



Why Are Contact Centres Still Failing Their Agents?

Engage, empower and enable
to become an employer of choice

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At a Glance

In a hurry? Here are some key nuggets.

Contact centres have a problem. Absenteeism is rife and staff retention is appalling - with attrition rates running at up to double the national average.

But what if it didn't need to be this way? What if contact centres could become employers of choice?

Technology is making this possible. Intraday Automation is changing cultures, helping to engage, empower and enable employees. It's ushering in a new era that's better for everyone – for agents, customers and companies.

Hear what industry experts have to say and how leading brands NatWest and Nationwide Building Society are keeping their agents happy, highly skilled and motivated – and see what rewards they're reaping as a result.

In this paper, we cover:

What's the problem?

“A relentless focus on metrics like schedule adherence, shrinkage and call wrap times puts pressure on the shoulders of agents.”

Nerys Corfield, Contact centre consultant at Injection Consulting Limited

Why switching to customer-centric, rather than cost-centric metrics is a win-win

“Resolution rates are the canary in the coal mine – they tell businesses when there are problems. This should be the foundational metric.”

Paddy Coleman, Founder of QStory – Pioneers in Intraday Automation

Why you must invest in your agents

“It's true, contact centres were viewed as a place to squeeze costs but... there's been a huge realisation that contact centres are the gateway to customer retention.”

Rich Athey, Senior Performance Manager at Nationwide Building Society

How to create happier agents

“Previously, everything was very one directional – people were just being told what to do. Agents are now part of the dialogue.”

Phil Baker, Customer Experience Lead at NatWest



How Contact Centres Become Employers of Choice

Contact centre agents play a crucial role in a business. They're the human face – the people answering questions and helping to resolve problems for customers. If companies want to keep those customers happy, and retain their loyalty, they should be placing a high value on the contribution of their agents.

These businesses should be bending over backwards to ensure their contact centre staff are happy, highly skilled and motivated. But this is far from being the norm.

Too often, contact centre agents are disgruntled, demotivated and deprived of proper training. You see this reflected in the level of staff absences and attrition that contact centres have to endure – with staff churn reaching up to double the national average¹. It also makes it hard to attract people that see it as more than a stop-gap. It's not a healthy situation - not for agents, not for customers, not for businesses.

If companies want long-term success, the impact this has on customer retention must be tackled head on. They need to create better places to work, and environments where agents can thrive. They need to become employers of choice - attracting and retaining top talent.

This doesn't need to be a difficult journey, but it does require an acceptance that contact centres have problems. A need to balance customer demand with the cost to serve has meant that, for decades, agents' needs have come last.

This culture is starting to change however, largely thanks to emerging technology that is helping businesses focus on their agents more. Intraday Automation is helping companies to provide more training and more flexible working schedules – without compromising service levels. This technology is transforming how the industry works.

With the help of expert commentary from industry consultants and practitioners, from companies such as Nationwide Building Society and NatWest, this paper explains why the contact centre industry needs to reconsider its priorities, why it makes sense to become an employer of choice and how automation is enabling change to happen. But, before we do that, let's look at some of those deep-rooted problems which leave many contact centre agents discontented.

This doesn't need to be a difficult journey, but it does require an acceptance that contact centres have problems.

1. ContactBabel, The UK Contact Centre Decision-Maker's Guide 2020-21



The Problem with Contact Centres

Anyone familiar with contact centres will know they are unique working environments. They might resemble an office set-up but, in reality, they operate more like a factory.

Just like a factory, they need to have the right number of staff in the right place, at the right times, to manage the workload coming down the line.

This has created a working culture that is distinct from a standard office. The most obvious distinction is the lack of flexibility afforded to agents.

Inflexibility

To ensure contact centres can meet customer demand, agents have traditionally been asked to adhere to strict schedules – and this impinges on employees in ways you don't see in office environments.

The idea that agents can only go to the toilet when permitted might be a dated one, but the restrictive nature of the job still impacts their ability to change hours, swap shifts or book annual leave in many companies. This makes it difficult for agents to manage their work-life balance effectively.

Another major factor is the huge emphasis on cost focused performance metrics.

Cost focused metrics

The tendency to concentrate on 'cost to the business' dates right back to the origins of contact centres in the '60s and '70s – when organisations started pulling staff out of branch offices to gain economies of scale and reduce costs. This need to maximise productivity and profitability, often at the expense of agent wellbeing, has blinkered organisations and lingered ever since.

You can see it today in the key performance indicators (KPIs) that contact centres are judged on, such as average call handling times (AHT).

Agents are not the priority

Despite being vigorously pursued, a focus on costs often isn't done with the interests of agents at heart.

