

The AI Receptionist explained.

Everything UK businesses need to know about AI receptionists in 2026 — what they actually do, how they work, what they cost, and whether your business is ready for one.

SECTION 01

What is an AI Receptionist, really?

Past the hype, an AI receptionist is a piece of software that answers your phone, holds a real conversation with the caller, and decides what to do next — book the appointment, transfer to the right person, log the enquiry, or answer the question on the spot.

If you've used a modern customer support chatbot, picture that — but on the phone, in real time, in any language you need. It's not an IVR ("press 1 for sales"), it's not a voicemail, and it's not a recording. It's a conversation, and most callers don't realise they're talking to AI until you tell them.

What it actually does, in practice

- ✓ **Answers every call, 24/7.** No voicemails, no missed leads, no callers hanging up because they were on hold.
- ✓ **Holds a real conversation.** Understands context, asks follow-up questions, and adapts to how each caller speaks.
- ✓ **Books appointments live.** Reads your team's calendar (Outlook, Google), checks availability, and books the slot during the call.
- ✓ **Qualifies and routes leads.** Asks the right questions, captures details, and either sends the warm enquiry to a human or handles it end-to-end.
- ✓ **Handles repetitive admin.** Password resets, account lookups, opening hours, billing questions — work that doesn't need a person.
- ✓ **Logs everything.** Every call transcribed, summarised, and tagged in your CRM. No lost notes, no forgotten follow-ups.

QUICK TAKEAWAY

An AI receptionist isn't a replacement for your team — it's a layer that handles the calls your team shouldn't be spending time on, so they can focus on the ones that genuinely need them.

SECTION 02

How it actually works.

There's no magic. An AI receptionist is built from a handful of well-understood components, stitched together to feel like a single seamless conversation.

1

The call comes in.

Your existing phone number routes to the AI receptionist. No need to change your number, port lines, or replace your phone system — it sits on top of what you already have.

2

Speech becomes text, in real time.

The caller's voice is transcribed instantly. Modern systems handle accents, background noise, and multiple languages — including UK English, French, Spanish, and others.

3

The AI decides what to do.

A language model — trained on your business's information, FAQs, and call flows — works out what the caller wants. It can ask follow-up questions, just like a human receptionist would.

4

It takes action.

Depending on the request, it answers the question, books the appointment in your calendar, transfers to the right person, logs a lead in your CRM, or escalates to a human. All within seconds, all on the same call.

5

You get the data afterwards.

Every call is recorded, transcribed, summarised, and tagged. You see exactly what was asked, what the AI did, and where the call ended up. Use it to refine the system, train your team, or spot trends.

WHAT ABOUT VOICE QUALITY?

In 2024 most AI voices sounded robotic. By 2026 they're indistinguishable from humans on a phone call — natural pauses, regional accents, even small talk. The bigger differentiator now is how well the AI *listens* and what it can *do*, not how it sounds.

SECTION 03

Why now is the moment.

AI receptionists existed five years ago, but they were expensive, robotic, and frustrating. Three things have changed in the last 18 months that move them from "maybe one day" to "this is genuinely worth doing now."

1. The tech finally works.

Modern voice AI handles UK accents, regional dialects, and complex multi-step requests reliably. Industry data shows AI receptionists now successfully resolve 30–40% of inbound calls without any human involvement — work that used to require a person on every call.

2. The economics flipped.

An AI receptionist licence now starts at around £32 per month. Compare that to the cost of a single missed lead, an out-of-hours opportunity that called a competitor, or the salary of a part-time receptionist (£18,000–£25,000 per year in the UK before NI and pension). For most businesses, the maths works out within the first week.

£32/mo

Starting price for a UK AI receptionist licence (RingCentral AIR, 100 minutes included)

30–40%

Of inbound calls now resolved by AI without human escalation

4 weeks

Typical time from kickoff to live AI receptionist on UK deployments

3. Customer expectations have shifted.

Callers now expect to get answers immediately, at any time of day, in any channel. A voicemail in 2026 reads as "we don't care enough to staff this." Businesses that respond instantly — to every call, every time — win the work that businesses with traditional setups lose.

The cost of waiting

Without AI receptionist

- ✗ 15–25% of calls go to voicemail
- ✗ Out-of-hours leads go to competitors
- ✗ Team time spent on repetitive admin
- ✗ Scaling = hiring more receptionists

With AI receptionist

- ✓ 100% of calls answered instantly
- ✓ 24/7 lead capture and qualification
- ✓ Team focuses on high-value calls
- ✓ Scaling = a settings change

SECTION 04

What to look for — and what it costs.

Not all AI receptionists are equal. Here's what separates a system you'll love from one you'll regret, and what to expect on price.

The five things that matter

- ✓ **Works with your existing phone system.** You shouldn't have to rip out and replace your current setup. The best AI receptionists layer on top of what you have.
- ✓ **Trained on your business.** Generic AI sounds generic. The system should learn from your website, FAQs, services, and real call recordings.
- ✓ **Integrates with your calendar and CRM.** If it can't book into your real calendar or log into your real CRM, it's a demo, not a deployment.
- ✓ **Transparent, predictable pricing.** Watch out for "per-minute overage" charges that turn a £32/mo plan into a £200/mo surprise.
- ✓ **Easy human handover.** When a call needs a person, the AI should hand off cleanly with full context — not start the caller from scratch.

What it actually costs

COST COMPONENT	TYPICAL RANGE (UK, 2026)	WHAT DRIVES THE COST
Platform licence	From £32/month	Number of minutes included, languages supported, integrations available
Setup & configuration	One-off, scoped to you	Call flow complexity, integrations (CRM, calendar, ticketing), languages
Ongoing support	Optional, monthly	How much optimisation and platform management you want to outsource

HIDDEN COSTS TO WATCH OUT FOR

Per-minute overages can double your bill. **Long contracts** aren't necessary for modern AI platforms. **Per-user pricing** on top of receptionist licences gets expensive at scale.

The logo for Fortay Connect, featuring the word "fortay" in white and "connect" in a teal color, both in a sans-serif font. A large, thick purple arc is positioned behind the text, curving from the top left towards the center.

fortay connect

READY WHEN YOU ARE

See it built around **your business.**

We don't do generic demos. Book a free Proof of Concept and we'll build a working AI receptionist around your real call flows — so you can see exactly how it handles your calls before you commit to anything.

Independent advice. Vendor-neutral. We'll recommend what's right for your business — Zoom, RingCentral, Dialpad, or another platform entirely.

Book your free Proof of Concept →

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