Agent Assist as a Service for Contact Centers: Real-Time Coaching Is Just the Beginning

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Topic: Conversational AI

Issues: How will AI-driven Agent Assist make a difference in the enterprise?

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SUMMARY

The shift to enhanced natural language processing is enabling smarter agent assist solutions that can help contact center agents in real-time. Aragon reviews the rise of agent assist platforms, which will include the ability to do real-time coaching.

INTRODUCTION

Aragon sees virtual agents working alongside human agents in the contact center. One of the use cases for this is Agent Assist: AI and non-AI assistance tools, which leverage technologies such as real-time coaching to improve the performance of human agents. This Research Note will provide an overview of the rise of virtual assistants, how agent assist is the next frontier of the intelligent contact center, and how to get started with this technology.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 era has shown enterprises that the contact center of the past is becoming obsolete, thanks to the unprecedented levels of customer service and support calls during the pandemic. In 2020, Aragon Research predicted that 40% or more of the workforce will continue to work remotely permanently, long after the pandemic has disappeared. This means that many contact center agents will continue to be remote, which presents challenges for managers and supervisors—who must ensure that customer, employee, and partner satisfaction is not compromised.

In addition to the challenge of remote work, keeping up with savvy customers' ever-changing needs in real-time is something that keeps business leaders up at night. Agent assist—a form of an intelligent assistant—will become a key component of the intelligent contact center due to the explosive growth of the conversational AI market. Aragon sees new AI-driven virtual agents working alongside and helping human agents. One of the ways this is occurring is through agent assist, a platform that leverages virtual agents who are equipped with technologies such as real-time coaching to improve the performance of human agents. This research note will provide an overview of the rise of these technologies, how agent assist is the next frontier of the intelligent contact center, and how to get started with this technology in your enterprise.

The Rise of Digital Labor and the Need for Virtual Agents

In 2020, Aragon introduced the concept of digital labor, which represents the body of computer-based virtual agents that we see growing at a 10x rate between now and 2025. The contact center is one of the most competitive areas for the overall digital labor market.

Virtual agents are appealing to enterprises because they are cheaper and more efficient than human agents. Historically, they have performed best with single tasks. Examples of task-specific virtual agents include greeting bots or scheduling and routing bots. Specific Q&A virtual agents are also one of the most popular ways to get started. This is due to the fact that these agents can be trained and deployed quickly and can produce increases in customer satisfaction by troubleshooting and answering questions faster.

The next generation of virtual agents includes agent assist, which goes further than simple chatbots thanks to powerful advances in natural language processing. These virtual agents will be able to handle a variety of complex tasks, including offering real-time coaching to human agents.
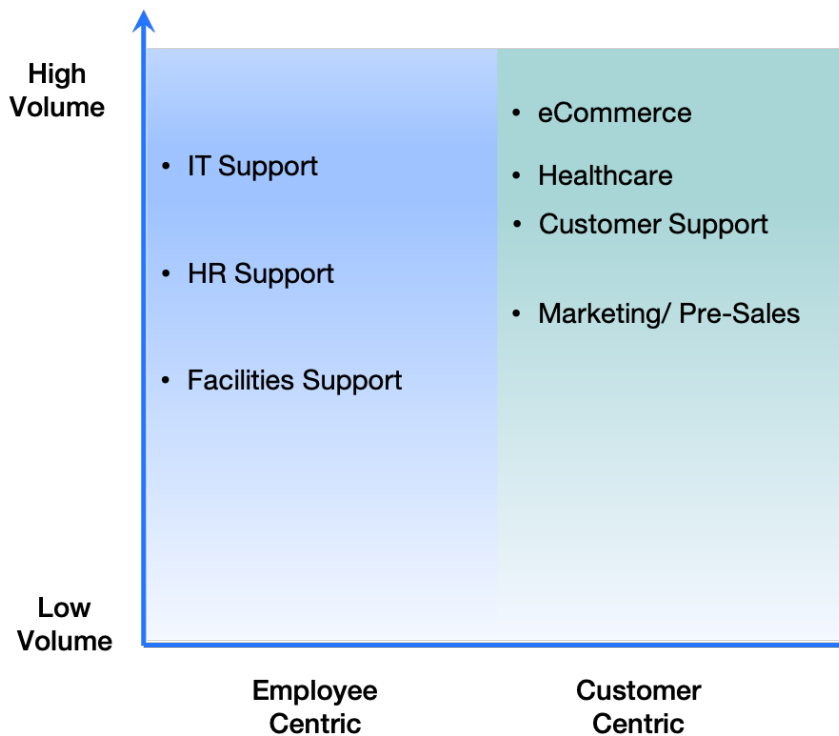
Figure 1: Use cases for agent assist continue to expand.

