



The Future of Work Now: The digital transformation of customer service and the emergence of Ireland's Cx professional

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CONTENTS:

Foreword	3
Preface	5
Executive Summary	6
Key Findings	8
Key Recommendations	10
Introduction	11
Research Objectives	13
Section 1: Research Method	15
Research phase I: the leader perspective	16
Research phase II: the employee perspective	18
Research phase III: the broader business perspective	18
Section 2: Research Findings	21
The digital transformation landscape:	22
Top-down & bottom-up digital transformation:	22
Key shifts due to digital transformation:	25
The Cx role profile:	26
The Cx employee skill set:	26
Skill transferability: emergence of the Cx professional:	29
The traditional Cx professional roadmap:	29
The post-digital transformation Cx acquisition and development roadmap:	30
Will new roles be created in the Cx sector in Ireland?	31
Section 3: Next Steps for Organisations	33
Conclusion	35
Bibliography	36

A man and a woman in business attire are looking at a screen. The woman is gesturing with her hands. The image has a blue tint.

With the continued development of innovative leadership and workplace practices, there is strong potential to position Ireland's Cx professional at the forefront of our digitally transformed, customer solutions offering.

FOREWORD



Globally, the Customer Experience (Cx) industry is undergoing a major evolution as a result of advances in technology. Digital disruption through automation including chatbots, artificial intelligence and machine learning are making a significant impact on Cx delivery and business models today. In addition, the ongoing shifts in customer expectations are impacting the way that the Cx activities traditionally operate.

Ireland is recognised internationally as a centre of excellence for Cx due to the availability of its highly-skilled, adaptable and mobile workforce. However, skills are dynamic and subject to obsolescence meaning a persistent focus must be maintained on the development of our workforce. There is a need to ensure the skills base reflects not just the current business demands but the challenges of future growth in existing and new markets.

Anticipating future skills is a challenge given the complex and dynamic modern world of work. This study considers how digitisation is shaping new organisational skills, roles and careers in a Cx context and the move to higher value more complex services. It seeks to build insights into the breadth and depth of the impact of digital transformation on Cx employees across different industry sectors and businesses in Ireland. Practically, it looks at identifying the knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics these jobs require, and how to develop role profiles that a digitalised workplace demands.

I would like to acknowledge all of those who contributed to this research report. Thanks are due to the many enterprises, employees and stakeholders who contributed their time and efforts. I would also like to express my thanks to the Department of Work and Employment Studies at the Kemmy Business School in the University of Limerick and Dr. Sarah Kieran. Finally, I would like to thank the ICBE Advanced Productivity Skillnet steering group and the ICBE team for managing and leading this study to a successful conclusion.

Paul Healy
Chief Executive
Skillnet Ireland



PREFACE

ICBE Advanced Productivity Skillnet members are undergoing fundamental transformation in the way they work. Robotic process automation (RPA), artificial intelligence (AI) and bots are replacing human tasks, but not necessarily replacing humans. This scientific research shows that the impact on the workforce is complex, nuanced and still very much in transition.

"The emergence of a clear customer experience (Cx) skill set is a breakthrough for our members and offers them a pathway to transition workers from roles vulnerable to digital transformation to the highly-skilled knowledge-based roles required post automation."

Professor Eamonn Murphy (Emeritus) | Managing Director

Vivienne Kiernan | Customer Relations Manager

Irish Centre for Business Excellence (ICBE)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With Ireland increasingly positioned as a customer solutions hub for the global customer experience (Cx) sector¹, this study is concerned with the impact of digital transformation on such Irish organisations, specifically their acquisition and development of Cx employees.

It is already known that developments in artificial intelligence (AI), robotic process automation (RPA), online self-service solutions and the general automation of Cx processes have an impact not just on the organisation's Cx strategy and business model but equally impact the Cx employee's needs and experiences of work. While significant insights are already available on the impact of digital transformation on Ireland's

workforce², evidence to date on the nature of Cx work and the skills required of Cx employees post-digital transformation is limited.

While not exclusive to larger organisations, Cx employees are prevalent in multi-national corporations (MNCs) in finance, Information Communications Technology (ICT), telecoms, insurance and other similar sectors. Typically providing customer solutions for large, global customers, they are also central to the provision of global business or shared services. As such, a Cx employee is defined here as any employee engaged in desk-based, knowledge-intensive, Cx work, either for internal or external customers.

"Administrative functions across service companies worldwide continue to be impacted by the drive towards increased automation. The degree to which such jobs will change are directly correlated to the routine or repetitive nature of those roles. This research reconfirms Northern Trust's understanding of these industry trends and we welcome the report's findings as an opportunity to augment our current change management initiatives."

Noel Gavin | Global Head, C&IS Global Learning Northern Trust

The Irish Centre for Business Excellence (ICBE) and their Advanced Productivity Skillnet, established the key objectives for this study as:

1. Examine the impact of digital transformation and automation within Cx roles.
2. Develop a role profile for Cx employees in Ireland.
3. Identify the skills required for these roles as digital transformation continues.
4. Explore a talent acquisition and development roadmap for Cx employees to help policy-makers, agencies, organisations and individuals, transition people from roles made vulnerable by digital transformation.
5. Identify if, and if so where, new Cx roles will be created in Ireland.

1 www.idaireland.com/newsroom/publications/ida_cx_transformation

2 www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/digital-transformation-assessing-the-impact-of-digitalisation-on-ireland-s-workforce.pdf

Led by the Department of Work and Employment Studies at the Kemmy Business School in the University of Limerick, this explorative study was undertaken across five sites and eight business domains in two large MNCs operating in Ireland. One organisation was in the financial services sector and the other in ICT. The research involved 32 in-depth leader interviews and 11 focus groups with 56 Cx employees. Findings were validated from a wider business perspective across organisations of different sizes and industry sectors including international and national retail banking, entertainment media, medical devices, global business/shared services and a representative for a number of small to medium enterprises (SMEs).

Findings in this study highlight the post-digital transformation of Ireland's Cx professional. Unlike the call centre agents of previous years, these Cx employees are highly skilled knowledge-workers with a significant depth and breadth of service skill that can be transferred across business domains and industry sectors.

This study concludes that, with the continued development of innovative leadership and workplace practices, there is strong potential to position Ireland's Cx professional at the forefront of our digitally transformed, customer solutions offering.

"This research is very relevant and timely for Rabobank in Ireland; while automation has already had some impact on our business, it is clear that the impact will become more profound in the next few years. As we are part of an international organisation, the identification in the research of the need for cultural dexterity in particular has been valuable. We will be using this research as a key input to our HR-led skills and learning and development planning over the coming period."

Nuala O'Hagan | Continuous Improvement Lead in Rabobank Dublin

”

KEY FINDINGS

1. **The 'Future of Work' is now:** While Irish organisations are at different stages of their digital transformation, those participating in this study are already actively engaged in digitally transformed Cx work.
2. **The emergence of the Cx professional:** A common Cx employee role and Cx professional career is evident regardless of the stage of digital transformation, the industry sector or the business domain.
3. **The 80:20 flip:** There is very clear evidence that Cx employees are undergoing a significant transformation in their work, moving away from high-volume, single-service transactions towards more complex, value add customer solutions. Led by digital transformation, this is referred to here as the '80:20 flip'.
4. **Cx skill dexterity:** Findings show that, while Cx employee skills themselves have not considerably changed due to digital transformation, the level and frequency at which they must be applied is significantly increased. This study specifically identifies the need for skill dexterity in Cx employees. Dexterity is defined as a sharpness of mind, or skill, in thinking creatively, and understanding and expressing something quickly and easily, moving swiftly and smoothly between tasks. As such, the Cx employee skills can be summarised as follows, where all skills are brought into play on a daily basis:

That is, 80% of the routine, standard service work is being automated. The remaining 20% of non-routine, non-standard work (problem solving, decision making, value add) will now grow to become 80% of the role. (See Section 2, Research Findings for more detail on the 80:20 flip).

The Cx professional skill set		
Task skills (Things we do)	Relational skills (Working with other people)	Cognitive skills (How we think)
Data dexterity	Intercultural dexterity	Sensemaker
Interdisciplinary dexterity	Customer centricity	Critical thinker
	Open-market negotiator	Agile worker
		Agile learner
Contextual business knowledge and acumen (Business strategy, culture, products, services etc.)		