"Most contact centres are driven to deliver on their defined SLAs or KPIs. Where an outsourcer is involved, these targets are enshrined into the contract. Failure to meet targets could mean penalties or loss of a contract," says Nerys Corfield, contact centre consultant at Injection Consulting Limited.

An expert in running and auditing contact centres, with more than 25 years' experience, Nerys adds: "Where there is a relentless focus on metrics like schedule adherence, shrinkage and call wrap times this pressure ends up on the shoulders of agents."

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Nerys Corfield
Injection Consulting

Resolution Rates Must Be Foundational

This pursuit of cost saving metrics may be ingrained in the culture, but it doesn't mean it should be prioritised above all else. If pursued aggressively - and at the expense of the customer - this can prove detrimental.

For example, where contact centres are trying to minimise headcount, agents can be set targets aimed at reducing AHT. In theory, getting customers off the phone faster means fewer agents are needed to handle call volume. But, while there's some truth in this, it can also be counterproductive.

Paddy Coleman, founder of contact centre technology provider QStory, explains: "If you're not careful, rather than reducing costs, the opposite can be achieved. If a customer is rushed off the phone before the problem is properly resolved, the customer will need to call back. This creates more work for the contact centre, not less."

"It's also exasperating for the customer who has been given a terrible experience and a bad impression of the brand."

“Resolution rates are the canary in the coal mine. They can tell businesses when customers are having problems and where staff need support.”

Paddy Coleman
QStory

Become Output Focused

Instead of fixating on input cost metrics, such as AHT, Paddy advocates for customer focussed output metrics - in particular, resolution rates.

“This should be the foundational metric that contact centres look to,” Paddy says.

“Resolution rates are the canary in the coal mine. They can tell businesses when customers are having problems and where staff need support.

“But here’s the other thing. To improve resolution rates, contact centres need their agents to be able to handle customer queries at the first time of asking. To do that, agents will need to be well trained and have the right answers to hand. If this is the case, they will reduce calls back to the contact centre and still end up lowering the cost to serve.”



Invest in Your Agents

If contact centres are focused on resolution rates, it makes sense to invest in agent training and wellbeing – so customers are served by highly skilled and motivated staff.

Well trained staff have the potential to reduce 4 in every 10 call backs to contact centres, according to research by SQM Group, which found that 38% of unresolved customer calls are the result of agent error.²

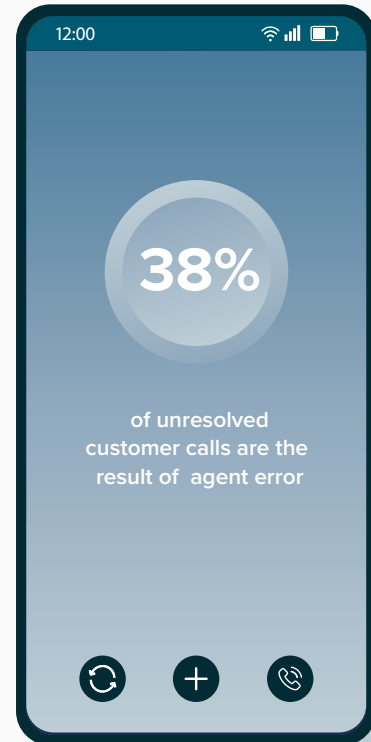
Contact centres that also invest in improving their agents' work/life balance will also reduce disaffection and inspire a more positive attitude among staff.

Happier staff = Happier customers

Providing staff with more personal development opportunities, and greater flexibility in their working schedule, is not just good for the agents. It will provide customers with a more consistent, high-quality experience. When companies have pleasant, knowledgeable staff answering calls, it keeps customers happy – and loyal.

“It’s true that call centres were viewed as a place to squeeze costs in the past but that’s becoming less the case. There is more appreciation now of the fact that agents are the face of an organisation,” says Rich Athey, Senior Performance Manager at Nationwide Building Society.

“There’s also been a huge realisation that, along with branches, call centres are the gateway to retention.”



Demotivated staff can underperform with customers – and can potentially inflict damage on the brand.

2. <https://www.sqmgroupp.com/resources/library/blog/top-10-best-practices-improving-FCR>

And a happier business

Happier agents can also mean a happier business – and not just in terms of retaining customers. If happier agents lead to lower attrition rates, this also means reduced recruitment – and all of its associated costs and distractions.

In addition, contact centres can also become a talent pool for the broader business. “New starters often see the contact centre as a foot in the door, an alternative way into large organisations. And for businesses, they can be a fruitful feeder ground,” says Rich.