Enterprises need to have a plan for digital labor and the different types of agents they will deploy in a contact center. Figure 1 shows that the use cases for conversational AI will continue to expand, which will increase the adoption rates of new agent assist solutions.

What Is Agent Assist and How Will it Impact Markets Such as the Contact Center?

Agent assist represents the next generation of virtual agents. It leverages the power of predictive analytics and machine learning to deploy sophisticated virtual agents that can help human agents serve their customers faster and with expertise and empathy. Once the appropriate agent has been matched with the customer, agent assist can do things such as:

- Identifying customer sentiment
- Diagnosing user issues
- Helping the human agent answer customer inquiries
- Coaching the human agent on how to continue to provide value by guiding the agent towards a successful outcome based on experience with similar inquiries
- Working directly with the customer in an autonomous fashion

Agent assist can also offer additional options, products, and services (upselling) appropriate to the current context or trigger events in the system that will follow up at a later date. Agent assist

will typically gather knowledge and information from the organization's support database and be able to provide informed guidance to help resolve customer issues.

The power of agent assist is that its real-time text and speech-based insights can streamline communication between customers and agents by providing important insights at critical moments and drive continuous learning throughout the enterprise. This becomes especially important with low-performing human agents; with agent assist, low performers can become top performers. This is the value of agent assist. Historically, new agents would learn from the seasoned or top performers, but this is a legacy practice requiring physical proximity (sitting next to that seasoned agent). This is not efficient and now impossible in the remote contact center scenario. Today, agent assist solutions can take the best practices of top performers and share them with all agents, thereby improving overall performance. It will transform the contact center and become a must-have capability.

The good news is that it is not hard to add agent assist to a legacy contact center platform. While many providers will continue to partner, more providers have invested in acquiring conversational AI platforms that enable the building of virtual agents, including agent assist. There is no denying that virtual agents are making a difference in the market. Providers that have offered their own capabilities or partnered have seen higher growth rates than traditional contact center providers.

The Key Trends Driving the Shift to Agent Assist

Trend #1: Digital Labor Is on the Rise

The digital labor market, which represents the growth of chatbots and virtual agents, is one of the fastest-growing software markets that Aragon has identified. Digital labor is the next competitive frontier because it's allowing enterprises to work smarter, not harder. The shift to digital labor has accelerated due to the COVID-19 pandemic, when key customer support personnel were forced to work from home, and many will continue to do so.

Digital labor is helping enterprises resolve customer support calls faster, reduce customer effort and time, reduce customer churn, lower costs for every function, and improve the agent experience. Enterprises will need to plan for the ratio of human labor to digital labor.

Trend #2: AI Adoption Is Increasing Overall in the Enterprise

AI adoption is rapidly increasing in the enterprise thanks to low-code/no-code approaches. Early chatbot building required programming skills. This required the business user to engage their IT organization to build and deploy their chatbots. This also increased friction with the ability to iterate and modify the functionality of the chatbot as it required a re-engagement with IT whenever a change was needed.

Many modern chatbots include the ability to build and deploy their chatbots through a low-code graphical bot builder and, in many cases, a truly no-code solution. This has enabled business users to build, update, and test chatbots on their own, providing them the flexibility to change their chatbots virtually on demand.

