquire new customers".

For example, while many technologists, the media, and industry pundits alike tout AI as the coolest new thing we should be taking advantage of, the reality is a lot more complicated than that. Here's a good [article](#) the Harvard Business Review published that illustrates this conundrum.

Another example could be Siri, Alexa, Google Assistant, and similar virtual assistants. These can be awesome for finding local restaurants, movie times, stocks and flight schedules, and indeed they are ubiquitous, but will they treat the valuable customers your enterprise spent millions of dollars acquiring as well as a well trained customer service agent - or even a dull IVR script that still gets the job done efficiently? What works and seems to make sense in one environment may not always translate well to your own particular environment - the only one that really matters.

And for a perspective on what matters in terms of acquiring the right talent to ultimately bring about your Digital Transformation strategy, this [article](#) by McKinsey is a great read. Indeed, there is no shortage of great literature available today on how to effectively go about making this change a successful one for you and your organization.

In summary, baseline what you already know and have, and in particular:

- Take a detailed inventory of what technology resources you own today and how adaptable these are likely to be going forward. Segregate end-of-life products and services from "still has use and potential" - just like those old touch-tone days.
- Understand what worked well in the past for your customer and still works well for them today. Really try to see this as if you yourself are the customer.
- Understand how varying age demographics use technology in different ways today. If you are a Boomer, ask your Millennial kids or nieces how they themselves use technology these days. Same (and vice-versa) goes for Gen X, Greatest Gen and any demographic. No harm in going straight to the audience after all of your online research.
- Learn what will likely never work and needs a completely new approach - or simply is not there yet (read as speech technology or AI in the early days). Research respected white papers and other sources of information whose authors don't have skin in the game (as in the HBR article above). Learn how to quickly discern what looks like product hype and what looks like the real deal.
- Learn/discover which new technologies are truly ready for prime time and fit for your specific purposes. Embrace them and add them to your Digital Transformation strategy arsenal as quickly as possible.
- Learn/discover which ones are not and walk away. You can always revisit.

In summary, it has never been more critical for non-technical and even semi-technical decision makers, analysts, and designers to become well versed in what aspects of technology are not just available, but truly fit for purpose and well beyond the hype stages. Understand that the folks spending substantial time and resources developing these new technologies have vested (and therefore usually biased) interests in touting them. And while there are many absolutely fantastic advances being made in technology these days, there are a lot of ones to avoid (or at least postpone) also. Chisel away at your Digital Transformation strategy, but don't be intimidated into making any hasty steps early in the journey. What really matters is that ultimately you get there in the end.



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