

Why US unemployment call centers need to put

customer service first

YOU ARE CALLER NUMBER

2,935

Introduction

When you consider all of the challenges both at home and overseas in recent decades of American history, it's not hard to understand why some agenda items get deprioritized over time.

Customer service is a prime example. It may seem only worthy of a 'nice to have' alongside much more pressing government matters, but the urgency and importance of customer service in government changing.

**25.7
million
unemployed***

*As of November 2020

As of November 2020, 25.7 million workers in the US remain officially unemployed, otherwise out of work due to the pandemic. Reliance on government services has increased as more citizens apply for unemployment benefits and other social services to help them get through. The ability to offer excellent customer service to these citizens is no longer a vanity project, no longer about optics; it's central to survival and has dire consequences when it fails.





1 Is anybody home?



States across the nation are swamped with unemployment claims and phone calls, delaying the resolution of even minor paperwork issues. It's a problem that states are wrestling with in different ways, ranging from adding phone staff to hiring contractors – but it will never be enough.

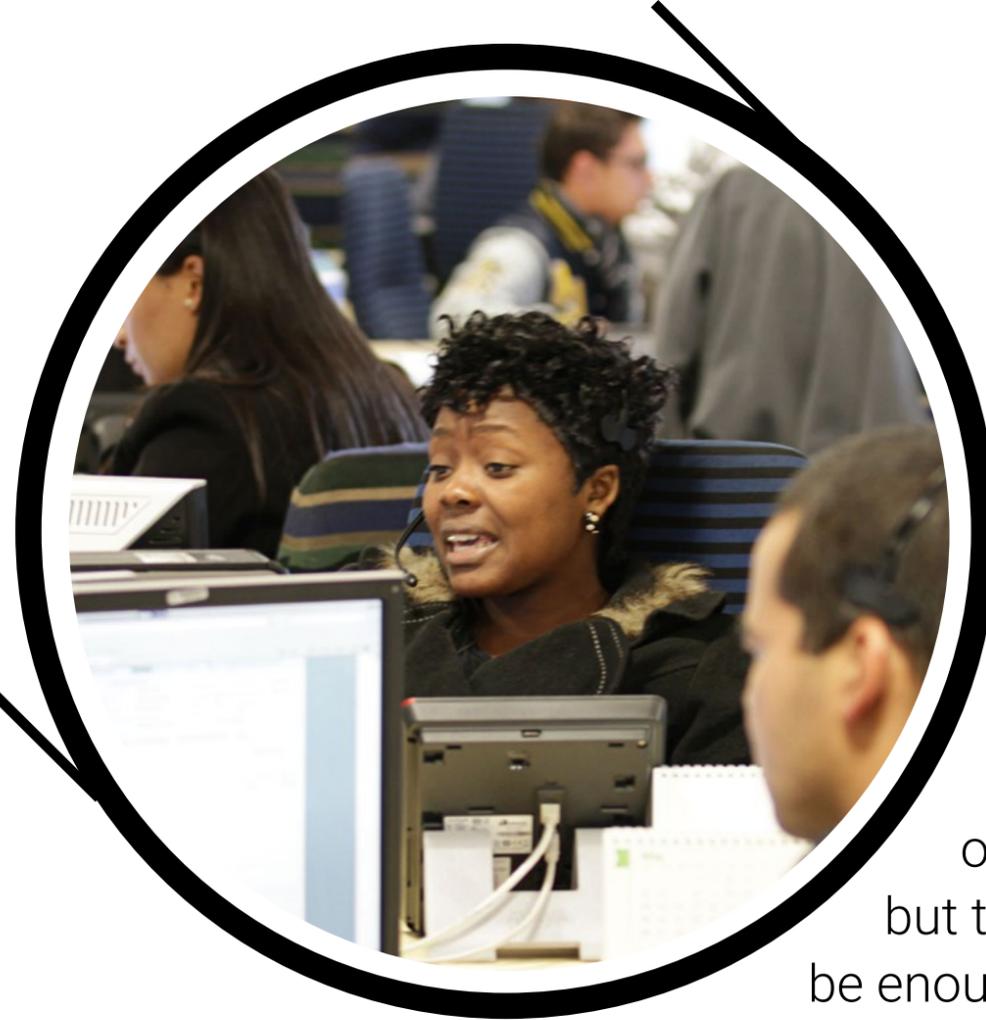
Automation – specifically artificial intelligence (AI) – has to be used for effective, timely and robust customer service. It can be deployed to work through the simple, administrative tasks and even proactively help people file their claims without the need for human intervention – leaving only the complex issues to be handled by call center staff. One of the most common arguments against this is that AI will take the jobs of hardworking American call center workers and ironically put even more people out of work if used to handle unemployment benefits.

