

# Developing Customer Relationship Management Operations during the Covid-19 Pandemic. A Digitalization Perspective

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## **Abstract**

*The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the firm's ability to manage customer relationships as it was done before, with lockdowns and restrictions making physical face-to-face interactions impossible. As a response, organizations had gone through an accelerated process of digital transformation and the use of social networks or communication tools proved to be more than useful when coming to quickly adapt to the new reality. Based on an original qualitative analysis on 11 Romanian managers carried out during June 2021, this paper aims to explore the digitalization perspective of developing customer relationship management operations during the COVID-19 pandemic by doing a semi-structured literature review, then analyzing the responses in an in-depth interview and providing key-findings.*

## **Keywords**

*COVID-19; digital transformation; customer relationships; digital technologies.*

## **Introduction**

Starting as an epidemic in mainland China in February 2020, the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, and sooner than we would ever imagine it changed the world as we knew (World Health Organization, 2020). Our lives were paused, businesses were shut and economies were put at risk by an invisible enemy. Currently, the world is struggling, with public health strategies, fiscal and monetary support, the speed of vaccine rollout, and the importance of hard-hit sectors making the difference between countries, but the prospects for the world economy have brightened (OECD, 2021). It is expected that the global output will rise by 6% in 2021, after a 3.5% contraction in 2020, but this won't be enough to match the pre-pandemic growth path, with many OECD countries having the living standards below the level expected before the pandemic. However, due to swift policy actions, after sixteen months into the pandemic, almost 2 billion vaccine doses were administered, paving the way for health and economic recovery. With the world economy slowly returning to pre-pandemic activity levels, the Global GDP is projected to rise by 5.75% in 2021 and close to 4.5% in 2022 (OECD, 2021).

Although, as of today, countries across the globe began to gradually ease the restrictions, with relaxation measures expected to continue during the summer, we are still relying on digital technologies to keep our activity close to pre-pandemic levels.

And although the general perception may be that employees are eager to return to the office, almost one in two workers in the UK is willing to take a pay cut to continue working from home in the long term (OWL Labs, 2020).

### Organic versus accelerated digital transformation in the context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, digital technologies have been adopted by companies as a response to the need for social distancing and as an alternative to the new normal, even if they were available on a large scale in the pre-pandemic period. For instance, traditional education organizations all over the world had to adopt electronic learning as it was the only possible way of continuing their activities during the lockdown, but this technology was available a long time before it was adopted. The term used to describe the development of favorable conditions for a historically unprecedented phenomenon is “disruption”, or revolutionary transformation. (Ganichev & Koshovets, 2021, p. 19). This process is happening with the forced “manual” transfer of daily activities of individuals and organizations to a new digital society. This is also important as humankind has to develop the ability to prepare solutions for the inevitable shocks and disruptions that confront the economy and society. One has a lot of recent examples to understand how important this process is, the 2008 global financial crisis and the recent COVID-19 pandemic being only the tip of the iceberg (Ra, Shanti, & Maclean, 2021, p. 44). And although a lot of effort was put since the start of the new millennium into the process of going towards a more digital economy with all its implications, it was not until recently that the entire world faced the need for this change more than ever, with the COVID-19 outburst resulting in massive disruptions to businesses from nearly every industry sector and impacting day-to-day activities of entire populations across the globe. The solution was found in technology, as the digitalization of business processes, online meetings, and remote working were the most natural choice when lockdown measures were taken. And although the larger impact of these changes is far from being completely measured and analyzed, first evidence shows that the accelerated process of digitalization actually increased productivity, reduced asset ratios, and produced an increase in the demand for training, as new technologies had to be learned by employees (Ra, Shanti, & Maclean, 2021, p. 237). However, there are also studies showing that the accelerated process of digital transformation has its downs. According to the software intelligence company Dynatrace, who conducted a global survey involving 700 Chief Information Officers, many IT managers have doubts about their ability to keep up with digital transformation as they don’t find proper integration between all teams in the company (CE Noticias Financieras, 2021, p. 1). This problem has multiple causes. First of all, due to the accelerated characteristic of this transformation, a lot of tools were used meaning that a lot of time is wasted to manually combine data, gather information, and align strategies rather than driving innovation. Another cause of this problem is the external factors affecting employees, with psychological problems and worries about work-life balance becoming a priority for organizations to keep employees as healthy and as productive as possible under new circumstances. But as the COVID-19 pandemic was gradually becoming normality, there were three categories of organizations: first there are those who “retreat to run” to conserve resources and keep business as normal as possible. Other organizations “strive to maintain” to get

back to strategies they developed before the pandemic. Last but not least, some organizations saw this period as a chance to reinvent their approach towards traditional business and provide a catalyst to their digital roadmap (Heller, 2020, p. 2).

