Acta Universitatis Danubius

ADMINISTRATIO

Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Workforce Management in the Call Centre Industry

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Abstract: This article examines the influence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on call centre operations management in South Africa, a key hub within the global business services sector. Adopting a qualitative, interpretivist design, the study explores how AI adoption reshapes efficiency, job roles, and customer experience. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants, comprising call centre agents, team leaders, and operations managers, reflecting the perspectives of employees directly involved in AI-enabled systems. Thematic analysis revealed a dual narrative: AI improves productivity and customer satisfaction, but also generates challenges linked to job security, learning demands, and the erosion of the human touch in service delivery. The findings highlight the need for a balanced approach where AI handles routine processes while employees focus on empathy-driven tasks in customer interactions.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; Call Centre Operations; Global Business Services; Employee Perceptions; Customer Experience

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1. Introduction

The South African call centre industry has become one of the country's fastest-growing sectors within global business services (GBS), positioning itself as a competitive offshore destination due to its multilingual workforce, cultural alignment with European markets and the United States (US) at relatively low costs (BPESA, 2022). South Africa has consistently been ranked among the top three global locations for customer experience outsourcing, reflecting the industry's contribution to economic growth, job creation, and foreign direct investment (Poisat, Cullen & Calitz, 2024). Within this environment, Artificial Intelligence (AI) adoption has accelerated, promising to transform operational efficiency, customer service quality, and workforce dynamics.

AI applications in call centres include chatbots, virtual assistants, natural language processing (NLP), predictive analytics, and automated quality monitoring systems (Huang & Rust, 2021). These technologies allow organisations to provide faster, personalised, and scalable services. For managers, AI reduces costs and improves oversight, while customers benefit from shorter waiting times and more consistent service delivery. At the same time, the introduction of AI has generated new challenges, including job security fears, increased employee surveillance, and concerns about the loss of the "human touch" in customer engagement (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2020).

The South African context complicates this transformation. Call centres are a crucial source of employment for young people, many of whom enter the labour market through entry-level agent roles. Yet, youth unemployment in South Africa remains above 55% (Statistics South Africa [Stats SA], 2023). This raises questions about whether AI adoption will exacerbate unemployment or, conversely, free agents to perform higher-value, empathy-driven roles. Industry observers have noted that while automation can streamline repetitive processes, customers still prefer human interactions for complex or emotionally charged issues (WhichVoIP, 2023).

Academic research on AI adoption in call centres has predominantly focused on developed economies such as the United States and the United Kingdom (Davenport, Guha, Grewal & Bressgott, 2020). However, studies in emerging economies remain limited. In South Africa, some recent studies highlight organisational readiness gaps, with managers citing limited skills availability and employee resistance as major barriers. These issues illustrate the need for context-specific research that situates AI within South Africa's socio-economic and labour realities.

This article addresses these gaps by exploring how employees and managers in South African call centres perceive AI adoption. Specifically, it examines how AI is reshaping operational efficiency, employee experiences, and customer service outcomes. By situating AI within the South African GBS context, the study contributes theoretically to debates on technology adoption in emerging economies, while practically offering insights for managers, policymakers, and industry leaders on balancing efficiency with social responsibility.

2. Literature Review

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become a central driver of transformation in service industries, with call centres being one of the most visible spaces where technology directly reshapes organisational practices and customer interactions. Globally, AI tools such as chatbots, predictive analytics, and speech recognition are increasingly deployed to improve efficiency, reduce costs, and deliver personalised services (Huang & Rust, 2021). Recent research highlights how these technologies reduce average handling times, support workforce scheduling, and enable companies to provide round-the-clock customer support (Davenport, Guha, Grewal & Bressgott, 2020). In the South African context, AI is already being applied to automate routine inquiries, anticipate customer needs, and strengthen compliance monitoring, positioning the country's call centre sector to remain competitive in global outsourcing markets (BPESA, 2022; WhichVoIP, 2023).

While the benefits of AI adoption are well-documented, scholars emphasise that employee perceptions are central to its success. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) has long suggested that perceived usefulness and ease of use are key determinants of adoption (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000). Building on this foundation, more recent studies stress that employee attitudes towards AI are also shaped by trust, fairness, and organisational transparency (Rahwan et al., 2021). The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model further provides insight into how AI simultaneously reduces repetitive tasks but creates new demands, such as the need for rapid learning and adaptation, with significant implications for employee stress and motivation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). South African research indicates that employees often welcome AI when it reduces workloads but remain sceptical when they perceive it as a threat to job security or as a mechanism of surveillance.

