

SPECIAL REPORT SERIES

Empowering agents in the AI era

New insights for contact center success



Create connection.
Value conversation.



Introduction

Contact center leaders have long fallen victim to an unfortunate irony, trumpeting the importance of customer centricity yet making boardroom decisions without sufficiently considering the voices and expectations of their customers.

The same irony applies to employee experience.

Whether discussing the correlation between “happy agents and happy customers” or, more recently, AI’s role in augmenting rather than replacing employees, leaders routinely underscore the value of driving employee wellness, satisfaction and empowerment. They do not, however, sufficiently consider their employees’ actual needs, sentiments and demands when pursuing new changes and initiatives. They unilaterally impose decisions and platitudes on employees, be it new technology they have to use, new workloads they have to manage or new career paths they may theoretically have to embrace.

They then wonder why employee disengagement and turnover remain so significant.

To elevate the contact center, it is imperative to break from this trend. It is imperative to robustly define how market trends are reshaping the agent role, deeply understand how agents feel about those changes and then partner with them on initiatives that will lead greater satisfaction and stronger performance.

This briefing, part two of our Contact Center Elevation Series, reveals how to establish roles, cultures and experiences that work for your employees.



Rethinking impact: Key employee experience considerations in the age of AI

Customer-facing chatbots may be the quintessential use case, but today's contact center leaders love to position AI as an employee-centric technology. They boast about how it will free agents from rote tasks and low-value interactions. They hype its ability to empower agents to engage in more personalized, empathetic conversations. They position it as a copilot rather than as an enemy.

The problem is that not one of these outcomes is cut-and-dried. As AI automation solutions begin to absorb low-value work and amplify agent capabilities, they introduce numerous ramifications for the employee experience. Left unaddressed, organizations will not simply fail to capitalize on the AI opportunity. They will actively weaken their employee culture at a time when happy, engaged, empowered agents are more

Defining and coaching for next-generation work

Because human agents are fundamentally more capable than AI at engaging in empathetic, personable communication, customer contact thought leaders assume that they will immediately thrive upon shifting to "complex work." This assumption is a major misstep.

For starters, only 16% of contact center leaders believe their agents presently have the high-level competencies – such as complex topic mastery, de-escalation, emotional intelligence and sales savvy – required for higher-caliber interactions. The typical agent was hired and trained to answer basic questions in accordance with a clear-cut script. They may have the theoretical potential to do more, but coaching them to unlock that potential will take time. An alarming 17% of contact center leaders believe it could take more than two years to ready agents for consultative interactions.

Even readying agents for complex interactions may, however, be a short-sighted endeavor. The simple reality is that there are fewer complex issues than

there are simple ones. If business leaders aim to avoid meaningful headcount reduction – as 83% do – they will have to define and prepare agents for non-interaction work.

Depending on the organization, industry and customer based, this "non-interaction work" could involve tasks like bot development and scoring, knowledge management contribution, customer feedback and call analysis or customer experience design. Any such task would require significant revisions to hiring, training and career pathing.

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Being realistic about agents' desire for complex work

Because no one is begging to perform the same rote tasks over and over again, it is understandable why leaders position the AI revolution as employee-centric. Clearly, there is appeal in shifting agents to higher-value, more conversational, more unpredictable workloads.

But there is also a naivete to this pursuit. Agents may want more variety in their day-to-day, but that does not mean they are craving markedly more difficult and draining interactions. And they are certainly not looking to perform harder work for the same pay and opportunities.

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Indeed, CCW Digital research confirms that while 90% of leaders believe agents are theoretically willing to take on higher-value tasks, nearly half believe that willingness hinges on new compensation and/or career opportunities. The simple reality is that if businesses want agents to play a more meaningful role in the customer journey, they will have to appropriately reward them.

Incentivizing the evolution of today's employees, moreover, says nothing of the need to attract higher-level talent in the future. If companies want to begin hiring those with greater conversational savvy, technological fluency and analytical prowess, they cannot position the job as an entry-level "call center" opportunity.

Granted, the advice to "pay your agents better" will not be imminently actionable for many organizations. What these organizations must do, however, is rethink the positioning and career opportunities of the agent role, as well as the behaviors and skills they wish to reward.

Additionally, they must take steps to reduce inhibitors to agent performance. "Complex calls" will never be as straightforward as "simple ones," but if companies can improve system integration, strengthen training and harness the power of agent-facing AI, they can prevent these tasks from becoming difficult. Upon doing so, they will lessen the burden of next-generation work – and perhaps ease concerns about compensation.

Preparing for new forms of agent burnout

Monotony can be tiresome and disengaging; there are only so many times an agent can tell a customer when their payment is due before the job starts to lose its sparkle.