41M
calls

93.3%
blocked / busy

0.5%
answered*

* Spring 2020 calls to Wisconsin State
Department of Workforce Development



However, that argument only holds true if humans are competing for the jobs in the first place. We agree that call center workers are hardworking and often underappreciated for the grievances they face, but they can't be everywhere at once and there can never be enough of them.

For example, less than 1% of calls to Wisconsin state unemployment call centers were answered in spring 2020. An analysis of 41 million calls to the State Department of Workforce Development found 93.3% were blocked or resulted in callers receiving a busy signal. Six percent of calls hung up and ultimately only 0.5% were answered. The failure to clear claims for more than 90,000 people resulted in the firing of the agency's secretary.





3,000%
increase in calls

“In 2010, the lessons should have been learned about the inability of the UI benefits system to keep up with high demand brought on by a recession... yet [the unemployment system] has not been modernized,” said Rob Cherry, deputy secretary of DWD.

But it's not just Wisconsin. Only 6% of calls to Colorado's unemployment line were answered in May 2020 as staff grappled with a 3,000% increase in calls compared to the levels pre-coronavirus. The average wait time was 47 minutes, and for months, citizens were unable to send an email or leave a message. Meanwhile, in California, just one lucky citizen in 1,000 reached a person at the Employment Development Department. No more than 20 employees at a time were answering calls, according to a report released in September. The department had a backlog of 1.6 million unemployment claims in fall of 2020 which, if changes are not made, will not be cleared until at least July 2021.



Negative experiences tend to have a more considerable impact on customer satisfaction than positive ones at the best of times. During a crisis, this is even more accentuated, and the stakes are that much higher. A dropped call about unemployment benefits could have several dire consequences, but at the very least, it results in a profoundly unsatisfied member of the public. There's intrinsically a cost connected with this. According to McKinsey: "Unhappy customers tend to generate a disproportionate amount of the cost to serve that agencies bear, for example, through problem phone calls, as well as risks, through lawsuits. Identifying and addressing these issues - even with temporary fixes - can build momentum toward deeper, longer-term improvement."

"Furthermore, our research suggests that customers who receive "excellent" resolution of their issues often experience even higher satisfaction than those who never had any issues at all."