Today, there are virtual agents that are capable right out of the box to assist the business owner in building a new virtual agent through natural language requests. In other words, bots are building bots.

Trend #3: Advanced Conversational Intelligence Leads to Increase in Real-Time Listening

The first wave of AI chatbots was introduced around five years ago with an overabundance of hype followed almost immediately by customer dissatisfaction. Early implementations didn't work well and relied on scripted answers to resolve user questions since AI technology hadn't matured enough at the time to enable chatbot interactions to be fluid and dynamic.

More recent advances in AI technology have improved natural language processing and understanding models to accurately deal with all the quirks and disorder that are typical in conversational human language. Many of the current algorithms used for parsing and analyzing human conversation can understand things like slang, jargon, humor, and intonations in real-time, and they are able to glean our intent from a natural language request, process a response, and reply in a natural language fashion. This is called real-time listening.

This has enabled the next generation of AI-based assistants to emerge, including agent assist. This next generation can provide a rich and friendly user experience for employees and customers alike. See Figure 2 for our view of the maturity timeline for chatbots and digital assistants.
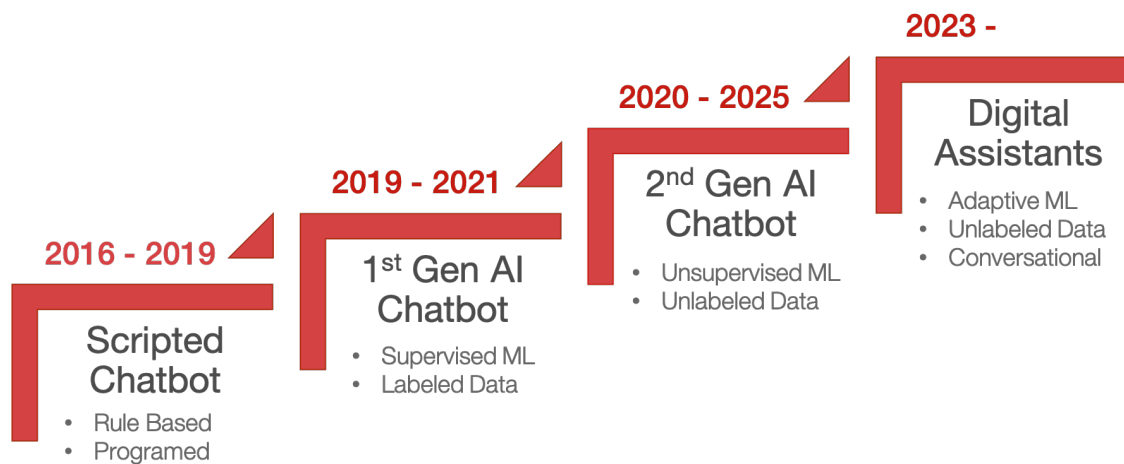
Figure 2: The Aragon Research Maturity Model for chatbots becoming smarter and becoming digital assistants over time.

Trend #4: Faster Processing Due to Local and Cloud Computing Horsepower

Software and algorithm improvements in the AI space are being powered by hardware advances in graphics processing unit (GPU) capabilities as well as advances in neural processing unit (NPU) capabilities that are specifically designed to excel at machine learning computations. These H/W advancements are enabling highly complex and compute-intensive natural language processing (NLP) algorithms to run in real-time.

There is a plethora of vendors in the conversational AI market, and many of these vendors are leveraging AI technology provided by the major cloud/AI providers such as Google, IBM, Microsoft, and AWS. However, there are a growing number of conversational AI vendors that are developing their own AI tech stacks and putting out some impressive performance statistics and AI results.

Why Is Real-Time Agent Assist a Game Changer?

