

# Customer service in the 4IR: What's changed?

By [Alan Yates](#)

4 Jun 2021

Covid-19 lockdown escalated change; the most obvious of which is that digital meeting spaces have made access to sales and support teams for customers much easier; even though face-to-face meetings have not completely disappeared.



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Many die-hards still prefer personal interaction in the real world, particularly in South Africa, as South Africans, by nature, are quite warm and value the one-on-one experience. In my experience, dealing with diagnostic equipment, this is particularly true of laboratory-based customers who truly value 'hands on' interaction and need a tactile experience with the equipment they use in order to feel that they understand it properly.

But whichever way our customers choose to interact with us is all part of a bigger picture, which has seen a shift in the way we achieve our 'Holy Grail': Customer Excellence.

One of the most notable shifts I have observed during the Covid crisis is that a coherent sales and service experience seems to be emerging. Cross-collaboration is happening more and more and internal silos are rapidly disappearing.

## Better access to people and data

Increased accessibility has brought sales, service, marketing and support teams closer together and more predictive ways of working – as opposed to reactive methods – are taking centre stage. In terms of diagnostic equipment, for example, technology that allows for predictive maintenance and service is on the rise.



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Predictive maintenance is a new way of working that uses big data to predict when components need to be replaced, and proactively have service teams at the ready to do the necessary maintenance on equipment before emergency intervention is needed. In this case, shared data gives rise to real-world collaboration in the customer's best interests.

Sharing data and using it to action real solutions has become more of a natural conclusion in our current landscape. With digital communication applications, there is less need for people to board aeroplanes and fly to training sites all over the world. Distance learning modules have become the norm, both for sales teams and for customers. And a more open sharing of resources has seen companies changing from hierarchical models to network models, where silos and the divide between departments and business counterparts – even in other countries – have become significantly less prevalent.

Covid saw a marked rise in cross-country collaboration between subject-matter experts. Sharing of methodologies that have worked in other markets has become commonplace. And because the African business landscape has always been highly adaptive, collaboration on the continent was fast-tracked, even before Covid in many ways.

The global mindset has changed because of better access to people and data. And the big question we, as customer leads, are asking is, 'How do we bring sales, service and the rest of the business together as one voice that stands completely for the customer, bridging gaps in communication pipelines, efficient service and proactive sales initiatives?'

### **More collaboration**

If there were to be a buzzword for what 2020 and 2021 have brought us as teams, it would be 'collaboration'. In a world where physical distance has become necessary, collaboration is seeing internal and external teams come together more. We are all beginning to see a bigger picture when it comes to our customer's interests. It is not so much just about selling any more as it is working towards one mutually beneficial goal.

As a B2B agent, it is in our best interests to work alongside our customers to reach their business goals. We can't be short-sighted in terms of focusing purely on our bottom line.

Customer excellence in the new world means using big data and cross-team collaboration to put big-picture solutions into place. If we, as customer-facing institutions are going to succeed in our businesses, partnerships – between our internal departments, with our international counterparts and with our customers – are likely to be what drives us to achieving excellence in the long-term.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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