Impact of digital transformation phenomenon on customer relationship management operations during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic – literature review

To impact the impact of the digital transformation phenomenon on customer relationship management operations during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic the author focused on realizing a semi-structured narrative literature review. During crises like the COVID-19 pandemic when everything is happening faster than usual and we are surrounded by an avalanche of information with research publications already expanding, literature reviews serve a crucial function. ProQuest Central, Scopus, Springer, Wiley, Google Scholar, McKinsey, Cap Gemini, Deloitte Ernst & Young, KPMG, and PricewaterhouseCoopers, the most used databases and sources were used to search for keywords “customer relationship management” and “digital transformation during COVID-19 pandemic”. Only studies that guide the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on customer relationship management in terms of digital transformation or digitalization in organizations were included, written in English. Due to the specific of the COVID-19 pandemic the publication date was limited to 2020-2021, but we also included studies from the past that analyzed the process of digitally transforming customer relationship operations. Researching the titles existing in ProQuest online library using keywords „customer relationship management”, “digital transformation” and “covid-19” generated 53 results. After screening the titles and reading the abstracts, a total of 16 studies were identified. Scopus generated 62 results after researching the titles that included „customers”, „digitalization” and „COVID-19 impact”. A total of 26 results were identified after screening the titles and reading the abstracts. Researching the titles existing in Springer using keywords “customer relationship management”, “digital transformation” and “COVID-19” generated 81 results. After screening the titles and reading the abstracts, a total of 39 results relevant articles were identified. Wiley Online Library returned 39 results after researching the titles using keywords “impact of digitalization in customer relationship management during COVID-19 pandemic” and “digital transformation”. After screening the titles and reading the abstracts, a total of 12 studies were identified. In total, all sources combined, we identified 93 studies and 6 reports as being directly linked to the research topic – the impact of digitalization in organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the end, after reading the full-text of each one, a total of 78 articles were removed for reviewing only a specific topic that was not directly linked to management, for having a small number of citations (below 10), for being a duplicate of an article from another database, for missing a qualitative approach of the interviews or for not being relevant due to the small number of respondents. For each article, we picked 3 to 6 main findings in a tabular form to ease the review process and to have a clear image for each one (Table 1).

**Table 1. Semi-structured narrative literature review - tabular form**

Topic	Main Findings
<b>The role of digital tools in customer relationship management during and after the COVID-19 pandemic</b>	<p>The emergence of a global crisis, COVID-19, has significantly changed consumer behavior in the market, shopping motives and consumer sentiment. The understanding of the needs and wishes of the customers is one of the most important marketing goals. The customer-oriented attitude has a direct effect on the customer's satisfaction. A complex understanding of these users' characteristics will allow researchers to better understand customer behavior in online shopping in the initial transaction, which presents the biggest challenge for the service providers. Understanding the user's characteristics will help the providers of goods and services to design the web pages better to achieve a competitive advantage. Due to these changes, which happened at an extreme pace, a new customer segment was created (Majercakova &amp; Rostasova, 2021, p. 5). Digital transformation is therefore a technology catalyst and an opportunity for traditionally non-digital businesses to gain new customers, extend market shares, and enter uncharted territory. 58% of the businesses indicated that the adoption of new technologies is meant to help their business to improve customer service. In addition, 43% use social networks to advertise and push sales by attracting new customers, with Facebook (33%) as the most preferred platform, followed by Instagram (19%), Twitter (10%), and LinkedIn (8%). The rapid evolution of social media and information and communication technologies, such as mobile technologies, have changed the traditional relationships between businesses and customers. Brands take advantage of technology, social media, and constant connectivity to foster organic consumer engagement and interactions towards co-creating personalized customer service. Realtime service offers dynamic engagement with connected consumers (Fusté-Forné &amp; Filimon, 2021, p. 5). Digital marketing has enabled companies from various industries to obtain real-time customer insights and create and communicate value to customers more effectively (Low, Ullah, Shirowzhan, Sepasgozar, &amp; Lee, 2020, p. 21). In summary, greater digitalization will allow innovative firms to grow and connect with new customers (Fredrich &amp; Bouncken, 2021, p. 13)</p>
<b>Customers response towards changes that involved digital tools during the COVID-19 pandemic</b>	<p>The customer's behavior has changed during the lockdown and massive use of the web and social media have become the channels to manage the product information gathering and purchasing activities (Bettiol, Capestro, Di Maria, &amp; Micelli, 2021, p. 2). One negative aspect noted was that many customers were not ready to make decisions concerning larger investments remotely. Hence, customers were satisfied when banks proactively contacted them to learn about their situation and needs and advised them on using remote services (Haapio, Mero, Karjaluoto, &amp; Shaikh, 2021, p. 8). As customers are continuously connected using mobile technologies, firms need to respond with connected strategies to improve their customers' experience (Kokshagina &amp; Schneider, 2021, p. 6). The demand for online services sets providers major challenges in maintaining customers' satisfaction in terms of shopping experiences. Customers view online purchasing as a convenient and efficient shopping method, but they perceive it as risky because of the uncertainty about the reliability of the product and service (Ozuem, Ranfagni, Willis, Rovai, &amp; Howell, 2021, p. 4).</p>
<b>Challenges of the digitalization</b>	<p>Digitalization is costly and will cause short-term profitability losses that, in turn, also negatively affect sales growth (Fredrich &amp; Bouncken, 2021, p. 13). Organizations are unwilling to spend because the initial investment of</p>

