

TALKDESK EBOOK

# Maximize Your Contact Center Performance With Employee Engagement

talkdesk®



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# Introduction

When contact center agents feel valued and empowered to succeed, they're significantly more likely to be self-motivated, loyal to your organization, and committed to developing the skills they need to deliver a high quality of service to customers.

By improving the contact center employee experience and driving engagement throughout the employee life cycle, customer-obsessed organizations can transform their operational efficiency and deliver a truly exceptional customer experience.

This ebook is designed to introduce today's CX and contact center leaders to the concept and potential benefits of employee engagement, while exploring a number of new strategies and innovative technologies that are well-positioned to contribute to a better employee experience in the contact center.



# I. The Growing Importance of Employee Engagement



# 85%

of employees worldwide do not consider themselves to be engaged in the workplace

“Employee engagement is defined as the emotional investment employees make in their organizations. It is the passion, involvement and motivation they bring to work, which they use to guide their work. Engaged employees identify with the goals of the organization and align their own goals with the organization’s goals.”

– HR Technologist

In business, people matter. Just take a look at the 2019 list of ‘Best Companies to Work For’ from Fortune Magazine, or ‘Best Places to Work’ from Forbes. Lists like these present a veritable who’s who of top global brands, Fortune 500 enterprises and industry leaders. Leading organizations around the world have recognized that investing in hiring and developing top talent is absolutely

critical to meeting and exceeding organizational goals.

However, an effective talent strategy goes beyond simply attracting employees with the right skills and experience. Ensuring that these employees are happy, motivated and empowered to succeed is just as critical. This approach has led to an increased global focus on **employee engagement**.

According to renowned author and motivational speaker Simon Sinek, “When people are financially invested, they want a return. When people are emotionally invested, they want to contribute.” This simple insight helps quantify why employee engagement can have such an outsized impact on business outcomes in the modern enterprise. Institutional research supports this conclusion, with Gallup

reporting that highly engaged employees can lead to substantial increases in productivity, retention and profitability.

Unfortunately, organizations around the world are suffering from an employee engagement crisis. Research from Gallup revealed that 85% of employees worldwide do not consider themselves to be engaged in the workplace.

# II. The Impact of Employee Engagement in the Contact Center

Conversely, a highly engaged workforce can reduce attrition by

# 24%

in high-turnover environments like call centers.



For most organizations, contact centers serve as a core pillar, if not the most important component, of the customer experience (CX). As contact center agents connect with customers, the quality of these interactions directly influence valuable customer relationships that impact revenue.

A combination of factors, including high turnover rates, increasingly complex agent workflows and ever-growing customer expectations has made employee engagement in the contact center more important than ever before. Poor employee engagement has a direct impact on high agent turnover. High attrition rates drive up costs

related to recruitment and training, adding to overall staffing costs that already account for 75% of a contact center's operational cost.

That's a problem in its own right, but the negative effect of high turnover is often more impactful and wide spread. It reduces the average agent's competency and can cripple a contact center's ability to meet service levels. It can also hurt morale by increasing the level of stress and demand being placed on the remaining agent population.

Conversely, a highly engaged workforce can reduce attrition by 24% in high-turnover environments like call centers.

The benefits don't stop there — contact centers that successfully generate and maintain employee engagement have an opportunity to reap substantial rewards. According to [Gartner](#), by making agents a priority, service organizations can increase their productivity by 19%.

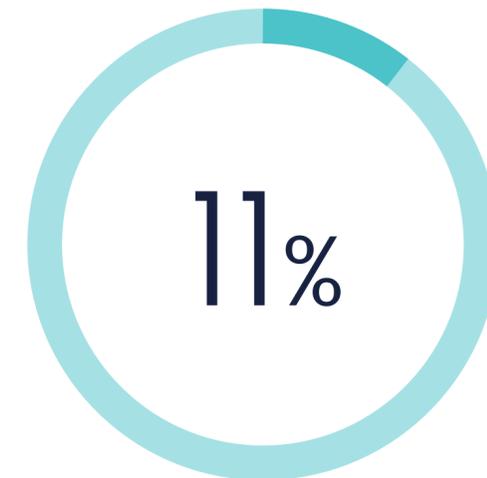
Meanwhile, [Ventana research](#) reports that when agents are satisfied at work, they hit their KPI targets 3x more often. The bottom line? By improving employee engagement, organizations can increase customer satisfaction by 11% and reduce customer effort by 9%.