5. **Skill transferability:** Importantly, the skills identified in Cx employees are transferrable across sectors, organisations and business domains. This finding highlights significant labour market potential for the cross-transfer of people and skills in the Cx space.
6. **Readily acquired business acumen:** While there is a context-specific knowledge base required, there is leader and employee consensus that this knowledge can be acquired through intensive on-boarding in the first 8-10 weeks with an organisation. Therefore, while the Cx skills needed post-digital transformation are becoming more profound, the context in which those skills are applied can be acquired in manageable ways.
7. **Need for continued innovation in Cx employee acquisition and development:** Leaders are already revisiting their Cx acquisition and development strategies and practices. There is evidence of some very innovative and effective practices to source and develop people with Cx skills (see roadmap page 30) but they appear to be in pockets, at site or domain level.
8. **Need for more proactive bottom-up digital transformation:** Findings show varying degrees of proactivity among leaders in initiating bottom-up Cx digital transformation, despite many believing it is the key to securing the future of the Irish customer solutions offering.
9. **Need for increased understanding of the post-digital Cx offering:** Leaders are keenly aware of the need for, and impact of, the digital transformation on the Cx sector in Ireland. However, this study highlights a lack of consensus among leaders and employees around the post-digital Cx 'value add'. That is, as 80% of the existing Cx role is digitally transformed, how the remaining 'service space' is occupied remains unclear.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

A number of key recommendations stem from these empirical findings, including areas where further research is required.

1. **Recognition of the complexity of Cx work as Ireland's digital transformation of the Cx sector continues:** The concept of skill dexterity and a rich understanding of the Cx employee skill set needs to be developed by human resource management (HRM) functions within organisations. Further investigation of the Cx skill set among SMEs would be of great value.
2. **Further innovation of Cx acquisition and development practices in organisations:** This new understanding of the Cx skill set should encourage more innovative Cx acquisition and development pathways are outlined in more detail in – Evolving Cx roadmap diagram, page 31. However, further investigation is required to better detail individual elements of this pathway e.g. labour market sources, recruitment and selection tools, on-boarding strategies, developing agile learning organisations etc.
3. **Bottom-up digital transformation strategies require continued partnership between Irish organisations and government agencies:** From the perspective of Ireland Inc., the post-digital transformation of our Cx offering needs to be aggressively pursued by organisational leaders and government agencies. Bottom-up digital transformation strategies and highly innovative Cx acquisition and development practices have the potential to further strengthen Ireland's position as a preferred customer solutions hub. Further research in strategic management and relationship marketing disciplines is required to explore the Cx value add post-digital transformation.
4. **Agency-led Cx professional skills programmes:** This skill set should inform further development of cross-agency, partnership-based strategies for Cx acquisition and development (such as university co-operative programmes, internships, upskilling and transition programmes, apprenticeships, vocational and postgraduate transition programmes etc.).
5. **Higher education programme reviews:** This new Cx skill set should inform 3rd level educators as they continue to review programmes of study in business and ICT disciplines to ensure they are meeting the skill requirements of the Cx professional career path, as much as is feasible at undergraduate/postgraduate levels.
6. **Understanding of the digital transformation leadership skill set:** Finally and most significantly, the challenge of this post-digital workplace necessitates further research into the leadership skill sets required to realise this potential for organisations and their people.

INTRODUCTION

While it is known that disruptive technologies such as AI and RPA are significantly affecting work processes in many business sectors, the impact of digital transformation on the roles within these sectors is less clear (Dolphin, 2015). This study is concerned with the impact of digital transformation on employees in the Cx sector in Ireland.

Cx employees are typically found in industry sectors such as finance, ICT, telecoms, entertainment media, insurance and other similar customer solutions organisations. Cx employees are also central to the provision of global business or shared services that is the servicing of enterprise-wide internal customers, usually in such business domains as ICT, finance, supply chain and HRM.

Regardless of the industry sector, we already know that customer service today is less about managing a high volume of standard, single-service transactions and more about the resolution of a lower volume of complex service needs and critical issues. As the impact of technology on the Cx sector is only going to increase in the coming years, we need to understand how this will affect the Cx employee role and skill set, which is an integral part of the Cx proposition (Larivière et al., 2017, Bowen, 2016).

While the full impact of technology on the future of jobs is as of yet an unknown (Frey, 2016), there is sufficient evidence that work is becoming polarised along a technology and human relations spectrum with technology related tasks increasing and human related tasks decreasing. Digital transformation in the Cx sector typically involves the centralisation of systems, the standardisation and automation of processes, and then the optimisation of employees.

It is known to lead to increases in productivity and decreases in cost. However, according to Cedefop's European Skills and Jobs Survey³, there is a risk that organisations and their employees may not always share these benefits equally.

³ <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/8088>.

"This Future of Work research resonates with the complex digital transformation we are currently undergoing in Bank of Ireland. We can see the 80:20 flip transition happening across the organisation and while this poses challenges for much of our staff, we must also be aware of the challenge this poses for our leaders. Leaders will need to prepare for the role change of the employees they manage; they need to enable their staff to make that transition to this complex more challenging role. Therefore, it is important that we in Bank of Ireland continue to support our leaders to ensure they have the right skills to effectively manage this transition."

Maria Kelly | Head of Bank of Ireland, Limerick

The need for more research into the Cx role and skill set has been repeatedly noted (Russell, 2008, Larivière et al., 2017, Bowen, 2016). While a range of '21st century skills' have been documented previously⁴, understanding the nature of Cx work during and post digital transformation, so that specific Cx employee skills can be developed and work opportunities fully exploited, is vital for Ireland's continued development as a customer solutions hub. Previous research into the future of work has found that a failure to recognise the skills associated with the successful management of automated front-ends, service processes, work queues, demanding customers and all the emotional and cognitive demands this entails can frequently go unrecognised by organisations (Hampson et al., 2009).

There is also a concern that digital transformation can lead to increased heterogeneity and the de-skilling of employees, reducing the complexity of roles and resulting in the loss of existing hard and soft skills over time (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002). To further complicate the issue, such highly skilled and multi-faceted employees are considered to be in short supply, with unmet labour demands representing significant challenges for organisations operating in more knowledge-intensive markets (Russell, 2008). This context presents significant challenges for organisations as they attempt to translate future skill requirements into talent acquisition and development programmes (Hurrell et al., 2013).

⁴ (Bainbridge, 2015), (Dolphin, 2015), (Davies et al., 2011), (Broadbent, 2015), (Frey, 2016), (World Economic Forum Future of Skills Report, 2018), (Sousa and Wilks, 2018), (Turiman et al., 2019).



RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

It is incumbent on policy makers, government agencies, educators and other influencers to ensure the Irish labour market is 'skill-ready' for the types of roles that will be available to them in this future world of work. It is also important to ensure that those organisations who have roles to offer can successfully meet their Cx acquisition and development needs.


This study seeks to build insights into the breadth and depth of the impact of digital transformation on Cx employees across different industry sectors and business domains operating in Ireland. Funded by Skillnet Ireland, through the ICBE Advanced Productivity Skillnet, the key objectives for this study are to:

1. Examine the impact of digital transformation and automation within Cx roles.
2. Develop a role profile for Cx employees in Ireland.
3. Identify the skills required for these roles as digital transformation continues.
4. Explore a talent acquisition and development roadmap for Cx employees to help policy-makers, agencies, organisations and individuals, transition people from roles made vulnerable by digital transformation.
5. Identify if, and if so where, new Cx roles will be created in Ireland.

A clear skill set for Cx employees is required if organisations, government agencies and educators are to safeguard opportunities for those already employed in this space and create new opportunities for the unemployed. This study of Cx employees in Ireland aims to bridge that gap.

This research into the Future of Work is timely for us. It validates and further clarifies the Cpl strategy as we experiment with new talent technologies, drive new perspectives on areas such as D&I, talent strategies and new operating models and prototype new solutions and partnerships so that we can always remain relevant to our clients and candidates."

Graham Burns | Cpl Regional Sales Director



In total, across the 2 organisations,
5 sites and 8 business domains,
58 Cx employees from
11 teams participated.

Section

1

Research Method



RESEARCH METHOD

This report draws on a body of research including extensive secondary research and primary research undertaken with two large companies within the ICT and financial services sector and the validity of these research findings were reviewed with academics from UL Kemmy Business School and with ten leaders from eight other companies with Cx operations.