The literature also points to the role of leadership and organisational culture in shaping these perceptions. A recent study demonstrates that paradoxical

leadership—where managers balance technological imperatives with human concerns—can reduce resistance to AI while fostering openness to change (Hu et al., 2025). In organisations where leaders emphasise training, transparent communication, and inclusivity, employees are more likely to perceive AI as a tool that augments rather than replaces their contributions. Conversely, poorly communicated or rushed implementation processes exacerbate anxiety, reduce morale, and reinforce resistance, undermining the intended productivity gains (Poisat, Cullen & Calitz, 2024).

At the same time, the risks associated with AI adoption cannot be ignored. Scholars caution that automation has the potential to displace routine roles, a particularly sensitive issue in South Africa where unemployment remains high and call centres act as entry points into formal employment for young people (Stats SA, 2023). Ethical concerns, including privacy and algorithmic bias, also complicate implementation. Kaplan and Haenlein (2020) argue that organisations risk eroding employee trust and customer confidence if AI systems are perceived as opaque or unfair. In South Africa, where the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) governs data use, compliance is not only a legal requirement but also a determinant of reputational legitimacy.

Despite these challenges, opportunities exist for leveraging AI to strengthen South Africa's call centre industry. Studies reveal that when AI is used to handle routine inquiries, employees are freed to focus on complex, empathy-driven interactions that enhance customer experience and loyalty (Huang & Rust, 2021; WhichVoIP, 2023). Emerging local innovations, such as multilingual natural language processing (NLP) tools tailored to South Africa's 11 official languages, also suggest pathways for contextually relevant adoption that aligns with cultural and linguistic diversity (TechCabal, 2025).

What emerges from the literature is a dual narrative. On one hand, AI offers operational efficiencies, cost savings, and enhanced customer service capabilities that strengthen South Africa's competitiveness in the global outsourcing market. On the other hand, the risks of job displacement, reduced autonomy, surveillance, and depersonalised service delivery remain significant, especially in a country grappling with unemployment and inequality. Existing research tends to focus either on technological capability or organisational readiness, with less emphasis on the lived experiences of employees and managers in adapting to AI-enabled environments. This study responds to that gap by examining perceptions within South African call centres, thereby advancing understanding of how technological transformation

intersects with labour market dynamics and organisational culture in an emerging economy.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory design to examine how Artificial Intelligence (AI) is influencing call centre operations in South Africa. A qualitative approach was considered most appropriate as it allows for the capture of nuanced and context-specific insights, particularly in a sector where employee and managerial perceptions are central to understanding the impact of technological change. Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, the research was premised on the view that organisational realities are socially constructed through the experiences and interpretations of individuals. This stance was critical for exploring how call centre employees and managers make sense of AI integration in their daily work.

The target population comprised individuals employed in the South African call centre industry across different roles, including frontline agents, team leaders, and operations managers. Purposive sampling was applied to ensure that participants selected had direct exposure to AI-enabled systems such as chatbots, predictive analytics, or automated quality monitoring. In total, 15 participants were interviewed, representing diverse operational roles and responsibilities. The sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation, where additional interviews no longer yielded new information or themes. This ensured that the perspectives gathered were sufficiently comprehensive to address the research objectives.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted over a two-month period in 2024. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was carried out either in person or online, depending on the participants' availability and geographic location. An interview guide was developed around key areas of inquiry, including the effects of AI on efficiency, job roles, customer experience, and management practices. The semi-structured format allowed consistency in questioning while providing flexibility for probing deeper into participants' unique experiences. With consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy in representation.

The analysis followed the thematic approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), which involves six iterative phases: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, review of emerging patterns, definition and refinement of themes, and the production of a coherent narrative. NVivo software

supported the coding process, enabling systematic organisation of the transcripts and ensuring transparency in the analytical process. Themes were generated inductively from participants' accounts, though interpretation was guided by established frameworks such as the Technology Acceptance Model (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000) and the Job Demands–Resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), both of which provided conceptual lenses for understanding employee responses to technological change.

Ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout the study. Approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee before data collection commenced. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study and signed informed consent forms prior to their involvement. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, with pseudonyms used in all transcripts and reporting. Participation was voluntary, and individuals were reminded of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Data were securely stored on password-protected devices, accessible only to the researcher, ensuring that participants' privacy and rights were protected.

By combining an interpretivist orientation, purposive sampling, rigorous thematic analysis, and strict ethical safeguards, this methodology provided a robust platform for uncovering how AI adoption is experienced and understood in South African call centres. The approach ensured that the findings reflected not only operational changes but also the deeper human and organisational dynamics that shape the intersection between technology and service work.

4. Research Findings

The analysis of interview data provided rich insights into how Artificial Intelligence (AI) is influencing call centre operations in South Africa. Across the perspectives of agents, team leaders, and managers, a dual narrative emerged: while AI was widely acknowledged as a driver of efficiency and customer satisfaction, it was also associated with challenges that affected job security, workplace morale, and the quality of service delivery. The findings are presented thematically, reflecting recurring patterns that capture both opportunities and risks.

4.1. Efficiency and Productivity Gains

Participants consistently highlighted improvements in efficiency as one of the most significant outcomes of AI adoption. Many agents reported that routine tasks such as retrieving customer data, verifying account details, and logging interactions were now handled automatically, allowing them to focus on more complex issues. Managers explained that average handling times had decreased, enabling the call centres to manage higher call volumes with the same workforce. AI was also said to reduce errors in data entry and improve the accuracy of information provided to customers, which, in turn, strengthened customer trust.

Several participants linked these gains to specific AI applications such as chatbots, which handled basic inquiries, and predictive analytics, which forecasted call volumes and allowed for better workforce scheduling. For example, one operations manager described how AI-driven scheduling tools ensured that peak call periods were staffed appropriately, reducing customer waiting times. Another participant noted that automated quality assurance provided real-time feedback during calls, improving adherence to compliance requirements. These accounts reinforce the widely held view that AI has become integral to enhancing productivity and operational reliability in the South African call centre industry.

4.2. Employee Adaptation and Training Challenges

Despite these efficiency gains, many employees described challenges in adapting to AI systems. Agents often referred to steep learning curves associated with continuous system updates and the introduction of new platforms. While managers emphasised the importance of training, some employees felt that training initiatives were rushed or inadequate, leaving them uncertain about how to use the systems effectively. This sometimes resulted in frustration, particularly when AI tools malfunctioned or when employees felt that the technology slowed rather than streamlined their tasks.

A recurring theme was the uneven distribution of training opportunities. Senior staff and managers were more likely to receive formal conceptiual training, while frontline agents often relied on informal peer learning or trial-and-error approaches. Several participants expressed a desire for more structured capacity-building programmes to ensure that all staff were equally prepared to work alongside AI. Without sufficient support, employees felt that the pressure to adapt quickly contributed to stress and, in some cases, resentment toward the technology. These

findings suggest that while AI adoption creates opportunities for skill development, the benefits are unevenly realised unless organisations commit to comprehensive and inclusive training strategies.

4.3. Job Security and the Human Touch

Concerns about job security were prevalent in the interviews, particularly among frontline agents. Many participants feared that as AI systems became more advanced, they might eventually replace human roles entirely. Agents noted that tasks they once performed manually were now automated, leading to uncertainty about the long-term sustainability of their jobs. While managers often framed AI as a complement rather than a substitute for human labour, this reassurance did not fully dispel employees' anxieties.

Beyond the issue of redundancy, participants also emphasised the irreplaceable value of human empathy in customer interactions. Several agents recounted instances where customers expressed frustration with automated chatbots and requested to speak directly to a human agent. In such situations, employees argued that their ability to display understanding, patience, and emotional intelligence was critical to resolving complex or sensitive issues. This reinforced a shared view that while AI could manage routine inquiries, the "human touch" remained central to customer satisfaction and loyalty. For many employees, this recognition of uniquely human strengths served as a counterbalance to fears of automation, highlighting the need for a hybrid model where AI and human agents work collaboratively.

4.4. Customer Satisfaction and Service Quality

From the perspective of both employees and managers, AI was perceived to enhance customer satisfaction by providing faster, more consistent responses. Automated systems were able to handle queries around account balances, billing cycles, and service requests without the delays associated with transferring between departments. Managers observed that this not only improved customer perceptions of efficiency but also reduced the frustration associated with waiting in queues.