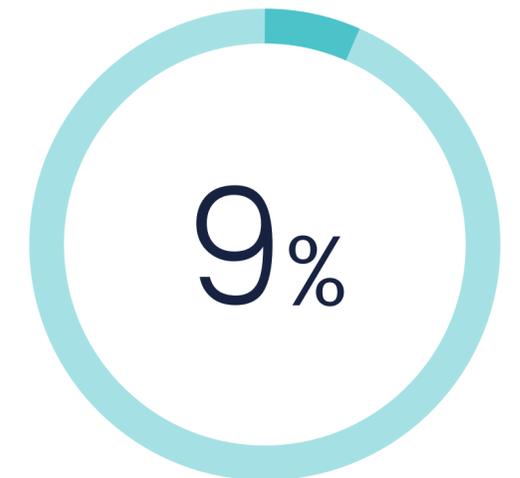
↓ Reduction in attrition



↑ Increase in productivity



↑ Increase in customer satisfaction



↓ Reduction in customer effort

# III. The Key to Employee Engagement: A Better Employee Experience



Gallup defines employee experience as “the journey an employee takes with your organization. It includes everything from major milestones and personal relationships to technology use and the physical work environment. It’s the big picture that ties together all of your efforts to attract, engage and develop your employees.”

While the benefits of improving employee engagement in the contact center may be clear, actually moving the needle isn’t easy. Engagement is influenced by a myriad of variables and inputs that collectively form each employee’s perception of their **employee experience**.

It’s not possible for organizations to control or even influence every aspect of the employee experience.

However, a critical examination of employee expectations, goals and pain points at different phases of their journey within the organization is the first step in identifying potential changes that will have the greatest impact. One of the most commonly-used frameworks for analyzing the employee experience involves breaking it down into smaller stages that represent the employee’s life cycle within the organization.

By breaking down the employee journey into well-defined sequential stages, the employee lifecycle approach can help organizations better understand how to leverage the relationship between the employee experience and employee engagement.

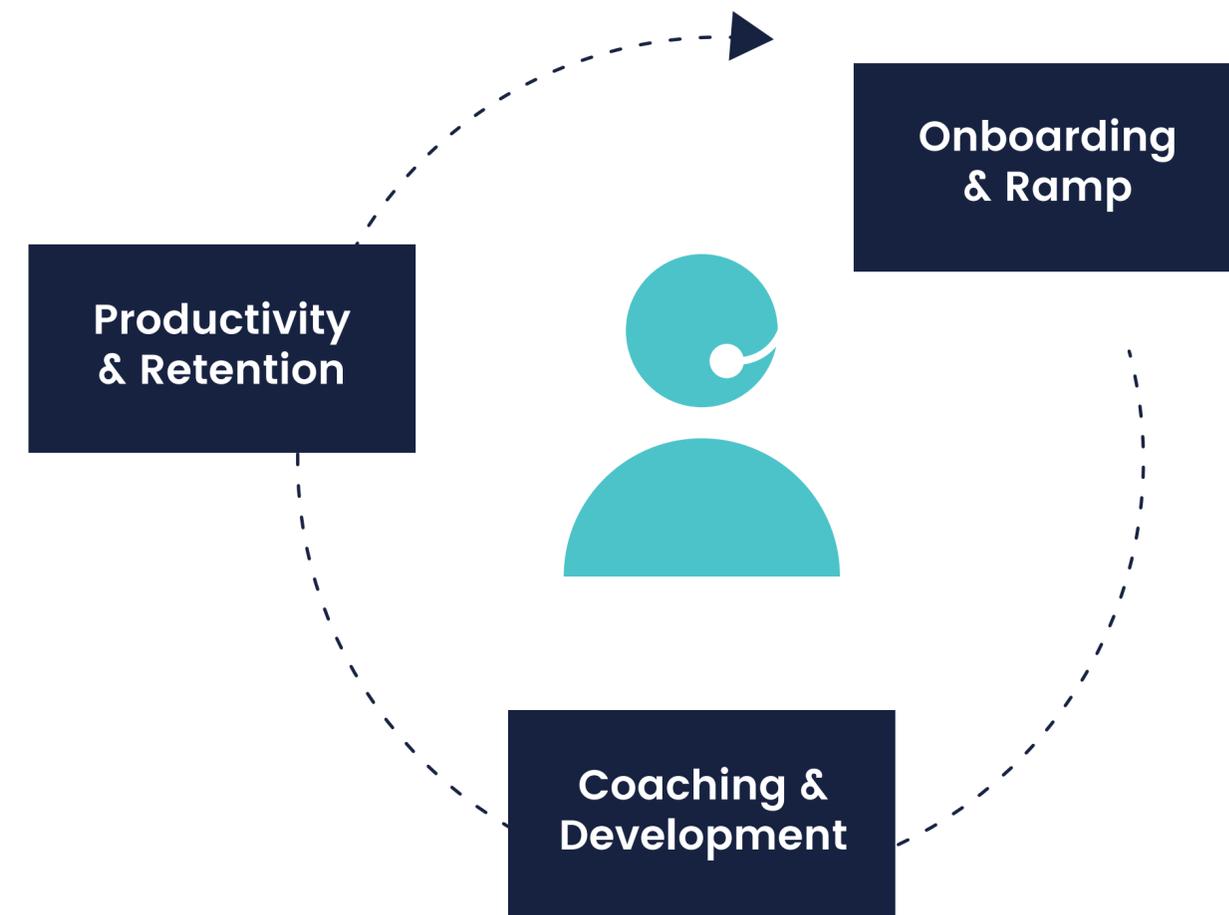
Although this framework can easily be applied to any context, it is particularly relevant for resource-intensive, turnover-prone working environments like contact centers. In these environments, failing to react to employees' changing needs and expectations is more likely to result in low productivity, burnout and high levels of employee attrition.