By adding more variety and opportunities for critical thinking, the pivot to complex work addresses this disillusionment. Unfortunately, it also risks creating a new type of burnout.

The mental strain of constantly dealing with challenging inquiries, looking up specific knowledge and seeking approval for creative, unscripted resolutions can

absolutely weigh on even the most eager, masterful agent. And though a contact center can ease some of this burden with smarter workflows, simpler approval processes and AI-based guidance, it cannot eliminate the emotional aspect of consultative work.

In most industries, the next-generation agent will deal with hostile customers whose issues carry significant emotional stakes. Interacting with these customers will impact the psychological health of agents, establishing a newfound importance for employee wellness programs.

Navigating diverse personalities and thought processes

Few contact centers have mastered agent training, and numerous factors are to blame. One of the biggest, however, is the challenge of dealing with diverse agent personas.

According to recent CCW Digital research, 61% of contact center leaders say that their training struggles to account for different personality types.

If managing diverse personalities is a problem now, when the typical agent is answering repetitive questions using a straightforward script, it will only

become a bigger issue as contact centers begin to encourage agents to lean into their unique personas in order to build more meaningful customer connections.

Creating a culture that can support diversity – in terms of demographic, skillset and personality – will be utterly essential moving forward. From customizing training to individual needs, to hiring and coaching supervisors to handle more diversity of thought, to leveraging intelligent routing to put agents in front of the most suitable customers, the days of reducing agents to “bodies in seats” are soon to be over.

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Recommitting to agent happiness

Although “happy agents = happy customers” is an appealing cliché in theory, it has been a hollow notion in practice. Knowing that the typical, repetitive interaction does not require utter glee, leaders have not necessarily gone “all in” in pursuit of agent satisfaction.

As interactions become more conversational, and as contact center leaders expect agents to perform harder work while wearing more proverbial hats, the importance of legitimate happiness becomes clearer. Agent demeanor will have a far more direct impact on conversation quality, which means organizations will have to take enthusiastic steps to drive (and measure) agent happiness.

Retention – a direct byproduct of happiness – will also become even more meaningful in the next-generation contact center. Since the typical interaction will require a more nuanced understanding of the business, its customers, and its processes, extensive frontline experience will be of incredible importance.



Employee-centric actions: Checklist for empowering employee happiness and productivity

With that deep dive into the future of the AI-powered contact center, it becomes abundantly clear that leaders will have to take a more creative, meaningful, employee-centric approach to agent experiences. They cannot simply make work tolerable; they have to make work empowering.

As they pursue that empowering environment – one in which agents have the skills, motivation, clarity and freedom to thrive – they will want to prioritize the following items.

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Truly understand (and commit to) empowerment

The ubiquity of the “employee empowerment” buzz phrase falsely suggests that today’s contact centers wholeheartedly want agents to engage in personalized, consultative, unscripted interactions.

Research suggests otherwise. At present, only 6% of contact center leaders give agents complete freedom to make decisions on refunds, make-goods and/or special resolutions. Such a number is already troubling, and it will be utterly unacceptable (and very un-empowering) in an era where customers are only escalating to agents because they were unhappy with the “scripted answer” available in self-service channels.

Restricting agent autonomy would also force employees to deal with the emotional blowback of saying “no” to customers who are already frustrated.

Granted, not every company is in position to give agents unlimited decision-making power. An essential task, therefore, is to identify exactly what freedom agents can and should have – and then culturally empower to leverage that freedom on a day-to-day basis.



Establish new agent profiles

The agent of the future requires a combination of topic mastery, emotional intelligence and the ability to handle more facets of the engagement process (such as sales and de-escalation). In order to cultivate a team of these agents, it is imperative to redefine the target agent profile. This effort will in turn lead to better recruiting, better compensation assessments and better training protocol.



Implement new contact center metrics and assessments

For far too long, organizations have countered their customer-centric rhetoric with metrics that come at the expense of customer satisfaction. As part one of our [Contact Center Elevation Series](#) revealed, it is imperative to establish metrics that more clearly communicate the importance of customer satisfaction – and the freedom agents have to deliver it. Modern metrics will also prove essential as contact centers rethink rewards, compensation and career opportunities.



Recommit to agent experience metrics, such as satisfaction, retention and effort

Shifting agents to consultative work places a greater importance on their happiness. It also places a greater emphasis on retention, since more experienced agents will be fundamentally better-suited for challenging customer inquiries.

And to prevent challenging interactions from becoming prohibitively difficult ones, “agent effort” also gains new significance. Inefficiencies related to logins, customer data gathering, knowledge lookups and approvals affect performance in the era of simple inquiries that agents can probably answer in their sleep; they will become exponentially more costly (not to mention draining on the agent) when agents actually need to pour through systems and knowledge content to gain the right answer.

