ICMI™

2012

Driving Agent Attrition

The Affect of Salary, Attrition Goals and Satisfaction on Turnover

Whitepaper

Table of Contents

Productivity Report

TABLE OF CONTENTS →

Interactive PDF

Navigate to sections with the click of the mouse.

Click Table of Contents at the top of each to return to this page.

Driving Agent Attrition: The Affect of Salary, Attrition Goals and Satisfaction on Agent Turnover

There is a clear correlation between agent satisfaction and attrition in the contact center. In order to discover why our agents leave, we must first examine the common processes and issues that affect the agent's daily life.

In 2012, the International Customer Management Institute (ICMI) surveyed 444 contact center professionals to understand the major drivers of external contact center agent attrition. The research examined agent salaries, contact center attrition goals and tools deployed to improve the agent's daily experience.

Among the key findings of ICMI's *2012 Contact Center Agent Salary, Retention & Productivity Report*, include the revelation that agent salaries are, in reality, not the most important factor in attrition.

Many of the participating contact centers (20.2%) revealed that they are only collecting agent feedback during coaching sessions and some (7.8%) do not conduct agent satisfaction surveys at all.

Agent desktop tools designed to increase agent empowerment, reduce training time and aid in rapid customer contact resolution are not widely deployed.

This whitepaper endeavors to provide a clearer picture around agent satisfaction and retention for customer care and contact center executives, directors, managers and supervisors, in a way that helps them balance the hard numbers of agent attrition and the related (and sometimes harder to define) costs of dissatisfaction at the agent level.

Attrition: Why Agents Leave

While it is true that agents do leave the contact center because they feel underpaid, our research revealed that salaries are not the leading reason for contact center agent attrition. In fact, 59.9% of the centers that participated in the research said that salaries are not a frequent reason for attrition. Agents are more likely to leave their positions for other roles within the organization or, in regions with dense contact center population, for an outside opportunity that may provide agents with richer career and skill-pathing opportunities. Career development opportunities are a recurring theme among the Top Drivers of Agent Attrition, (see sidebar), and play a significant role in the retention equation. 50.8% of participating contact centers responded that "external agent turnover" (agents leaving the contact center for opportunities outside the organization) accounted for up to half of their overall attrition.

If agents feel that they have little or no input on the presentation of the products or services that they deal with every day. ICMI Certified Associate Cheryl Helm points out that many of these drivers stem from agent frustrations in not being able to make changes to the organizational inefficiencies they see every day in working with customers. Because agents are often answering the same customer requests or complaints over and over again, they have a keener insight to the improvements or updates that are required in any of our customer-facing materials. Helm says, "If we [as agents] can't handle the situation, if we don't have the authority to make it right, of course you're going to get more customer complaints and problems." And frustration will build across the board.

The bottom line here is, agents will leave the contact center – or the organization entirely – if they feel overlooked, underutilized or otherwise ill-prepared for career advancements.

When we look at these top attrition drivers on a broader scale, two areas of contact center management beg focus: agent satisfaction and agent tools (such as agent knowledgebase, desktop tools, including Instant messaging, remote access, etc.).
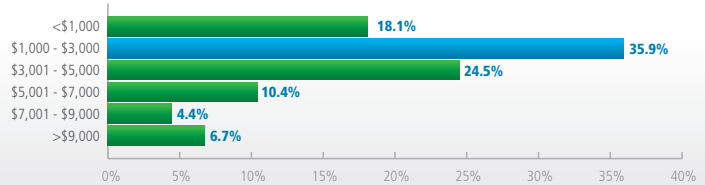
The Top Drivers of Agent Attrition

+ Better opportunities (both inside and outside the organization)
+ Repetitive work
+ Lack of career development opportunities
+ Pace of work too fast
+ Skillset/expertise not being utilized
+ Dislike handling customer complaints and problems
+ Daily physical confinement (being tied to their desks)
+ Inability to work up to handling more complex customer issues as skills advance
+ Sense of powerlessness or lack of control
+ Inflexible work environment
+ Low pay
+ Not valued/appreciated for contributions
+ Lack of challenge
+ Rigid rules
+ Lack of insufficient incentives/rewards
+ Inconvenient/undesirable work hours
+ Excessive scrutiny/micromanagement

For the majority of contact centers, the agent workforce is the largest budget line item, which means that agent retention is a significant part of the return on that investment. The majority (60%) of research participants said that their cost to hire a new agent ranged from $1,000 – $5,000. 46% of U.S. participants reported that costs to hire a new agent averages $3,000 or more. For 41.8% of those same participants, the annual cost of agent churn can climb to $25,000, or more.