Staff were not trained to fix the kinds of problems that required extra help

2 Can parts of the transaction really not be automated?

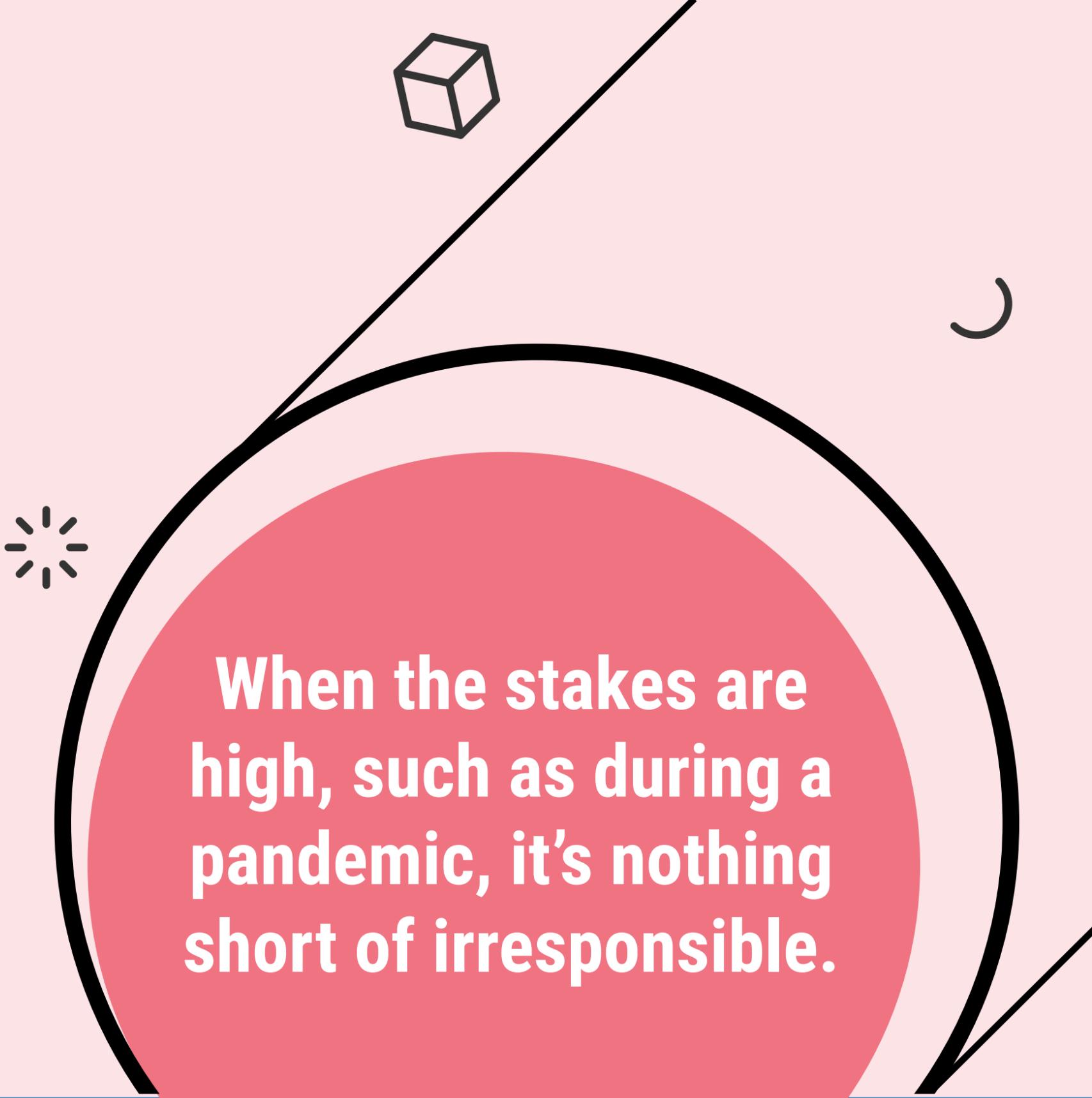
Like many states, California's Employment Development Department's response was to employ more people. A report on operations revealed that 2,250 people worked at its call centers at the end of August, but "it hasn't worked well". One of the main reasons is that staff at a second call center were not trained to fix the kinds of problems that required extra help.

Three states east, The Colorado Sun gives the case study of one Jamie Scappaticci, who had to call the state's unemployment call center five times a minute between 8AM and 12:30AM to get on the phone with someone. Her benefits had lapsed because she didn't realize she had to request a payment every two weeks. When she finally got on the phone, the response was: "Yup, you can change your status to active online now."

Surely there are more intelligent ways of handling unemployment requests? It's a colossal waste of everyone's time and energy. When the stakes are high, such as during a pandemic, it's nothing short of irresponsible.

Cher Haavind, Deputy Executive Director for the Department of Labor, was reported saying: "We've made system improvements and we will continue to make improvements but it's fairly new territory." She added: "And quite frankly, it's our first pandemic."

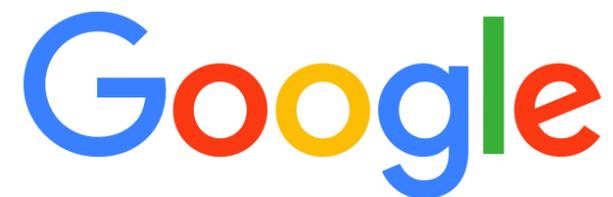
While we are all experiencing our first pandemic, we can still learn from the recession data pointed out by Mr. Cherry in Wisconsin.



