

White Paper

Are You Empowering Your Operators?



These unsung heroes of healthcare play a critical role in customer service — but they need your assistance.

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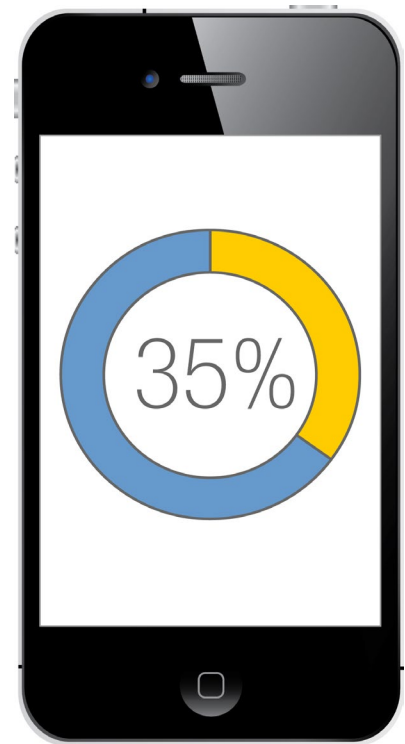
Calls Make a Big First Impression

When callers contact your hospital, their first 30 seconds on the phone sets the tone for the remainder of their engagement with your organization. How quickly the call is answered, the type and tone of the greeting they receive, the speed that their request is handled — all of these factors represent the beginning of a positive or negative patient experience that reflects your brand, for better or worse.

Your switchboard operators are still the frontline of your healthcare network. A good operator greets the caller in a brief but friendly manner, quickly identifies each caller's need, and then works to meet that need. Sounds simple, doesn't it?

But that's just the beginning. Operators often have many other non-switchboard responsibilities, making it difficult for them to provide an excellent caller experience—the kind that improves customer satisfaction, boosts your brand, and helps generate revenue. These other duties can be beyond mission-critical. Because in healthcare, the skill, knowledge, and dedication of your operators can literally mean the difference between life and death.

We'll examine many of the challenges faced by healthcare switchboard operators, how this key group impacts the patient experience, and offer recommendations on how to empower operators with much-needed assistance.



Percentage of patients that say they are not likely to return for care based on their initial call.

Source: Baird-Group

Switchboard Operators are in High Demand

The need for experienced, talented, and committed switchboard operators in healthcare has never been more urgent. Why? Greater competition and emphasis on the patient experience. Growth in insured populations and the resulting uptick in care. Broader and more complex communications. All of these forces and more have transformed switchboard operators into vital (but often invisible) cogs in the American healthcare machine. And

Channel	2015-2016 Change
Telephone	4.1%
Email	1.6%
Chat	40.6%
Social Media	3.8%

Source: ContactBabel; "2016 Contact Center Decision Maker's Guide" Baird-Group

despite the availability of newer communication channels (e.g., email, Social Media), use of the voice channel is still growing versus some of these other mediums. People schedule appointments, build relationships, make inquiries, book procedures—all via the telephone. The telephone isn't retro. It's vital.