This study was primarily undertaken in two large MNCs operating in Ireland for a number of years. These organisations were invited to participate in the research due to their similarity in terms of their MNC status, size, and service operation but also due to their contrasting business sectors. One is in the financial services sector and the other is in the ICT sector. Between the two organisations, the research involved five sites and eight business domains. These domains included:

- Global business/shared services (finance, human resources and ICT) for their own organisation.
- Enterprise-wide management of global supply chain and ICT for their own organisation.
- Global Cx (mainly business to business) across a range of business requirements such as relationship/account management, financial reporting and technical support.

While operating in different business sectors, as MNCs, both organisations had similar structures and operating procedures. With regard to their plans for digital transformation, it is fair to say that while both were proactively progressing the Cx automation, the ICT organisation was significantly further along this journey than the financial services organisation.

Research phase I: the leader perspective

The first phase of the research was to explore the digital transformation journey, better understand Cx offerings and Cx employees, and investigate leader understandings of the skills they believed were required for these roles now and in the future. An understanding of the labour market and the impact digital transformation might have on Cx acquisition and development were also explored. To this end, organisations were asked to identify a number of leaders within these Cx service domains, who might best convey the breadth and depth of their function. In total 32 participants were interviewed over a period of eight weeks towards the end of 2018. Please see Table 1 for a summary profile of these participants.

Interviews were semi-structured in nature and devised following a detailed review of existing evidence on the skill set of Cx employees in contemporary work contexts. Semi-structured interviews allowed the research team focus data gathering towards the study's research objectives, while still allowing scope for each participant to share insights particular to their experience. In summary, each interview sought firstly to establish the context of each business domain, the current and planned automation of the Cx offering, and its known and envisaged impact on the Cx employees and skill sets. Secondly, the interviews sought to ascertain perceptions of its impact on current and planned Cx acquisition and development practices. On average, interviews took approximately 60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed for analysis. A qualitative thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was conducted to identify the high-level themes and sub-themes which emerged in line with the research objectives. Additionally, any new insights that might be relevant to the development of the organisation were captured, even if they were not directly in line with the original research objectives.

Table 1

No.	Job title	Business domain	Organisation
1.	Vice President of Enterprise Solutions	Technical support services	ICT 17 participants 3 sites
2.	Enterprise Technological Services, Senior Director		
3.	Solutions Services, Senior Director		
4.	Enterprise Technological Support, Senior Manager		
5.	Engineering Technologist, Senior Director		
6.	Product Documentation Management Director		
7.	Director of IT Service Operations	IT shared services	
8.	Director of IT Services		
9.	Inventory Management Director	Supply chain	
10.	Vice President of HR Shared Services	Human resources	
11.	HR Change Specialist		
12.	Vice President of Sales	Sales solutions	
13.	Sales Director		
14.	Sales Manager		
15.	Sales Solutions Manager		
16.	Strategic Change Lead 1	Business transformation	
17.	Strategic Change Lead 2		
No.	Job title	Business domain	Organisation
18.	Chief Operations Officer APAC	Operations	Financial services 15 participants 2 sites
19.	Chief Operations Officer Ireland		
20.	SVP Global Learning	Human resources	
21.	Head of Talent Acquisition		
22.	Head of Talent Agency Ireland	Client transfer agency	
23.	Head of Transfer Agency Europe		
24.	Head of Investor Servicing	Customer services	
25.	Head of Fund Accounting	Finance/fund accounting	
26.	Head of Financial Reporting		
27.	Head of Fund Accounting Operations		
28.	Programme Director	Business transformation	
29.	Head of Process Innovation		
30.	Strategic Change Manager		
31.	Business Process Analyst Manager		
32.	Innovation Project Manager		
Average age profile 40+, 7 female and 25 male, 30 Irish nationals, 2 foreign nationals. Average organisation tenure 10+ years.			

Research phase II: the employee perspective

A central focus of this study was to investigate skills from the perspective of Cx employees. To this end, the leaders involved in Phase I were asked to invite their teams to engage with the study. It is important to note that no particular brief was given to determine the level of service or skills at which these employees were operating but rather a random selection to represent the business domains and Cx services within each site.

In total, across the two organisations, five sites and eight business domains, 58 Cx employees from 11 teams participated. Following an email briefing on the nature and purpose of the study, they were invited to attend a team-based focus group.

At this focus group a critical incident research method was employed. This form of job analysis brings together small groups of employees at the same peer level that is typically the one team. Following introductions and ethics considerations, employees were invited to individually identify some critical incidents they experienced in the previous six months. This could have had a positive or negative outcome and could have engaged one or all of the team. Regardless, it is considered that a detailed analysis of even one critical incident provides a lens through which one can understand the full scope of a role, and thereby identify the range of knowledge and skills required. If one can manage such a critical incident from beginning to end, then one has the required skill set.

As such, Cx employees were not asked to identify the skills they thought they needed, but instead were asked to describe in detail the reactions, emotions, decisions, tasks, other activities and behaviours in which they engaged. The researcher guides the group through this explorative process. Sometimes the group will settle on one common critical incident and sometimes two or three will be examined. Typically, even if all team members were not directly involved in the incident under discussion, they would have experienced similar incidents and joined in the conversation from their own perspective. Each focus group was recorded and then transcribed for analysis. Again following a qualitative thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006), this data allowed the research team identify the task (things we do), relational (how we engage with other people) and cognitive (how we think) skills for the roles, as relevant to each team.

Research phase III: the broader business perspective

Following the analysis, the key findings were validated in three ways.

Firstly, findings were presented to an academic group through the UL, Kemmy Business School Research Series. This allows academics from other disciplines and departments to review the findings and offer critique or insight as needed. Any suggestions or insights were then incorporated into the study.

Secondly, key findings were subsequently presented individually back to a new group of leaders in each organisation, not all of whom had participated in the study. Each finding was discussed to determine its validity from the broader perspective of the organisation. Again, feedback was noted and incorporated into the study as appropriate.


Thirdly and finally, a new group of business leaders across a range of other Cx organisations and industry sectors were invited to participate in a research round table. Invitations issued through the ICBE. All were deemed to have expert knowledge and experience of Cx employees. Ten leaders agreed to engage in a detailed review of the findings. An overview of their expertise is outlined in Table 2.

Guided by the researchers, the group were invited to question and discuss each finding against their own organisation and experience of Cx employees and skills before, during and post digital transformation. This final feedback was noted and incorporated into the study.

Table 2

No.	Job title	Business domain	Industry sector
1.	Head of Region	Service development	Retail banking
2.	Community Banking Leader	Branch management	
3.	Continuous Improvement Lead	Customer services	
4.	Director of Operations	Fund investments	Financial services
5.	Marketing Services Solutions Lead	Marketing	ICT
6.	Director of Customer Support and Delivery	Human resources	Medical devices shared services
7.	HR Manager		
8.	Site Leader	Customer services	Entertainment media solutions
9.	Regional Manager	Recruitment	National recruitment agency
10.	Operations Director & Excellence Lead	Operations	MNC shared services