Since “what gets measured gets managed,” implementing specific metrics for agent sentiment – and the effort that drives that sentiment – is a crucial step for the contact center of the future.



Amplify voice of the agent, seek meaningful buy-in

This briefing opens by discussing the irony of devising employee experience strategy without actually listening to (or even empathizing with) actual agents. It is time to bring that ironic misstep to an end.

Providing agents with a firm, closed-loop platform for sharing their feedback is utterly essential to the success of tomorrow’s contact center. Leaders absolutely must listen to what agents are saying and experiencing, and then use that intelligence to improve workflow, simplify operational strategies and strengthen the internal contact center culture.

In addition to capturing agent feedback, successful leaders will place an immense premium on obtaining agent buy-in for new initiatives. Without gaining agent support for new workload, new metrics, new compensation strategies or new AI technologies, leaders risk facing considerable resistance – and thus bottlenecked ROI – to their supposedly pro-employee investments.



Provide multi-layered employee wellness support

Moving forward, employee wellness cannot be an empty promise. Similarly, it cannot be a broad, hollow term used to describe a general interest in employee happiness.

A successful agent experience hinges on a real, concrete, multi-faceted approach to employee wellness. Yes, it will involve investments into the office or at-home work environment. Yes, it will involve parties and team-building moments. Yes, it will involve gamification and reward initiatives.

But it will also provide meaningful mental support. The consultative agent of the future will be dealing with emotionally draining matters, while potentially interacting with rude and emotionally abusive customers. Providing agents with a platform for dealing with that mental drain – and training on how to process challenging calls in real-time – will be the difference between a brand that hires agents and one that empowers them.



Reconsider the role of outsourcing partners

Contact center leaders have historically leveraged outsourcing a strategy for filling volume gaps. Lacking the internal personnel to address all customer inquiries, they have turned to outside partners to achieve the necessary capacity without enduring the time, effort or financial burdens of exclusively hiring and developing agents on their own.

As contact centers prepare for a world in which “AI handles simple issues so agents can focus on complex ones,” it behooves leaders to rethink this approach. Because more customers will solve simple problems in self-service, inbound volume may actually fall.

Inbound complexity, on the other hand, will greatly increase.

And so instead of viewing outsourcing exclusively as a way to fill volume needs, savvy contact center leaders will leverage partners to fill competency gaps. Since their internal agents may not all have the skills, experience, actionable intelligence or empowering systems to handle the surge in complex work, they can turn to partners who have already cultivated “consultative” teams of agents.

Moving forward, the right outsourcing partner will not simply be a firm that helps a business answer more calls. It will be one that helps a business deliver better, more fundamentally human support.



Why partner with Foundever®?

Managing CX can be a challenging undertaking for companies of any size. Foundever offers a strategic solution to high operational costs, scalability and complex technology integration. Thanks to +40 years of industry expertise, over 800 brands across 45 countries trust us to deliver our services in over 60 languages. Our global teams handle 9 million customer interactions daily, blending innovation with operational excellence to tackle your CX challenges effectively.

Our services and delivery models

Foundever provides CX outsourcing services tailored to every stage of the customer journey. Our services include customer care, technical support, back-office support, collections, trust & safety and sales & retention. Our CX delivery solutions include in-center, work-at-home and hybrid work models utilizing onshore, offshore and nearshore support, ensuring scalability and flexibility to serve your customers wherever they need us.

Ensuring operational excellence

Our global operating standards, PeakOS, ensure consistent performance, efficient processes and high-quality outcomes. PeakOS streamlines operations, enhances security and complies with PCI DSS, ISO 27001 and SOC Type 1 and Type 2 certifications. It supports globally consistent hiring, training and performance management practices, promoting continuous improvement, professional development and employee engagement.

Leveraging advanced CX solutions

Foundever leverages advanced CX solutions to streamline and improve the quality of customer interactions with technologies like conversational AI, generative AI, intelligent automation and interaction analytics. Our CRM and CCaaS platforms ensure seamless integration and flexibility, complemented by effective CX strategy and design.

Our knowledge management delivers the right information to agents and customers faster, while our learning and development uphold high-performance standards. We offer omnichannel CX strategies with self-service options that allow customers to engage through their preferred channels. Our social media CX strategies transform platforms into powerful support channels and our unified agent desktop equips agents for exceptional service delivery.

