



Thank You for Calling; How Can We Help?

Using Technology to Address Challenges in
Contact Center Staffing



What's technology got to do with keeping call center agents from quitting after a few months? A lot, it turns out.

Modern business communication systems can use the power of networks and mobile computing to boost the effectiveness of contact center agents and empower high-quality interactions with customers, managers and co-workers.



Contact center agents who feel invested in a company's success are more likely to stay on the job. Giving them the right tools helps managers not just address key staffing challenges common to contact centers, but to significantly improve their performance.

Common Challenges Facing Contact Centers

Every contact center has unique challenges depending on the industry it serves and the kind of work it does. But they all deal with three key issues:

- 1.** Ensuring quality in the face of uncommonly high staff turnover. Many centers lose half of their agents every year, some far more.
- 2.** Determining proper staffing levels. Centers need worthwhile ideas for handling peak call volumes without adding extra staff.
- 3.** Moving beyond voice communication. The rise of video and mobile technologies creates a vast range of possibilities in customer service and collaboration.

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Contact centers with high-quality learning management systems can train their new agents quickly and efficiently. Yet training alone cannot address all the issues in contact center attrition.

This is where modern business communications technologies come in. The latest business phone systems can extend contact center features to your entire staff, letting experts jump in during peak call volumes. And video technologies that allow screen sharing can dramatically improve a call agent's ability to deliver first-class customer service.

Challenge: Ensuring Quality in the Face of Staff Turnover

Contact centers have some of the highest attrition rates in private industry. The findings of Deloitte Consulting's "2013 Global Contact Center Survey," which polled more than 560 contact centers on four continents, illustrate the issue succinctly:

- 10% of respondents said their turnover was over 50%
- 24% of respondents had annual turnover rates between 10% and 50%
- Among call centers with more than 500 employees, 40% had 10-50% annual turnover, and 31% had greater than 50% annual turnover.

It's not unusual to hear of contact center attrition rates reaching 300% per year. Admittedly those are the extremes, but there seems little doubt that high turnover bedevils the industry.

Depending on the source, estimates suggest that attrition adds about \$4,000 to \$6,000 to the cost of an agent. All these stats point to staggering costs: If a 500-agent call center has to hire 250 new agents per year and attrition tacks a \$5,000 price tag onto each new hire, turnover costs the center \$1.25 million.

Reducing those costs while keeping quality high is a complex challenge, of course, but modern communications technologies point to possible solutions.



Remedy: Proper Training and Call-Routing Technology

The average contact center agent is an hourly worker without a great deal of education or experience. The key is developing a strong standardized training program that uses a sophisticated learning management system, or LMS, that takes employees through onboarding and product training as quickly as possible. Poor training is the surest way to cripple morale.



Introduce employees to progressively more challenging customer interactions

New hires need a gradual introduction to your most difficult product challenges or most demanding customers. Call-routing technology can give them only as much as they can handle. New hires should not feel they've been tossed into the deep end of the pool without swimming lessons.

Use technology that allows you to monitor, whisper and barge

Contact center phones need three options: monitor mode, for silently ensuring the new agent is catching on; whisper mode, so a trainer can offer instructions the agent can hear but the customer can't; and barge mode, so a supervisor can intervene directly in call and ride to an agent's rescue when a customer is angry or unruly.

Sample Scenario: Monitor, Whisper and Barge

Managers and trainers in contact centers need to be able to communicate with new people in three main modes:

Monitor

Monitor lets you listen in to an agent's calls silently in real time. Neither the agent nor the customer is aware you're there. You're a silent partner standing by just in case.

Whisper

Whisper lets you speak quietly to an agent without the customer hearing. Say it's an agent's first day on the job. Whisper mode lets you say things like, "OK, ask them for their account number." "Can I have your account number please?" "OK, now thank them and tell them you'll be back in one second."

Barge

Barge makes you part of the call. A classic example is the customer demanding an instant response: "I don't understand why my product's not here yet." The customer loses patience and starts yelling at the agent. Now the manager jumps into the phone call and says, "Sir, my name is Roger and I am the manager of this call center." That can quickly de-escalate a confrontation, which will make the agent most grateful.



Challenge: Determining Proper Staffing Levels

In contact center utopia, there's always someone available the moment a customer calls. In reality, contact centers operate within the limits of their available budgets and trained staff. This is why every center uses call queues. Each also must calculate how long they think their customers will accept being kept on hold.