There are several different interpretations of the employee lifecycle, but most include some variation of these five stages: Recruitment, Onboarding, Development, Retention and Exit. The remainder of this ebook is

structured around an abridged life cycle framework that aligns with key strategies and technology solutions that benefit CX leaders:

- **Onboarding and Ramp**
- **Coaching and Development**
- **Productivity and Retention**

The needs, concerns, goals and ambitions of employees vary immensely from stage to stage. Whereas the average new hire is just trying to learn the ropes and find their comfort zone without making too many mistakes, a veteran top-performer might be frustrated with repetitive manual tasks and actively seek out new challenges. In the following chapters we'll examine a number of strategies, best practices and technology solutions that improve the employee experience and increase engagement at each stage of the employee lifecycle.



# IV. Onboarding and Ramp

Successful onboarding can improve employee performance by

15%

and encourage up to

20%

greater discretionary effort from the workforce



Gallup defines onboarding as “the critical stage that connects the talent acquisition process to long-term, sustainable performance. It fulfills promises made during recruiting and hiring so employees don’t experience a bait-and-switch situation, and it lays the foundation for the rest of the employee experience.” This is the stage through which new hires learn the attitudes, knowledge, skills and behaviors required to function effectively within an organization. It usually lasts for 90 days and plays a pivotal role in setting the employee on the path to a successful tenure with the company.

An agent’s first few weeks in the contact center are absolutely critical to retention and engagement. According to Gartner’s Jim Davies, “Once recruited, agents need to be appropriately trained and their transition to the working environment ‘softened’ to avoid high churn rates.” Harvard Business Review supports this claim, with research showing that 20% of staff turnover takes place within the first 45 days. Meanwhile, successful onboarding can improve employee performance by 15% and encourage up to 20% greater discretionary effort from the workforce.

# What are the pain points?

Company	Agent
<p>According to the <a href="#">SHRM Foundation</a>, “organizations perceive effective onboarding as improving retention rates, time to productivity and overall customer satisfaction.” This is especially true in the contact center, where training new agents quickly and effectively is critical to maintaining KPIs in a high turnover environment.</p> <p>Maintaining the right balance between onboarding speed and effectiveness isn’t easy. Placing too much emphasis on speed can lead to critical mistakes that damage customer relationships, while moving too slow can cause staffing issues and long customer wait times.</p>	<p>Meanwhile, from the agent’s perspective, onboarding can be extremely stressful and challenging. They are expected to quickly absorb a significant amount of information including policies, processes, product details and technology workflows.</p> <p>Opportunities for personalized learning and support for different learning preferences can range from limited to non-existent. When the honeymoon period ends, agents are expected to start handling customer interactions at a frenetic pace, with little room for error.</p>

# Ways to improve onboarding and ramp

There are a number of useful strategies and innovative technology solutions to ease agents into serving customers full time, while preserving an efficient onboarding process and reducing the likelihood of mistakes.



## Additional learning formats and personalized programs

There is no ‘one size fits all’ approach when it comes to learning. An effective onboarding program should support different learning preferences and proclivities for various mediums across a diverse agent population.

A traditional classroom setting may be appropriate for some agents, whereas others might benefit from self-learning options and additional mediums like video, text and interactive modules. One example is to turn screen and audio recordings of real customer interactions conducted by top-performing agents into a learning tool for new agents. Another is to deploy a searchable knowledge base that includes written content, recordings and even interactive visuals, providing agents with the resources they need to augment their formal onboarding curriculum.

Assessments should be used throughout the onboarding process to identify each agent’s specific strengths, weaknesses, and general knowledge gaps. This data can then be used to generate a more personalized learning path that assigns supplementary content for review.



## Virtual assistants

An agent’s first few weeks handling customer interactions can be a stressful time for both the agent and their supervisor. By introducing technology that supports those interactions, contact center leaders can help new agents proceed with confidence and reduce the likelihood of costly mistakes. Virtual assistants, powered by artificial intelligence (AI), help agents by analyzing customer inputs in real-time to suggest optimal next steps, suggest responses based on scripts and offer answers to questions based on information stored in a knowledge base or product catalog. Virtual assistants can even take direct actions, such as scheduling an appointment, allowing the agent to give the customer their full attention.



## Mentorship and feedback

Designing effective human support systems for new agents significantly improves the onboarding experience. Contact center managers should consider creating new onboarding cohorts that have a higher ratio of supervisors and supported by experienced agents on a rotational basis. Each new agent should be assigned a ‘buddy’ or mentor — a top-performing, experienced agent that can help guide their learning.