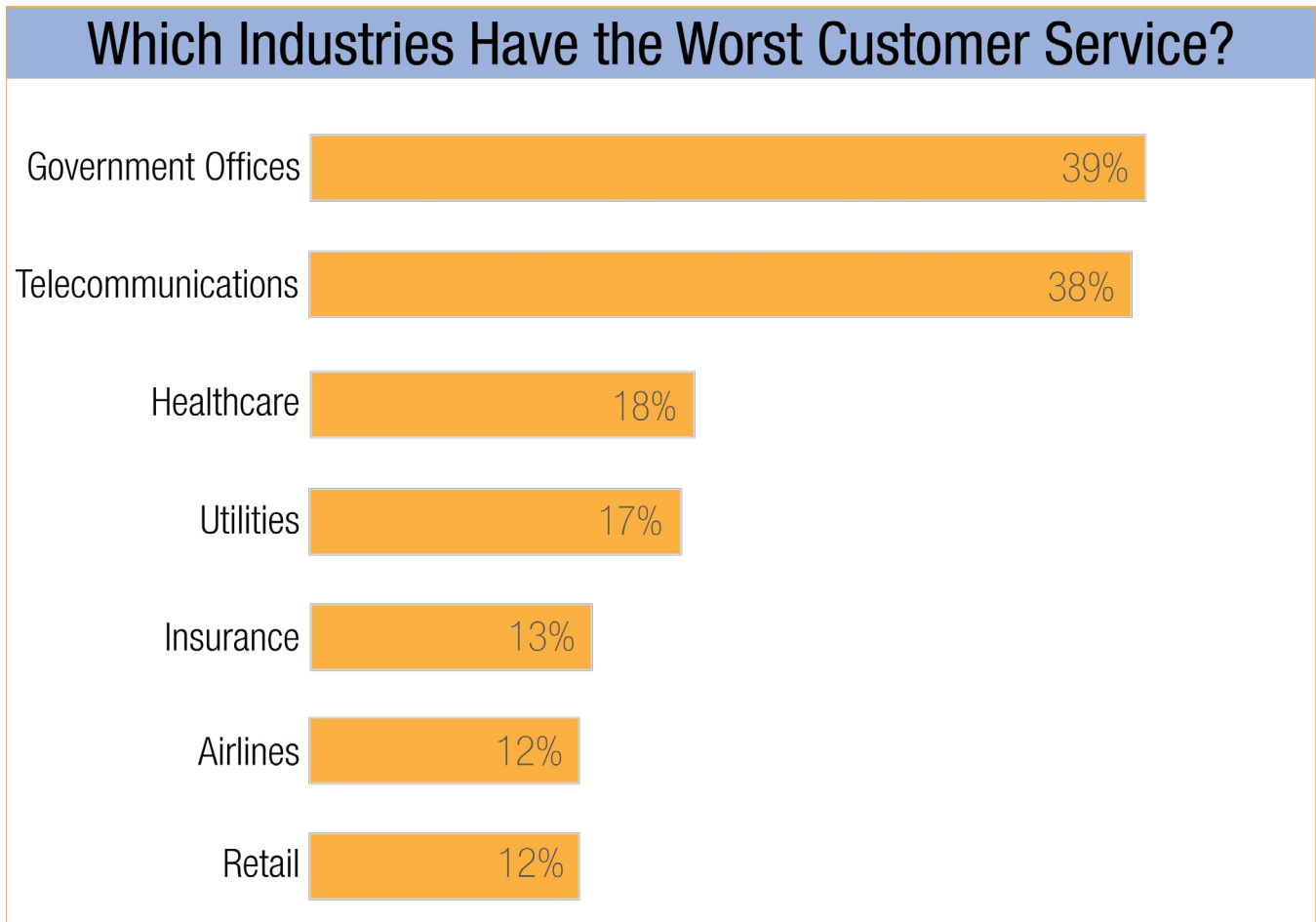
Despite the importance of switchboard operators, healthcare facilities often find it difficult to hire sufficient staff to meet service level targets and caller experience goals. Current labor statistics estimate that there are 15,000+ switchboard operators in U.S. healthcare today.

Industry	Employment
Business Support Services	17,110
General Medical & Surgical Hospitals	15,260
Automobile Dealers	7,430
Offices of Physicians	7,060
Traveler Accommodation	5,840

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Aggregated data from popular job search sites such as Monster, Indeed, and Career Builder list approximately 800 open positions for this role at present, meaning more than 5% of these positions remain unfilled, nationwide.

The staffing challenges and complexities of the position certainly contribute to a general perception that healthcare facilities often provide poor customer service, as reflected in a 2015 Ipsos survey:



Source: Ipsos; 2015

So why is the work of switchboard operators so challenging? And if improving patient experiences is universally acknowledged as a competitive differentiator, why do hospitals have such a hard time staffing and delivering excellent service at the switchboard? We explore the answers below.

Operators Have to Deal with Diverse Callers

Operators in healthcare environments must provide timely and friendly service to a wide variety of different caller communities—including patients, family members, employees, doctors, insurance agents, vendors, and other public callers. It's safe to say that healthcare switchboards handle a greater variety of callers and requests than any other market.



Healthcare operators must provide pleasing service for a wide variety of different caller types and requests.

Beyond this diversity, these callers also have unique needs, destinations, and expectations. But they all want the same result—fast and seamless connection to their required destination, resource, or information.