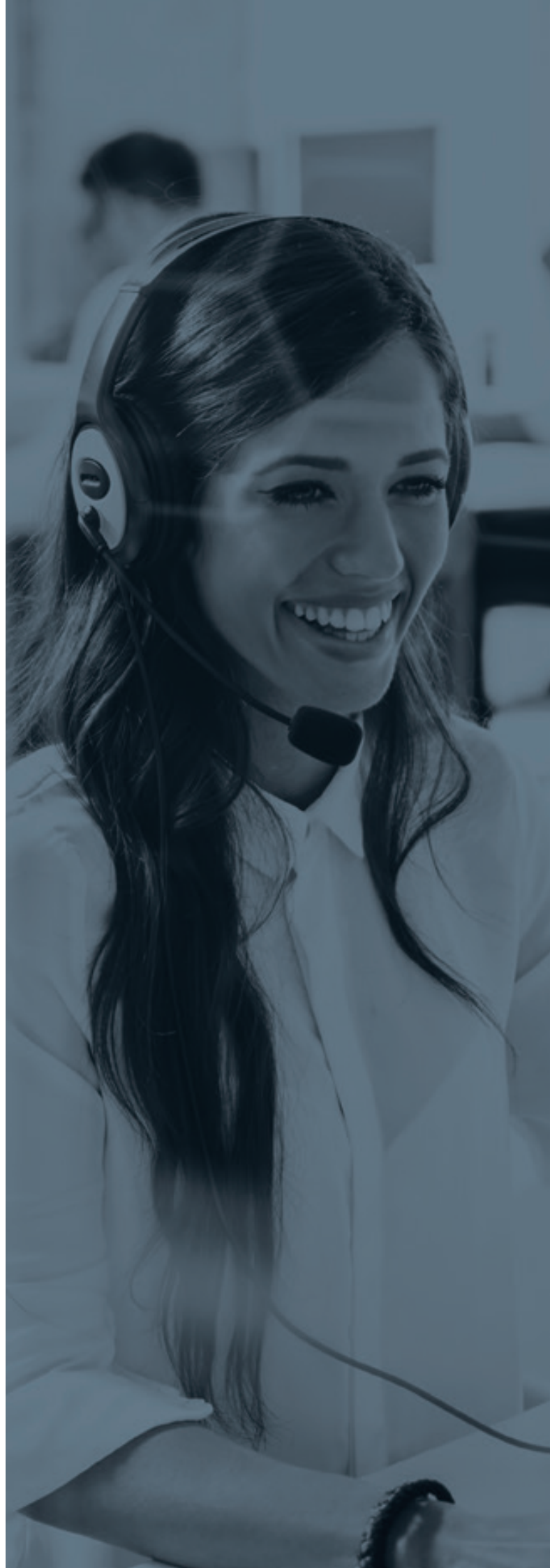


Regardless of the stage of digital transformation, there is a very clear understanding that Cx roles are undergoing a significant transformation, which is referred to as the 80:20 flip.

Section

2

Research
Findings



RESEARCH FINDINGS

The digital transformation landscape

- The 32 leaders who participated in this study are all very aware of the pathway to digital transformation and its critical value to their organisation and Ireland's potential as a customer solutions hub.
- Findings show that different organisations, sectors, sites and business domains are at very different stages of digitisation. This depends on the organisations' global Cx strategy, the particular site service, and even the particular site operations strategy.
- While leaders in this study acknowledge the impact of digital transformation on Cx employees, as found in previous empirical studies, many leaders struggle to articulate the skills required for these roles beyond an abstract description.
- However, this study does highlight the significant work underway to better understand these skills and develop the appropriate talent acquisition and development practices to ensure they, and their Cx employees, progress through the transformation successfully.
- All 56 Cx employees who participated in this study welcome their organisations' plan and progress for the digitisation of their roles. While there were the usual concerns expressed about the pace of change, the trialling, testing and sometimes quality fixing of individual new Cx elements, all are actively engaging with and supportive of the process of digitisation.

Top-down & bottom-up digital transformation

- This study finds that Cx digital transformation in Ireland is occurring simultaneously from the top down and the bottom up. Generally, that which is driven from the top is enterprise-wide and involves significant changes to the Cx offering. In contrast, that which is driven from the bottom focusses more on generating efficiencies within existing processes and does not have an impact on the customer, other than possibly a faster and more efficient service.
- Findings indicate these two broad approaches occur to varying degrees within organisations, sites and business domains in Ireland. Digital transformation is significantly influenced by the local site, and even the team-level, leadership strategy. In some sites, there was a strong, proactive drive to seek out digitisation opportunities. The prevailing view is that Irish sites need to be more aggressive in adding value to the global Cx strategy.
- This can be achieved by creating service efficiencies through, usually, low-cost digitisation at a simple, case-by-case level. It can also mean seeking out larger-scale digitisation opportunities and sourcing funding to become test sites for the global organisation. This might involve local level development and piloting in advance of showcasing the potential to the global organisation. This approach goes beyond mere digitisation however and on into the Cx strategy. There were a number of cases where the local digitisation effort was shared as best-practice and adopted globally. This approach was also found among other forms of organisations where local sites of indigenous organisations influenced the national entity.

CASE STUDIES

Case study on customer registrations.

Enterprise-wide digitisation process: the top-down approach.

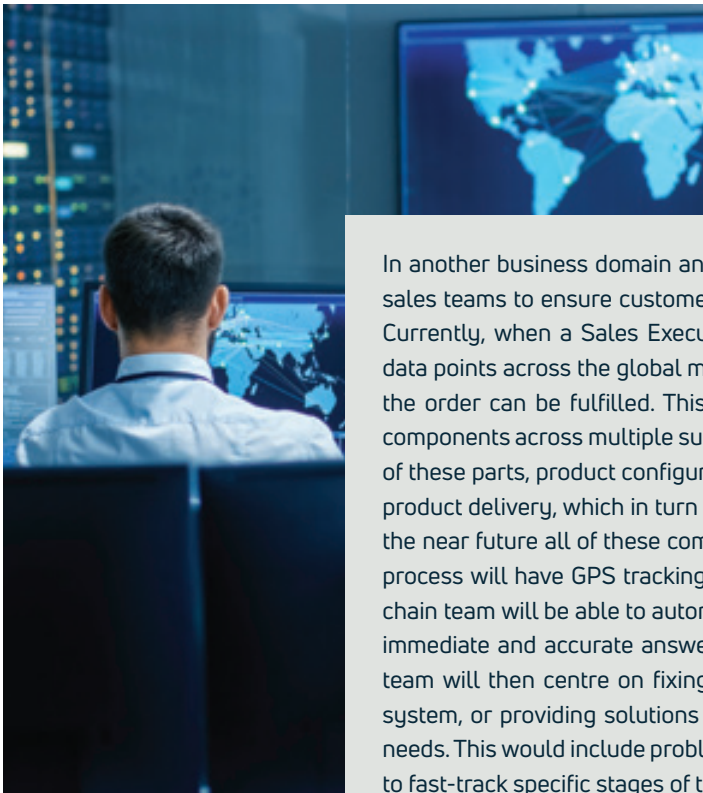
In one business domain analysed, the complete customer registration process will shortly be moving online to a self-service process. Following a period where the registration process had been standardised, with some of the more basic elements already off-shored in recent years, the process is now moving entirely online. In the near future the customer will complete the end-to-end registration online and the service function will oversee the process. The service function will engage where the customer has difficulties with online registration, respond to any anomalies in the process such as missing data, inaccurate data and security issues, all of which will probably be automatically flagged by the system.



Case study on supply chain.

Enterprise-wide digitisation process: the top-down approach.

In another business domain analysed, the supply chain service team liaises with global sales teams to ensure customer orders, generated in the sales pipeline, can be fulfilled. Currently, when a Sales Executive places a query, supply chain must source multiple data points across the global manufacturing and distribution process to determine when the order can be fulfilled. This includes tracking down and then reporting on product components across multiple suppliers in multiple geo-locations, stages of manufacturing of these parts, product configuration in line with customer requirements and then finally product delivery, which in turn can be to multiple geo-locations for a global customer. In the near future all of these components, the manufacturing process and the distribution process will have GPS tracking and QR code scanning digitised end-to-end. The supply chain team will be able to automatically see this process end-to-end and provide a more immediate and accurate answer to the global sales team. The role of the supply chain team will then centre on fixing any anomalies within these reports, as flagged by the system, or providing solutions for the sales team should the lead times not meet their needs. This would include problem solving any bottlenecks with suppliers and attempting to fast-track specific stages of the manufacturing, configuration or distribution process.



Case study on process by process digitisation.

Local digitisation efforts: the bottom-up approach.

In one case a particular site has developed an Innovation Centre whose sole focus is the digitisation of service processes. This is done on a case-by-case basis where service teams work with the Innovation Centre to identify specific processes that can be first standardised and then digitised. This could be the generation of a specific report that was previously done individually for each customer but, through the development of simple query tools, can now be generated automatically. The Innovation Centre is aware that these solutions are temporary fixes on the journey to digitisation and will, in time, be overtaken by top down, enterprise-wide solutions. However, the leadership view is that the digitisation and innovation mind-set needs to be developed now. By engaging with the digitisation of services now, Cx employees are engaging with more advanced service processes, developing their digital skills and, importantly, increasing the service performance for the Irish customer solutions site.



Case study on local effort becoming global best practice.

Local digitisation efforts: the bottom-up approach.

