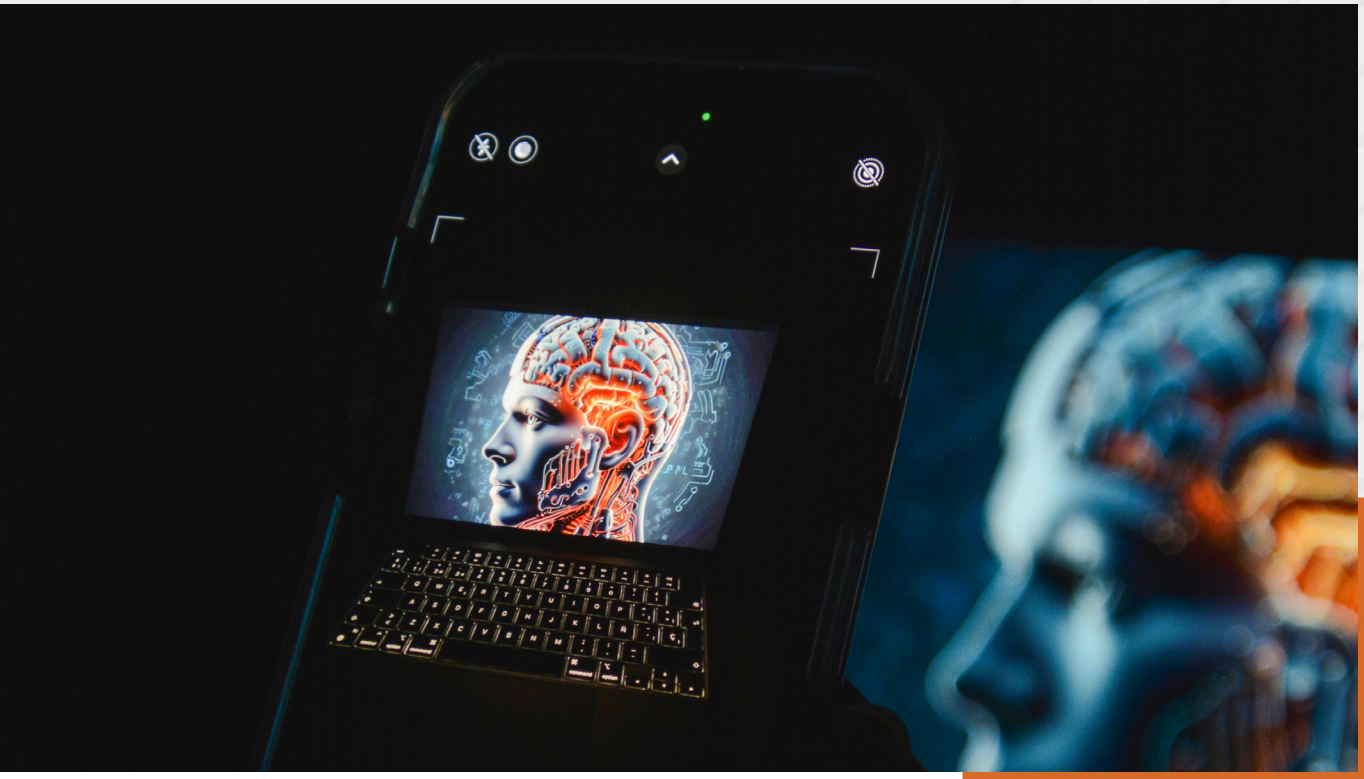
CCW CUSTOMER CONTACT WEEK DIGITAL

2025 SPECIAL REPORT SERIES

AI Trends in 2026

WRITTEN BY: BROOKE LYNCH



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Featuring Insights From



Michele Carlson
Director of Product Marketing
& Head of Content Strategy
NICE



Tamsin Dollin
Director of Product Marketing
NICE

Introduction

AI is reshaping the contact center in ways that go far beyond efficiency. It is becoming the backbone of how organizations design, deliver, and scale transformation of customer experience. From decisioning to workflow orchestration to elevating agent performance, AI is no longer an experiment; it is the new operating model. And leaders know it: CCW Digital research shows 99% of organizations are maintaining or increasing their AI investments this year.

Yet investment alone does not guarantee impact. As AI adoption accelerates, executives are grappling with a bigger question: Which trends matter most, and how can leaders implement AI with meaningful, measurable outcomes?

The answer starts with moving beyond hype and grounding AI in a clear strategy. When brands understand where AI creates value, and when they deploy it through a unified platform that connects data, intelligence, and action, transformation becomes predictable, scalable, and completely focused on the customer.