The big shift in analytics when it comes to the contact center is that real-time understanding is needed. Gone are the days of offline transcription. Conversations—whether voice or via live chat—need to be monitored in real-time and processed so that the customer can be assisted immediately. This is made possible by having natural language processing (NLP) and natural language understanding (NLU) deployed as part of agent assist's voice analytics. The agent assist can then recommend the best approach to the human contact center agent: what to say or do in order to assist the customer in the best way possible. This leads to the customer waiting less time to be helped and results in better outcomes, more sales, and/or more resolved issues. This means more satisfied customers and less frustrated human agents.

Real-time agent assist is also a game-changer when it comes to onboarding or training new human agents, especially during an era of remote onboarding. With agent assist, new human agents can get up-to-speed faster and can avoid rookie mistakes, thanks to having real-time coaching guiding them in their decision-making.

What Are the Key Characteristics of Real-Time Agent Assist?

Real-time agent assist platforms listen to customer conversations and can identify opportunities to improve the performance of the human contact center agent servicing the customer. Agent assist platforms will have the following capabilities:

- Use NLP and NLU to listen in real-time to customer and contact agent speech
- Provide real-time call transcription
- Identify patterns in real-time speech to continuously learn and improve the performance of the platform
- Integrate with the enterprise knowledge base
- Recommend next-best actions to human agents based on real-time insights
- Provide and display in-depth analytics of insights over time

Agent Assist and the Key Benefits to Reps and Agents?

Agent assist helps human agents excel at their job. Instead of troubleshooting a customer service issue on their own, which can take several minutes or more, human agents can rely on the real-time guidance provided by agent assist to help their customers faster, and with ease. They will be provided with the right thing to say and the right way to say it—as tone is everything when it comes to customer support.

Additionally, with agent assist's transcription features, human agents no longer have to transcribe calls themselves. With automated transcription and auto-complete/reply, this saves them both time and effort. Instead of focusing on menial tasks, they can focus their energy on helping their customer.

Compliance is another scenario where agent assist is beneficial. It not only can present critical messages and information, but it can track agents to ensure they are saying, communicating, and leveraging critical information.

What Are the Benefits to Supervisors and Managers?

In an era of increasingly remote work, having a manager equipped with expert advice who can deploy it the instant it's needed is paramount to an employee's success—especially if that employee is new or a low performer. The problem? It's virtually impossible for a manager or supervisor to assist all of their direct reports simultaneously.

In sales, Aragon identified the new market of sales coaching and learning, which helps sales managers better prepare their reps for success when it comes to selling remotely. Sales leaders realized they needed more than the traditional LMS-based approach to onboard, train, and coach their sales teams to be the best they can be. Contact center agents now require that same level of instant support and continuous learning unique to their job duties, and that's where agent assist comes in.

Agent assist helps to bridge the gap between human agents and their supervisors. It does this by assisting supervisors in coaching low-performing agents into top performers. During a customer support call, agent assist can coach the human agent in real-time, providing them with suggestions of what to do or say next. While some agent assist platforms offer guidance only based on a set of keywords, the future of agent assist will require providers who can listen and understand the entire conversation in real-time. One of the providers of agent assist who is already offering this is Cresta (see Note 1).

The other key capability of agent assist is the platform's ability to accurately transcribe the conversation between the customer and a human agent. Managers and supervisors can utilize this transcript to identify teaching opportunities or provide feedback to their agents based on what was said during the call.

Real-time feedback is another benefit. Today, many call centers leverage legacy QA where call transcripts are completed days or weeks later. It is unrealistic and impossible for managers to review all of these complete transcripts. Feedback then becomes arduous and late. New agent assist solutions also provide managers with real-time visibility into calls and chats. They can listen to calls, get alerts, and provide feedback in real-time, which may result in a more positive outcome or help the agent in real-time for the very next call.

Agent assist solutions can track all agents, getting insight into their level of engagement with the solution, how often they follow tips or recommendations, and if they are compliant, overcome objections, or use upselling, etc. Agent assist can then provide these insights to managers.

Key Areas Where Agent Assist Will Make a Difference

Agent assist will make a difference across several vertical markets. Some of the use cases include:

eCommerce—Agent assist can be used across retail eCommerce sites to help human agents address customer needs, concerns, or issues (e.g., returns), given the increased live interaction with human agents already noted above.