High agent turnover is not good for the contact center budget, productivity or overall climate.

What is your estimated cost to hire a new agent?

Cost	Percentage
<$1,000	18.1%
$1,000 - $3,000	35.9%
$3,001 - $5,000	24.5%
$5,001 - $7,000	10.4%
$7,001 - $9,000	4.4%
>$9,000	6.7%

In 2010, Gallup reported that "60-80% of workers are not engaged at work." While this statistic refers to a spectrum of industries, its message is applicable to the contact center workforce. Employee engagement is a large part of the disconnect between retention and satisfaction. And it's often not as simple as just being "happy" to come to work every day. Agents are leaving because they are not being adequately challenged to exceed their performance potential in their work environment. As a result, the agents' commitment to meeting performance goals – both personal and organizational – starts to lag. And eventually, agents will move on to better opportunities.

Agent Work Environment:
Tools for Improving the Agent Experience and ROI

With agents handling multiple channels, the pressure on them grows. Some centers are using customer self-service to deflect simple and repetitive calls, and that is removing some of the "grind" that can correlate with attrition. However, this results in a higher ratio of more complex interactions reaching agents, so the challenge of training agents for skills and career development is as significant as ever.

Agent desktop tools are helping some centers meet the challenge of reducing training time, increasing agent empowerment, dealing with difficult customers and even repetitive work.

Some of the tools that contact center leaders report that they are using to boost agent satisfaction and contact center ROI include:

- Instant messaging
- Integrated presence, one-touch functions
- Remote access
- Desktop integration/automation tools
- Automated navigation to customer records

Instant messaging can help connect agents to more experienced colleagues and subject matter experts. It is the most widely used tool among centers surveyed for the report.

Also helping contact center agents to access the right people and information to best serve customers are agent knowledgebase tools, agent help lines and manual search/ask for subject matter experts.

Knowledgebase tools allow agents to access procedural, product and other information quickly. They can dramatically reduce the time to train new agents or to train agents on new programs, etc. They also allow all agents to access the wealth of communal knowledge – the information on that Post-It note on Mary's desk that helps her every day is now available to all agents.

Agent help lines allow agents to reach out to subject matter experts, colleagues and supervisors for intel and assistance, reducing the need for follow-up and pushing contact resolution.

Manual search/ask for subject matter experts may seem rudimentary, but it is straightforward in its efficacy in helping agents get the right information in customers' hands.

Although they lag dramatically in their deployment in centers surveyed, the tools indicated below are helping some centers.

Integrated presence, one-touch functions allow agents to conference in supervisors or stronger colleagues into calls.

Remote access/desktop sharing between agents and supervisors and internal subject matter experts allows agents to share customer records and text, email and web queries.
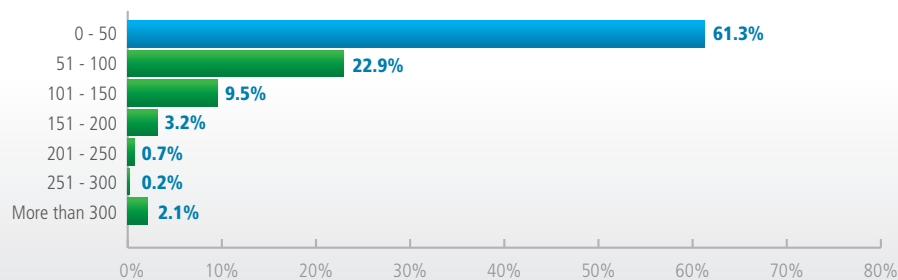
Desktop integration/automation tools allow agents to complete customer queries and transactions more quickly by linking applications in one screen on the agent desktop (for example, CRM and fulfillment/order placement). These tools also allow you to eliminate the need for agents to copy and paste data into several application windows. Automation has the added benefit of increasing compliance and reducing the repetitive nature of agent work.

