BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English
Call centres: Are you talking to AI?

This is not a word-for-word transcript.

Phil

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Phil.

Pippa

And I'm Pippa. Have you ever phoned up a company and had your call held in a queue? If you have, then you've probably heard messages like this:

AI call agent

Hello, your call is important to us. You are number 89 in the queue. If you'd like to continue to hold press 1, if you'd like to return to the main menu press 0.

Pippa

How do you feel when your phone call is put on hold, Phil?

Phil

Oh, frustrated usually, although I do like it when there's a number saying how many people are in front of you. That's good.

Pippa

Well, when your call is finally connected, it's usually a call centre worker you'll speak to – a real live person who'll hopefully fix your problem. But increasingly, this work is now done using artificial intelligence, or AI. And this is causing problems in countries like India and the Philippines, where call centre jobs make up a big part of the economy.

Phil

In this programme, we'll be asking who's really in charge at the call centre: humans or AI? As always, we'll be learning some useful new vocabulary. And remember you can read along with the programme, and find the list of new words and phrases, by visiting our website, bbclearningenglish.com.

Pippa

But now I have a question for you, Phil. Around the world, numbers of call centre workers have grown rapidly in recent years. If you're listening to this, maybe you're a call centre worker yourself. So, approximately how many people work in call centres globally, Phil? Is it:
    a) 7 million?
    b) 17 million? or,
    c) 27 million?

Phil

I think b) 17 million.

Pippa

OK, well you'll have to listen to the end to find out the answer. Now, one worker worried about the impact of AI on jobs in the Philippines is Mylene Cabalona, president of the call centre workers' union, B.I.E.N. Here, she tells BBC World Service programme, 'Tech Life', about some of the difficulties of her job, and why she fears for the future:

Mylene Cabalona

So, and this person is quite already aggravated, and he keeps on **yelling** and that's the, **you know**, that's the difficult part because the mental stress also… **you know**, you have to **pacify** the client, and you have to make sure you're able to resolve the concern. And then the difficult part on that conversation is that you're being monitored by an AI.
[…]
I mean, eventually AI would replace… us. It's going to displace workers… **you know**, eventually, **in the near future**. Even, **as a matter of fact,** there's been a study that says that about 300,000 workers or around 27% of workers that's going to be displaced because of AI, and that's slowly happening.

Phil

Call centre work involves dealing with customers who've phoned up to complain. They're often angry, aggravated and **yelling**, or shouting, down the phone. It's Mylene's job to **pacify** them, to calm them down.

Pippa

If that wasn't stressful enough, Mylene's conversations are monitored by AI systems to see how well she fixes her clients' problems. You might think AI was built to support workers like Mylene, but she fears AI will replace her **in the near future**, a phrase meaning 'very soon' or 'within a short time'.

Phil

Mylene emphasises her fears about being replaced by giving details about a study she read, which claimed that 27% of workers will be displaced by AI. She uses the phrase, **as a matter of fact**, to emphasise what she's saying, and to give more detail as evidence to support it.

Pippa

But Mylene thinks AI will never fully replace humans. She says AI lacks one important quality, empathy. Here, she explains more to BBC World Service's, 'Tech Life':

Mylene Cabalona

Well, I don't think AI is, you know, **empathetic**, or… whenever they talk, I mean if ever a machine or a robot talks to them, **you know**, people are more compassionate than, **you know,** when you talk to a robot.

Phil

Mylene says that AI is not **empathetic**. Unlike humans, it can't put itself in someone else's place and share their feelings or experiences.

Pippa

If you listen carefully to Mylene's speech, you'll notice she says, **"you know"**, a lot. Phrases like, **"you know"**, "um" and "ah" are called filler words and are used to give the speaker time to think, or to express uncertainty. Right, I think it's time I

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revealed the answer to my question, Phil. I asked you how many call centre workers are there globally.

Phil

And I said 17 million.

Pippa

Which is the right answer. OK, let's recap the vocabulary we've learned in this programme, starting with **yelling**, another word for shouting.

Phil

To **pacify** someone means to calm them down when they're angry.

Pippa

In the near future means very soon, or within a short time.

Phil

The phrase, **as a matter of fact** is used to add emphasis to what you're saying, to give more detail about what you've just said, or to introduce something that contrasts with it.

Pippa

If you're **empathetic**, you're able to put yourself in someone else's position and share their feelings or experiences.

Phil

And finally, filler words like 'um', 'ah' and **'you know'** give the speaker more time to think, or to express uncertainty. Once again, our six minutes are up, bye!

Pippa

Bye!

VOCABULARY

yelling
shouting

pacify (someone)
calm down someone who is angry

in the near future
very soon, within a short time

as a matter of fact
used to add emphasis to a statement, to give more detail about what has just been said, or to introduce something that contrasts with it

empathetic
able to put yourself into someone else's position and share their feelings or experiences

you know
(filler word) used to give the speaker time to think, or to express uncertainty

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