CCW Digital is thrilled to partner with NiCE to showcase the strategic AI trends defining CX in 2026 and to discuss the future of technology in the contact center.

Michele Carlson, Director of Product Marketing at NiCE explains, “The AI era belongs to leaders who can clearly identify their AI use cases and implement with confidence. Customers are forming opinions instantly.” CCW found that one-third of customers already see AI improving their experience, while many remain cautious. The solution is a unified AI platform, where intelligence that powers every workflow, interaction, and decision, turning data into actionable outcomes at enterprise scale.”

By prioritizing high-impact use cases and investing in a platform that unifies data and insights to automate actions, organizations can build an AI-powered experience that strengthens trust, accelerates performance, and consistently exceeds customer expectations.

3 AI Trends Guiding The Future of CX

AI is now central to how organizations design, deliver, and scale customer experience. But impact doesn't come from adopting tools, it comes from understanding where AI creates meaningful value. These three AI trends offer a roadmap for leaders entering the next phase of their AI journey with clarity and confidence.

1. AI-First vs. AI-Only

Customers are signaling both optimism and concern about AI's growing role in service. CCW Digital research shows 60% worry they will have a harder time reaching a human as AI adoption rises, and 91% believe companies are increasingly pushing them toward self-service.

These concerns are understandable, but they don't reflect the full story. When deployed thoughtfully, AI strengthens rather than replaces human experience. Self-service powered by conversational and agentic AI gives customers fast, intuitive, 24/7 support, while reserving human agents for the moments that require expertise, personal connection, and complex judgment.

Carlson shares that customers want an experience that goes beyond speed. They want experiences that feel effortless, consistent, and responsive, and they expect them on their terms. Delivering this level of service requires organizations to augment their human workforce with AI.

As Tamsin Dollin, Director of Product Marketing at NiCE, states, "Conversational and agentic AI agents act as first responders by proactively engaging customers, personalizing at scale, and keeping interactions personal in real time. Meanwhile, your human experts are positioned to do what they do best: connect, relate, and innovate."

Critically, AI-first is NOT AI-only. AI-first means designing experiences where technology leads the routine, repeatable, and transactional work, and humans lead the moments that differentiate the brand. As Carlson explains, "A true AI-first strategy means designing experiences where tech and talent collaborate, and where people, processes, and technology move together as one.,"

As Dollin adds, it is not an AI-only mindset, but an AI-first strategy that allows organizations to provide customers with the support that they need, wherever and whenever they need it.

By placing AI agents on the front line, organizations reduce friction, accelerate outcomes, and ensure human support is available where it has the greatest impact. Without AI in that first layer, human agents can become overwhelmed, and customers feel it.

2. Reworking the Agent Desktop with Agentic AI

AI investment spans the full customer journey, but one of the most transformative opportunities sits inside the agent workflow. CCW Digital research shows 84% of leaders are prioritizing workflow automation, a clear signal that the agent desktop is ready for reinvention.

The future agent is more strategic and consultative, solving higher-value issues and building deeper customer relationships. That future hinges on agentic AI.

"With 77% of agents handling complex tasks most of the time, the next leap forward lies in intelligent enablement," says Carlson. "Powered by Language Action Models (LAMs), agentic AI transforms service from task management to impressive outcomes. Rethink the agent desktop as a dynamic AI layer that responds to natural language and executes tasks end to end. Instead of menus and clicks, agentic AI can plan, decide, and complete work across systems instantly."

This marks a fundamental shift. Yesterday's AI supported agents with suggestions. Today's agentic AI takes action by updating payments, processing refunds, summarizing interactions, triggering workflows, and completing back-office work automatically.

The result? Agents spend less time navigating systems and more time doing what customers value most: resolving complex issues, offering expertise, and building trust. Rather than making experiences less human, agentic AI amplifies human connection by removing the work that distracts from it.

3. AI Agents Help Unify the Organization

As organizations advance their AI strategies, misalignment becomes impossible to ignore. Siloed data, disconnected systems, and fragmented processes undermine ROI and limit AI's effectiveness. According to CCW Digital research, only 7% of organizations say their service, sales, marketing, and support teams are fully aligned on customer experience.

This gap directly impacts speed, consistency, and customer satisfaction, and AI agents are emerging as a powerful way to close it.

"Customer experience extends far beyond the contact center, and now, so do AI agents," says Dollin. "Today's AI-powered workforce operates across the enterprise, resolving issues, updating records, and triggering fulfillment without handoffs or delays. The outcome is a direct, intelligent path from intent to resolution, creating a more connected experience at every touchpoint."