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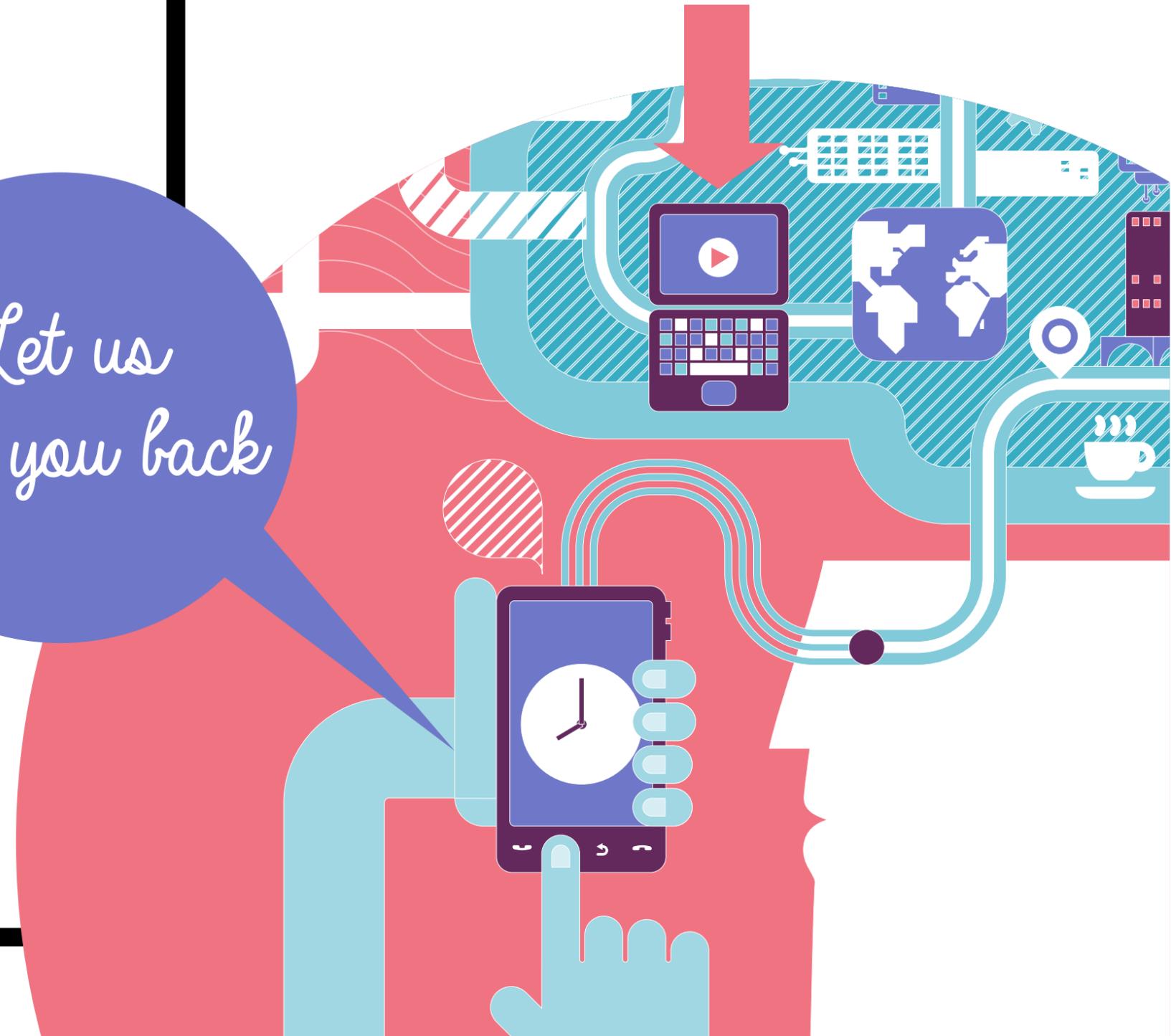
In fairness to Colorado, the state has since unveiled a slew of new measures to take the service into the digital age. How-to videos, virtual agents and callback forms have all been deployed, as well as a new partnership with Google to solve common issues.

It's great to see progress being made within customer service, but we think it can be made quicker. The Google partnership is a significant step forward in automating these conversations. Still, what if, rather than citizens contacting the department, the department could reach out to them using AI, carry out the conversation before any issues are impending and resolve them before the need to pick up the phone? Such a mechanism is not just possible – it's essential to deal with future crises.