This is a view echoed by Nerys, who highlights the large volume of graduates that pass through contact centres. “Canny advisors will look at the contact centre as the front door into a big company and canny organisations appreciate the potential that is likely to exist within their contact centre advisor pool.

“If a business splits their attrition into ‘internal/external’ or ‘negative/positive’ - and they celebrate internal/positive attrition - it creates a very positive and progressive environment where potential is nurtured.”





The Making of Happy, High Performing Agents

If businesses want to have happy, high performing agents they must acknowledge the challenges they face and create a culture that feels fair and supportive – something that’s almost taken for granted within a ‘normal’ office environment.

But there are stark contrasts to a traditional office when it comes to changing the culture of the contact centre, particularly the perception that they’re inflexible places to work. Historically, significant planning obstacles have made it difficult to react to agent requests quickly, such as granting a last-minute day off request or time out after a particularly difficult call. This has inhibited flexibility and restricted the time available for training – all of which breeds frustration, demotivation and a ‘them versus us’ mentality.

Frankly, even if the will to accommodate agents more was there, the means to make it happen weren’t. But the emergence of technology such as Intraday Automation (IDA) is allowing contact centres to do much more for their agents, quickly and at scale.

Contact centres are now better able to:

- listen to what agents have to say,
- give them more control over their work/ life balance, and
- help them to learn, develop and grow – so they can be proud of the job they do.

In other words, they can: engage, empower and enable.

Businesses must acknowledge the challenges they face and create a culture which feels fair and supportive.

engage

empower

enable

Engage

If contact centres want motivated agents, it's crucial they feel like they matter. They must believe that their concerns are being heard, that those above them in the organisation understand their problems and that they're willing and prepared to do something about them.

This has been a major priority for NatWest in recent years. It wanted its agents to know they were being listened to, and that company dialogue wasn't one sided.

To address this, the company deployed an agent app that is now being used as a 'one stop shop' – where agents can make requests, receive support and offer feedback.

“We recognised that we needed to change the relationship between our agents and the business,” explains Phil Baker, Customer Experience Lead at NatWest.

“Previously, everything was very one directional with people just being told what to do – which led to disengagement with the planning process.

“We wanted to meet that head on and allow seamless communication – and the app has been a powerful enabler of cultural change. Agents are now part of the dialogue, helping to direct our real-time planning approach.”

Employees who experience high levels of wellbeing in the workplace are 3 times more likely to stay with their employer.

Great Place To Work
& John Hopkins University



**3 X MORE LIKELY
TO STAY**

Creating a fairer culture

Creating more equitable relationships between agents and the wider business is key to building a culture that is based on fairness and trust - and one that more closely resembles how we'd expect to be treated in 'the office'.

NatWest has seen the value in this. The company tackled its operational challenges and the perceived unfairness it uncovered to make its contact centres a place where people feel heard and valued. For example, it has provided agents with a hugely popular time-banking feature that enables them to claim back any time they work after their shift has ended.

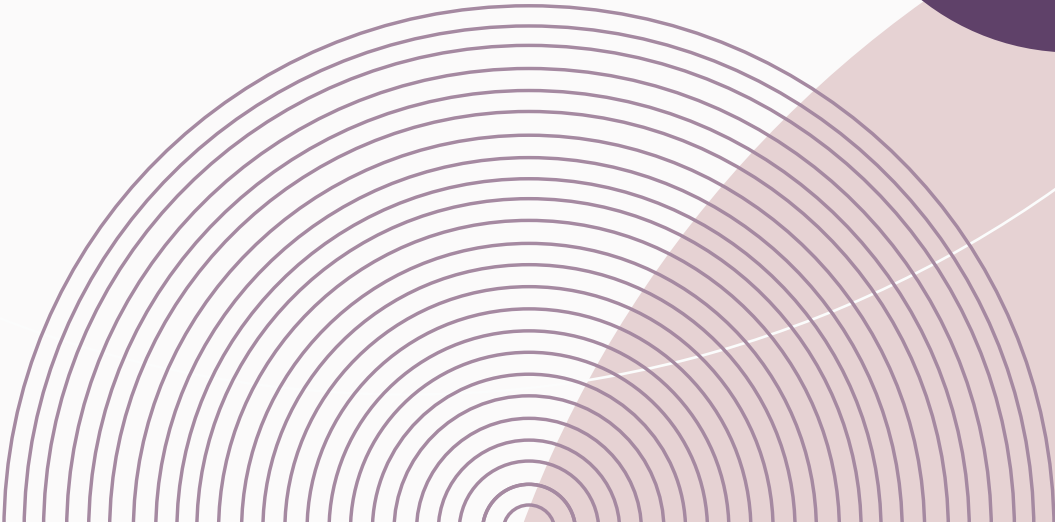
Not only is this fair, but it's also encouraging positive behaviour. Agents are now happier to accept customer calls near the end of their shift and make sure they fully meet the customer's needs before ending the call.