In another supply chain case analysed, the leader was aware of the time and effort expended on the generation of PowerPoint status reports. Required for multiple products, multiple geo-locations, and by daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly and annual periods, these reports were developed manually and repeatedly by all members of the team. As with many other Cx employees, this required the sourcing, extraction, cleaning, checking and manipulation of data from multiple business domains, systems and geo-locations. Once deemed ready in an Excel format, it then had to be developed in a more visual, management-friendly format with PowerPoint. Following an extensive software development project, all supply chain data is now available in an online, interactive solution. Today, any member at any level of the supply chain team can log on, view and drill down through every possible data point and variable available to the organisation, as appropriate to their role and need. The focus of their role can now become less about knowledge-management (being able to update the business on what is where, when etc.) and more on solution-management (fixing bottle-necks, fast-tracking, problem-solving etc.). This solution, having been conceived as a local, bottom-up fix, evolved to becoming a top-down enterprise wide digitisation.

Key shifts due to digital transformation

- The traditional picture of taking one service call at a time, from one customer at a time, no longer applies in today's Cx space. The reality for Cx employees is dealing with complex customer needs within specific time frames and strict policy or legal regulations. This requires managing a range of business variables (data, inputs, outputs etc.) across multiple business domains, multiple geo-locations and multiple systems.
- Regardless of the stage of digital transformation, there is a very clear understanding that Cx roles are undergoing a significant transformation, which is referred to here as the 80:20 flip.

The 80:20 flip

The routine, standardised work of sourcing, cleaning and collating data into usable reports is steadily being automated, to a point where **80% of a typical Cx role is or will become automated**. Now, and increasingly in the future, most business data will be automatically generated into highly tailored business reports.

Pre-digital transformation, the remaining **20% of the Cx role involves non-routine, non-standard decision-making, problem solving and proactive value add services**. Post-digital transformation, it is envisaged that this 20% will expand to fill the gap left by the automation of the routine.

As such, Cx employees are experiencing an **80:20 flip** where 80% of the role will be based on decision-making, problem solving and value-add services and 20% on validating, interpreting, visualising and communicating a range of automatically generated business reports.

- As disruptive technologies advance and business value and supply chains are consolidated, the depth and breadth of the Cx role significantly increases - increased efficiencies are shown to place increased demands on the Cx employee.
- Furthermore, engaging in service work today entails dealing with large, global customers generating very high revenue for the organisation or enterprise-wide shared services under increasingly tight business targets. This frequently requires Cx employees to stay with the customer issue until it is resolved, leading to long working hours, unplanned weekend work and generally unpredictable working patterns. This is generally accepted as part of the job, though many Cx employees feel the pressure of this environment.
- Findings from critical incident reviews with Cx employees clearly indicate an intensification of work during and post-digital transformation. Cx employees speak of the lack of 'space' in their roles. While generating reports from multiple data sources, needing to make a number of phone calls or engage in a number of email dialogues to uncover service issues is time-consuming and sometimes tedious, it is a safe space for the Cx employee. They are familiar with the routine, they understand the process and they have some control over their pace of work. When they do have to engage in the higher-order 20%, they have the mental energy and space.
- It is clear from the findings that Cx employees themselves are expressing serious concerns at having to operate at this level 80% of the time. Their leaders, as found in this study, do not appear to fully appreciate this. In particular, the level of risk and decision making associated with Cx employees needs to be considered. While decisions were always made, automation has increased the breadth, depth and frequency of these decisions and therefore the associated risk when the wrong decision is made is also increased.
- These findings have an impact on how these roles should be designed and remunerated. They also have significant implications for this new 'agile' working environment where the skills associated with flexibility, adaptability and uncertainty, requiring agile working practices and agile learning opportunities, need to be carefully considered by leaders.

- An area for concern identified in this study is the prevailing view among leaders that the impact of digital transformation on Cx employees is always positive. Most leaders perceive that the removal of manual, repetitive and boring tasks (i.e. the 80% of data input, sourcing, extraction, cleaning etc.) is a positive thing for Cx employees. All forms of automation, from their perspective, 'releases' Cx employees from the routine and allows them to embrace a more 'interesting and rewarding' type of work (i.e. the 20% of problem solving, decision making and proactive value add service). Even when probed as to the intensity of work within this 20% already, and the impact of it now growing to 80%, most leaders believe Cx work is improving for employees. There is merit in this view, as task-autonomy, task-diversity and increased opportunity for using relational and cognitive skills is known to increase job satisfaction. However, there is also the significant issue of work intensification for Cx employees as routine, low-risk or low-order tasks become increasingly replaced by non-routine, high-risk or higher-order tasks.

The Cx role profile

- Regardless of the organisation, business sector or business domain in which these Cx employees are working, the findings of this study strongly indicate the clear emergence of a Cx professional and career path. Despite the contrast in the primary finance and ICT research sites, and then the broader business contexts explored through the research roundtable, all findings point to the emergence of a Cx professional in Ireland.
- Furthermore, while different service offerings might necessitate different levels of skill expertise, for example dealing with a single local business customer versus a portfolio of international business customers, the skills at the centre of this work are the same.

Following a detailed job analysis across 56 Cx employees, the following profile provides an overview of the key dimensions of the role. This Cx role profile now provides a foundation for policy-makers, leaders, HRM functions and Cx employees themselves to understand and develop the Cx professional career path.