This cross-functional intelligence is essential in the age of AI. Bottlenecks that once felt inevitable, for instance, manual follow-ups, data inconsistencies, and back-office delays, become solvable when AI agents orchestrate work across systems and teams.

Dollin highlights how leaders should begin: "Audit where customer requests still rely on manual follow-ups or back-office intervention. Each friction point is an opportunity for enterprise AI agents to orchestrate work across systems and teams."

Understanding the full customer and agent journey enables leaders to deploy AI agents where they have the greatest impact. The result is an end-to-end experience that feels seamless for customers and significantly more productive for employees.





Trends Today, Table Stakes Tomorrow: Where to Begin

In a market where innovation is accelerating, leaders can't afford to treat AI as a future project. The trends reshaping customer experience today will become tomorrow's expectations. Organizations that prepare now, by focusing on the right use cases and building the right foundation, will be the ones that lead confidently into the next era of AI-powered service.

To stay ahead, the priority is clear: invest in the use cases that create the greatest, most immediate impact.

Targeted AI Use Cases for Maximum Impact

When asked about their goals for AI investments, contact center leaders consistently highlight three priorities:

- increasing self-service adoption,
- elevating proactive customer engagement, and
- freeing agents to focus on high-value, complex interactions.

To achieve these outcomes, NiCE recommends starting with targeted, high-impact use cases that produce measurable ROI quickly.

One of the most important use cases today is intelligent workflow automation. Instead of relying on manual steps or swivel-chair processes, AI-driven workflows move effortlessly across systems, channels, and teams. It's no surprise that 84% of organizations are prioritizing workflow automation; it removes friction, improves consistency, and unlocks capacity for more strategic work.

AI also plays a critical role in automating decisions and taking action. As Carlson notes, AI can now update records, process requests, resolve tasks, and route issues autonomously. This kind of intelligent action enables real-time, proactive engagement and drastically improves speed and accuracy.

Self-service remains another essential use case. Customers expect 24/7 support that is intuitive, conversational, and capable of resolving issues instantly. Delivering this level of service requires a robust AI-first self-service layer, not only to meet demand, but to create a consistent experience across voice, chat, and digital channels.

Choosing the right use cases is where AI success begins. When leaders deploy AI intentionally by prioritizing opportunities with measurable impact, they build a foundation that can scale across the entire end-to-end experience. From there, AI becomes not just a tool, but an operating model that powers continuous improvement and future-ready CX.

Looking Ahead: AI and Trust

As organizations accelerate AI adoption into 2026, the next phase will hinge on something far more foundational than technology: trust. With nearly every enterprise investing in AI this year, the differentiator will not be who uses AI, but who can prove that AI is reliable, transparent, and delivering measurable value.

Carlson notes that trust becomes the defining advantage in this new era. And trust requires visibility. After years of AI buzz, leaders need clarity they can stand behind: How is AI making decisions? Where is it driving impact? And can its actions be validated?

"It's not simply about monitoring system health; it's about giving leaders the ability to understand, explain, and stand behind the intelligence that drives their business. When every decision, prediction, and action can be traced and measured, AI shifts from an experimental tool to a strategic partner," Carlson explains.

This shift is essential. Organizations cannot continue their AI journey on hype; they need outcomes. And that begins with giving leaders transparent insight into performance, risk, and business impact. When leaders can see how AI influences resolution, efficiency, satisfaction, and cost, AI becomes not just a tool but a catalyst for confident decision-making.

Looking ahead, AI will increasingly influence strategy, operations, and customer experience at every level. Preparing for this future requires more than deploying new features. It demands treating AI as a strategic partner, not a tactical fix, and building a holistic AI strategy that can scale, adapt, and deliver sustained value.

The organizations that do this well will earn something rare in today's landscape: customer trust, employee trust, and leadership trust in the intelligence powering their business.

Case Studies

Blue Cross of Idaho

Blue Cross of Idaho aimed to enhance contact center efficiency and customer satisfaction through a fully integrated solution. They selected the NiCE contact center platform, combining Desktop Automation and Workforce Management to streamline operations, alongside Interaction Management and Analytics to capture and analyze data from all customer interactions, delivering a more efficient and insightful experience for both agents and customers.

The results:

- 17% general reduction in average handle time (AHT)
- 39% more efficient interactions
- 87% faster talk time for specialized calls
- $250,000 annual savings

"With NiCE's data integration, automation, and real-time guidance, we knew we'd hit a gold mine." - James Mills , IT Supervisor, Blue Cross of Idaho