

DID YOU KNOW?

Approximately 28% of NCTC members are already using AI daily. Another 28% are piloting it, with 44% not using it yet, according to NCTC's 2Q AI member survey. The results showed a clear demand for AI, with 50% of members saying they are ready to move with the right support and 28% ready now. Another 22% reported being interested but not ready yet. Top barriers are security/privacy concerns, lack of expertise, data quality and ROI uncertainty.

NCTC MEMBERS TEST AI'S POTENTIAL

Answering a customer's billing question costs **Conway Corp.** about \$10.50 when a human picks up the phone. With AI, that drops to \$6.50—and 40% of callers never need a human at all.

Conway is one of four **NCTC** member companies that piloted the co-op's new AI Center of Excellence, and the results were strong enough that the board has approved rolling it out to the full membership. This week's Independent Show offered a chance for members to decide if they want to pay for the upcoming AI subscription offering.

Conway Corp., a city-owned utility in Arkansas, decided to start with AI for appointment confirmation. "We very narrowly focused that pilot specifically where document intelligence was there. We've got point of confirmation, voice and digital chat," Conway Corp. CTO *Jason Hansen* said during a breakout session at the show. "It easily can expand out into trouble tickets, and that's where we see the most value."

The pilot was able to reduce 13 unproductive truck rolls due to customer responses and customers responded to notifications approximately 45% of the time. At a cost of about \$100 per truck roll, preventing 20 unproductive truck rolls a month would get Conway to break even. In addition to trouble tickets, Conway is interested in using the program for self-service rescheduling. The pilot was done with third parties like cloud-based communications platform **Twilio**, but Conway's data was always kept separate through the **Azure** hyperscale database platform.

Conway also participated in the NCTC voice chat pilot, a project Hansen described as more challenging. The number one reason customers call Conway is to find out how much their bill is—which spans telecom, water, wastewater and electricity. Even though that info is available in Conway's app, people still call, so that's where it decided to focus. "That use case meant that we had to authenticate a user, and we had to authenticate them with information that we weren't going to send to the cloud," such as the last four digits of their Social Security number, said Hansen. "We had to do some programmatic hashing of those data points so they could be checked against to verify. All of those were built. We trained it on customer manuals, on voice calls."

Over 1,300 calls have come in around billing and about 40% were taken care of and never made it to a live agent. Hansen said the other 60% tend to need help with payment extension. "We're authenticating almost 65% of the users before they even talk to a live agent. So our data in our system is good enough to identify 65% of users, whether it's on their social that they provide, the PIN they



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provide or we recognize the phone number that they're calling from and we can know who they are before we get started," he said.

In May, NCTC surveyed members and the results solidified its plans. "What really shone through was members are using AI, but members don't have a strategy. Members need governance help. They need help with understanding who are the right AI partners, and they need help with integration," said *Rob Smith*, VP of Group Purchasing at NCTC.

To successfully launch these AI projects, it takes a lot of people and expertise that not every company has. "We have about 48 employees. We were dabbling in AI, but I don't have the staff," said *Peter Curran*, Cybersecurity & AI Architect for **MTC** (Margaretville Telephone Company). Like many of his peers, Curran was particularly concerned about governance. NCTC's survey found 44% of member companies lack AI governance frameworks. "NCTC came to us with 'it's a work-in-progress, but a solution'... Also working with **EY**, a company that has a level of experience coming to this and bringing that to us, a small operator, is incredible."

MTC's pilot focused on document intelligence. "We have a treasure trove of company-specific material, and it's in a drive, or you do a Word search or something to try to find what you're looking for. It takes forever, and so this is a great solution for us," Curran explained. On average, the AI document repository tool has seen around 11 inquiries per day—a number MTC hopes will grow as employees get more comfortable with using it. On average, feedback indicates the tool will save an employee about 3.5 minutes a day, with about 26 inquiries a day needed to break even on labor costs.

As a security leader, Curran takes comfort in that if someone puts in a query for material not in MTC's database, they will be told, "I don't know." "That's incredible for those who play with AI," he said, explaining how it eases concerns the AI will hallucinate answers.

The fourth AI pilot focused on customer churn/retention marketing, analyzing customer behavior to identify churn risks and generate personalized retention strategies. "This is an ML model within the Azure platform that identifies the top 10% of your customer base that is likely to churn based on things like promo roll-ups, trouble tickets, outages, calls into a customer service center, things like that. The future of that will be not just the identification of the top 10% but the next best action," said Smith. He said it's in an earlier stage with more work to come.