However, participants also identified risks to service quality when AI was over-relied upon. Some customers, particularly older individuals, reportedly struggled to engage with AI systems and expressed dissatisfaction when their queries could not

be resolved without human intervention. Others viewed automated responses as impersonal, particularly in cases where empathy and reassurance were required. Employees often found themselves repairing the damage caused by customer frustration with automated systems, suggesting that customer experience is enhanced only when AI is deployed in balance with human engagement.

4.5. Organisational Alignment and Integration Issues

The findings also revealed challenges associated with the integration of AI into existing organisational structures. Managers frequently noted that AI systems were not always seamlessly aligned with legacy platforms, resulting in inefficiencies and duplication of effort. For example, an agent described how information captured by AI tools sometimes had to be re-entered into older databases, negating the intended time savings.

In addition, employees reported feeling disconnected from decision-making processes around AI adoption. Many felt that management introduced new systems without adequate consultation or explanation, which created resistance and reduced buy-in. Several agents explained that they only learned about new technologies once they were already in use, leaving them little time to prepare. Managers acknowledged this issue, admitting that the speed of technological change often outpaced their ability to communicate effectively with staff. These findings underscore the importance of organisational alignment and participatory communication in ensuring that AI adoption supports rather than disrupts operations.

4.6. A Dual Narrative of Opportunity and Risk

Taken together, the findings illustrate a dual narrative surrounding AI in South African call centres. On one hand, employees and managers recognised the clear benefits of AI in terms of efficiency, productivity, and customer service. On the other hand, challenges related to adaptation, job security, service quality, and organisational alignment tempered enthusiasm. While managers tended to frame AI as essential for global competitiveness, employees were more cautious, highlighting the social and emotional dimensions of call centre work that technology could not replicate.

This tension reflects broader debates about the role of AI in the workplace. For many participants, the future of call centre work lies not in the replacement of human

labour but in the development of hybrid models where AI and employees collaborate. Such models would allow AI to handle repetitive tasks while human agents focus on complex problem-solving and relationship building. The findings suggest that South African call centres have the potential to leverage AI for operational excellence while preserving employment and enhancing customer trust, provided that adoption strategies prioritise training, transparency, and employee engagement.

5. Discussion of Key Findings

The findings of this study illustrate the complex and multifaceted ways in which Artificial Intelligence (AI) is reshaping call centre operations in South Africa. Participants described a dual narrative of opportunity and risk: on one hand, AI offered clear benefits in terms of efficiency, productivity, and customer satisfaction; on the other hand, it introduced significant challenges around adaptation, job security, and the preservation of the human touch in service delivery. This discussion section interprets these findings in relation to existing theories and literature, highlighting both the alignment and divergence between the South African context and global research.

The first and most consistent finding was that AI has become an important driver of efficiency in call centres. Participants highlighted how automation of routine processes reduced average handling time, improved data accuracy, and facilitated better scheduling. These outcomes align with global literature that positions AI as a tool for enhancing operational performance in service industries (Huang & Rust, 2021; Davenport, Guha, Grewal & Bressgott, 2020). In South Africa, where cost efficiency is essential to maintaining global competitiveness in the outsourcing market, these gains are particularly critical. The results also reinforce the strategic narrative advanced by BPESA (2022), which positions AI as central to sustaining the country's attractiveness as a global business services hub.

At the same time, the study revealed significant challenges associated with employee adaptation and training. Agents frequently described steep learning curves, particularly when new systems were introduced without adequate change management preparation. This reflects earlier work on technology adoption, where perceived ease of use and adequate training were found to be critical determinants of acceptance (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000). More recent studies similarly argue that insufficient training exacerbates employee stress and resistance in AI-enabled environments. The findings suggest that South African call centres must prioritise

structured and inclusive training programmes if they are to ensure equitable adaptation across all levels of the workforce. Without such interventions, AI risks reinforcing capability gaps between frontline agents and managers.

