

Service with a silicon smile

Customer service
in the age of AI

Management summary

Artificial intelligence (AI) is revolutionizing customer service. AI-driven technology generates value for customers, increasing efficiency and boosting customer satisfaction. At the same time, it reduces costs for companies and optimizes their operations. Hardly surprising, then, that as our major new survey of customer service executives confirms, around 95% of customer service departments have already implemented some form of AI in their operations. Yet, *how* companies use AI varies widely, with many only using it in simple use cases to support human customer service agents. Asia leads the way in pioneering advanced applications of AI, particularly at the customer interface. Europe lags behind, progress currently hampered by factors such as legislative hurdles and legacy structures.

As AI begins to be used for more complex cases than at present, so the traditional role of human customer service agents will change. This switch will increase productivity and enhance process efficiency, reducing the need for human involvement in day-to-day customer service tasks such as handling customer inquiries, providing information and taking orders. At the same time, a new role for human customer service agents will emerge based on higher-level technological skills, the ability to handle more complex tasks and more advanced communication skills – three skill areas that are currently in short supply on the market.

Implementing AI is not always straightforward. A number of hurdles must be overcome, from a lack of maturity in operational application and inflated management expectations to regulatory constraints. Customer service functions also need to do their homework in regard to AI, replacing their current approach focused on individual use cases with a more holistic perspective on AI. In many cases, they will need to break up existing business silos, implement end-to-end processes, define an AI governance model for the entire organization and adjust both their operating model and their organizational structures accordingly.

What immediate tasks must be addressed in response to the AI revolution? Customer service departments should review their AI strategies to ensure comprehensive integration, focusing on foundational elements such as end-to-end processes and data structures, while training their workforce to meet the new standards. By so doing, organizations can enhance their AI capabilities and boost their competitiveness.

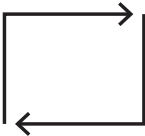
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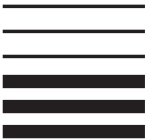
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On average:
NPS improvement by **15%**
Operational cost decrease by **26%**
Headcount reduction by **27%**



Customer service job profiles to change significantly



AI maturity low to medium for most respondents

1

AI addresses today's core customer service challenges

But humans still have a role to play

Artificial intelligence is revolutionizing customer service, enhancing customer satisfaction and at the same time minimizing costs and optimizing operations for companies. AI has a wide range of applications in customer-related areas, from processing and interpreting large amounts of data to driving chatbots and helping develop responses to specific customer issues. Often, its role is not to replace human employees but rather to augment their capabilities – allowing firms to provide better, more effective and more customer-specific solutions at a lower cost.

To understand how companies currently use AI in their customer service departments and the challenges they face, in late 2024 and early 2025 Roland Berger, in partnership with Potloc and TalentNeuron, carried out the most comprehensive global survey of decision-makers in customer service departments to date. The survey covered multiple industries and companies of all different types. The responses provide us with insights into specific challenges in the field of customer service, the most promising areas for applying AI, how widely AI solutions are used today and current use cases for the technology.

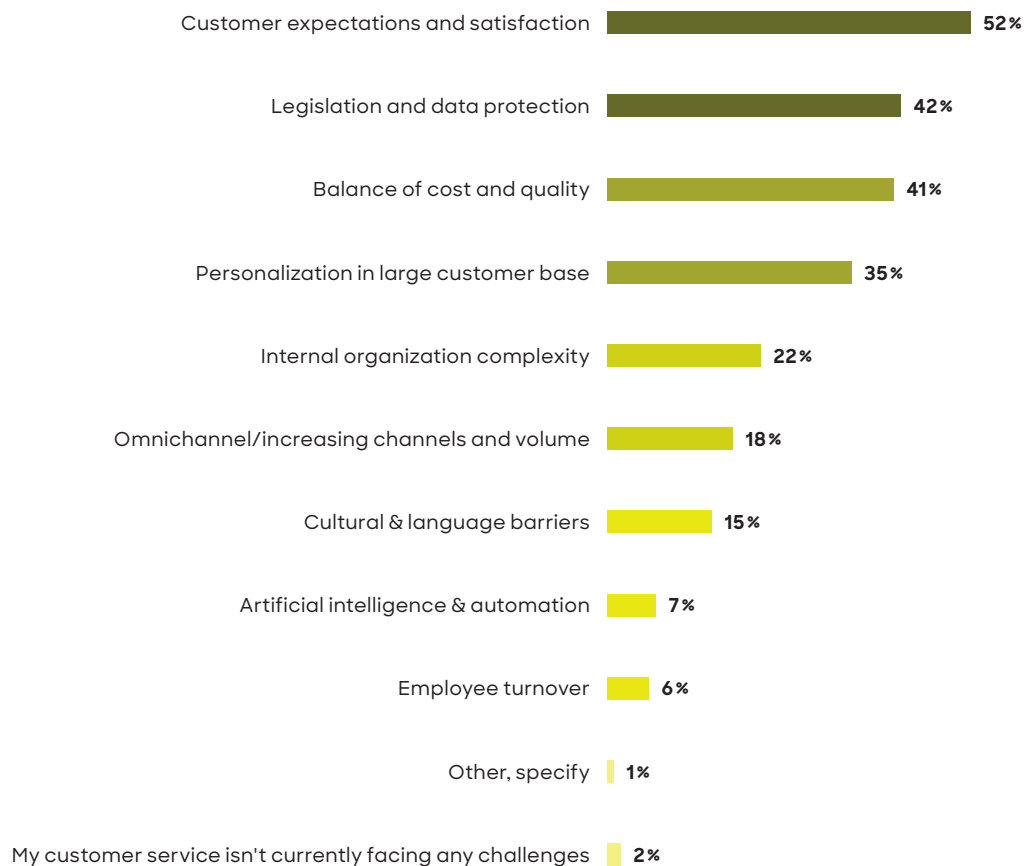
According to the survey, the greatest challenge faced by customer service departments today – mentioned by 52% of respondents – lies in meeting customer expectations. Customer expectations are extremely diverse, ranging from being able to immediately resolve inquiries, knowing the customer's purchase history and building on background knowledge, to accessing information about delivery dates, shipment delays, changes in product availability and the like. Meeting these expectations ensures customer loyalty, which is vital for companies; As one respondent, the head of customer service at a European industrial company, put it, "Customer loyalty throughout the lifecycle is crucial. But it is challenging due to poorly documented processes and a lack of unified guidelines."