**process in customer relationship management in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic**

installation and reengineering is very high, and the outcome is not 100% assessable. Anyone can track personal data that belongs to an individual through the Internet. A lack of awareness about emerging technology and skepticism keeps businesses from pursuing digital strategies. Inadequate technology increases concerns about data protection (Bagale, Ramana Vandadi, Singh, Kumar Sharma, & Garlapati, 2021, p. 13). The digitalization process has been strongly associated with increasing inequality and job loss. On the topic of cyber-security, there are security risks and concerns regarding the increased reliance on digital technologies that can be hacked. The accustoming to digital technologies has also been linked with changes in social interactions, the loss of empathic ability, the growth of internet addiction, and the desocialization of individuals (Van Veldhoven & Vanthienen, 2021, p. 12). SMEs are known for experiencing significant challenges when adopting ICTs as they often struggle to attract and retain the required skills and expertise, and are usually less aware of available ICTs and their benefits. Moreover, they often cannot afford expensive, customized ICT solutions as they generally have limited financial resources (Wendt, Adam, Benlian, & Kraus, 2021, p. 2).

**Opportunities of the digitalization process in customer relationship management in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic**

Digital transformation initiates a paradigm shift characterized by hyper-connectivity and involvement of end-customers along the value chain, including new opportunities for value co-creation via gamification or crowdsourcing. Particularly young customers share a greater expectation for digital servitization and building a digital identity (Fredrich & Bouncken, 2021, p. 11). The rapid evolution of social media and information and communication technologies, such as mobile technologies, have changed the traditional relationships between businesses and customers. Brands take advantage of technology, social media, and constant connectivity to foster organic consumer engagement and interactions towards co-creating personalized customer service. Realtime service offers dynamic engagement with connected consumers (Fusté-Forné & Filimon, 2021, p. 5). More personalized features for the customer and more versatility, openness, and globalization for the supply chain are obtained through digitalization. Consequently, it must be possible to react quickly and efficiently to customer needs and generate the latest version at smaller batch sizes. Using digital resources, you can recognize areas that need professional development and workforce gaps. It is now simpler to monitor employee performance, train them, and educate them. By implementing digital tools, clients can enhance the business's metric analysis. Metrics such as internet traffic, operation metrics such as sales and acquisitions, information metrics such as customer insights, and people metrics such as employee job satisfaction can all be used to enhance various facets of the organization quickly (Bagale, Ramana Vandadi, Singh, Kumar Sharma, & Garlapati, 2021, p. 11).

**Future of customer relationship management**

The implementation of a digitalization strategy will take time to break even (Fredrich & Bouncken, 2021, p. 13). A new customer segment was created - digital-only. They may not even realize it, but when they return to the previous state nothing will be like previously. The people will not behave in the store in the same way as previously (Majercakova & Rostasova, 2021, p. 5).

*Author's elaboration*

## Methodology

To explore how firms responded to the COVID-19 challenges with the main attention on the use of digital technologies in customer relationship management, this article draws on in-depth interviews carried out on Romanian employees from various sectors. The responses were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic (June and July 2021). Managers of the firms were interviewed through a set of open-ended questions that followed an interview guideline to keep the conversation structured and on point (Table 2). Specifically, the questions aimed to assess more in-depth:

- The level of digitalization in organizations before the COVID-19 pandemic;
- The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on customer relationship management with a focus on digital tools and their use in the process;
- Future of business after the COVID-19 pandemic ends.