Delivering Industry-specific expertise

Foundever understands how to meet each client's unique needs, offering tailored solutions across various industries, including banking and financial services, insurance, healthcare, retail, technology, telecommunications, media, utilities and logistics. We scale our services to meet the needs of disruptor brands preparing for or experiencing rapid growth. By partnering with Foundever, brands across diverse sectors and growth stages can enhance customer experiences, improve operational efficiencies and achieve measurable success.

Cultivating a culture of care

With over 150,000 associates worldwide, united by an award-winning performance culture, we ensure every customer interaction builds long-term loyalty. Our forward-thinking approach to customer experience outsourcing delivers competitive advantages when they matter most. Our mission is clear: to be the solutions and the teams behind the best experiences for the world's leading brands, transforming customer service into a powerful tool for business growth and customer satisfaction.

Our promise to you

Foundever is more than just a service provider – we're your strategic partner in navigating the future of CX. By blending human expertise with AI-driven capabilities, we empower your brand to deliver exceptional customer experiences. Our global reach, advanced technological solutions and industry-specific expertise make us the trusted choice for brands looking to stay competitive and customer-focused in today's rapidly changing marketplace.

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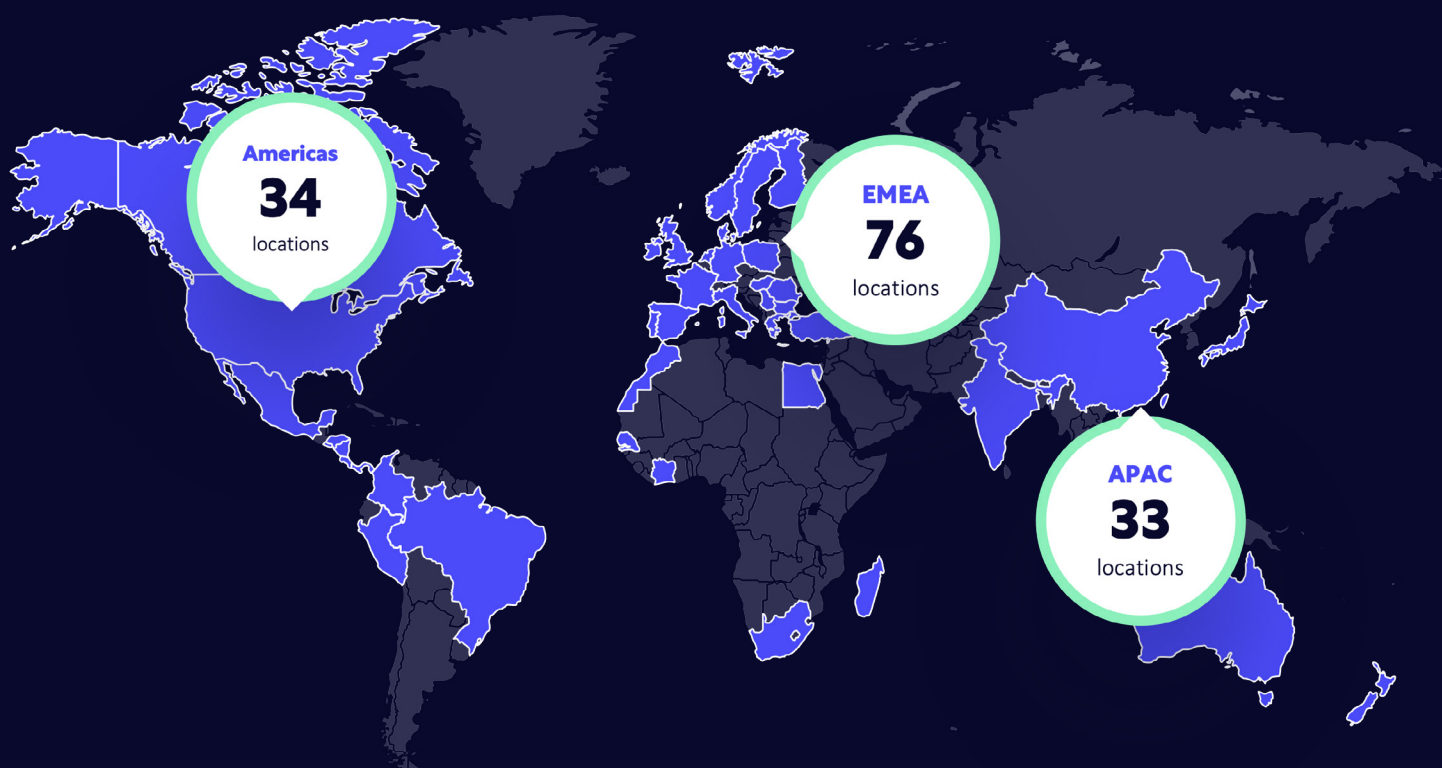
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