// In banking, remote rather than branch-based customer service centers are essential for the customer experience – but they face challenges such as evolving structures and changing demands. AI offers significant opportunities here."

Head of customer service at a leading European bank

Other challenging areas for customer service departments include legislation and data protection concerns under statutes such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The rules are particularly challenging for banking and insurance companies (42%), who are required to comply with anti-money laundering and know-your-customer legislation, for example. Other major challenges identified in the survey include balancing cost and quality (41%), and personalization in the case of large customer bases (35%) – all areas that AI can address effectively. Significantly, respondents do not view AI and automation in themselves as challenging. ► **A**

A Key challenges for today's customer service leaders



Source: Roland Berger, Potloc

Respondents view technology, automation and AI as the most promising area for customer service solutions. Indeed, AI solutions appear to have replaced the trend identified in previous years towards offshoring, nearshoring and the like. The head of the shared customer service function at a global consumer packaged goods company commented as follows: "Outsourcing efforts on a large scale are over for us – they simply don't provide major efficiency gains anymore. We are now on a joint journey with our outsourcing partners regarding process automation and insourcing selected tasks. ► **B**

B Solutions to today's customer service challenges



Source: Roland Berger, Potloc

// We plan to use AI for low-complexity interactions only. High-complexity issues need personal touchpoints."

Head of customer service at a North American industrial company

WILL AI REPLACE HUMANS?

Respondents believe that the new technology can support or even take over the majority of customer service requests from consumers. However, few think that the technology will replace human agents in customer service entirely – complex tasks will still need to be handled by people, at least for the foreseeable future. The head of customer service at a German audio manufacturer agreed: "Simple complexities will be handled by AI in the future, while complex problem-solving will still take some time."

Interestingly, the survey reveals major differences regarding the importance accorded to AI and technology by respondents in different industries, and by teams focusing on different types of customer service. Respondents working in customer service operations focused on B2B customers are more likely to see human agents as an integral part of customer service operations: The role of the human agent remains central but they are supported by AI assistants at all times – before, during and after the customer interaction. ►C

C Current and future role of AI in customer service

Today's focus



AI assistant

Helps the user complete tasks, human remains in control

Before the interaction

Interacting directly with customers:

- Real-time chat translation
- Speech routing and self-service automation
- AI-powered chatbot
- Supporting operator onboarding
- AI-based call routing

During the interaction

Providing assistance to the operator:

- Improving productivity by automating routine processes within the operator desktop
- AI-powered suggestion engine providing real-time help to humans via non-voice channels
- Real-time coaching on call content & customer insight (e.g., sentiment analysis)
- GenAI-based multilingual spellchecker

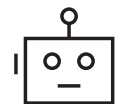
After the interaction

Working in the back office:

- Summarizing calls and interactions using GenAI tools
- Generation of coaching notes to simplify and modernize agent coaching
- Predictive analytics and customer insights to improve service level and provide operators with actionable insights



Emerging model



AI multi-agent system

Performs tasks on behalf of the user, minimal human intervention

Source: Roland Berger

By contrast, respondents in certain industries such as financial services and travel (airlines, hotels, railroads) and certain countries (such as China) were more likely to believe that technology would take over from humans for most tasks in the future. In the case of transportation and travel services, this could be because the industry started relying on automation and digital processes earlier than other industries due to the number of customers served and interactions occurring on a day-to-day basis. In the case of China and some other Asian countries, the reason could be that AI is already used more widely in customer service in these countries than elsewhere.

2 Early days, big promises

Have we reached a turning point for AI?