Automated navigation to customer records (via CTI or softphone integration with CRM). Computer telephony integration (CTI) or softphone applications pop up with basic customer or telephone information, but the agent must still launch the appropriate applications and navigate to specific pages within them. Integrating CTI or softphone applications with the core agent applications, such as CRM, and automating navigation to customer records within an application drives productivity as well as customer satisfaction.
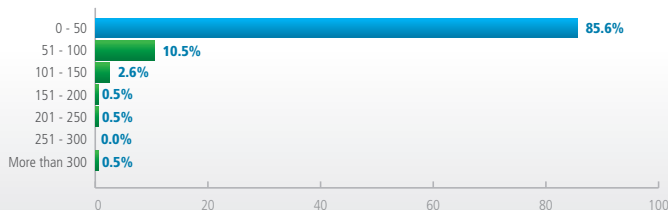
Agent Work Environment:
Agent Development and Empowerment

Agents that feel ill-prepared to perform their daily tasks or under-utilized in their skillset will eventually become restless in their role and seek other opportunities, whether it's inside or outside of the organization. 61.3% of the contact centers that took part in ICMI's research reported that agents spent up to 50 hours per year in training, and that training is primarily focused around learning new (85.6%) or existing (78%) desktop applications.
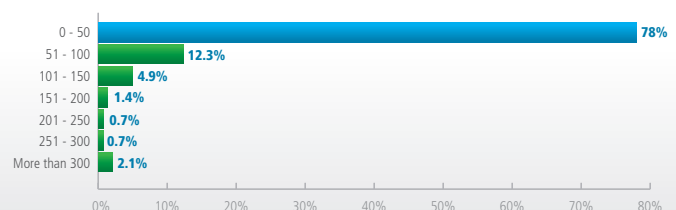
How many hours of ongoing training do your agents receive per year?

Hours	Percent
0 - 50	61.3%
51 - 100	22.9%
101 - 150	9.5%
151 - 200	3.2%
201 - 250	0.7%
251 - 300	0.2%
More than 300	2.1%

How many hours of ongoing agent training is dedicated to training on NEW desktop applications?

Hours	Percent
0 - 50	85.6%
51 - 100	10.5%
101 - 150	2.6%
151 - 200	0.5%
201 - 250	0.5%
251 - 300	0.0%
More than 300	0.5%

How many hours of new agent training is dedicated to training on EXISTING desktop applications?

Hours	Percent
0 - 50	78%
51 - 100	12.3%
101 - 150	4.9%
151 - 200	1.4%
201 - 250	0.7%
251 - 300	0.7%
More than 300	2.1%

But with so many hours dedicated to tools and technology, is any time left for developing our agent's career-based skills? Ongoing agent training and development should seek to reinforce standard contact center processes, as well as keep our agents updated on new policies and procedures.

In addition, comprehensive training and coaching programs that go beyond just the "tools of the trade" will help agents feel empowered and excited about their jobs.

For example, it is well-known in the customer service industry that employees of the Ritz Carlton hotels are entrusted with the ability to assist customers at any cost (up to $2,000) without management approval. By empowering and motivating its employees to handle situations to the best of their ability without authorization gives Ritz Carlton an edge over its competitors.

Similarly, in the Braun call centers, agents are provided with a set of guidelines and are then encouraged to make decisions based on an individual customer interaction (e.g. whether or not to extend a warranty, to provide a repair or a replacement). These agents are also encouraged to learn about the products by borrowing them and trying them out at home.

The bottom line here is that we must provide our agents with an environment that supports and encourages both their individual goals and the overall achievement goals of the contact center.

Agent Feedback and Satisfaction

Our research found that many organizations still do not have a formal program for measuring agent satisfaction. And, of those that do, many still do not conduct agent satisfaction surveys more than once each year. This means that many agents likely feel that they have no voice in their center, and others may feel that their voices are not heard enough to make a significant difference.

