

INVESTING IN YOUR AGENTS FOR THE LONG TERM

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Ideas to improve agent retention.

BY Tamara Schroer, Working Solutions

If you run a contact center, you spend a lot of time and money to find, train and retain customer service agents. Depending on your business model, it could be up to 25% of your overhead or more.

Such a big outlay begs the question: Are your agents an expense—or are they an investment?

With recurring costs, what processes and professionals do you have in place to: (1) motivate people; (2) reduce attrition; and (3) sustain a quality workforce?

What's required is an integrated workforce strategy. It should be built into the business for recruiting the best agents, immersing them in client programs and planning for their ongoing development.

That's essential for brick-and-mortar call centers, based on the industry's high turnover, and it's critical for remote contact centers where on-demand workers, often independent contractors, operate virtually.

Success requires focus in several areas, such as:

- Fostering a caring culture, which creates the right environment to attract and onboard great agents.
- Using degreed educators, with the know-how to present your company's business and engage agents in it.
- Investing for the long term, protecting your

agent assets and ensuring a return on investment for the business.

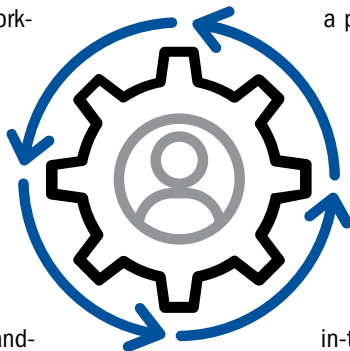
Fostering a Caring Culture

Smart job applicants do their due diligence before applying for contact center work. Cultures vary by companies. As does the value placed on—and the investment made in—agents.

Job-review sites, such as Glassdoor, reveal the good and the bad about a place through candid reviews by employees and contractors. Their comments sway not only applicants, but also influence business decisions when selecting service providers. And emotional intelligence is a factor.

It can differentiate an in-touch company from an out-of-touch workplace, be it in-office or remote. Glassdoor ranks companies from 1 to 5, and anywhere in between. Numbers do tell and people gravitate to where they'll feel appreciated, whether part-time or full-time. As a result, the caliber of applicants rises.

A caring culture promotes open communications and stimulates learning. Agents feel welcome and want to be there. Experience shows they're engaged, willing to participate and more productive. A positive outlook translates into improved service and business performance. Happy agents make for satisfied customers.



Given your culture, how do your agent metrics—say, employee satisfaction scores—measure up?

Using Degreed Educators

Having a great corporate culture to attract talent is key to any workforce strategy. Also integral is in-depth education of a company's brand and business.

Often, this task falls to contact center trainers, usually knowledge experts. Their teaching methods might be limited to traditional lectures delivered in a classroom or via WebEx. Lessons also are taught online through self-study courses. By-rote schooling can short-change agent engagement and understanding of a customer service.

This is where degreed educators benefit agents and prove superior for a contact center business. First, lessons are all educator-led. They are geared to reach different learners—auditory, visual and kinesthetic or hands-on—through crosstraining techniques. Instead of a four-hour lecture, agents switch from self-study to role-playing in small groups to gamification exercises.

Second, educators skilled in the virtual classroom know how to break down the contact center curriculum into bite-size chunks for easier comprehension. For example, they do micro-learning with tools such as PowToon to animate presentations or Biteable, engaging agents with infographics and interactive tutorials. To ensure 100% participation in the virtual classroom, they could energize agents with Umu for interactive experiences or Kahoot for game-based learning. Gamification provides stimulated customer-service scenarios in fun ways, using tools such as educaplay multimedia and C3 Softworks quizzes.

Fact is, educator-led instruction recreates real-world interactions. It better prepares agents to address different customer personas and ever-escalating consumer expectations.

Given the education, are your agents schooled to deliver kick-ass customer service?

Investing for the Long Term

No matter how thorough the instruction, agents won't know everything the first day on the job. On average, adult learners retain 60% to 75% of what's taught to them. The gap needs to be constantly closed.

For contact center operations, this means circling back to reinforce key lessons, listening to agents' customer calls and providing them with continuous feedback. Badge recognition, such as Badgr, for instance, rewards and encourages ongoing performance after initial onboarding.

Depending on the complexity of the service that your agents provide, an educator might create a 30-, 60- or 90-day development plan to keep sharpening agents' skills. It's done through a learning management system—an online university, employing the same teaching methods used by institutions nationwide. The system underpins all agent development, inside the virtual classroom and outside with ongoing education.

An agent website complements all of this, promoting a sense of community, which is essential for remote contact center operations. There, agents review their performance, receive business updates and learn about new opportunities, as well as interact with peers on client programs.

A long-term commitment to agents pays dividends—every day and throughout the years. Well-educated in your company's products and services, agents identify with the brands they serve and tend to stay. An average of several years is not uncommon. Some agents remain longer, reaching five-, 10- and even 15-year anniversaries.

Given these numbers, how does your agent longevity stack up?

Your Customers Know

Yes, all of these things—fostering a caring culture, using degreed educators and investing for the long term—can be a lot to take in, much less do and pull off.

But consider this: Looking at 2018 call center trends, an IBM Watson[®] post reports “the overall turnover rate for the call center industry is between 30%–45%, and each individual turnover can cost a company upward of \$6,440.” That adds up to a lot of money—right out the door. Naturally, IBM makes a case for more artificial intelligence (AI) and automated

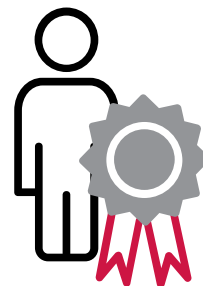
customer service to reduce expenses, which is where the industry is evolving.

Granted, it's a valid point for self-service.

Beyond that, it also drives home the need for well-trained, motivated and intelligent agents (IA). They remain critical to solve complex customer issues.

Given agents' importance in delivering quality service: Are they an expense—or an investment?

Ask yourself. Consult coworkers. Or better yet, survey your customers. They'll tell you, based on their own experiences. ●



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