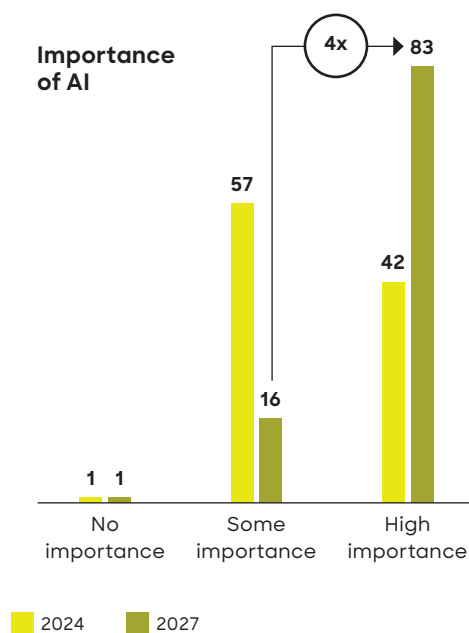
The survey found that 95% of customer service centers have already implemented some form of AI in their operations. But the extent to which AI is used varies: In many cases, implementation only extends as far as basic use cases. Customer service leaders also vary in how important they consider AI: 42% of respondents felt that it was of high importance, while 57% said it was of some importance only.

We may, however, have reached a turning point for AI. When we asked respondents how they thought AI would affect their customer service work over the next three years, the percentage considering it to be of high importance almost doubled, to 83%. Many customer service leaders said they feel that AI adoption is still in its infancy, and that they have seen more of a change in the last 12 months than in the years before. As AI develops

faster and faster, its importance for customer service functions – and hence its implementation – is also likely to surge.

► D

D Importance of AI in customer service, 2024 vs. 2027 [in %]



Current use cases for AI technology mainly revolve around the generation of spoken and written responses to customer inquiries. However, for the time being at least, AI-generated responses are often not communicated directly to consumers; rather, they form the basis for human-generated communication. Thus, some companies use AI to pre-formulate individual emails to customers, while others use it to summarize key aspects of a conversation, the summary then being checked by a customer

Source: Roland Berger, Potloc

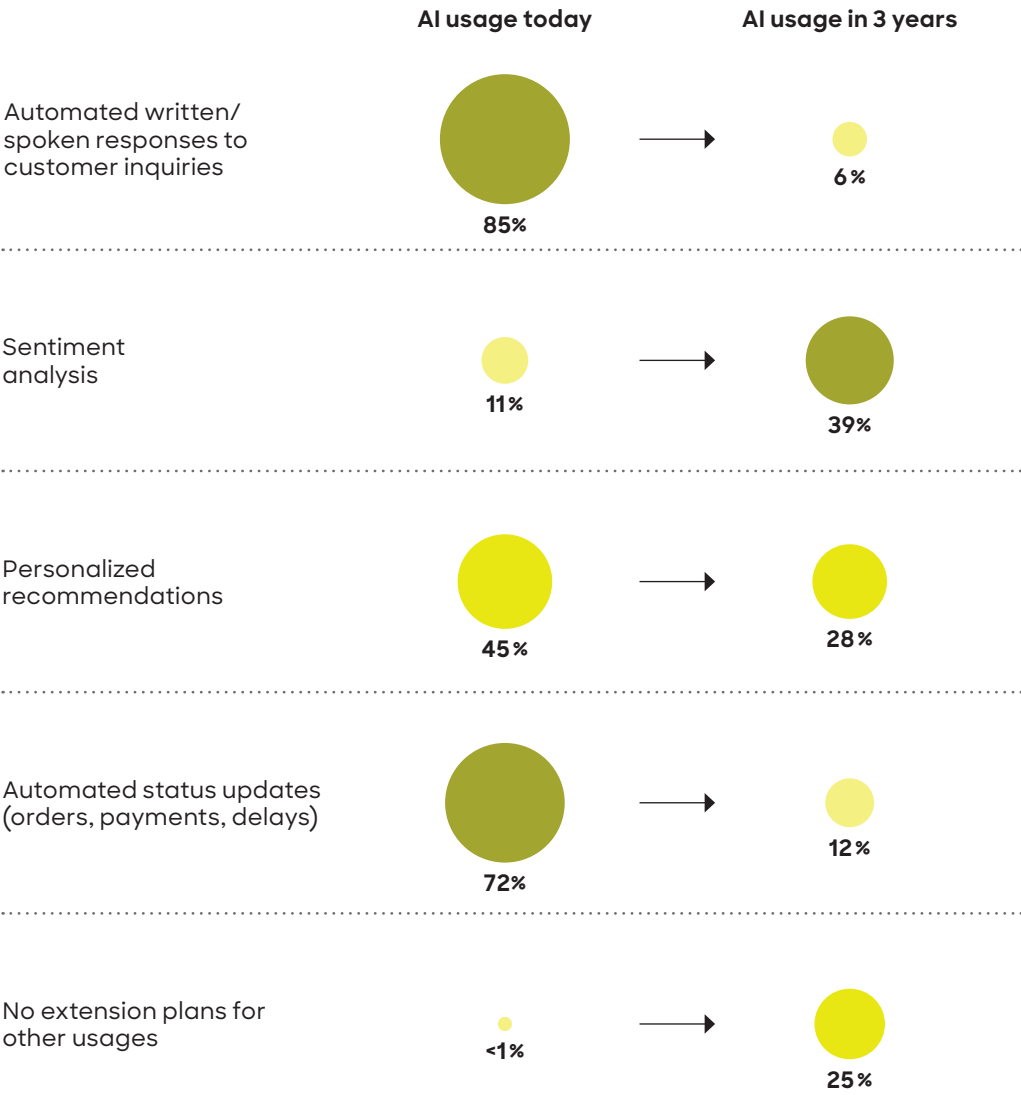
service agent before being sent to the customer. Some firms also use generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) to power chatbots, which support service agents. Other use cases include automated status updates on orders, payments and the like, or generating personalized recommendations for customers.