Concerns around job security also emerged strongly from the interviews. Many agents feared that AI could eventually displace their roles, despite managerial assurances that technology was meant to complement rather than replace human labour. This finding echoes global anxieties around AI-induced job loss (Poisat, Cullen & Calitz, 2024), but takes on greater urgency in the South African context, where youth unemployment is among the highest in the world (Stats SA, 2023). The tension between technological innovation and social responsibility is therefore particularly acute in South Africa. Managers face the dual challenge of leveraging AI for competitiveness while also maintaining their role as providers of large-scale entry-level employment. The preservation of call centre jobs has important implications not only for individuals but also for national socio-economic stability.

Despite these concerns, participants also highlighted the enduring importance of human empathy in customer service. Customers were often dissatisfied when automated systems failed to understand their needs or resolve their issues, turning instead to human agents for reassurance and conventional complex problem-solving. This finding reinforces the argument by Huang and Rust (2021) that while AI can deliver speed and efficiency, it lacks the emotional intelligence required for nuanced interactions. Employees' emphasis on empathy underscores the need for hybrid models in which AI handles routine inquiries while humans manage complex and emotionally sensitive tasks. Such models reflect the principle of "human–AI complementarity," where technology and people collaborate to achieve outcomes neither could accomplish alone (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2017).

Service quality also emerged as a theme shaped by the balance between automation and human involvement. On the positive side, AI was seen as enhancing consistency, speed, and compliance in customer interactions. On the negative side, over-reliance on AI risked depersonalisation, particularly among older customers or those requiring reassurance. This mirrors research by Hu et al. (2025), who found that employee technophilia and leadership style moderated perceptions of AI's impact on service quality. In South Africa, where call centre success is partly linked to perceptions of warmth and cultural empathy, the erosion of the human touch could undermine the sector's comparative advantage in global outsourcing markets.

The findings also pointed to organisational alignment issues. Employees often felt excluded from decision-making processes around AI adoption, which contributed to resistance and reduced buy-in. Managers acknowledged these communication challenges, suggesting that the speed of technological change often outpaced their ability to engage staff effectively. These results reinforce insights from organisational change literature, which emphasise the importance of participatory communication and transparency in building trust and alignment during transformation initiatives (Lewis, 2019). They also echo Rahwan et al.'s (2021) warning that opaque AI implementation can create perceptions of unfairness, undermining trust in both technology and management.

Taken together, the findings contribute to the literature by contextualising AI adoption within an emerging economy where labour market realities, cultural dynamics, and regulatory frameworks shape organisational outcomes. In developed economies, debates around AI often focus on efficiency, profitability, and innovation. In South Africa, these priorities are intertwined with pressing social concerns such as unemployment, inequality, and cultural inclusivity. This suggests that AI adoption in the South African call centre sector cannot be understood solely through the lens of technology acceptance or organisational efficiency; it must also be examined in relation to broader socio-economic conditions.

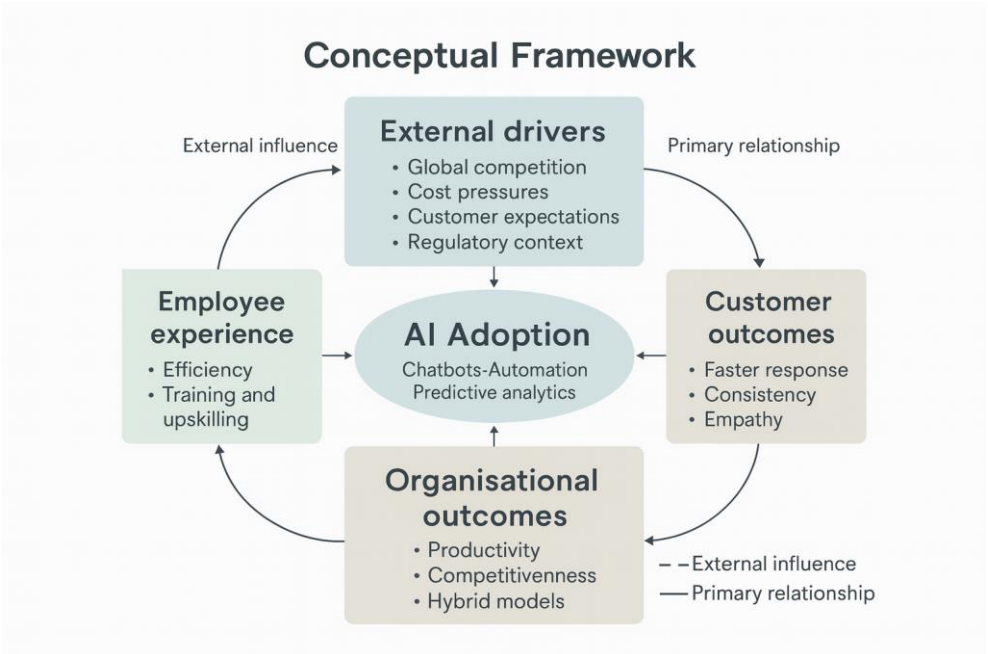

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: AI Adoption and Call Centre Outcomes in South Africa