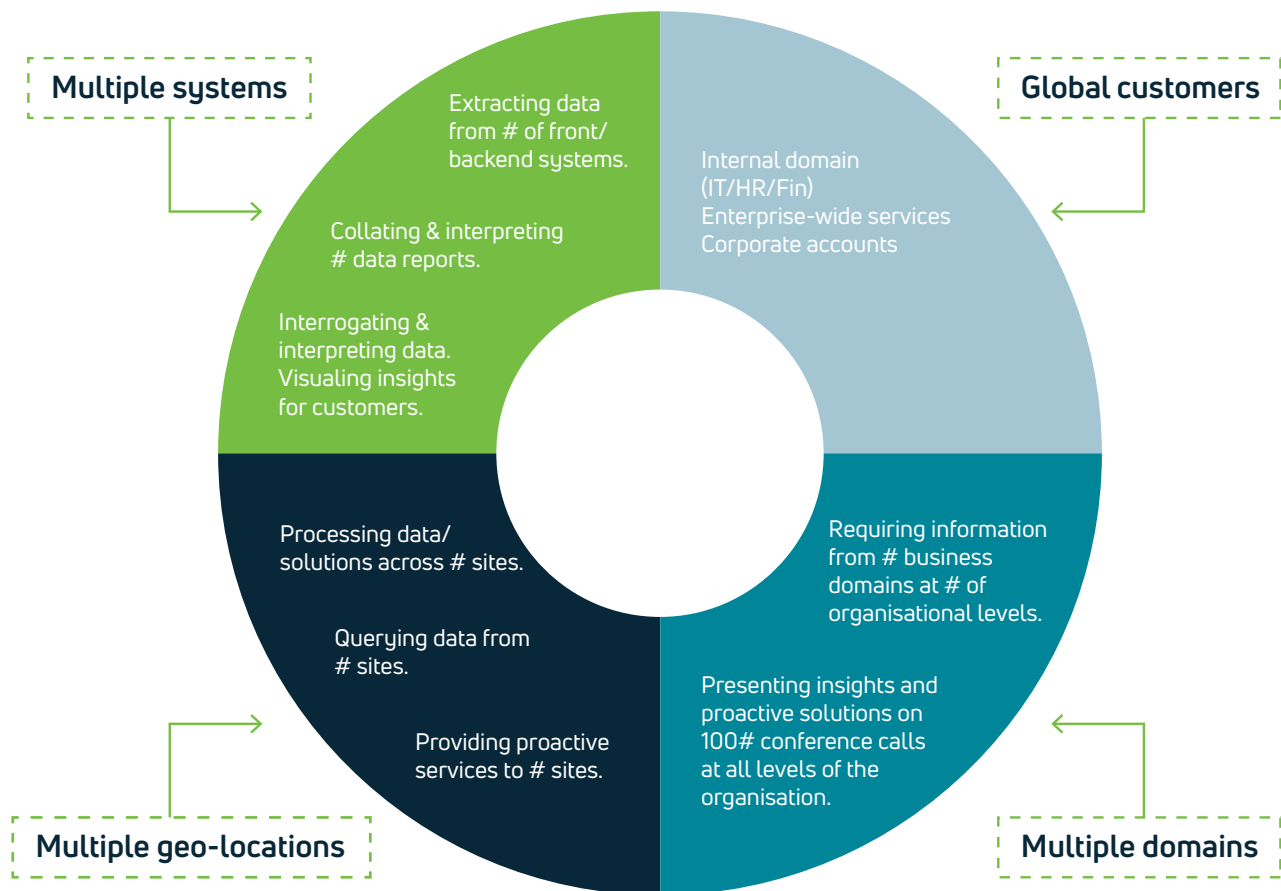
The Cx role profile

- Cx employees are highly-skilled knowledge-workers, making daily, moderate-level organisational decisions. Decisions are made from data drawn from multiple business domains, multiple geo-locations and multiple systems.
- Generally, decisions require high-levels of intervention in sourcing, validating, interpreting and communicating insights from this data. While many elements of the manipulation of this data into usable formats is under digital transformation already, the validating, interpreting, communicating elements will remain. Communicating data requires significant skills in visualising and selling the story of the data across different business domains.
- Decisions are also required in relation to non-data aspects of service. These relate to a broad range of inputs from across the organisation and across into its supplier network/value chain. This usually requires decisions around how to ensure the timely delivery of inputs, their quality delivery and, at times, decisions to move ahead without all or part of an input.
- Problem-solving decisions are required due to anomalies in the data, inability to achieve required inputs signalled by the data, and/or potential negative customer outcomes signalled by the data. This leads to significant levels of negotiation across the organisation on a daily basis. Despite the fact that all key stakeholders are operating in the one supply chain or under the one corporate brand, competing agendas, targets and sometimes cultures, require significant negotiation of inputs as if operating in an open-market.
- Finally, Cx employees seek to proactively add-value to the Cx offering based on insights in the data through their interpretation, visualisation and communication of this data.

The Cx employee skill set

Following a detailed analysis through the critical incident technique outlined earlier, a number of core, critical skills have been identified. Findings show that, while the skills themselves are not changing, the level and frequency at which they are applied is significantly increased. The need to utilise all skills simultaneously, daily, often in a random manner, and the need to switch seamlessly from skill to skill, while applying them in different ways to different tasks, is considerably heightened in today's Cx space. This study therefore underlines the need for skill dexterity in Cx employees.

Cx Role Profile



Skill dexterity

Dexterity is defined as a sharpness of mind, or skill in thinking creatively, and understanding and expressing something quickly and easily. Definitions regularly refer to the ability to move swiftly and smoothly between tasks. In applying the concept of dexterity to the skills identified, this study highlights the level and frequency of application of these skills in these roles.

Skill	Description
 <p>Data dexterity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ability to engage in the management and meaning of data across multiple sources, systems and business domains. The ability to understand the composition of a broad range of business report inputs and formats so that their accuracy, relevance and application can be determined. The ability to reformat these reports to meet individual customer needs or specific, non-routine business situations. The ability to interpret these reports, visualise the data and communicate its meaning and value as a critical component of the customer proposition.
 <p>Interdisciplinary dexterity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ability to understand different business inputs, and how they build towards meeting a customer need. The ability to identify key stakeholders and build critical relationships and networks across different geo-locations, business domains and organisational levels. The ability to work effectively and simultaneously across and between different business domains. The ability to overcome and manage competing needs, resources and different perspectives across different geo-locations and business domains.
 <p>Customer centricity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To develop and maintain customer relationships. To appreciate the value of the customer relationship and offering in the organisation's business strategy and brand. To be able to identify, articulate, anticipate and meet customer needs through the service offering. To be able to proactively add value to the customer experience through the service offering.
 <p>Intercultural dexterity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ability to understand different cultural approaches to work. The ability to be able to apply one's emotional intelligence and social capital to very different cultural and business contexts. The ability to get work done effectively and efficiently across multiple geo-locations.
 <p>Open-market negotiator</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ability to determine business needs and seek out and secure solutions despite competing resources and agendas across key stakeholders. The ability to make decisions appropriate to their role and level in the organisation. The ability to recognise when and how to escalate a decision. The ability to influence decisions at all levels of the organisation as appropriate.
 <p>Sensemaker</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ability to continuously scan, interpret and make sense of business contexts, requirements and issues in uncertain business environments and situations. The ability to articulate these business needs at all levels of the organisation and ensure all key stakeholders appreciate their scale and scope.
 <p>Critical thinker</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ability to critically evaluate these situations and reach appropriate conclusions based on evidence, experience or intuition. The ability see the big picture, translating complex business processes and issues into understandable concepts for key stakeholders and customers alike.
 <p>Agile learner</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ability to seek out learning opportunities as appropriate. The ability to learn quickly and implement learning outcomes quickly and effectively in uncertain environments. The ability to transfer knowledge from personal learning opportunities systematically back into the business.
 <p>Agile worker</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ability to be flexible and adaptable to changing business contexts and requirements. The ability to cope with a significant cognitive load on an on-going basis. The ability to work effectively and efficiently across and between different contexts, tasks and people.

Skill transferability: emergence of the Cx professional

The skills identified in the Cx employees here are found to be transferrable across sectors, organisations and domains. While Cx employees did not necessarily recognise this, analysis of the data on their skills strongly suggests otherwise. Certainly there is a context-specific knowledge base required relating to the organisation's strategy and culture, the specific industry sector, and business domain. Nonetheless, there is strong evidence in this study that this knowledge can be acquired through intensive on-boarding in the first 8-10 weeks with the organisation. Therefore, this study finds that while the skills needed for the future are becoming more profound, the knowledge around which those skills are applied can be acquired in manageable ways for both the organisation and employees.

The traditional Cx professional roadmap:

For most engaged in this study, Cx employees usually have had either a general business or computer science degree. They are typically in the 35+ age range and the majority have been with the organisation for at least five years. While some have transitioned to Cx roles from more technical or operational roles, most entered the organisation in some form of Cx role.

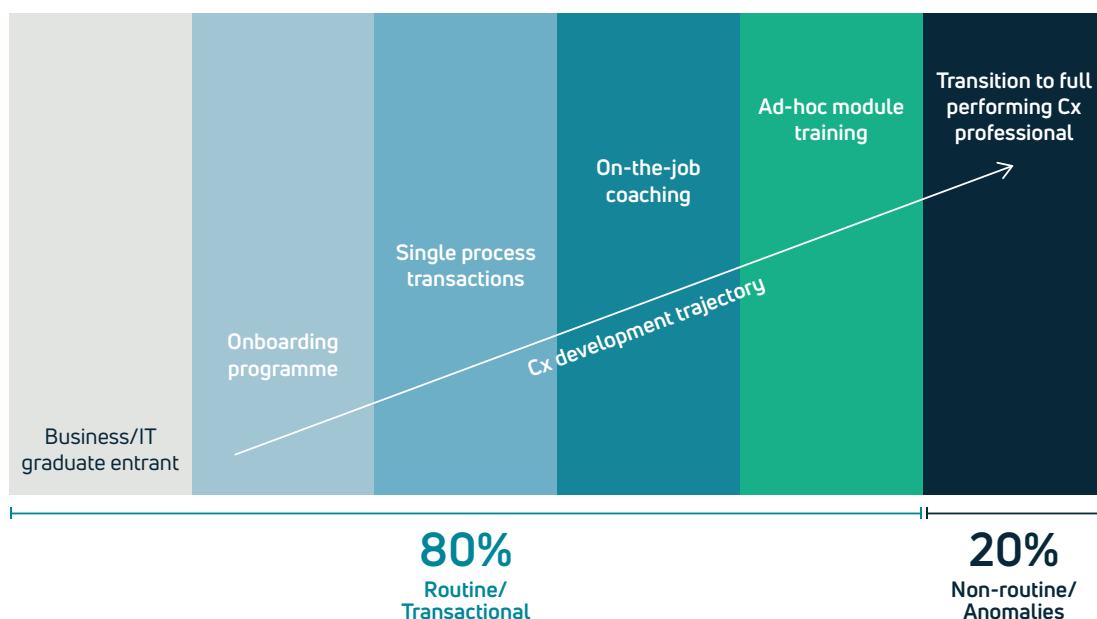
The most common career pathway found was through graduate recruitment programmes. Cx employees either completed a graduate programme in their current organisation or previously in another similar organisation.

Furthermore, while there was movement of Cx professionals across organisations, they were typically only between those of similar size, industry sector and business domain.