// In our organization, AI manages simple tasks like emails and meetings. We currently have a three-year change management program in place, helping employees adapt – and easing their fears."

Head of shared customer service function at a global CPG company

Asian countries are more advanced in their implementation of AI-based solutions. Use cases here include "sentiment analysis" and AI voice chatbots. Europe currently lags behind, with some companies just beginning to experiment with AI voice bots. ▶ E

E Outlook for AI in customer service



Source: Roland Berger, Potloc

WHAT DO THE NEXT THREE YEARS HOLD?

Over the next three years, we believe that the focus will shift from simple use cases to more advanced use cases in customer service, such as sentiment analysis and personalized recommendations. However, the survey results reveal that one-quarter of respondents are not, in fact, planning to implement AI to a greater extent than now over the next three years, including a mix of smaller companies and advanced implementors. A number of reasons for this are possible: Some companies are overwhelmed by the current transformation and feel unable to keep up with the pace of technological change. Companies also need to upskill their customer service agents, adapt processes and reshape data structures – tasks that are often difficult to achieve in today's customer service landscape. These factors limit some companies' plans to extend the use of AI in the coming years. The head of customer service at a global CPG company commented as follows: "So far, there has been no Big Bang effect, as capabilities are still lacking. But this will happen – and when it does, our local teams will struggle. They are simply not ready for change on this scale."

// We have started with AI in our shared customer service center. But before we extend its application to local teams, we need to do our homework. We first need standardized processes across countries and regions, and we need to structure our data. Only after that can we continue expanding our use of AI."

Head of customer service at an international consumer products company

3

The Big Bang

How AI will transform us

The survey makes it clear: Customer service leaders expect AI to lead to significant performance improvements, with only very limited negative side effects. Improvements will occur in a wide range of areas, from faster response times and reduced operating costs to enhanced data insights and greater customer satisfaction. At the same time, the team culture within customer service teams is not expected to suffer – although teams will see their roles change and some reduction in headcounts is inevitable.

Better customer service will leave customers happier than ever before

73% of respondents expect AI to shorten response time on average by 34%

65% expect AI to boost the organization's net promoter score on average by 15%

59% expect AI to increase process efficiency on average by 19%

AI will change customer service job profiles

99% of respondents do not expect AI to influence the team culture

25% expect AI to lead to changes in employees' capabilities and skills

16% expect AI to change the role of customer service

Customer service departments will become more efficient – and leaner

42% of respondents expect AI to cut operational costs on average by 26%

49% expect AI to enhance data insights

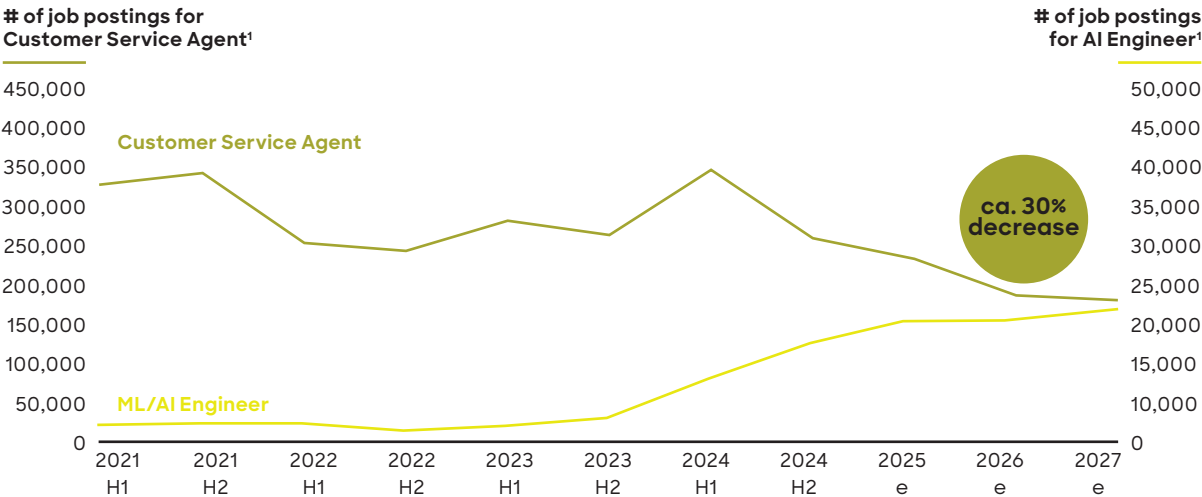
37% expect AI to reduce headcount on average by 27%

Some 37% of respondents in the survey believe that AI will lead to reductions in headcount. This is a much lower figure than that reported by other studies. Specifically, half of our respondents think that between 21% and 30% of the customer service headcount could be lost, with one-quarter thinking the losses will be bigger and one-quarter thinking they will be smaller. In the interviews, most customer service leaders said they expected agents to be upskilled or to move to new customer service roles rather than being laid off.