Operators must become adept at assessing the needs of each caller type, then providing the connection or information the caller requests, quickly and efficiently. After that, they move on to the next call in the queue, which will most likely be a completely different type of caller with a completely different need. In short, every caller is different—and every request brings unique challenges.

Operators Do Much More Than Answer Calls

Another contributing factor is the broad boundaries of the position. Healthcare switchboard operators must fill a wide range of roles, each requiring specific skills and abilities. At any given moment, an operator could be wearing one of these very different hats:

- General Information Encyclopedia
- Employee and Staff Directory Expert
- Medical Response Coordinator
- Database Manager
- IT/Technology Specialist
- Private Investigator/Detective
- Internal Communications Coordinator
- Bereavement/Emotional Support Counselor
- Security Officer
- Facility Concierge
- Alarm Dispatch Officer
- Transportation Coordinator

Because they fill a variety of roles, switchboard operators in healthcare must also bring an equally diverse set of hard and soft skills to the table:

- Technical Aptitude
- Computer Literacy
- Communications Skills
- Typing Skills
- Teamwork
- Confidence
- Patience
- Kindness
- Empathy
- Dedication
- Focus
- Perseverance

The Workload is Heavy — Even On a Good Day

The balancing act between call handling and non-call handling duties and the hectic atmosphere of the work space mean one thing—healthcare operators are busy, constantly. Their work environment can be hectic, noisy, and stressful—or worse. Consider this sample set of responsibilities, compiled from hospital switchboard operator job postings on Monster, Indeed, and Career Builder:

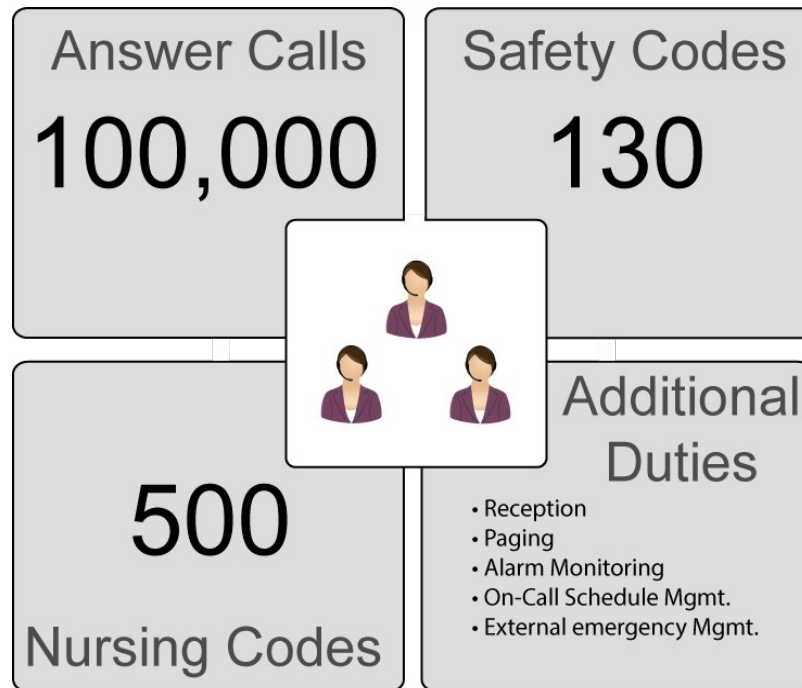
Call Handling Duties:

- Greet public callers, understand their need, and connect them to the appropriate destination
- Connect internal callers to requested destinations
- Provide external phone line access to employees
- Assist patients in making external calls
- Provide security coverage as needed
- Provide concierge/receptionist coverage as needed
- Maintain contact directory database and act as the facility contact data expert
- Maintain appointment schedules
- Assist in scheduling of conference calls, and track via call log
- Assist in scheduling of conference rooms, and track via appointment log
- Notify telecommunications/IT staff of any voice network problems
- Take messages for physicians, executives, and other employees
- Provide after-hours answering service functions for medical offices

Non-Call Handling Duties:

- Announce, clear, and track medical codes via code log
- Page staff and personnel as needed, track via page log
- Coordinate medical response to inbound ambulances and MedFlights
- Monitor medical gas supplies
- Notify security and medical staff of any external emergencies that may impact the hospital
- Maintain on-call schedule and provide on-call information to staff and employees
- Initiate emergency/adverse event procedures and notify key personnel, update procedure manuals as needed
- Schedule diagnostics procedures on behalf of patients and medical staff
- Support morgue attendant duties and coordinate with funeral directors
- Assist in filing, data entry, and other clerical duties as needed
- Provide security and concierge department coverage, as needed

Parlance customer data reveals the impact these many different responsibilities can have on monthly operator workload:



** Hypothetical hospital call center receiving 1.2M calls/year*

The many call handling and non-call handling duties of operators adds up to significant monthly workload.