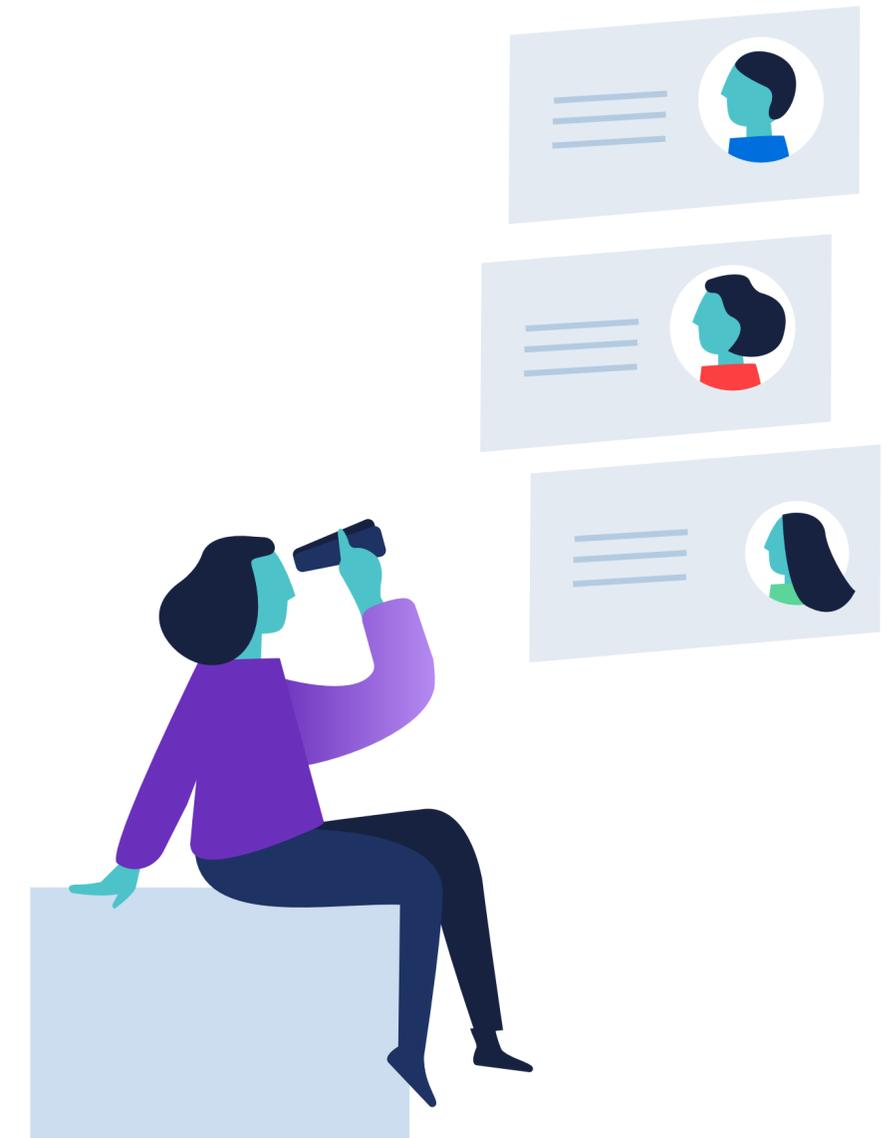
To be effective, this strategy must be codified through shift scheduling that provides both new agents and their experienced mentors with short breaks dedicated to feedback. Although it might seem difficult to justify the time commitment from veteran agents, the positive impact on new agent retention and performance are a worthy investment.

Plus, employing this strategy has the added benefit as a social recognition and career development mechanism for experienced agents—you might just identify your next great supervisor in the process.

### Quick-tip for onboarding remote agents: **Try virtual coffee breaks**

While technology can cover most training and support needs, even enhancing the overall agent experience, something that it cannot replicate is peer socialization.

Provide integrated tools for collaboration with chat, audio and video capabilities. Encourage remote employees to make time for informal meetings and gatherings. [GitLab](#), for instance, encourages remote team members to take virtual coffee breaks and even pairs them up for randomized video calls.



# V. Coaching and Development

Once an employee is fully ramped and has become a self-sufficient, contributing member of the team, they enter a new phase of their employee lifecycle that's focused on developing the skills required to become a top performer.

In the contact center, coaching and development have never been more important. The proliferation of digital channels and self-service technology has shifted the focus of many contact center agents to more complex, revenue-generating opportunities. According to McKinsey, "The demands

facing contact-center staff are becoming more complex, more varied and more valuable. That calls for a smarter coaching approach."

Just like onboarding, effective coaching and development is critical to employee engagement. According to research from Gallup, adopting a strengths-based development program can increase employee engagement by up to 15%. Additionally, McKinsey found that when contact center supervisors spent at least 60% of their time coaching on the floor, staff-retention rates were more than twice the average.