What is clear, however, is that AI will change customer service job profiles. Most standard day-to-day tasks will be automated, including customer inquiries, information sharing, taking orders and even direct communication with customers. This will affect the majority of customer service agents, except customer service leaders and managers. In the United States this change has already taken place, and many companies have stopped advertising traditional customer service jobs and have partly laid off or reskilled their existing workforce.

In total, an estimated 29.6% of tasks can be automated today. As AI technology continues to evolve, we will likely see two developments. On the one hand, human customer service agents will need significantly greater technological skills and must be trained to work with the support of AI – creating the right prompts and understanding the underlying data, such as product and logistics information, pricing components and customer data. At the same time, the number of human customer service agents doing the jobs they do today will decrease by around 30% – and those who do will be strongly supported by AI, making it easier for untrained people to perform these tasks. ► F

F Evolution of customer service jobs (illustrative)



1 Number of job postings for Customer Service role and AI/ML Engineer role for Brazil, USA, UK, Germany, France, Italy, China, Malaysia, Singapore and Japan

Job profiles today

Standard and complex customer communications
Administration of customer & sales-related data
Internal alignments and problem-solving

Job profiles in the future

Customer communications based on AI input
Administration tasks
Complex customer communications and problem-solving
Steering AI

Source: Roland Berger, TalentNeuron

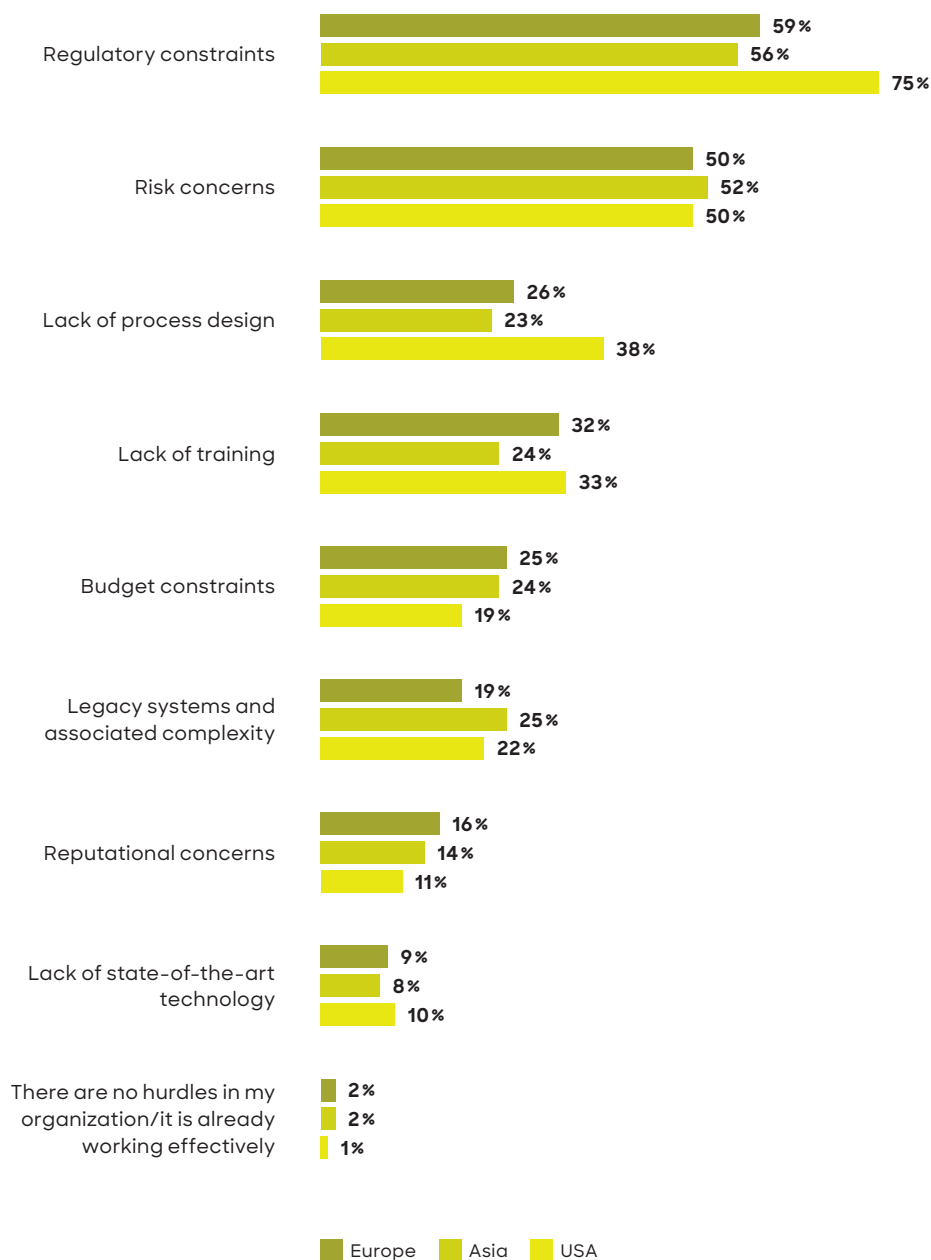
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Is your organization prepared?