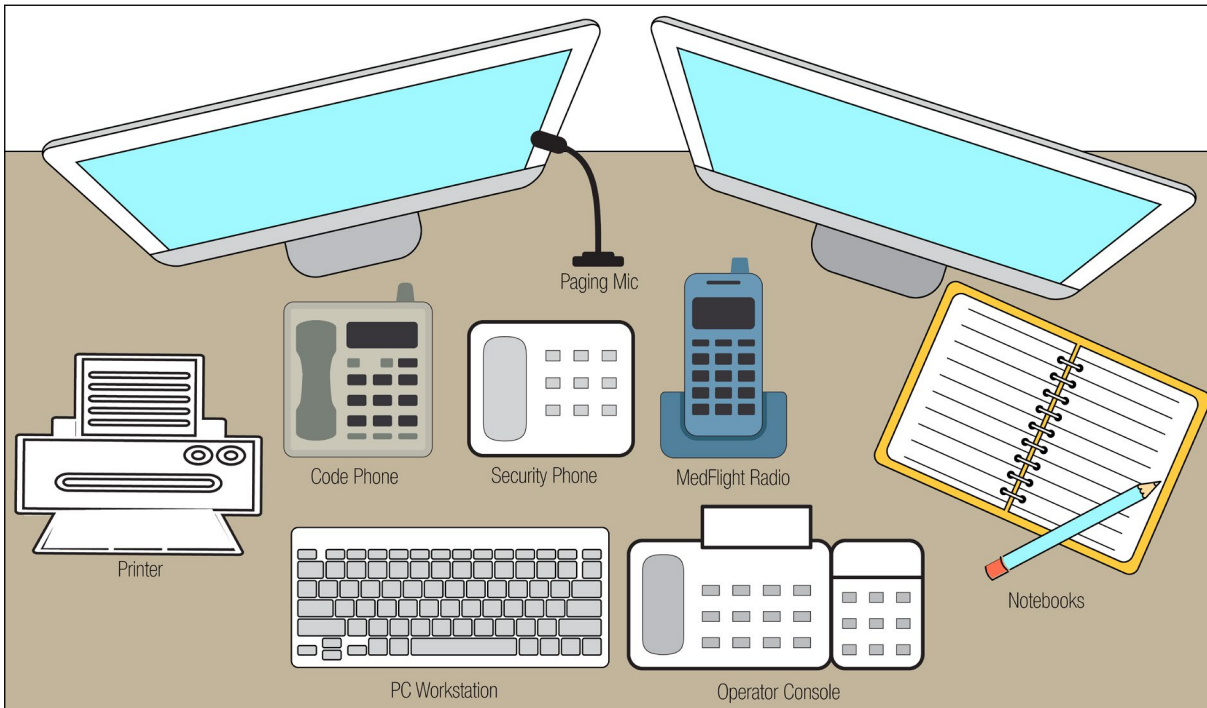
So where do switchboard operators priorities lie when faced with two competing sets of crucial responsibilities? They can deliver excellent service to callers—helping generate revenue and improving the hospital’s brand image. Or they can monitor alarms, communicate vital information across the facility, and coordinate medical responses that can mean life and death.

Unfortunately for callers, operators must drop everything when they need to manage one of their critical non-call handling responsibilities, such as an urgent code. During these events, calls are left to ring or are put on hold until operators can finish their code processes (announcing, notifying, clearing, tracking, etc.) Only then can they jump back into their primary responsibility—answering calls. Callers, meanwhile, have no knowledge or insight about why the phone remains unanswered, so they grow increasingly frustrated.