*Let us
call you back*

HELP VIDEOS HERE



3 The price of inaction

The increasing importance of customer service from government agencies isn't just a byproduct of the coronavirus pandemic – it has become more critical everywhere. In the private sector, customer service is one of the main battlegrounds between competitors, resulting in enormous investments every year searching for a competitive edge. As a result, citizens have become accustomed to the customer service bars set by companies like Amazon and expect the same ease with every interaction they have – including in government. The problem is that government services have no competition, and the investment is harder to argue. But as the gap between the private sector and the public sector customer service becomes wider, the shortcomings of the latter have been laid bare.





The cost to the government – or rather the particular party in power – is not necessarily measured in money but in lost votes. As Deloitte explains: “Government does not just provide services to citizens; citizens also provide “services” back to the government. The most obvious example of this is when citizens elect leaders.”

But it shouldn't be just the threat of lost election that galvanizes leaders to put a higher price on customer service. “[Effective customer service] can also be extended to solution design and even policy development,” Deloitte goes on to say. Neglecting

customer service at a state level means that these agencies miss out on valuable insights to shape what the public really wants. There's an ideological argument here but also a very self-interested one – governments can turn state and federal services into the best research tool they have to measure public mood.

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This is already happening on some levels. For example, the National Weather Service has spent time learning how their users like to be spoken to in recent years. “We worked hard to really embed with our users, understand their lingo, ‘speak their speak’, so we could help them understand weather threats in their own terms,” says Laura Furgione, former Deputy Director of the National Weather Service . What if this could go further? What if this could become a two-way conversation instead, where the agency could gain insights from the most engaged members of the public?

Imagine if all agencies worked in this way and then could share data with each other, using each other’s resources when needed and ultimately allowing the government to build complete pictures of the citizens they serve. Building trust is critical to doing this, which is why achieving excellent customer service is important.



Agencies can gain far deeper insights if they have an engaged audience. Never has this been highlighted more than by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, which placed an extreme strain on state and federal agencies at the beginning of lockdown. Calls to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention increased 100-fold at the start of the pandemic, while the Veterans Affairs Department had to ramp up telehealth capabilities by 1,000%, providing more than 100,000 appointments in May. Speaking to Nextgov, Justin Herman, who heads public sector business for remote contact center provider Twilio, also points to courts using video-conferencing tools and more personalized experiences being offered, such as the method of communication they would prefer. “The fact is that this isn’t going away,” Herman says . Now that engagement is taking place more digitally, the opportunity for trapping these insights is ripe for the taking.

This could have a game-changing impact on the way that unemployment benefits are handled in the US.