A strengths-based development program can increase employee engagement by up to

# 15%



# What are the pain points?

Company	Agent
<p>Contact center leaders and supervisors face a number of challenges trying to implement effective, scalable coaching programs. For some supervisors, the sheer breadth of their non-coaching related responsibilities prevents them from having enough time to spend on coaching.</p> <p>In many cases, poor analytics, lack of process automation and limited recording solutions also present barriers for leaders seeking to holistically evaluate agent performance and implement personalized development plans. The result? Extreme variation in agent performance that translates into inconsistent customer service.</p>	<p>These same limitations also impact the agent experience. Many agents have limited real-time insight into their own performance. They often rely on incidental feedback generated from limited quality management programs, instead of receiving a holistic evaluation.</p> <p>In these cases, feedback is typically focused on correcting mistakes and non-compliance, rather than identifying and developing areas of strength. Actionable feedback can also be difficult to come by and self-improvement opportunities are extremely rare.</p>

# Ways to improve coaching and development

New strategies and technology investments intended to improve the coaching and development experience should focus on a few key areas that can benefit both agents and supervisors.



## Interaction analytics and automation

With interaction analytics, organizations can significantly reduce the manual effort required to execute their quality management (QM) programs and enable a more holistic approach to agent evaluation.

With AI algorithms that analyze each customer interaction and evaluate important variables including topics, sentiment and compliance, recordings can easily be categorized, prioritized or flagged for further review.

Organizations that adopt this approach can score every customer interaction rather than a small, non-representative sample, ensuring that performance issues, non-compliance and development opportunities are always reliably identified in real-time. In these instances, relevant content from an integrated learning management system (LMS) or knowledge base (KB) should automatically be assigned for agents to review.



## Actionable, personalized development

As the automation of interaction analytics frees up time, contact center supervisors should double down on in-person coaching and actionable learning opportunities. Overall, the focus should be on identifying agent strengths and developing them over time.

Advanced recording technology that combines omnichannel interactions and agent screen activity into a single, unified experience can be leveraged as a teaching tool.

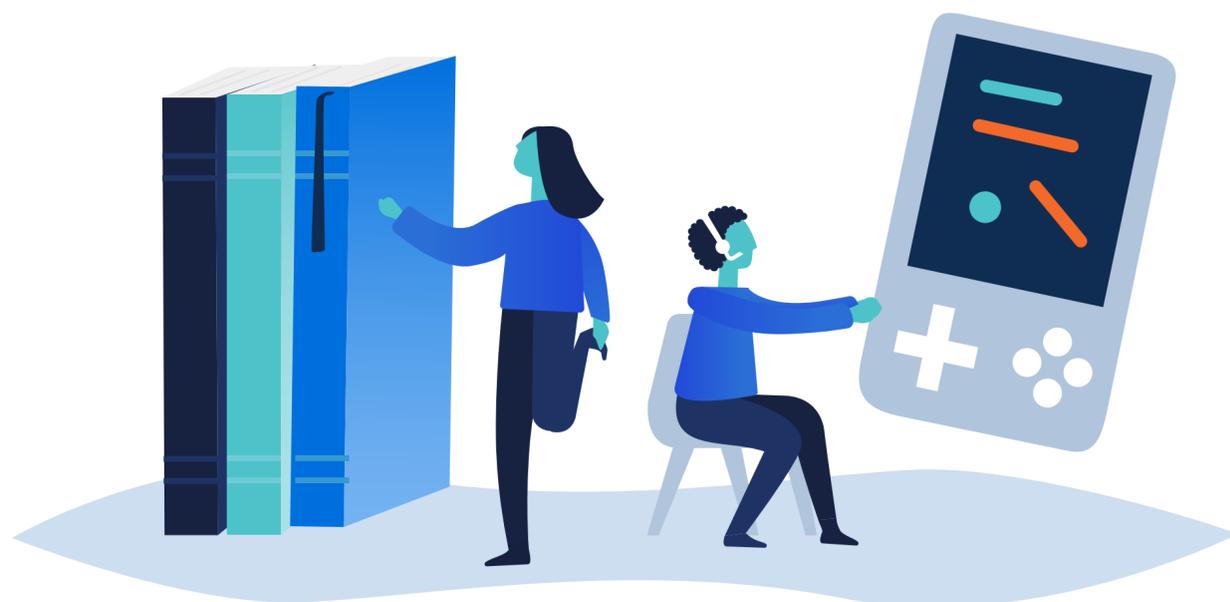
Supervisors can add time-stamped notes to call out strengths and weaknesses, assign recordings to agents for review or even use them as the basis for in-person coaching sessions.