**Table 2. Firms and roles interviewed**

Firm	Industry	Market	Interviewee position
<b>Firm 1</b>	Media and Telecommunications	B2B/B2C	Head of Digital Media
			Digital Sales Manager
			CMO
<b>Firm 2</b>	Office supplies and stationery	B2B	Marketing Specialist
<b>Firm 3</b>	Banking	B2B/B2C	Branch Manager
<b>Firm 4</b>	Software Development	B2B	IT Project Manager
<b>Firm 5</b>	Banking	B2B/B2C	Data Analyst
<b>Firm 6</b>	Internet Cloud computing, Advertising	B2B	Strategic Partner Manager
<b>Firm 7</b>	Beverages	B2B	Supply Planning Coordinator
<b>Firm 8</b>	Cosmetics, skincare, fragrance, and personal care company	B2C/B2B	Finance Director
			People Lead

*Author's elaboration*

To reach the research purpose, a word cloud analysis was implemented to extract the main words that emerged from the interviews. Starting from the transcription of the interviews collected, the following criteria were applied: the same word present both in singular and plural was counted as a single word; synonyms were considered as a single word in the final count. After the cleaning process, from the total number of words that emerged, only those with a minimum frequency of 10 were included in the word cloud. From a total of 1.941 unique words, 23 words, whose frequency ranges from 10 to 106 formed the cloud. Regarding the visualization of the words, frequency (words that appear more frequently are larger) and scale (rare words are shown differently than common words) were chosen as visualization modes after research. The word order is random. The tool used for cleaning the text and counting the words was wordcounter.net. For the visual representation of the word cloud, wordclouds.com was used.

## Results. Developing customer relationship management operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. A digitalization perspective – word cloud analysis

A word cloud is a visual representation of word frequency that provides a first look for formative purposes (DePaolo & Wilkinson, 2014). The main conclusion of this analysis is the importance of the digital and online tools in customer relationship management during the COVID-19 pandemic and that almost all strategies were people-oriented (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Keywords mentioned in the interviews**  
(Author's elaboration)

“The first measures taken by the organization were meant to limit the necessity of physically going to the office through work from home, meaning a transfer of day-to-day activities (including customer meetings) to an online environment. Where this wasn't possible due to technical limitations or other constraints, we organized two-week shifts to avoid as many risks as possible.”

Besides the importance of digital tools in customer relationship management, the word cloud also reveals other key terms, from which results that the main focus in organizations was to find new solutions to adapt as quick as possible, keeping employees experience as close to normal as possible so they can implement the adapted strategies and offer the customers a smooth transition towards online interaction. These preliminary results offer an overview of the accelerated digital transformation organizations had to deal with.

After developing the word-map, a step-by-step strategy of adapting to the new reality was extracted by analyzing the content provided in the interviews, taking into consideration the level of digitalization before the COVID-19 pandemic, the moment they realized that an accelerated digital transformation process is needed and organizations' preferences regarding the digital tools used.



**Table 3 First steps taken by organizations at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic**

Solution	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Develop internal infrastructure for employees</b>	7	100%
<b>More frequent calls</b>	5	71.4%
<b>Electronic signature</b>	2	28.5%
<b>Video tutorials for customers</b>	2	28.5%
<b>Online meetings</b>	2	28.5%
<b>Use of social networks</b>	1	14.2%

*Author's elaboration*

The first step taken by organizations was to develop the internal infrastructure and to offer their employees a smooth transition towards work from home so they can offer the customers an experience as close as possible to normality by using digital tools (Table 4). Ease of the sign-up process, online payments, and electronic invoice activation were also main concerns where normal interaction was happening physically at the branches.

“At the beginning of the pandemic, in late February 2020, the following steps were taken: business trips in other countries/ continents were canceled, as well as strategic customer events in the country and we were advised to continue the customer relationship management using only online tools.”

When it comes to the main purpose of the digital tools used when the first restrictions were imposed, video communication apps were the most used. Where these tools were already common, due to the specific of the business (an international organization or virtual teams), the transition was smoother and other tasks were prioritized. Important resources were also allocated towards keeping those applications functional, upgrading them, and adding new features by gathering an increased amount of feedback from new users. In terms of the existing levels of digitalization, many organizations were already taking baby steps towards a more digitalized approach. But due to the specific of this crisis, an important change was in terms of communication inside or outside the organization, where there were no reasons to find new solutions before the pandemic, thus facing even digitalized organizations with new challenges and work from home becoming the new reality and normality even though before this was a “nice to have” mention in the job description. A low level of digitalization before the COVID-19 meant also that the efforts put into adapting the offline solutions were not centralized and it resulted in a high number of independent digital tools or apps: „If before the pandemic our digitalization level was around 2 on a scale from 1 to 5, I think that now we are between 4 and 5. In 2019 we had 6 apps available for employees and customers, at the end of 2020 we had 18 in total.”