Pre-digital transformation, the aforementioned 80% standard and routine of Cx work allows employees to experience a range of business scenarios in a staged manner, build their skills over time and ultimately 'grow' into their roles. Following a highly tailored onboarding programme, usually lasting eight to ten weeks, new employees are assigned to single customer processes (generally not customer facing) within a broader Cx team. On-the-job shadowing, coaching, close supervision and modular top-up training solutions allow new employees try-out, test and build their new knowledge and skills over time.

In essence, new Cx employees have lived somewhere deep and low-down in the 80% for a period of time until the organisation feels they are ready to move up the 80% and eventually, slowly, move into the 20% where they are closer to the customer and closer to their non-routine, high-impact problems and decisions. While some new employees have felt more than ready to engage in the 20%, this is not always advisable for the organisation. As previously highlighted, while most decisions made in this space are moderate-level for the organisation, the impact of making the wrong decision can be significant. The general consensus in this study indicates that the development process takes between 5 and 8 years to be a fully and high performing Cx professional.

Traditional Cx roadmap



The post-digital transformation Cx acquisition and development roadmap:

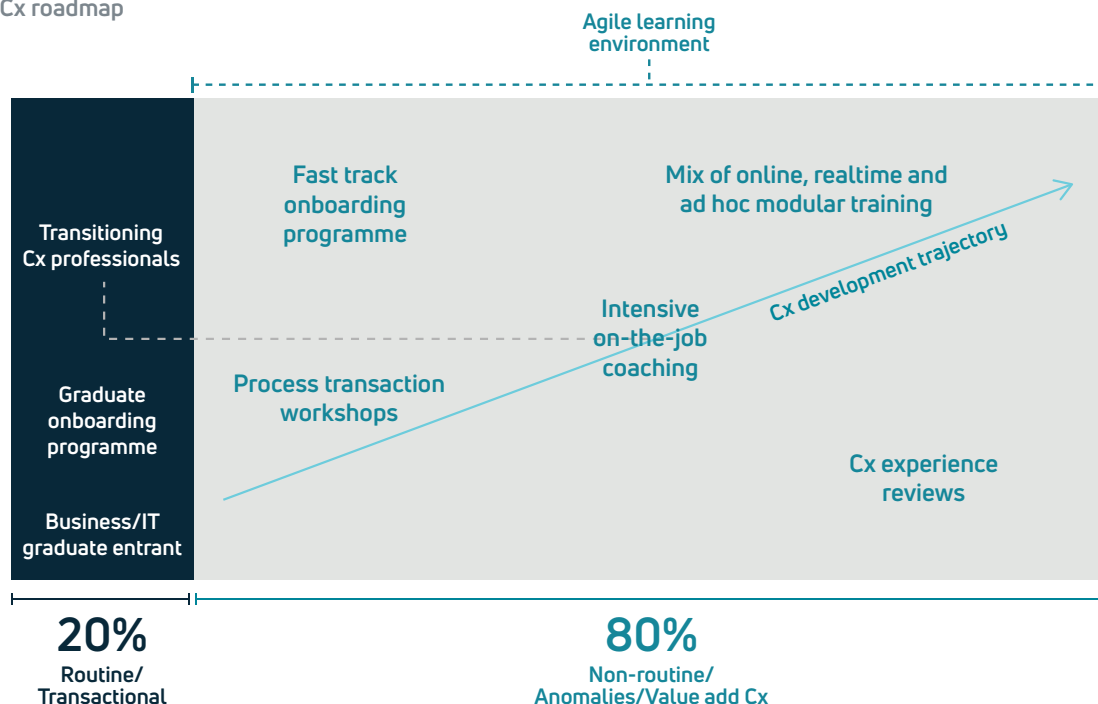
As the 80% 'safe space' for employee development is being automated, it not only leads to an intensification of work for those at a full performing level, but it also removes the safe space for less experienced Cx employees to learn their roles. This has many consequences for organisations.

- Findings in this study show mixed views and approaches to labour market sources for Cx roles. These range from fixed views that they are graduate-entry roles through to the view that they require a minimum of 8 to 10 years' Cx experience. This view is largely influenced by pre-digital Cx work, where the routine and standard 80% held pockets of very low skilled service work, attractive to business and IT graduates looking to enter an organisation and build a career over time.
- Post-digital transformation however, the job landscape is very different and, with the 20% non-routine growing to 80%, many leaders would not envisage graduates as the main labour source of the future. Some sites and business domains have already advanced their Cx acquisition strategies to account for the changing nature of these roles. There were a number of successful cases of close partnership with ETBs, Skillnet learning networks and Government programmes aimed at attracting and successfully transitioning more experienced job applicants. The prevailing view here was that the critical skills required for Cx employees post digital transformation are typically lifewide skills that can be drawn from other types of service work in, for example, SMEs, public sector or not-for-profit organisations. In many of these different types of businesses, employees deal with multiple types of customers, multiple variables and many non-routine problems, albeit without the scope, scale or highly systematic processes of the larger organisation. Where more diverse labour markets were being tried, leaders involved spoke about the natural traits of an individual and how, in the interview process, they seek to determine their conceptual/critical thinking and problem solving traits in a general way. They believe, if these traits exist then the business knowledge and context can be taught in a reasonable time-frame through intensive 8 to 10 week onboarding programmes.
- However, there were also many cases where these alternative labour sources were not considered successful. The findings indicate that many leaders perceive some sections of the labour market are not a source of potential Cx employees. It is difficult to ascertain where this lack of suitability lies, though issues around the working hours were raised by a few. For some sites and business domains the service day is at the control of the customer. If an issue is outstanding it is not appropriate to end the working day at the scheduled time of 5.30pm and it may require additional effort into the evening hours. This lack of control over one's working hours will not suit everyone – typically anyone with dependents. The fact that most graduates are younger, unattached and without dependents results in them becoming the default labour source. There is also a view that many elements of Cx work are routine and low-skilled and therefore only attractive to graduates who need the work experience. However, post-digital transformation this study shows this landscape will have changed and therefore leaders will be required to rethink their assumptions and challenge existing mind-sets.
- Some organisations, sites and business domains are however already challenging these mind-sets. Interestingly, it is the digital capability itself that is viewed as the answer. With technology now allowing seamless handover of customer issues between Cx employees, remote working solutions, and 24/7 operations across multiple geo-locations, the view among some leaders' is that there is no longer an argument for one Cx employee being the sole contact for a customer or for this being a value-proposition for the customer. The view expressed here is that customers want the best service and that does not mean from the single-best employee but from the single-best organisation. From this perspective, the scope exists to significantly change the design of Cx workplaces to allow for greater diversity among employees.

- New approaches to Cx development are also emerging, with many leveraging digital capabilities. These include fast-track onboarding programmes for more experienced Cx employees transitioning into a new industry sector, online and modular training solutions, virtual coaches and the transfer of Cx employee learnings back into Cx systems through AI and machine learning. Critically however, the recognition of the

need for the sensemaking of and reflection on the Cx experience is one of the more immediate requirements identified by some leaders and most Cx employees. This can be as simple as creating a scheduled reflective and review-based space for Cx employees where experiences, challenges and solutions can be shared and then systematically transferred back into the Cx employee roadmap.

Evolving Cx roadmap

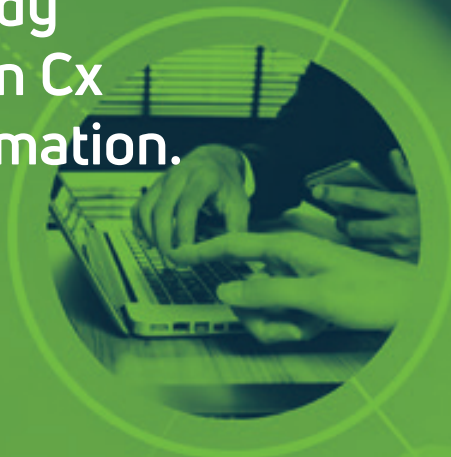


Will new roles be created in the Cx sector in Ireland?