## Transparency, self-learning and gamification

There are several opportunities for organizations to use motivational techniques in ways that both engage agents and help them develop new skills. Organizations can intrinsically motivate some agents simply by providing them with personal performance metrics and dashboards. They can also provide agents with better opportunities to learn and develop new skills on their own by interacting with knowledge base content

or skills-based curriculums in an LMS. Milestones based on KPIs or the completion of development programs should be incentivized through gamification techniques like leaderboards, badges and social recognition. When agents hit major milestones or develop skills that align with strategic priorities, organizations might even consider offering tangible rewards like gift cards, perks or special privileges.



### Quick-tip for coaching remote agents: **Coach proactively**

The lack of face-to-face interactions may complicate the standard feedback process. This dynamic often puts employees in a defensive mode, which may be exacerbated by the lack of non-verbal communication.

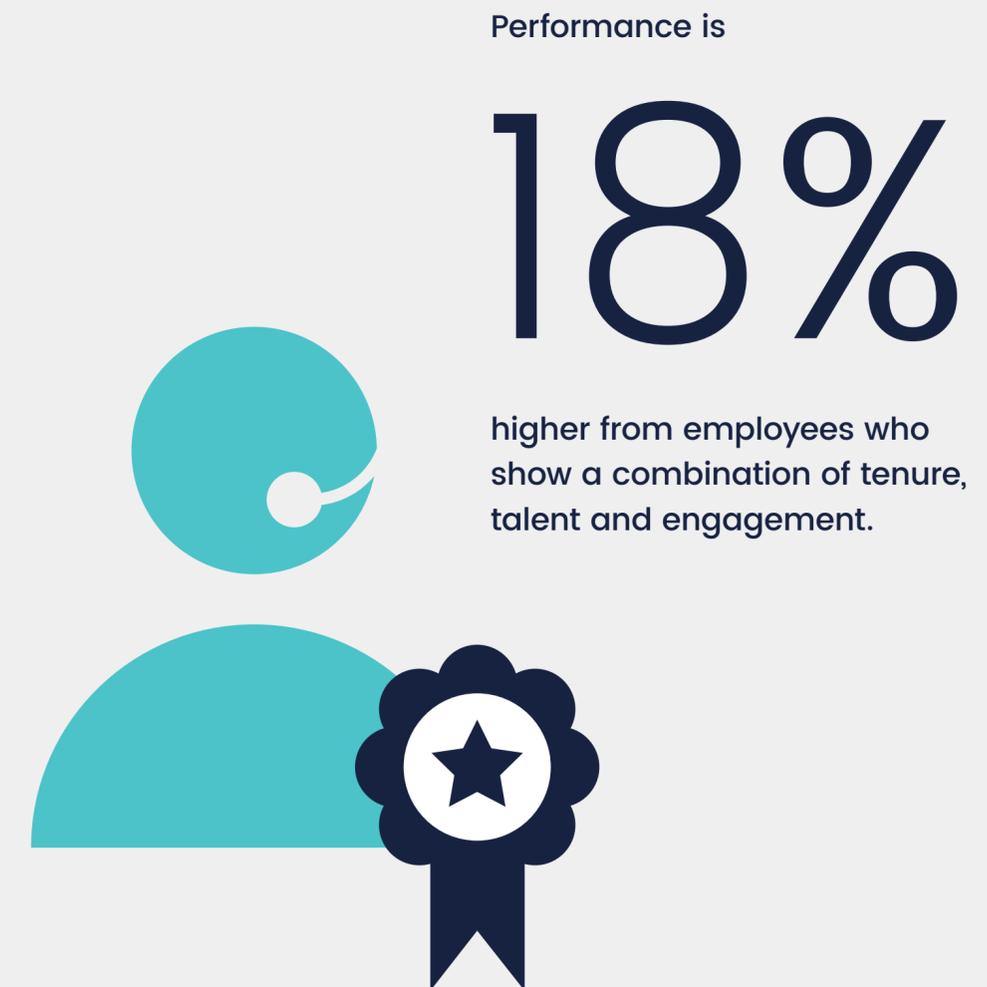
Proactive coaching is about guiding your agents on how to perform when facing a future situation. Focusing on self-improvement and future expected outcomes will set a positive tone for the conversation.

# VI. Productivity and Retention

Once employees have proven themselves as consistent top-performers over an extended tenure, they become exceedingly valuable to their organizations. If you think of hiring and developing employees as an investment (and you should!), this is the stage of the employee lifecycle where that investment has the potential to pay off in spades. According to [SHRM](#), “when a significant number of your employees are long-tenured, they know their jobs well and are highly productive, which frees up time and resources for innovation and growth.”

Unfortunately, research from [Harvard Business Review](#) suggests that “the

employees with the longest tenures in your company are also the least likely to be engaged.” However, HBR also notes that “people with the right natural talent for their jobs, and long tenures in them, outperform colleagues dramatically—and their contributions skyrocket when they are also engaged.” The same study found that employees who exhibit this elusive combination of tenure, talent and engagement perform 18% higher than the average employee. Therefore, it’s important for contact center leaders to invest in strategies and technology that will not only help retain their experienced agents, but keep them engaged, motivated and highly productive.