Larger call centers already have this figured out. They use workforce management systems to help them identify the right level of staffing for the expected call volumes on any particular day.

Yet workforce management systems can ignore one critical component of the equation: They assume the supply of agents is finite, meaning that, for instance, only 100 agents can be available during peak times.

Actually, modern business phone systems make it possible to expand your staffing so that people in other departments can jump in during peak times and keep your hold times down without hiring extra people. And your agents don't need to feel quite so stressed when the call volumes are heaviest.



Remedy: Technology That Manages Call Volume

If 10 customers are on hold, someone needs to pick up the phone. Supervisors, technicians, sales people, engineers and other staff have motivations to speak to customers and can be available to help out during peak call times — provided your company phone system has advanced contact-center features that can route customer calls to them.

Live dashboards

A top-quality business phone system has a dashboard that reveals the system's workings in real time. You can see all your call queues, and you can put the word out that you need call help during peak times.

Live dashboards empower people to make good business decisions; some contact-center technologies end up obfuscating in the interest of automating. That's not good for anyone.

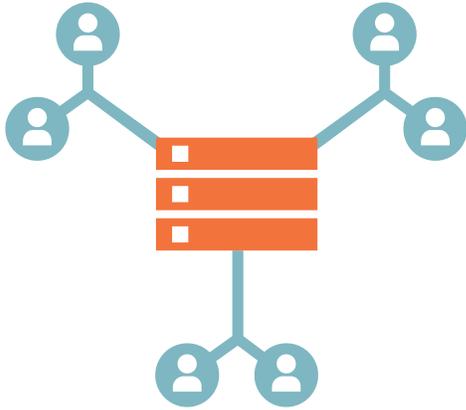
“The best reporting systems are web-based”

Reports

While a dashboard can tell you what's happening right now, only a report can tell you what happened last Tuesday. Modern business phone systems create digital data that can be analyzed to streamline a business with remarkable precision. The

best reporting systems are web-based and allow direct export to programs like Excel, making it easy to develop charts and graphs illustrating where staffing is adequate and where it needs help.

Sample Scenario: The Live Dashboard



As a contact center manager or IT manager supporting a call center, how can you be sure you've got enough people to handle all the customers who are on hold?

Let's say you're a cable operator and you have an outage in the area: Facing the prospect of thousands of angry customers, you've got to be able to change the message people hear when they call in so it tells them where the outages are.

A live dashboard in a modern business telephone system lets you do this in an instant. And you can always see what's happening in all of your queues in real time. You can see how many agents are logged in, how many calls are holding, what your longest hold time is, what your average answer time is, either in the individual queues or across your queues.

This can even be done remotely from your smartphone or laptop. You see whether

John is at his workstation because the dashboard will tell you how long it's been since he last touched his computer. You'll know whether Suzanne is on a phone call, because you can see which call she's on, whom she's talking with, and how long she's been talking.



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Challenge: Moving Beyond Voice

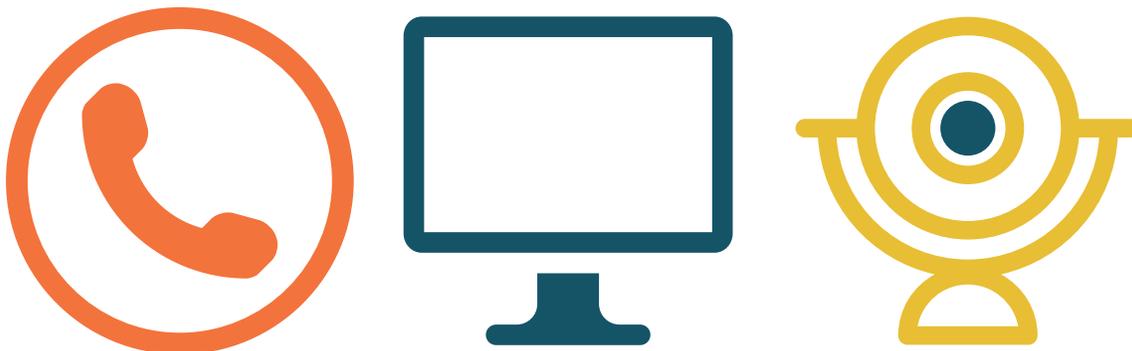
We used to call them call centers, but now they are contact centers. That's because so much of customer service has evolved beyond the phone call.

Today's contact centers communicate with customers via email, live chat, phone calls, video conferencing — pretty much any technology enabled by networking technology.

