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AI360 podcast

Season 1, Episode 13: The role of AI in evolving customer success

Host:

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Rohan Gupta: Hello, everyone, and welcome to another episode of AI360! I'm very excited to have a friend and colleague, Aftab, join the show today. Aftab, do you want to do a quick intro for us?

Aftab Khanna: Rohan, thank you for having me. My name is Aftab Khanna, and I'm with Deloitte, based in the Bay Area. I've worked a lot in our customer success practice, I'm a founding member of that team and operate very closely with CCOs in the technology space, helping them to optimize everything in post-sales.

Rohan Gupta: Well, thanks again for joining us. So, I know that customer support has been a very big topic in the Generative AI world. But if we zoom out a little bit to the entire post-sales life cycle, the next big opportunity is customer success. So could you talk a little bit about the opportunity for AI and customer success, and what does the future look like for this business function?

Aftab Khanna: Sure. I'll quote one of my favorite authors, Charles Dickens: "It's the best of times. It's the worst of times." Customer success has come out of a slightly difficult period in 2022 and 2023, like all of tech. Teams have gone through cutbacks. There have been questions around the budget and all, but overall it's still a very fast growth area. It's critical to driving value realization for customers.

And interestingly, the technology spend for customer success is one of the fastest-growing markets. CAGR is about 25% year on year, so there's plenty of automation opportunities, especially using AI.

I see AI playing two critical roles in customer success going forward. At the top of the funnel, really helping to drive greater productivity for customer success managers by automating a lot of their tasks and thereby freeing up their time and their capacity to actually talk with customers more and get them to value faster. And I think at the bottom of the funnel, it's going to be a great accelerator and enabler to finally get us to the true digital touchless motion, especially for mid-tier and SMB customers. You literally can imagine a scenario where there's no human intervention required and pretty much AI is driving a lot of digital automated communications to get us to the touchless motion.

Rohan Gupta: I can see how all these use cases are actually going to free up time for a lot of the CSMs. Could you speak a little bit more to some of those use cases? In particular, Aftab, what are some of the biggest ones you see as working in the market today?

Aftab Khanna: Yeah, so Rohan, we did research last year. We surveyed about 150-plus customer success professionals, and I'll highlight three prominent use cases that came out of that research.

Number one to me is around organizing and managing content. So about 30% to 35% of time that a CSM spends on average every week goes into either preparing for customer meetings or managing content that comes out of customer meetings—figuring out who is doing what, assigning action items, very practical manual stuff. Which, if you think about it, you know, it's low-hanging fruit for GenAI-related capabilities. So that, to me, is one critical use case where GenAI can help them prepare for customer meetings and then manage everything they need to do coming out of those customer meetings and track those items.

The second one gets a little bit bigger. It's about getting the right account snapshots. So how does a CSM get the right view of the customer real estate that they're managing. Today, they spend is about 30% to 35% of their time (again) on getting information from different data sources and compiling the right view of a customer account. And if you think about it, there's a great role that AI can play by pulling information from different tools and areas, summarizing it, and giving them something to take into a customer meeting and talk about and really have them focus on the key areas that they need to.

Lastly, I would say the third use case is around value and health measurement. Can you use the knowledge you have of a customer based on the sale information, based on the account plan, based on the opportunity information, and maybe generate a first part of a success plan, or generate the first cut of a customer onboarding playbook, generate a first cut of a health scorecard. And so again, that frees up time that a CSM spends today and doing those activities and helps them really add on more things on top of it and get to insights quicker and get to actually figuring out where they can help drive value faster for their customers. So those are the three prominent use cases that I see that are ripe for activation across enterprises.

Rohan Gupta: Makes sense. In fact, you know, a lot of CCOs that you and I have talked about, how they're trying to expand the coverage ratio of their post-sales teams. So, an indirect effect of this is the same individual being able to cover more accounts. So, you know, I'm curious from a customer's point of view, what's going to change? In this world, when they actually get a lot of their services delivered through AI, how will that change? And actually what benefits will they realize?

Aftab Khanna: I foresee two primary benefits. I think one is a direct benefit, which is that you will actually get more insights on how you can get value better because the CSM is now no longer talking to you about how your metrics have shaped or how you use the product. They have mental space and capacity to guide you along the journey and say, "This is the next use case that you need to take" or "Here's how you need to use the product better." The quality of insights that a customer success manager can bring to you can improve, and thereby, that only ends up improving your experience.

The other side to this is a lot of innovation today is focused on driving in-house productivity. But how can you turn it around and make it customer-facing? And some companies have started doing that. But I imagine a scenario where there's a customer portal where, you know, you have insights on customer usage and that tells the customer directly how they can enhance their usage. How do they compare against their peers? What are, let's say, three or four actions that they can take based on their current usage pattern to get more value out of their product? It's a little bit like how we on Netflix get like guided recommendations. Could you do that in an enterprise IT setting? And to me, that's the Holy Grail, and that would really uplift and enhance experience because then, as a customer, the low-hanging fruit is available to me. I'm talking to my CSM only about what really needs to happen going forward.

Rohan Gupta: Thank you so much for that. As we wrap up our episode, could you talk a little bit to our listeners about where they should get started? What are some of the things that they can do to actually begin to realize all those benefits that you laid out for us?

Aftab Khanna: It's a great question, Rohan. When we talk to chief customer officers, I think there are three things that we are suggesting to keep top of their mind as they start off on their journey. I think number one, data is key—because ultimately any insights that you get, any kind of account view that you're gathering, the data has to be correct. It has to be reliable. So my hope is that this push for AI actually starts or reinvigorates a lot of data cleanup and data modernization that needs to happen both upstream in sales and downstream for sales.

I think the second piece to me is the technology integration. So how do you make sure that customer success tools with AI capabilities also don't end up being sandboxes by themselves? Make sure they're talking to the different tools in the organization, both upstream and downstream.

And the last piece to me is around a little bit of change management—and what are you doing to train your CSMs to operate in this new AI world so that they are actually using the insights that they get and adding more value, the right commentary on top of it to get the best out of it and make customers realize that they're getting more value. So to me, those are the three fundamental spaces that I think CCOs need to focus on as they start off on this journey.

Rohan Gupta: Makes sense! Thank you so much, Aftab. I really appreciate the time, and for all of our listeners listening in, we'll see you very soon with another episode.

Aftab Khanna: Thank you.

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