



The Human in the Middle

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AI is taking the easy calls. What is left for people is the work that defines the relationship, and it needs a different kind of agent, leader and partner.

I recently spent two days with the leadership team of one of the clients we support. Much of the conversation came back to a single phrase they use for their customer service strategy: human in the middle.

The idea is simple to say. AI takes on the routine, transactional work. People handle the conversations that need a person. Most service leaders I talk with agree with it in principle. Far fewer have worked through what it actually asks of their operation, their frontline and their partners.

My colleague DeJon Gaines, our Chief Technology Officer, recently wrote "Where the Human Stays." He argued that the placement of the human is an architecture decision, and that a well-designed system routes on consequence as well as confidence. I agree with every word of it. This piece is about the other half of the same question. Once the system knows where the human belongs, what does it take to make the human in the middle good at the job?

That is not a technology question. It is a question of people, leadership and partnership, and it is where I see most of the real-world work still to be done.

01 What is left when the easy calls are gone

Start with what changes on the frontline.

On a billing program we support, an AI agent now handles balance inquiries and standard payments. Those were once a steady share of what our agents handled every day. They were short, predictable and easy to get right.

What reaches our people now looks very different. A common example: a customer who has moved and finds they are being billed for both the old and the new location. They are frustrated, sometimes angry, and they have a point. Someone has to de-escalate, explain clearly what happened, and resolve it by removing the charge or issuing a credit. No script covers it end to end, and no customer wants to hear one.

That is the future of the frontline in a single call. As AI absorbs the easy work, the human workload does not just get smaller. It gets harder. Every interaction a person handles is now, by definition, one the system could not or should not finish on its own.

Our operations team said it plainly when we discussed this: AI is going to take on most of the easy transactional work, and what is left for our agents will be the complex calls that need a person to deliver the kind of service AI cannot.

02 The middle is not a handoff point

It is tempting to picture the human in the middle as a safety net, the place a conversation lands when the AI gives up. That picture undersells the role.

In practice, the person in the middle stands between three things at once.

1

Between the system and the customer.

The agent has to understand what the AI already did and said, so the customer never has to start over, and then decide what to do with it.

2

Between the policy and the person.

Policies are written for the general case. The customer on the line is a specific case. The agent is the one who has to apply the rule fairly, recognize when an exception is warranted, and explain the outcome in a way the customer accepts.

3

Between the brand and the relationship.

For many customers, the one conversation they have with a person is the moment that decides whether they stay. The agent is not just resolving an issue. They are carrying the client's reputation into the hardest interaction of the customer's year.

Seen that way, the human in the middle is not where automation ends. It is where the relationship is won or lost.

The job has changed. Hiring has to change with it.

If the work is harder, the people doing it need different strengths.

For a long time, frontline hiring in our industry favored speed, accuracy and the ability to follow a process consistently across hundreds of similar calls. Those still matter. But when the routine calls are gone, the profile shifts toward people who can stay calm with an upset customer, listen for what is not being said, explain a complicated situation in plain language, and make a sound judgment call without waiting for permission.

That has practical consequences:

 Hiring	 Training	 Tenure
Hiring has to test for judgment and de-escalation, not just system aptitude. Scenario-based assessments built on real contact types tell you far more than a typing test.	Training has to move from scripts to situations. New agents need practice with the hardest calls they will face, not the easiest ones, because the easiest ones are no longer theirs.	Tenure matters more. The knowledge that lets an experienced agent resolve a messy billing dispute in one call takes time to build. Attrition in the middle is more expensive than attrition used to be, because the people leaving are the ones handling the calls that matter most.

IN HEALTHCARE AND PATIENT ACCESS

In healthcare and patient access, the same shift is already visible. When scheduling confirmations and routine reminders move to automated channels, the calls that remain are the patient who is confused about a referral, the caregiver trying to coordinate several appointments, or the caller who is frightened and needs to be heard before they can be helped. Those are not calls you can hand to someone in their second week with a script.

The shift asks just as much of supervisors and managers.

When an operation handles a mix of easy and hard calls, a supervisor can coach to the process and catch most problems. When almost every call is a hard one, coaching has to focus on judgment: why an agent chose to issue a credit, how they handled an angry customer's first thirty seconds, whether they explained the outcome or just announced it. That requires leaders who can see a wide range of interactions and coach on specific behaviors, not just scores.

It also requires leaders to protect their teams. Agents in the middle absorb more frustration per hour than they used to, because the frustrated customers are the ones who reach them. Burnout is a real risk. Schedules, breaks, peer support and a clear path to escalate to a supervisor are not perks in this model. They are part of the operating design.

THE MEASUREMENT TRAP

There is a measurement trap here too, and leaders need to see it coming. When AI removes the shortest, simplest contacts, the averages on the human side change even if nothing about performance does. Average handle time tends to rise. Volume per agent tends to fall. Satisfaction can dip simply because the remaining customers arrived with harder problems. An operation that judges its people on the same scorecard it used before the shift will conclude that they are getting worse at exactly the moment they are doing more valuable work.

Average handle time
tends to rise

Volume per agent
tends to fall

Satisfaction can dip

The fix is to measure the middle on what it is there to do: resolve the problem in one contact, keep the customer, repair the relationship, and get the judgment calls right.

Resolve the
problem in one
contact

Keep the
customer

Repair the
relationship

Get the
judgment calls
right

Human in the middle only works if the person in the middle is allowed to finish the job.

In the billing example above, resolution means removing a charge or issuing a credit. If the agent has to submit a request and tell the customer someone will follow up, the AI did its part, the agent did their part, and the customer still leaves unhappy. The most important design decisions in this model are often not about technology at all. They are about authority.

In my experience, the clients who get the most from this model settle a few questions early and in writing:

01

What can the agent resolve on the call?

Credits, waivers, exceptions and adjustments, with clear limits.

02

When does the agent escalate, and to whom?

A defined path, with a response time, so escalation is not a dead end.

03

What does the AI hand over?

The account history, what the customer has already been told, and what the system recommends, so the agent starts from the full picture.

04

How will we review the hard calls together?

A regular look at the toughest interactions, so policy and practice improve together.

Those decisions sit with the client, but they are best made together with the partner who runs the frontline. That brings me to the last point.

What this means for the partner you choose

For years, outsourcing conversations centered on cost per contact, speed of answer and how quickly a partner could scale. Those still matter. But in a human in the middle model, the partner is not handling the overflow. It is handling the interactions that most shape how your customers feel about you.

That changes what you should ask. Alongside the technology questions DeJon proposed, I would add three about the people in the middle:

1**How do you hire and train for the calls AI cannot handle?**

Ask to see the assessment and the training scenarios, not a description of them.

2**How do you measure your people after automation changes the call mix?**

A partner still managing to the old averages will push agents in the wrong direction.

3**What authority will your agents have to resolve the problem on the call, and how will we decide it together?**

If the answer is that every exception goes back to you, the model will not deliver what it promises.

At TLCx, this is the work we are focused on with the clients we support. The technology is moving quickly, and it should. Our job is to make sure that when a customer reaches a person, that person is ready, equipped and empowered to make the conversation worth having.

The middle is where the relationship lives

AI will keep getting better at the routine work, and every operation should welcome that. It frees people from the calls that never needed them.

But the companies that win the next few years will not be the ones that automate the most. They will be the ones that invest the most in what is left: the people in the middle, the leaders who coach them, and the authority that lets them finish the job.

If your team is working through what human in the middle means for your own operation, I would welcome the conversation.



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