The satisfaction of our agents carries an additional value for the organization: it influences customer satisfaction. Our agents connect with our customers directly, and their level of satisfaction (or frustration) is likely to shine through those interactions. Of the contact centers surveyed, 53% responded that customer satisfaction scores are factored in when measuring agent performance.

Ways to Improve Employee Satisfaction

What is the best way to improve the satisfaction of your agents? Formal agent feedback programs are instrumental in creating and maintaining agent satisfaction. But it's not enough just to solicit and collect that feedback: Management must show, on an ongoing basis, that it is acting on the feedback. All agent suggestions or requests can't be accommodated, but when this occurs, management should explain why and, when possible, seek compromise after determining the root of the request.

In order to properly act on agent feedback, management must also consider the following steps, as explained below:

- Focusing on the "right" things
- Hiring and Onboarding
- Training
- Management

Focusing On the Right Things

The two metrics that are under an agent's control are adherence to schedule and quality of the contact. Management needs to take a closer look at its current set of performance standards and reinforce – or revise – what best correlates with the organization's mission and values.

In terms of your contact center's current coaching program, consider the following:

- Who does it?
- Who should be doing it?
- Have they been trained to do it right?
- Who monitors the coaches?

Hiring and Onboarding

When it comes to hiring and onboarding new agents, be sure that your job descriptions align with the actual function of the role. (i.e. Does HR really know what you're looking for?) Also take into account the candidates that are interviewing for the job. Are they meeting the standard agent criteria for your center? Do they show potential for upholding the goals of the organization? An important part of a new agent's success is the transition from the comfort and security of the training room to real life on the floor.

Training

Once your center is properly staffed, you'll need to consider training on the basics of contact center operation.

For example:

- Random call arrival
- KPIs and reporting
- Basic contact center terminology
- Adherence and quality

In addition, you need to also consider how an agent operates within a Contact Center. Your agents should be required to maintain a certain degree of Professionalism and Soft Skills, in order to best carry out the operations basics listed above,

Management

The key role of a Supervisor goes far beyond simply monitoring the productivity and breaks of his or her particular team of agents. Supervisors need to really understand the agent's role and key performance indicators.

- Have they been trained to be supervisors?
- Reinforcing agent training
- Agents leave or stay because of a supervisor
- 70% of the supervisor's time is spent doing what?
- Monitoring and coaching the coach

Conclusion

An important part of delivering an exceptional customer experience is to ensure the overall satisfaction of your agents.

There is plenty you can do to improve the environment and culture within the contact center, and keeping your agents happy is just the beginning. You also need to provide them the tools they need to work as effectively and efficiently as possible. Listen to them on an ongoing basis and act on their feedback. And, empower them to take on a stronger role in the contact center.

When you take these steps, you will reduce agent attrition, boost agent satisfaction and positively impact customer satisfaction.

About This Whitepaper

This research was made possible by the underwriting support of Avaya (www.Avaya.com). ICMI research sponsors do not have access to research participant information, including individual survey responses. The full analysis of ICMI's 2012 Contact Center Agent Salary, Retention & Productivity Report referenced in this whitepaper can be purchased at http://www.icmi.com/agentsalary.

About ICMI

The International Customer Management Institute (ICMI), is the leading global provider of comprehensive resources for customer management professionals—from frontline agents to executives—who wish to improve contact center operations, empower contact center employees and enhance customer loyalty. ICMI's experienced and dedicated team of industry insiders, analysts and consultants are committed to providing uncompromised objectivity and results-oriented vision through the organization's respected lineup of professional services including training and certification, consulting, events and informational resources. Founded in 1985, ICMI continues to serve as one of the most established and respected organizations in the call center industry.

About Our Sponsor

Avaya is a global leader in enterprise communications systems. The company provides unified communications, contact centers, data solutions and related services directly and through its channel partners to leading businesses and organizations around the world. Enterprises of all sizes depend on Avaya for state-of-the-art communications that improve efficiency, collaboration, customer service and competitiveness. For more information, please visit Experience Management: Building Next-Generation Customer Service Delivery.

AVAYA

The Power of We™