Overcoming implementation hurdles

Almost all respondents recognize that there are hurdles to implementing AI-based technology. The chief hurdles according to the survey are regulatory constraints (reported by 63% of respondents), followed by risk concerns (51%). Notably, reputational concerns were only mentioned by 14% of respondents. ► [G](#)

G Hurdles to the use of technology in organizations



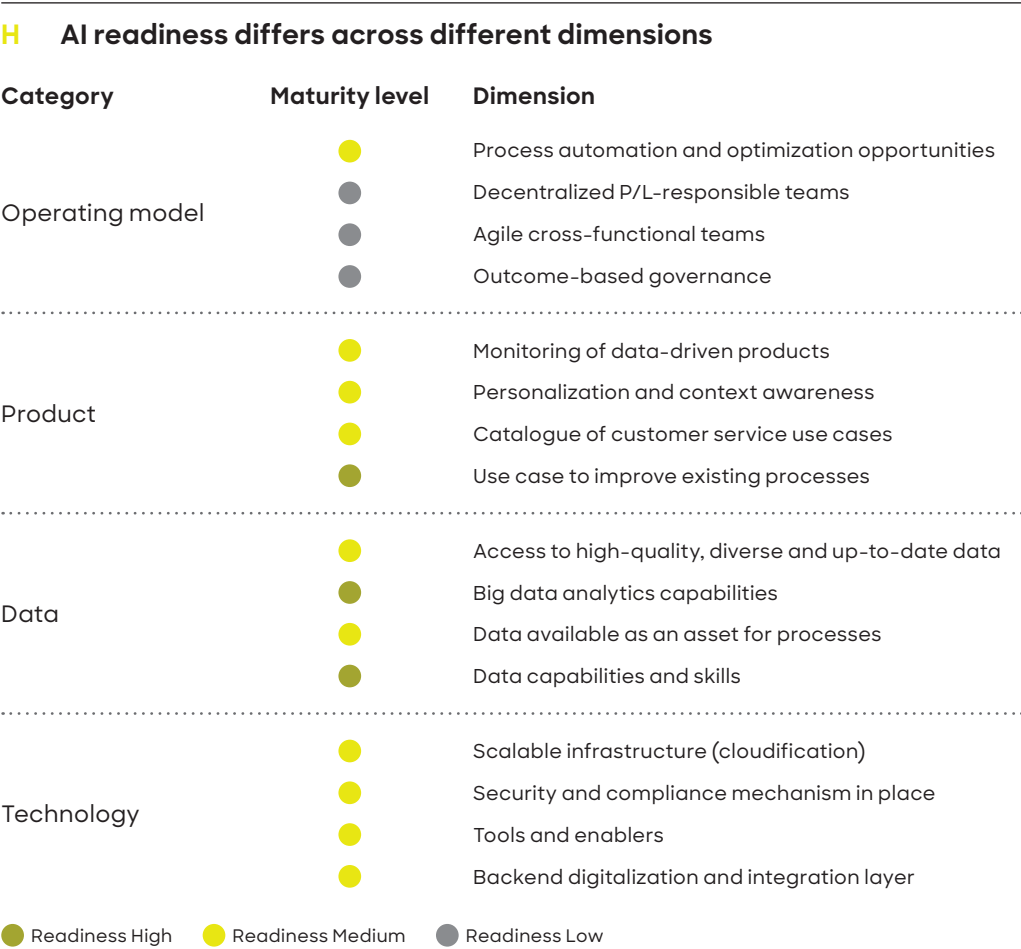
Source: Roland Berger, Potloc

Differences are found between the United States and the rest of the world. Here, it is worth noting that the survey ran around the time of the US elections, when respondents were unsure about what the future held with regard to legislation. In addition, the large proportion of US respondents identifying the lack of process design as a hurdle to AI is likely due to the fact that, historically, process design is accorded much greater importance in the United States than in Europe and Asia, say.

All industries consider regulatory constraints and "risk concerns" two of the top three hurdles to AI implementation. Other hurdles in the top three for some industries are budget constraints, lack of training (for example, in financial services, where companies and institutions feel that workers need to be trained in industry specifics) and legacy systems (especially in formerly regulated industries such as telecommunications).