Smith shared that the next 60 days or so will be spent making sure the offering is ready to be commercialized with a launch date targeted for around mid-September. There will be an ROI model that members can plug their specific data into to understand expectations.

"Every single operator here should reach out to NCTC and just have a conversation," said Hansen. "It's a great place to start, at least to see where they're going. Maybe the three, four options that we have are not where you're looking to be, but in six months there's going to be more."

CFX Daily (ISSN 1069-6644)
is published daily by Access
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cablefax.com

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Annual subscription price:
\$1,999.00/yr

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VERIZON POSITIONS FOR FIBER EXPANSION AFTER EATON INVESTMENT

In October, **Verizon** inked a deal with **Eaton Fiber** in an effort to grow in markets beyond its footprint and the **Frontier** base it absorbed. Now things are being taken up a notch, with **Bain Capital** and **Tillman Global Holdings** announcing a \$1.5 billion injection into Eaton to help accelerate Verizon's fiber broadband expansion in the U.S. The agreement is expected to close before the end of the year. As a result of the investment, Eaton will acquire **Ripple Fiber**, an operator with markets in Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, North Carolina, South Carolina and Washington. Ripple customers will soon transition to Verizon without any service interruptions. Additionally, Verizon is purchasing a small part of Ripple's network and related assets that are adjacent to or partially within Verizon's existing fiber footprint in the Carolinas. According to **New Street Research's** Broadband Insights report, Ripple held nearly 250,000 fiber locations at the end of 2025, with potential plans to reach 500,000 by the end of 2026. "99% of Ripple's footprint overlaps with Cable. **Charter** overlaps 58% of Ripple's footprint. 37% of Ripple's footprint overlaps with other fiber providers with the largest overlaps in the **AT&T** and **Brightspeed** footprints," NSR wrote, adding that it expects Verizon to make more fiber deals in the next year or so. "We continue to believe that Verizon needs to acquire more fiber assets (Brightspeed or perhaps **Uniti**) to get close to the size of AT&T's fiber footprint."

AT&T-ECHOSTAR SPECTRUM DEAL CLOSES

The \$23 billion transaction that'll see **EchoStar** give **AT&T** certain wireless spectrum licenses closed Tuesday. AT&T received 30 MHz of nationwide 3.45 GHz mid-band spectrum and 20 MHz of nationwide 600 MHz low-band spectrum, which will help the company's 5G capacity and download speeds as well as its AI-related initiatives. While \$20.25 billion of the proceeds went to EchoStar, \$2.4 billion went into a Wireless Creditor Trust that'll be used to pay entities that the company still owes—a condition the **FCC** attached when it OK'd the deal in May. The transaction was [first announced](#) in August and came on the heels of EchoStar's run-in with the FCC regarding its 5G obligations and spectrum licenses.

DAZN'S RSN PUSH STARTS IN THE BIG APPLE

As teams across the **NBA**, **NHL** and **MLB** deal with another year of RSN uncertainty, **DAZN** has been one of the rumored players interested in joining the game and obtaining the local rights for major sports teams. It took quite a first step Wednesday, announcing a partnership with **MSG Networks** and **YES Network** to make DAZN the exclusive direct-to-consumer streaming host of the Yankees, Knicks, Nets, Rangers, Devils, Islanders and Sabres starting with the 2026-27 season. It marks the end of a near two-year Gotham Sports app experiment between YES and MSGN. Current Gotham Sports subscribers will continue to have access through the end of the MLB season, and the exact timing and details of the migration to DAZN will be announced at a later date. For DAZN, pay TV customers who receive YES or MSGN will be able to authenticate at no additional cost. DAZN will also carry 24/7 live feeds of MSGN, **MSG Sportsnet** and YES' networks, as well as on-demand content and studio programming. Fans on social media seemed to embrace the news, despite yet another change in live sports distribution. "Bummer for Gotham sports, they had almost figured out how to get the platform working last season," wrote one Reddit user. "I mean... it can't be worse, right? ...right?" questioned another. *Awful Announcing* Owner/Editor Ben Koo even [added](#) on **X**, "I/ We have never recieved [sic] as many people nudging us to write about how much an app sucks as Gotham." No pressure, DAZN.