Operators Face a Dizzying Array of Technology

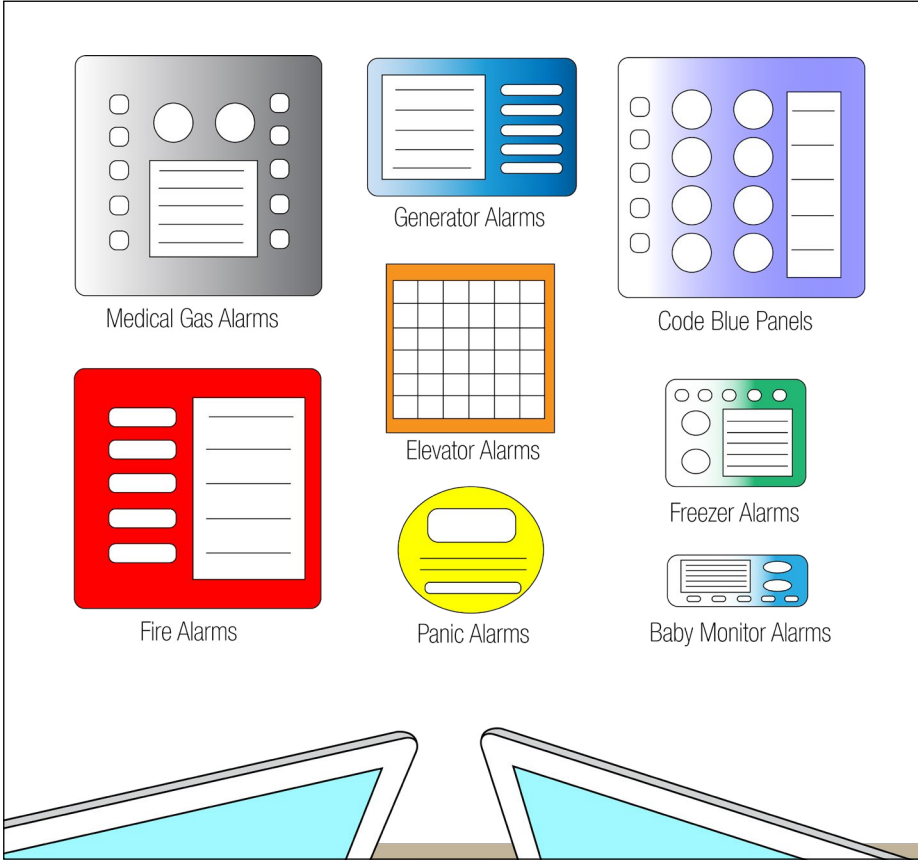
In addition to the different workload difficulties healthcare operators face, their workspace presents its own challenges. The switchboard room/call center can be a hectic, even chaotic atmosphere. Phones ringing, walkie-talkies relaying messages, alarm monitors for assorted facility services buzzing and beeping—it can be exciting, but also overwhelming.

To appreciate the complexity that hospital switchboard operators face, just take a look at the many different devices and tools commonly found in their workspaces:



Assorted communications needs necessitate a wide array of technology for operators to manage.

But the operator's desk is often just the beginning of their dauntingly complex work environment. On the walls, you'll find many different types of alarm panels and other display systems for operators to monitor—each featuring its own interface, sounds, and displays. These panels often represent many different eras of technology, some of it fairly outdated and/or non-intuitive.



Numerous alarm panels to monitor add further complexity to the workspace environment.

Operators Rise to the Challenge

Despite these challenges, healthcare switchboard operators are often known for being remarkably dedicated to delivering excellent service. Most healthcare facilities tell stories of how an operator helped save a life, went way above and beyond to provide assistance, or helped an emotionally charged caller in a time of need. Operators routinely stay late to provide shift-change coverage. They help other departments when needed. In times of crisis, they take an “all hands on deck” approach. They facilitate communications to, from, and within their healthcare network—24/7/365. Their commitment is remarkable, amazing even.

So considering how much your switchboard operators do for your patients and other caller communities, what can you do for them? How can you help them keep pace with call management and their other responsibilities? How can you make their work less stressful and more rewarding—while ensuring an exceptional caller experience?