- A critical concern for all is what becomes of the 'service space' created by digital transformation. Findings show that leaders believe the net jobs in their organisations will remain the same. While there is consensus that for some sites and business domains, the rate of new jobs being created is likely to slow or stop, leaders do not envisage any redundancy of Cx employees. The prevailing view across all participating in this study is that the tasks removed by automation will be replaced with new Cx tasks related to a more proactive or value-add offering. They envisage the aforementioned 20% of managing anomalies in data, data quality assurance, customer problem solving and the proactive, value-add elements of their customer service to become the new 80% of the job. This will be further supported by the addition of new customer portfolios, service offerings and potentially new business domains from the global organisation. Therefore, it is argued that, while the gross service tasks will significantly reduce in the coming years, the net Cx employees will remain the same.
- Crucially however, for Irish sites to be successful, many of the leaders participating in the study argue that they need to be more progressive in seeking out opportunities for the Irish site. They need to be planning years ahead of the global organisation to determine what is the likelihood of automation for each of the Irish site's Cx offerings and then establishing a site strategy for new offerings and 'value adds'.
- However, there is little evidence from those leaders participating in the study as to what exactly these new customers, service offerings or business domains are, how they are likely to be attracted or offered to the Irish site, or when exactly it might happen – before, during or after the automation of Cx work. While it should be noted that it is possible that these leaders are not in a position to share their global organisation's strategies for the Irish site, it is equally possible they do not know and cannot influence these strategies.



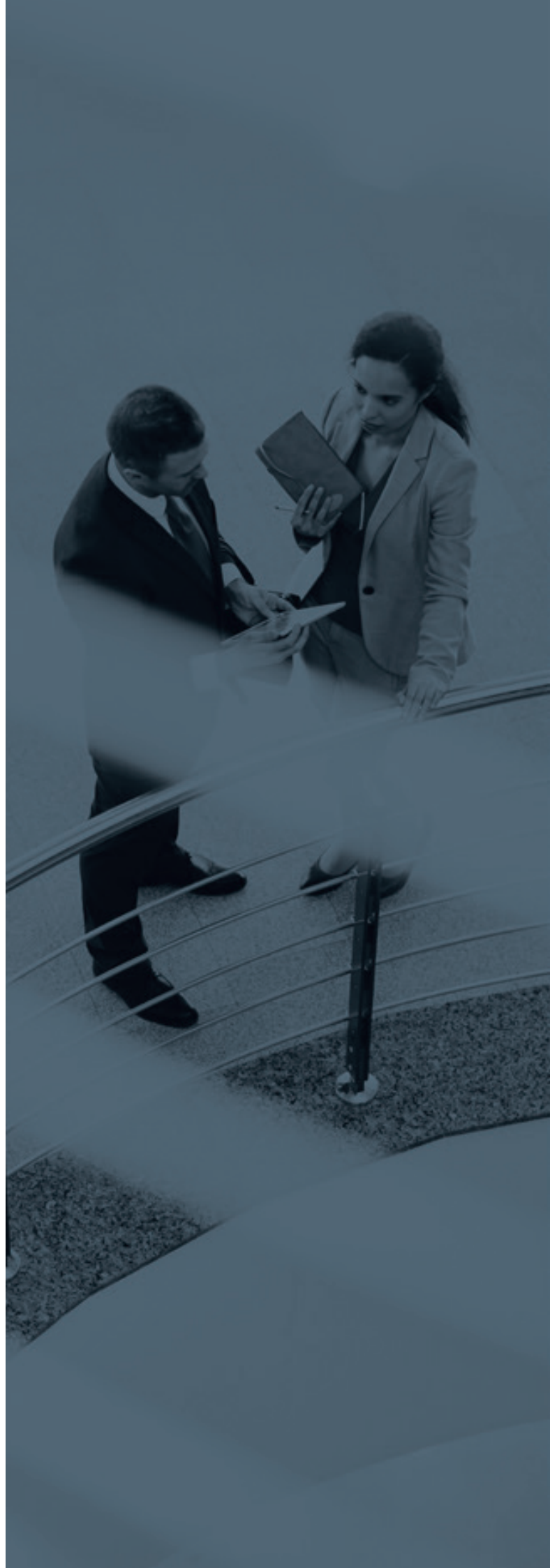
Ireland is already
fully engaged in Cx
digital transformation.



Section

3

Next Steps for
Organisations



A number of critical leadership and HRM related recommendations need to be considered as a result of this study.

The person and the job:

1. The emergence of the Cx professional needs to be acknowledged by both leaders and the employees themselves.
2. The complex and demanding nature of mid- or post-digital Cx work in organisations needs to be acknowledged by leaders.

The skill set:

3. The concept of skill dexterity within these roles needs to be recognised.
4. A clear and rich understanding of the Cx skill set is needed to guide HRM practices, specifically the approach to Cx employee acquisition and development.

The source of talent:

5. More diverse profiles of Cx employees need to be considered for these roles. In particular, lifewide and lifelong experience and expertise in different forms of Cx work need to be recognised. New, more diverse sources of employees, in different types of organisations, industry sectors and business domains need to be considered.
6. Cross-agency, partnership-based strategies to Cx acquisition (such as university co-operative programmes, internships, upskilling and transition programmes, apprenticeships, vocational and postgraduate transition programmes etc.) need to continue across organisations, government agencies and educators.

The talent roadmap:

7. Organisations, government agencies and educators need to develop learning pathways for those with Cx experience and skills, or just Cx traits, to transition from unemployment or between different types of organisations.

8. 3rd level educators need to continue to review programmes of study in business and IT disciplines to ensure they are meeting the skill requirements of the Cx professional, as much as is feasible at under/post graduate levels.
9. Highly evolved Cx development solutions need to be developed to promote and support the concept of the agile learner in organisations. These include real-time, digital learning solutions, more modular approaches, extensive coaching and Cx reviews.
10. Most importantly however, agile learners need learning space in organisations. This includes a systematic and protected space for reflection, review, sensemaking, transfer of learning and making the mistakes that learning inevitably entails. One of the most critical risks of digital transformation is the speed it brings to the process. This needs to be balanced with reflection and patience if the organisation is to control technology and not the other way round. This is a significant challenge for organisations but it must be one that is met directly by its leaders.

The outcome:

11. Ultimately the purpose of digital transformation must be to deliver successful organisational outcomes. In the service space these are successful Cx offerings. In the Irish context, this customer value-add is not yet fully articulated and this needs to be addressed.
12. At a deeper level, for Ireland Inc., the post-digital transformation value-add of the Irish site needs to be aggressively pursued by Irish site leadership teams. Bottom-up digital transformation could be part of this national offering. However, this study also indicates that the Cx skill set is strong in Ireland and this should be fully exploited.

CONCLUSION

This study finds strong evidence that the future of work is now. Ireland is already fully engaged in Cx digital transformation. Regardless of the stage of transformation, the industry sector or the business domain, this study has identified the emergence of a Cx professional and a clear Cx skill set. Grounded in the concept of skill dexterity, these skills include; data dexterity, interdisciplinary dexterity, customer centricity, intercultural dexterity, open-market negotiation, sensemaking, critical thinking, agile learning and being an agile worker.

There is clearly existing talent and further potential for talent in this space in Ireland. This opportunity can and should be leveraged to contribute to individual, societal and organisational success. There is significant scope for further development of people into these types of roles from across different organisational types, industry sectors and business domains. In particular there is significant scope for transferability of these skills across organisations.

This will however require important shifts in some leader mind-sets; how these roles are perceived, designed, managed, how working patterns are structured and possibly how the employees are remunerated. It will also require development of new and more innovative approaches to Cx acquisition and development, challenging existing, traditional models.

These findings have significant implications for the leadership of organisations through and beyond the digital transformation of the Cx sector and Ireland's new knowledge-economy. While the study has its limitations, being explorative in nature, the findings nevertheless provide rich insight into both the challenges and potential of Cx employees in Ireland.

Future research should seek to explore these findings in other industry sectors, in SMEs and across different business domains where other forms of knowledge work exists. Importantly however, the challenges faced by leaders as we continue the digital transformation of the Cx sector require urgent attention. As we reflect on the complexity of skill dexterity required in Cx employees, where only moderate level decision making is required, it begs the question as to the skill set required of leaders in today's future of work.

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About ICBE Advanced Productivity Skillnet

ICBE Advanced Productivity Skillnet is the national network for enhanced productivity in the Irish manufacturing and service sectors.

The mission of the ICBE Advanced Productivity Skillnet is to raise the output of every worker in Ireland, through various learning, development and knowledge sharing initiatives with a focus on advanced methodologies and technology.



Kemmy Business School

The Kemmy Business School (KBS), University of Limerick (UL), was established over 30 years ago and is one of the largest business schools in Ireland. It is the academic home to over 3,000 students and over 100 faculty and staff and offers a wide range of business and management education programmes, both on campus and at external locations throughout Ireland.



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