STARZ, CRUNCHYROLL BUNDLE ON PRIME VIDEO

Starz and **Crunchyroll** are bundling up on **Amazon's Prime Video** platform. Customers can sub to both streamers for \$16.99/month, representing over 23% in savings. The deal gives viewers access to all of Starz's original series and its film library, along with a very healthy dose of anime programming from Crunchyroll. Starz is no stranger to Prime Video bundles. It's also part of a combo with **AMC+** and **MGM+**, offered for \$21.99/month. You can also get Starz bundled with **Hallmark+** for \$13.99/month.

BOOST MOBILE'S BACK TO SCHOOL DEAL

EchoStar's Boost Mobile launched a new back-to-school savings hub that includes its Unlimited Plan for \$10/month for the first three months and then \$25/month forever for new customers. It's also offering a multi-line discount for the Ultimate plan, starting at \$50/month. For students shopping for a new phone for the first day of school, they can get a **Samsung** Galaxy A27 5G at no additional cost when they prepay for two months of the \$60 Unlimited Premium plan.

FIFA WORLD CUP SHOWS SCALE OF HISPANIC VIEWERSHIP

Horowitz Research found that the **2026 FIFA World Cup** set a new benchmark for multicultural, multiplatform sports engagement, noting the increased scale of Spanish-language viewing in the U.S. The tournament saw 23.9 million viewers tune into **Telemundo's** telecasts, with the broadcaster and **Peacock** reporting that the digital average minute audience during the group stage was up 251% vs Qatar 2022. The firm's research also showed that 54% of Latinx consumers said they intended to watch the 2026 tournament, significantly higher than the total market (42%). And they weren't just engaging via TV screens but also on social media, second screens and shared viewing experiences. "The scale of Spanish-language viewing and the outsized role of Hispanic fans highlight how deeply soccer is embedded in cultural identity and community connection in the U.S.," wrote the firm.

YOUTUBE LEADS NIELSEN'S GAUGE REPORT FOR MAY

Streaming had a tight grasp on overall TV viewing in May, with **YouTube** maintaining its position at or near the top of **Nielsen's** latest "The Gauge" report. While cable (20.4%) and broadcast (19.2%) combined to take 39.6% of the TV pie, streaming came in at 48.6%, while the "other" category claimed 11.7%. Within streaming, YouTube had a platform-record 13.8% share of TV viewing, followed by **Netflix's** 8%, **Disney's** 4.9% and **The Roku Channel's** 3.1%. **Tubi** and **Paramount+** had 2.3% apiece, while **Peacock** and **Warner Bros. Discovery**—which includes both **HBO Max** and **discovery+**—had 1.8% and 1.5%, respectively.

LG TV ADDS FREE CLOUD GAMING

Television manufacturers have been working to beef up their cloud gaming offerings for the last few years, with Xbox and **NVIDIA's** game streaming apps now available on several brands, including **Samsung** TV and **LG** TV. But while those are subscription services, LG TV is also set to offer free cloud gaming through a partnership with Phynd. Available on LG TVs from 2021 and newer that are running webOS 6.0 or higher, the streaming platform gives CTV users access to a curated library of free party, action, puzzle and trivia games. There's even "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" The Phynd app is available now on the LG Apps store, with users able to connect a game controller or use their smartphone to play.

COMCAST'S VERTICAL REALITY COMPETITION

Here's an outside-the-box way to build out your brand social team: **Comcast** is launching a new vertical reality competition series called "Best in Class" for **Instagram** and **TikTok**. Produced by **NBCUniversal's** Rock Studios, the snackable show will see six rising college creators compete for a six-figure Xfinity brand partnership. It kicks off Aug. 5 and is hosted by digital creator and sports media personality *Katie Feeney*.

JULY RATINGS, SHARK WEEK START

Fox News swept the primetime and total-day cable ratings for July, posting 2.33 million and 1.49 million viewers P2+, respectively. In prime, **MS Now** came second with 1.02 million, with **HGTV** trailing behind at 734,000, **CNN** at 658,000 and **Hallmark Channel** at 582,000. MS Now also came second in total day with 633,000. CNN made it an all-news top three with 463,000. **ESPN** recorded 435,000, while HGTV rounded out the top five with 362,000. -- **Discovery Channel's** yearly "Shark Week" festivities got off the ground Sunday with a 0.94 live+SD rating throughout the evening among A25-54. That helped Discovery rank as the top net among the demo Sunday, in addition to the M25-54 category. Additionally, Discovery had the top-three ad-supported cable telecasts that day for both A25-54 and M25-54: "Air Jaws: Red, White & Breach," "Invasion of the Mega Sharks" and "K-Pop Shark Heroes."