Customer Support—Agent assist can be deployed to coach a human agent in solving customer issues and may, in other cases, work directly with the customer in an autonomous fashion. Agent assist can also be used in retention scenarios.

Healthcare—Customer healthcare is another area where agent assist can be used to guide support representatives to improve the wellbeing of patients who require assistance. This will continue to be critical for healthcare organizations as telehealth takes off.

Sales—Agent assist can support inbound or outbound sales teams, providing faster answers to questions, objection handling and more, driving increased revenue per call.

Marketing/Pre-Sales—Agent assist can gather website visitor contact info and automatically schedule meetings with sales reps. It can also make outbound interactive phone calls with potential clients to generate a sales funnel for later follow-up by a human sales representative.

Note 1: Cresta Overview

Overview: Cresta offers a real-time coaching platform that includes agent assist for agents and Cresta Director for managers and supervisors. Cresta helps teams improve their performance, increase CSAT and NPS, lower AHT and RPC, and in turn, boost customer satisfaction and experience. Cresta customers include Intuit, Adobe, Cox Communications, Porsche, and Dropbox. Cresta is backed by Sequoia, Greylock Partners, and Andreessen Horowitz

Location: San Francisco, CA

CEO: Zayd Enam

Key Segments Served: Automotive, Retail Hospitality, Telecommunications, Enterprise SaaS, Finance, Banking

Primary Use Cases: Sales, Customer Support, Customer Retention

Availability: Available now

Website: cresta.com

Aragon Research

Healthcare—Customer healthcare is another area where agent assist can be used to guide support representatives to improve the wellbeing of patients who require assistance. This will continue to be critical for healthcare organizations as telehealth takes off.

Internal Support—Agent assist can be used within organizations in specific areas to support employee questions in areas such as HR benefits, IT support, and facilities.

How to Get Started with Agent Assist in Your Enterprise

With the arrival of digital labor, the shift to real-time agent assist is underway. Enterprises will need to make decisions about investing in an agent assist platform in conjunction with an intelligent contact center to compete for better customer experiences, or they risk losing customers and employees alike.

Although many enterprises have been experimenting with virtual agents, the next frontier is real-time coaching. Choosing an agent assist platform that can successfully leverage AI to listen to the entire context of the agent-customer discussion is of paramount importance (see Note 2 above). Once deployed, the agent assist platform should be updated with knowledge and model adjustments on a regular basis. Continue to ask for detailed product roadmaps for the next 12-24 months.

Note 2: Cresta Agent Assist for Live Voice and Chat Overview

Description: Cresta helps teams address customer concerns with confidence through the use of AI. By helping teams hone their skills and more easily find success, Cresta reduces ramp time, helps boost employee morale and culture, and lowers attrition.

Cresta helps teams drive better CX, ensure compliance, and unlock revenue opportunities with their AI-driven, real-time coaching platform. This platform provides live guidance to every agent based on the best practices of top performers and allows managers to see and track every conversation and agent progress.

Key Agent Assist Offerings
- Real-time guided responses
- Personalized coaching during every conversation
- Automated workflows with applications in ticket creation and knowledge base
- Reporting on agent and team progress over time
- Compliance enforcement through editable guidelines, best practices, talk tracks, and methodologies

Aragon Advisory

- Enterprises should look at agent assist as a way to enhance the productivity and performance of contact center agents and sales representatives.
- Enterprises should look beyond basic chatbot solutions and instead start with offerings that can assist and coach human agents in real-time.
- Evaluate vendors who can demonstrate capabilities today and have a roadmap for continued innovation.

Bottom Line

During the pandemic, two things happened in the workplace: AI came of age and virtual agents became real. Agent assist is a growing segment of the digital labor market focused on assisting agents with live customer interaction, and these platforms offer proven ways to enhance productivity and improve employee and customer satisfaction. AI will play a bigger role in helping to ensure that agent assist offerings can provide real-time coaching.