A Refreshingly Effective Solution

Intuitive Self-Service

Today’s advanced and intuitive self-service solutions can help address common switchboard challenges and meet the expectations of 21st century callers. It’s like adding operators, but without increasing headcount. With additional virtual operators on your team, your dedicated switchboard operators no longer have to sacrifice customer service while dealing with codes, alarms, or other high-priority responsibilities. Traditional options, such as IVRs and auto attendants, provide poor performance and make a negative impact on customer satisfaction. But advanced, proven self-service solutions allow you to speak naturally and deliver fast, simple, and intuitive interaction that mimics a live operator. No menus or phone trees. No instructions. No frustration. Just a fast, accurate connection—and a pleasant experience.

Here are just a few of the ways new self-service technologies are helping switchboard operators in healthcare today:

- **Improve the Patient Journey**

Healthcare callers don’t want to be placed on hold. And they certainly don’t want to have to navigate a complex maze of options to get to the doctors, information, or resources they need. In fact, the majority of healthcare callers refuse to engage with traditional (and annoyingly inefficient) phone trees. They dive for the 0 button or simply do nothing. Hospitals employing dated IVRs and lackluster auto attendants are essentially sacrificing the patient experience in a misguided attempt to cut costs. In the long run, sticking with outdated technology costs you more in lost revenue—from abandoned calls, alienated callers, and brand degradation—than it saves.

More advanced and intuitive self-service solutions are easy and efficient for the caller, delivering much higher engagement rates, as well as much lower abandonments and opt-outs. They decrease the potential for lost revenue while ensuring that operators are available for critical callers who need personalized service.

- **Reduce Operator Call Load**

Thanks to intuitive and natural interaction capabilities, today's advanced self-service solutions can dramatically reduce the number of calls handled by your operators by as much as 50%. Callers with routine requests (which can total half of the call volumes in healthcare environments) are connected to their destination or information in seconds. This new efficiency frees operators to concentrate on more complex calls, or to focus on their many non-call handling duties. What does it mean for callers? It's a win-win for all callers. Callers get fast and simple connection for most requests—and immediate connection to an operator for more complex needs.

- **Empower Patient Self-Service**

Callers don't want to wait for an operator or agent, and they refuse to engage with phone trees and outdated IVRs. Delivering natural and intuitive connections makes it fast and easy for patients to get where they need to go and do what they need to do. When callers are given a fast and simple experience, self-service rates skyrocket—delivering the robust ROI healthcare organizations crave.

- **Enhance Your Brand**

Today's advanced self-service solutions can also extend beyond the switchboard to create an exceptional enterprise-wide caller experience that enhances your brand. By replacing IVRs at the switchboard, in the contact center, at departmental locations—even at affiliated medical practices—callers can enjoy a holistic self-service experience that gets them to their required resource in seconds. One voice. One health network. One brand experience. Thousands of satisfied callers.

- **Consolidate Operator Services**

As many healthcare networks look to reduce costs by centralizing their operator services, advanced self-service solutions can help streamline services and keep operators available when needed. By triaging calls and directing them to the proper destination, resource, or service line (for callers dialing into the wrong line), today's self-service solutions increase the speed of access and reduce the level of effort for callers.

Turn Switchboard Challenges into Better Caller Experiences

As you know, switchboard operators serving healthcare organizations have a very difficult role. They act as your frontline for customer satisfaction, while supporting a wide range of services and processes that impact hospital operations, medical outcomes, and the patient experience. Managers widely acknowledge operators as hardworking and dedicated, but they are often overloaded with too many responsibilities to manage all of them effectively.

The traditional approach to solving switchboard operator issues meant increasing staffing. But escalating, budget-busting personnel costs can become unrealistic very quickly. Many healthcare networks have turned to IVRs and auto attendants to help solve the issue—much to the annoyance of callers. Slow, cumbersome, and unresponsive, these outdated applications can do more harm than good in the long run.

More and more healthcare networks and facilities are deploying advanced self-service solutions to assist their operators and please their callers. Fast, simple, and intuitive, these flexible solutions deliver the fast, easy, pleasant experiences that today's callers expect—and the results that switchboard managers crave, from higher efficiency to improved caller satisfaction.

About Parlance

We are caller advocates, on a mission to make businesses easier to engage for callers. We partner with our customers, providing intelligent, virtual agents and operators. Our solutions leverage the latest speech recognition technology to emulate live agents and operators, and we bundle software, expertise, personal attention, and performance management as a service. We're transforming the caller experience, and we invite you to join us.



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