# What are the pain points?

Company	Agent
<p>Like most industries, attrition in the contact center decreases the average competency of employees, which ultimately hurts the customer experience. A recent report from <a href="#">McKinsey</a> states, “since longer-tenured agents have more expertise and institutional knowledge to bring to customer interactions, improving employee retention also has a direct impact on the quality of customer care.”</p> <p>With attrition rates averaging 33% in US contact centers, according to <a href="#">ICMI</a>, organizations should be motivated to keep agents happy. However, the need to maintain aggressive KPIs and keep operational costs down makes it particularly challenging for contact centers to find the right balance of policy and technology that can help.</p>	<p>According to the same McKinsey report, a few of the top factors that influence employees to stay longer include opportunities to advance, a strong community, low stress levels, breaks and flexibility, as well as strong alignment with the company mission.</p> <p><a href="#">A 2019 study by the staffing firm iHire</a> supports McKinsey’s research, with respondents reporting that a lack of growth/ advancement opportunities, a negative or toxic work environment and poor work-life balance are three of the top reasons for leaving a role. Another key factor to long-term retention is providing top-performing agents with more challenging, higher-value work and removing repetitive manual tasks from their workflows.</p>

# Ways to improve productivity and retention

In order to increase retention and engagement within experienced agent populations, contact center leaders should consider technology and policies that help reduce repetitive tasks, streamline workflows, increase flexibility and promote recognition, while also providing new challenges and growth opportunities for top-performers.



## Streamlining workflows with integrations

By investing in tight integration of data and automation between software solutions, organizations have a significant opportunity to not only reduce boring, manual tasks that lead to disengagement, but improve overall agent productivity. For example, an integration between an AI-driven virtual assistant and a CRM system can completely replace the need for agents to manually take post-call notes, while also ensuring a more consistent standard of record keeping. Intelligent self-service options like virtual agents and customer-facing knowledge base tools reduces the number of simple interactions that experienced agents are more likely to find boring and frustrating.

Meanwhile, integrating various systems that agents engage with in their most common customer service workflows provides agents with a more streamlined and enjoyable technology experience. This also has the added benefit of reducing context-switching, so that agents can focus more attention on providing a great customer experience.





## Mobile-friendly and flexible scheduling

Today's contact center agents expect greater flexibility and a better work-life balance than they have in the past. Offering technology that enables part-time and remote work is a boon to utilisation and staffing efficiency, as employees with non-traditional working arrangements are easily flexed in and out of shifts based on customer demand.

Contact center leaders should offer greater flexibility to top-performing agents, either as an added perk that's tied to performance or as a general policy. In order to effectively implement either strategy without negatively impacting KPIs, contact centers must first invest in an intelligent and user-friendly workforce management system that supports omnichannel workflows. The capability to accurately predict surge and slack, as well as the impact of policy changes and schedule requests, empowers supervisors to make informed decisions and optimize their staffing/scheduling strategy.



## Performance-based rewards and recognition

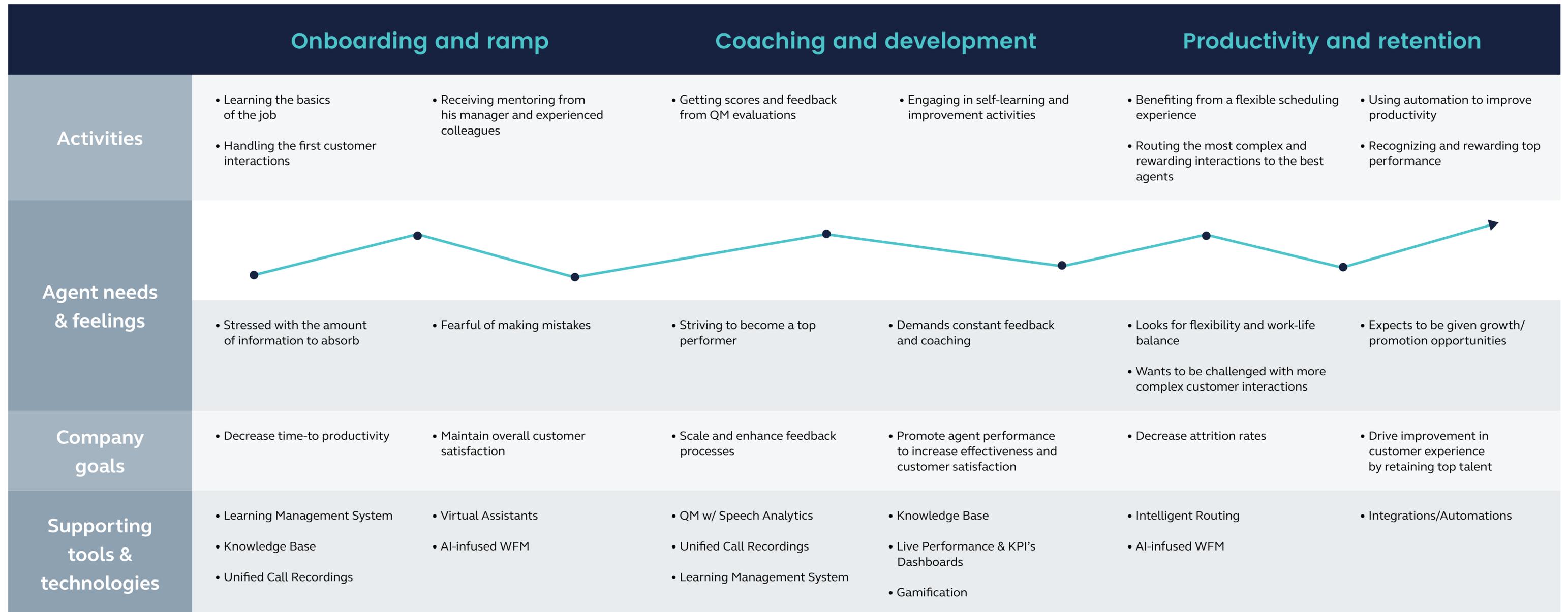
Top performing agents should be recognized and rewarded for their work in order to keep them motivated over time. This can come in the form of social recognition, such as highlighting choice recordings in group teaching sessions, or positioning them as mentors to new hires. Other examples include tangible rewards like greater scheduling flexibility and priority shift-assignments, or more autonomy to make decisions related to customer interactions, like approving small discounts.