**Table 4. Percent of solutions that had a digital component**

Percent of solutions that had a digital component	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>&gt;90</b>	7	100%
<b>75%-90%</b>	1	14.2%
<b>50%-75%</b>	1	14.2%

*Author's elaboration*



All managers admit that many of the solutions found had at least one small digital component (Table 4). There are still some parts of the business that couldn't be digitalized, this being different from industry to industry.

„Even simple initiatives like sending a Christmas gift required a small digital component as we had to ask people to fill out a short form to confirm the address where we could find them for delivery.”

The need for an accelerated digital transformation hit everyone right at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and even some of the managers acknowledged this trend long before it was so much needed, it still affected them. Having the example of China, where collective actions restricting the physical interaction started at the end of 2019, it was clear enough that a lot of effort will be focused on transitioning towards an almost exclusive online relationship between the organizations and the customers.

**Table 5. Challenges of transitioning towards a predominantly digital relationship with the employees and the customers**

Transitioning towards a predominantly digital relationship with the employees and the customers – challenges	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Internal challenges</b>	4	100%
<b>Reluctant customers</b>	4	100%
<b>Time spent in front of the computer by employees</b>	3	75%
<b>Capture the customer's attention</b>	1	25%
<b>Replace the social interaction</b>	1	25%

*Author's elaboration*

The main challenges of transitioning towards a more digital relationship with the employees and the customers were internal – adapting and succeeding in working together as before as a team, teaching them new tools, and setting some rules for efficient and productive work (Table 5). In the Banking industry, it was hard to convince the customers that the processes are safe enough to be kept online to avoid physical contact, thus making it harder for the managers to keep the customers' satisfaction level close to normal. This was done by providing video examples, training, and additional information so that the whole process was clear enough. When it comes to accelerated digital transformation versus an organic environment, most managers admit that the pandemic produced faster and more efficient changes, but for sure it would have been a lot easier to implement these changes in an organic environment. An important mention is that the reduced level of digitalization in public administration meant that an important part of the customers had little to no experience with digital tools because they were not needed before the pandemic.

“You can't give up something that helps you improve your business and help you to evolve.”

This belief is shared by most of the interviewed managers, with solutions implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic still in place and constantly improving using the provided feedback so it's more suited for the customers. One big step was made

towards accepting work from home as a normality, but first studies show that a hybrid approach is more likely to be preferred by the employees.

## Discussion and conclusions

The main purpose of this analysis was to investigate the role played by digital tools and the digital transformation process on customer relationship management during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. A word cloud analysis provided initial keywords that were used by the interviewed managers and showed their focus during the process of adapting to the new reality. Adoption of digital tools was the main focus in most of the organizations with significant attention towards first keeping the employees happy by assuring the proper infrastructure and providing enough video examples and tutorials for them to use new digital tools efficiently. Communication was also an important aspect, both inside and outside of the organization, online meetings becoming the new normal, employees having an increased number of weekly calls with the customers or the partners so that all the details that would usually be discussed face to face are clear enough. When analyzing the digital component of the changes implemented at the beginning and during the COVID-19 pandemic, almost all interviewed managers admit that even the small processes had a digital component.

With the pandemic still affecting the whole world and gradually increasing the level of uncertainty that companies had to deal with and forcing customers to avoid as much as possible physical contact, the need of communicating with customers from the distance with the use of digital tools has become a top priority. More than that, the whole customer experience had to be adapted and a “digital alternative” had to be developed, from choosing a service to electronically signing the contract that will later be delivered more safely, the whole process can now be done with only a few clicks on the personal device. The quality of service and the capability of the firm in interacting with customers are more important than ever, with the pandemic creating new challenges but also offering new opportunities. One thing is sure, that many of the changes implemented at the beginning and during the COVID-19 pandemic are here to stay and improve so that they become even more suited for the customers.

## Limitations and future research

The author acknowledges that the study has some limitations. Even if through in-depth interviews, still a small number of managers were analyzed, coming from one city that could influence the gathered results. A research opportunity is represented by quantitative research on customers so that the impact of the changes proposed by the organizations should be compared with the customers’ perception.

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