INDUSTRY READINESS - A VARIED PICTURE

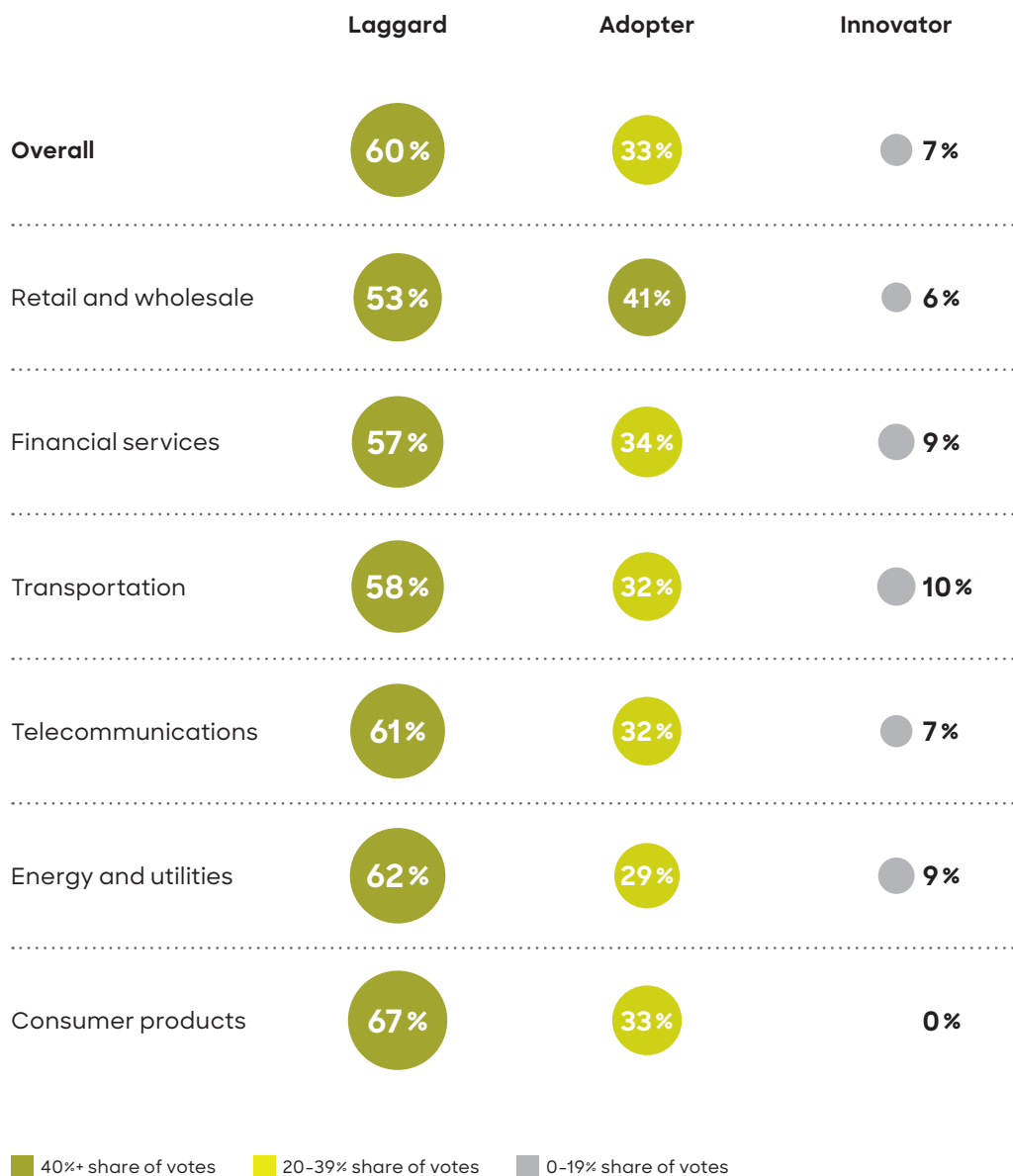
Most customer service departments already use some form of AI for certain tasks, as reported above. However, customer service departments' readiness for implementing AI technology varies depending on which dimension we look at. For example, readiness is high in terms of data capabilities and skills, or the existence of use cases for improving existing processes, but much work remains to be done in developing agile cross-functional teams, decentralized teams with P&L responsibility, and outcome-based governance. ► H



Source: Roland Berger, Potloc

We asked respondents whether they felt their organizations were ready to implement AI in terms of operating model, technology, access to high-quality data, process automation and suchlike. On the basis of their responses, we classify them broadly as "innovators", "adopters" or "laggards". Overall, we discovered that only seven percent of respondents are innovators, indicating that a large gap exists between the potential of AI in customer service and the perceived innovativeness of those implementing it. The largest numbers of "adopters" are found in the retail and wholesale industry – a sector with a strong history of implementing customer engagement solutions. No innovators at all are found in the consumer goods sector. Indeed, most industries have yet to develop the necessary maturity to fully utilize AI technology in customer service. ▶ |

| AI implementation readiness by industry



Source: Roland Berger, Potloc

// Industries with e-commerce channels are leading the way with regard to AI implementation due to their data availability."

Head of customer service at a North American industrial company

The largest group of respondents (36%) are of the opinion that AI technology will automate processes that would otherwise be outsourced, nearshored or farshored. However, the latter solutions will remain an option for non-critical tasks: 29% say they will increase outsourcing, 28% that they will increase nearshoring and 13% that they will return to insourcing. Again, different industries vary: 11% of respondents in the insurance industry and 8% of those at technology firms say they will increase their level of outsourcing. At the same time, 37% of those in insurance will shift from nearshoring to farshoring, and 50% of those in technology will increase their level of nearshoring as their overall headcount decreases.