However, arguably the most important way to reward and recognize top-performers is to identify ways to challenge them and aid their career development. One example is using skills-based routing technology and CRM data dips so that VIP customers and high-potential upsell opportunities are routed to the most competent, experienced agents. It's a strategy with clear benefits for the organization, but the impact on the agent shouldn't be ignored either. By providing these agents with greater responsibility, autonomy and a clear career advancement path, organizations drastically improve their odds of keeping them motivated and retaining them long term.

## Quick-tip for retaining remote agents: **Make sure technology doesn't fail them**

Remote workers often feel at a disadvantage when compared to their in-office colleagues. The tools available to remote workers suffer from inconsistent performance and are often not standardized. At first, this may represent just a minor annoyance, but remote workers may eventually feel that it's inhibiting their performance. Employee frustration over inadequate tools can lead to increased attrition among remote team members. Make sure that tools and connections used do not deteriorate under usage peaks. Also, try to strike a balance between security concerns and allowing the agents' full usage of their tools functionalities.

# Employee journey map



# VII. The Exponential Benefits of an Exceptional Employee Experience

Mike Rickheim, vice president of talent management at Newell Rubbermaid, defines engagement as “giving people the tools they need to succeed in their careers, which in turn drives the outcomes that we’re seeking in the marketplace. When you look at it through that lens, when people have the tools they need to succeed, feel good about their personal growth opportunities, and receive the appropriate rewards and recognition for their contributions, it’s a win-win proposition.”

Driving meaningful improvement in employee engagement, and reaping the associated rewards, requires a detailed analysis of the gaps and pain points at each stage of the employee lifecycle. It then requires measured investment in the deployment of new strategies, processes and technology that help solve those pain points and improve the overall experience of work. One key takeaway is that your staff’s needs, expectations, goals and ambitions

are not static. They change and evolve throughout each employee’s tenure with your organization. It’s time for contact center leaders to truly adopt an agent-centric mindset and apply it to each stage of the employee lifecycle.

As we’ve hopefully established extensively in the preceding chapters, doing so drives powerful results for both operational efficiency and the customer

experience. However, let’s quickly reiterate some of the key benefits:

First, there’s the potential to significantly reduce the cost of staffing and labor, which can account for between 50% and 70% of a contact center’s operational budget. Hiring, training and developing employees is a huge investment and replacing an individual employee can range from one-half to two times that employee’s annual salary.

Fortunately, a highly engaged workforce can reduce attrition by up to 24% in high-turnover environments like call centers. Furthermore, a differentiated employee experience helps contact centers attract better talent and hire new agents more efficiently.



Increase in sales



Increase in productivity



Increase in customer

Equally important is the impact of employee engagement on productivity and the customer experience. A study by The Temkin Groups reports that 79% of companies with engaged employees had a significantly better customer experience than companies who did not. Research from Gallup found that higher engagement has the potential to drive a 17% increase in productivity, a 10% increase in customer satisfaction and a 20% increase in sales.

Numbers aside, Mike Rickheim hit the nail on the head—investing in creating a better experience for employees, particularly those that have the most direct relationship with your customers, is a win-win proposition. One thing is for certain; it's simply not possible to deliver world-class customer experiences without employee engagement in the contact center.

Regardless if you are well on your way to modernizing your contact center's employee experience, or just starting to consider the right approach, Talkdesk is there for you every step of the way. Kick start or accelerate your journey towards a better employee experience today by exploring our comprehensive suite of [Workforce Engagement Management™](#) products.

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