Source: Developed by the Researchers

This framework illustrates how external drivers of competitiveness push organisations toward AI adoption, which directly shapes employee experiences and, in turn, affects customer satisfaction and organisational outcomes.

Another key contribution of the study is the articulation of the dual narrative surrounding AI in South African call centres. On one side, employees and managers acknowledged the operational benefits of AI, including efficiency, productivity, and improved customer experience. On the other side, participants highlighted risks related to workforce adaptation, service quality, and long-term job security. This tension is represented visually in Figure 2.

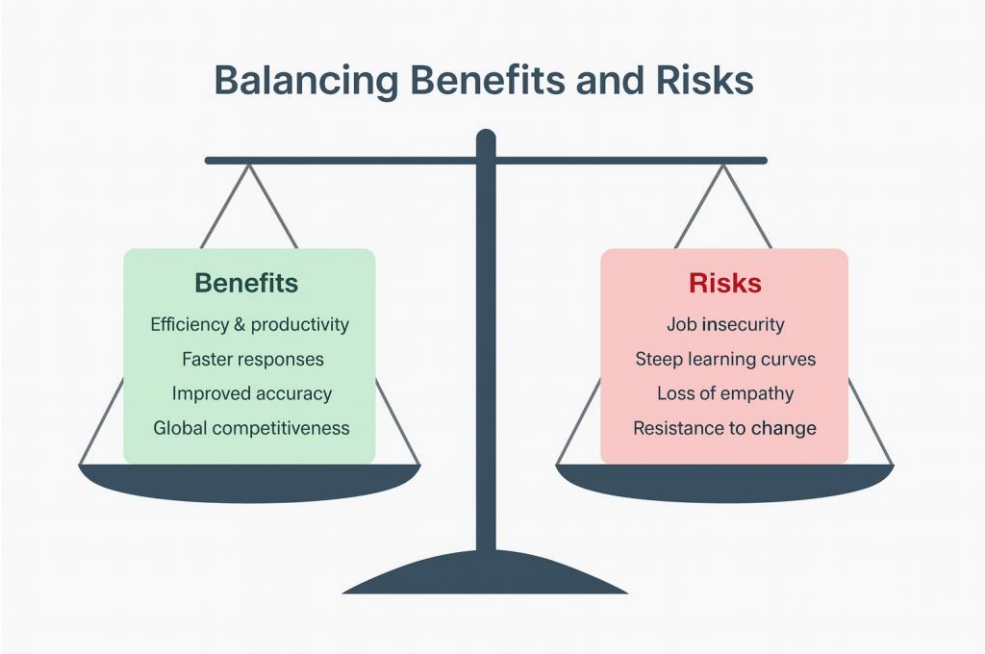

Figure 2. The Dual Narrative of AI in South African Call Centres

Source: Developed by the Researchers

Figure 2 highlights the balance managers must strike between leveraging AI for efficiency and safeguarding the human and social dimensions of call centre work.

The implications of these findings are significant. For managers, they point to the need for transparent communication, inclusive training strategies, and deliberate efforts to preserve human empathy in service delivery. For policymakers, they underscore the importance of investing in workforce development and ensuring that AI adoption aligns with national priorities of job creation and social inclusion. For researchers, they highlight the need for more context-specific studies that integrate technological, organisational, and socio-economic perspectives.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that AI adoption in South African call centres is neither a straightforward success story nor an impending crisis. Rather, it is a complex process shaped by competing pressures of efficiency and empathy, innovation and job security, global competitiveness and local social realities. The challenge for South Africa lies not in resisting AI but in harnessing it responsibly, ensuring that technological transformation strengthens rather than undermines the human foundations of service work.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study set out to explore how Artificial Intelligence (AI) is reshaping call centre operations management in South Africa, with a particular focus on employee and managerial perceptions. Through semi-structured interviews with 15 participants representing frontline agents, team leaders, and operations managers, the research revealed a dual narrative of AI adoption: while technology has generated measurable improvements in efficiency, productivity, and customer satisfaction, it has also created challenges related to adaptation, job security, and the preservation of human empathy in service delivery. These findings contribute to the broader literature by situating AI adoption within an emerging economy context, where labour market dynamics, cultural diversity, and social inequality intersect with technological transformation.