Cameras in PCs, laptops, smartphones and tablets enable communication and collaboration opportunities that were unthinkable just a few years ago. Call center agents can enter live webcam chats with engineers to develop deeper knowledge about the products they are helping costumers figure out.

Abilities like screen sharing make it easy for agents and customers to share and swap images, which can make interactions much more efficient for the simple reason that a picture is worth a thousand words.

Great, you think, but what does all this have to do with reducing call center turnover? Think of it this way: Providing your contact center agents with the full range of communications technologies helps them feel like people with important work to do rather than robots reading a script.



Remedy: Video Technology Integrated into Workspaces and Workflows

Modern business communications technology makes it easy to do two tasks that not long ago were unthinkable: sharing screens and setting up webcam video sessions.

It's important to distinguish between the two. Video conferencing is all the rage among business executives and knowledge workers. But for everyday customer service interactions, the customer has no reason to know what the contact center agent looks like, so live video in this context is rarely necessary.

Screen sharing, however, opens up vast opportunities for interactions between customer service agents and customers with questions. It could be as simple as the customer asking, "is that available in green?" and the agent using screen sharing to reveal a picture of the product so they'll know whether it's the shade of green they prefer.

A more sophisticated approach that might generate more sales would be to say, "Yes, we have it in green. But we also have a couple of other products that might be even a better fit for you. Let me show you." Then the agent shares screens with that customer in real time.

Screen-sharing possibilities are nearly boundless. If you're not granting your agents access to these possibilities, they're more apt to find employers who do.



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Sample Scenario: Video Collaboration

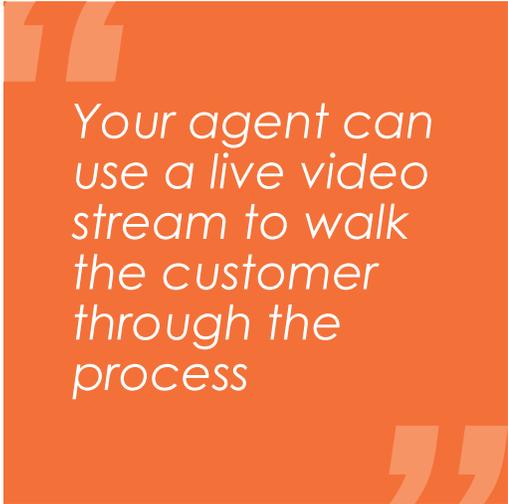
Let's say you're a TV manufacturer and your contact center supports calls from customers baffled by installation challenges.

It's complicated for an agent to explain how to connect all the cords behind the TV in the right places, and there's no telling what kind of devices the customer intends to hook up to the TV.

The support solution here is to set up a video collaboration between the customer and the agent. The customer can use the camera on a smartphone to show your agent the back of the TV and the device that should be connecting to it.

Your agent can use a live video stream to walk the customer through the process of hooking up the TV. Neither the agent nor the customer ever need to see each other's faces — they just use the video to do things that would be a hundred times more difficult with words.

You just need the right software in place to make it happen.



Your agent can use a live video stream to walk the customer through the process

In a study of contact center workers in the United States, Cornell University researchers found that centers with high degrees of employee involvement have about half of the annual turnover of those that use an assembly-line approach.

So high attrition does not have to be a fact of life for contact centers. Contact center agents need to feel like you'll help them out when there's a crush of customers, that you'll help them draw on the expertise of your knowledge workers, and you'll ensure they feel deeply involved in the work of your business.

Modern business communications technology is far from a cure-all — it can't fix shortsighted management and lax leadership — but it does create unprecedented opportunities for contact center agents to collaborate with experts within their companies and provide far better service to customers.

As a developer of premium business-communications systems, Fonality has the expertise to help you address these challenges by extending contact-center features across your entire company. We can't tell you how to treat your people, of course, but we can help you make sure they have the best tools available to do their jobs.

About Fonality

Fonality has built its business around helping growing businesses use their phone systems to become more competitive and successful. It has been developing Unified Communications systems since 2004 with more than 20,000 clients serving more than 260,000 end users around the world.

The company's engineering team developed the Fonality Heads Up Display interface and patented hybrid solution to meet the unique needs of emerging companies.



Fonality provides business phone systems and contact center solutions designed exclusively for growing businesses. Fonality is the only provider that can deliver the same user experience in the cloud and on-premise, with innovative features that help smaller businesses save time, communicate more efficiently and reduce costs.

For more information, visit www.Fonality.com or call 1-877-366-2548.