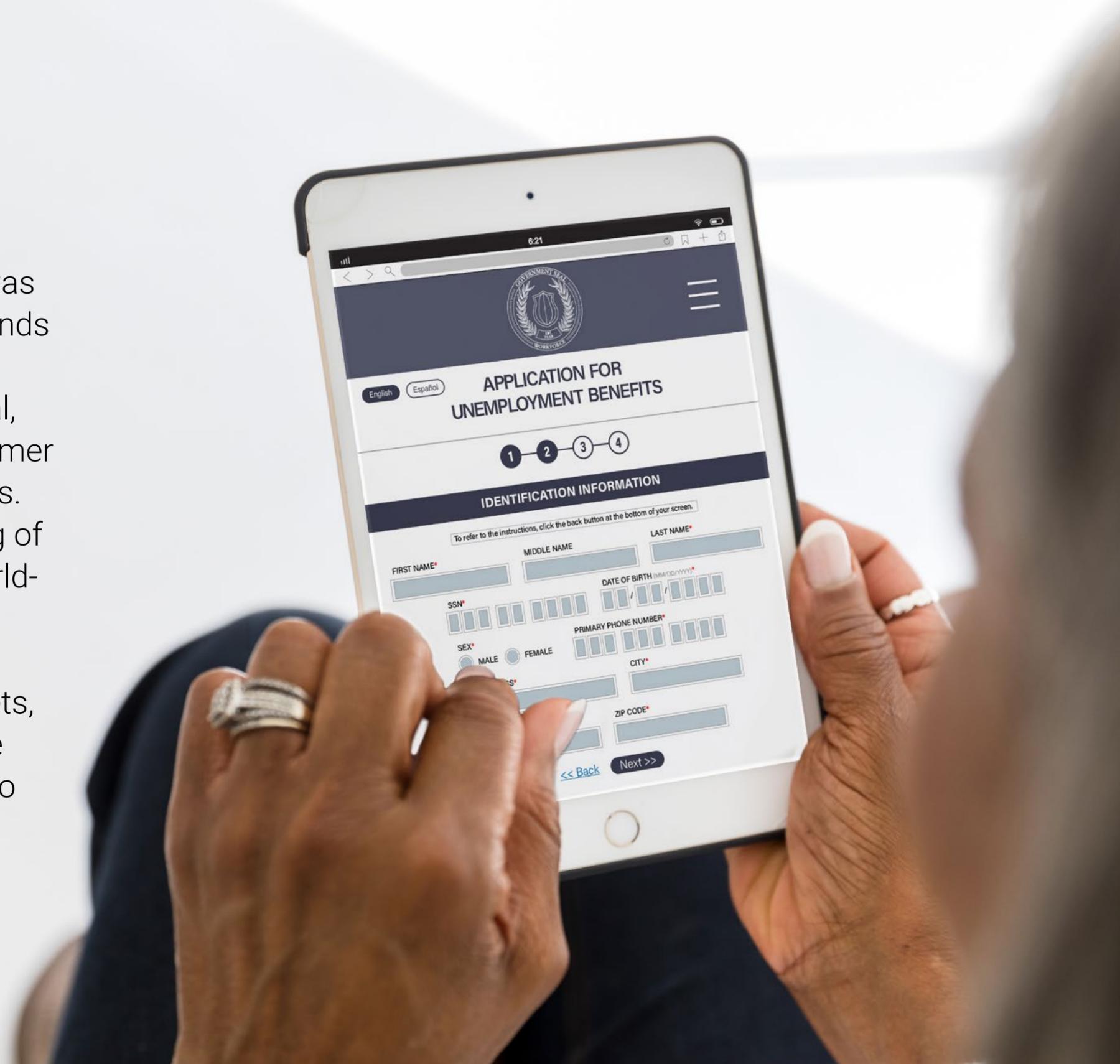
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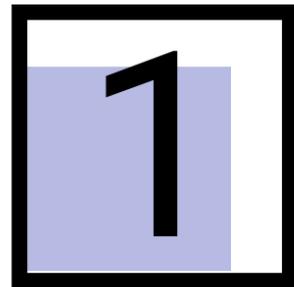
4 Next steps

State services cannot afford to fall farther behind private sector leaders when it comes to customer experience. It was necessary before the spread of Covid-19, but like many trends accelerated by the pandemic, greater customer service – especially in unemployment benefits – is now fundamental, no longer a ‘nice to have.’ The risks in not prioritizing customer service range from disengagement to lost votes to lawsuits. The reward for agencies is gaining a deeper understanding of the people they work for and the possibility of creating world-leading government services.

Though state services lack the private sector’s deep pockets, the good news for them is that the private sector has done the trial and error and there are some fantastic examples to shamelessly copy for the good of all.



5 Five Key Lessons



The job is too big for humans alone

As shown in California, Colorado, Wisconsin and many others, the number of inbound calls to government agencies is too much for call center staff to tackle alone in times of crisis. They need support from digital, automated tools like AI.



Phone calls are often a waste of time

If a citizen is spending hours on hold just to be told they can now complete something online, then that's a terrible experience for them and an unrewarding experience for the call handler.



Proactive communication is the only way of taking control

As long as state call centers are set up to constantly react to inbound communication, they will never get ahead of any future crisis. Government needs to be the one making contact first.



Use humans when necessary

Technology alone cannot provide faultless customer service but using it to take care of the basics can create a more rewarding job for your call center staff and a better user experience. This will help increase response times and success rates.



Collaborate with the private sector

Customer service is a crucial differentiator for most businesses, with many great examples of how to do this effectively. You don't need to start from square one to bring an effective customer experience to your department. There's plenty of great technology already in existence that can help make meaningful change quickly.



About ContactEngine

ContactEngine is a Conversational AI technology that enables agencies to proactively engage citizens in conversations that fulfil government objectives. ContactEngine automates outbound citizen engagement across all channels and generates unique insights into the changing patterns of communication by applying demographic and intent analysis, linguistics and ground-breaking artificial intelligence principles to mass volumes of raw data. For more information about ContactEngine, please visit www.contactengine.com/government