One of the clearest insights is that AI has become indispensable to operational efficiency in call centres. Automation of routine tasks, predictive scheduling, and real-time quality monitoring have allowed organisations to improve accuracy, reduce waiting times, and manage higher call volumes without proportionate increases in staffing. These outcomes align with international findings (Huang & Rust, 2021; Davenport, Guha, Grewal & Bressgott, 2020) and reinforce South Africa's competitiveness in the global outsourcing market. However, while these operational

gains are significant, they cannot be considered in isolation from the social and organisational costs they create.

The findings also underscore the uneven distribution of benefits and burdens associated with AI adoption. Managers tended to frame technology as a strategic necessity, while frontline employees more often described frustration with steep learning curves and anxiety about redundancy. This divergence reflects gaps in communication and training, as well as deeper questions about the role of human labour in an increasingly automated sector. For South Africa, where call centres provide critical entry-level employment in a country marked by high youth unemployment (Stats SA, 2023), these issues carry weighty socio-economic implications.

Another important theme is the enduring importance of human empathy in customer service. While AI can deliver speed and consistency, participants highlighted the irreplaceable role of human agents in handling emotionally complex interactions. This supports existing scholarship that positions empathy as a key differentiator in service work (Rahwan et al., 2021; Hu et al., 2025). South African call centres, which are often valued globally for their cultural warmth and interpersonal skills, risk losing this competitive advantage if automation is overemphasised at the expense of human connection.

From these insights, several recommendations emerge for managers, policymakers, and researchers.

First, organisations must institutionalise comprehensive training and development programmes that equip employees at all levels to work effectively with AI. Training should not be limited to technical skills but should also address soft skills such as adaptability, collaboration, and emotional intelligence. Structured mentoring, peer learning, and continuous feedback mechanisms can reduce anxiety and build confidence, ensuring that employees perceive AI as a tool for augmentation rather than replacement.

Second, transparent and participatory communication is essential. Employees should be engaged in decision-making processes around AI adoption, both to build trust and to ensure that implementation strategies reflect the realities of frontline work. Regular feedback channels, including surveys and workshops, can provide employees with opportunities to voice concerns and contribute to shaping solutions. By embedding inclusivity into communication, organisations can mitigate resistance and foster stronger buy-in.

Third, managers must design hybrid service models that combine the efficiency of AI with the empathy of human agents. This requires deliberate task allocation: AI should handle routine, high-volume processes, while human employees should be prioritised for complex problem-solving and relationship management. Such an approach not only enhances customer satisfaction but also reinforces the value of human labour, reducing fears of redundancy.

Fourth, policymakers and industry associations have a role to play in ensuring that AI adoption aligns with broader developmental goals. This includes supporting workforce reskilling initiatives, promoting digital inclusion, and ensuring that regulatory frameworks such as the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) are upheld in AI-driven service environments. By embedding AI strategies within national employment and skills agendas, South Africa can harness technological change in ways that support social equity and economic growth.

Finally, researchers should extend the evidence base by conducting longitudinal and comparative studies on AI adoption in call centres. While this study provided qualitative insights from a small but diverse sample, future research could employ mixed methods, larger samples, and cross-country comparisons to build a more comprehensive understanding. Attention should also be paid to how cultural diversity and multilingualism shape the acceptance and effectiveness of AI in customer service environments, particularly in Africa's heterogeneous markets.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that AI adoption in South African call centres is neither a straightforward path to efficiency nor a one-dimensional threat to employment. Instead, it represents a complex transformation that must be navigated carefully, balancing technological innovation with human well-being. The challenge for managers and policymakers lies in creating systems that harness AI's potential while safeguarding the social and emotional dimensions of service work. If implemented responsibly, AI can enhance South Africa's position as a leading global outsourcing destination while contributing to inclusive growth and sustainable employment.

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