This variation in figures indicates that no single future operating model has yet emerged as superior to other operating models. In the past, we have seen trends towards outsourcing, then towards offshoring, and then – as quality concerns arose – towards nearshoring. Nowadays, large companies typically have a mix of all three, while smaller firms use outsourcing to handle peak periods. As AI develops, it is not yet clear whether it will be mostly implemented in processes at offshore shared service centers or by outsourcing suppliers, or whether companies will insource their customer interactions and have them done by AI. At one leading CPG company, the shift is clearly in the direction of insourcing: As the head of the shared customer service function said, "Outsourcing is no longer yielding efficiency gains. Instead, our shared service center and outsourcing providers are making a collaborative journey towards insourcing and automation."

5

The path ahead

A framework for future-ready customer service

How can customer service departments become AI champions? The answer lies in fully embracing the potential of AI and adapting their customer service operating model accordingly. Of course, that is easier said than done: Legacy structures mean that the shift will be difficult for many customer service departments. A more practical approach for these players may be to embark on a step-by-step transformation, automating and optimizing processes and structures one by one, gradually adding more and more AI use cases.

We identify three stages of maturity for customer service departments. The first is where the department provides a standard offering, with some processes automated and the setup partially centralized. In the second stage, players become "transformers" and operate with a wide range of automated and outsourced processes and an optimized, value-driven customer experience (CX), for example. The third stage is that of AI champion, with customer service fully driven by AI, a personalized customer experience and full-service availability 24/7. ▶ J

J Stages of customer service maturity



Source: Roland Berger

Firms need a structured approach to transforming their customer service operations. They also need to "do their homework" – addressing data structures, developing governance models and adjusting organizational structures and processes. We recommend the following framework, which ensures customer service leaders take a holistic approach that covers all key aspects of the transformation process:

#1 VISION AND TARGET-SETTING

We encourage companies to develop a clear vision for their customer service function with regard to AI, including setting targets and defining ambition levels for AI and aligning these with the overall business and customer service strategy. At the same time, they should create a future value proposition for (external and internal) customers and a service offering for different customer segments. These efforts will be most effective if complemented by a robust communication channel strategy.

#2 OPERATIONS

The next step is for companies to review their target operating model in light of their new AI targets, ambition levels and use cases. They should ensure they have an end-to-end view of customer service processes. Importantly, the organization must be equipped with the necessary resources, capabilities and governance structures. Other tasks include cross-functional optimization, reducing silos, developing a target footprint and defining where innovation should take place. In addition, they will need to define the internal operating model, including roles and responsibilities, and develop a comprehensive AI target operating model and footprint, including a clear inhouse, nearshore/offshore and outsourcing strategy. Finally, we advise them to identify, evaluate and prioritize high-value AI use cases tailored to the customer service function – not on a case-by-case basis but taking an end-to-end perspective, starting with the customer and including internal customer service operations.

#3 SETUP

To become a future leader in customer service, firms will need to adjust their job profiles, redefining salary levels and incentive systems. In parallel, they should upskill existing employees through training programs (using AI, where possible) and implement change management strategies, creating a positive environment in the team and across the company. Target capabilities and required talent and expertise must be identified, and talent development efforts aligned with the organization's AI goals.

#4 ENABLERS

Enablers are the key things that must be in place in order for the rest to be effective. A priority here is for the company to decide on the data and technology setup, including data governance frameworks, and select the tools and technology that will be used. This entails introducing coherent data structures, improving data quality and collecting data from multiple sources.

About this study

This study is based on research carried out by Roland Berger, Potloc and TalentNeuron between November 2024 and March 2025. It presents the results of a survey of more than 550 customer service leaders, including both heads of customer service departments or sole decision-makers for the customer service function (41% of respondents) and co-heads of the department or regional, divisional or functional leaders involved in decision-making processes (59%). In total, the respondents represent more than 200,000 employees in customer service departments. Additionally, the report contains insights from more than 20 detailed interviews with customer service leaders that we conducted in order to interpret and validate the survey's findings. The respondents were from the following clusters of industries: consumer packaged goods (CPG) and retail, including wholesale and consumer products; financial services and insurance, including banking and asset management; utilities such as energy and water; technology, media and telecommunications (TMT); and transportation, including railroad, airport, aviation and maritime operations.

Respondents came from a broad range of key geographies: the Americas (including the United States and Brazil; total respondents: 150), Europe (including Germany, Italy, France and the United Kingdom; total respondents: 200) and Asia (including China, Singapore and Malaysia; total respondents: 200). They were employed at a wide range of companies in terms of size, from small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs; minimum headcount: 250) to large global cooperations. Some 87% were from companies with more than 500 employees, the largest groups coming from firms with 1,000–5,000 workers (31% of respondents) or more than 10,000 workers (24%). The customer service teams led by our respondents cover the entire spectrum, from small teams with fewer than 25 full-time equivalents (FTEs) to very large teams with more than 1,000; that said, almost 60% were from customer service teams with more than 100 FTEs. Respondents led departments that provided business-to-consumer (B2C) services, business-to-business (B2B) services, or both.

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Further reading

- ➔ [THE GEN-AI DRIVEN TRANSFORMATION](#)
- ➔ [EVOLVE OR BE LEFT BEHIND - THE FUTURE OF CONSUMER SPENDING AND RETAIL](#)
- ➔ [TWIN TRANSFORMATION:
HOW AI AND SUSTAINABILITY CAN DRIVE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE](#)

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