Another benefit of this type of automation is that it takes potentially contentious decisions out of the hands of individuals – helping to remove any suspicion that decisions are unfair.

“This is a big reason why time-banking is so enormously popular,” explains Paddy. “Agents would previously need to lobby managers to get back the time owed to them. Without a system recording the data, it's almost impossible to do this in a way that's 100% accurate – and it feels unfair. But this now happens automatically.”



NatWest has made its contact centre a place where people are valued and heard.



Empower

A lack of flexibility is clearly one of the biggest factors affecting agent happiness. When you consider that flexibility is also the number one priority for job seekers in 2022, according to a survey by Lloyds Banking Group, this is a major problem.

If automation isn't deployed, any changes requested by agents will create big headaches. Traditionally, this has meant shifts and holiday allocations needing to be locked down weeks in advance.

This is less than ideal for staff and it makes last minute requests – to attend a medical appointment, for example – difficult.

This was something Phil Baker was keen to address at NatWest. “When it came to last minute requests, around overtime or shift changes, we’ve previously been very rigid in our approach,” he explained.

But by automating its approval process, the workload created by change requests has been minimised. There’s no longer a need to update payroll, change records or complete other additional forms of administration. IDA solutions can instantly check whether a request will impact service levels, or not, and make approvals without any human intervention. This is enabling approximately 98% of annual leave requests to be approved on the spot.



Flexibility is the number one priority for job seekers in 2022.
Survey by Lloyds Bank Group



Planning says 'Yes'

Automation has also helped Nationwide Building Society address its agents' requests for flexibility. "This technology has really changed the parameters," explains Rich Athey, Senior Performance Manager at Nationwide Building Society.

"We've been able to remove that 'planning says no' label and enable positive engagement with agents. We now have an active feedback loop that allows us to consider their ideas. For example, we're looking into offering 'golden days' which would guarantee agents three days a year that they can take off, without needing the approval of a manager."

He adds: "The biggest difference flexibility has made, and where we've seen the biggest take up, is the ability to match break times. Agents can now arrange to meet their friends for a coffee. That might seem like a small thing, but it's had a massive impact on happiness and wellbeing."



“We've been able to remove that 'planning says no' label and enable positive engagement with agents.”

Rich Athey
Senior Performance Manager,
Nationwide Building Society


Enable

Contact centres can also empower agents by giving them the skills they need, and trusting them to do a great job. Perhaps one of the biggest benefits of automation lies in how it enables the training and coaching necessary for this to happen. With contact centre managers often focused on the day's operational goals, such as reducing shrinkage, more people-focused objectives, like training, can get pushed down the priority list.

But IDA finds time for agents to attend training without affecting service levels. Staff feel more invested in and more equipped to do a better job, which is great for overall job satisfaction.

“When agents struggle to answer questions it's deeply frustrating, not just for customers, but for agents too. It takes a toll on employees,” explains Paddy.

“If they're also expected to meet call handling times, a lack of sufficient training can be particularly tough. It's like a factory worker being asked to continue meeting production targets with a broken machine.”



When focusing on operational goals... more people - centric objectives like training can get pushed down the list.

A higher level of customer service

In recent years, the level of knowledge and competency demanded of agents has also increased. Not only do they need to keep up with changing regulations and product information, they're also often required to consider customer wellbeing.

Rich explains. "In the last two years, we've seen a growing focus on the need to protect the customer. Our agents are having to deal with issues such as domestic and financial abuse, gambling addictions, fraud and scams. It's a more complex environment, and more upskilling is required as a result."

Rich admits that it hasn't always been easy to find time to provide agents with the training they need. But IDA provides planners with a real-time view of customer demand and the supply of agents, so when pockets of time become available, opportunities to provide training are not lost.

NatWest was able to identify 3,000 hours per month, which could be reallocated to other activities, including the training and coaching of agents.

Idle time can be reinvested into valuable offline activities



With contact centre automation, it's entirely possible to change this culture and treat agents more fairly.

Conclusion

For too long, contact centres have been upholding a culture that has become increasingly unattractive to potential employees.

The drive to minimise headcount and squeeze the most out of agents has done little for their personal development - while the restrictive nature of the job and ways of working feel completely at odds with the era of flexibility.

This has left contact centres facing a battle to attract and retain talent.

But it's entirely possible to change this culture and treat agents more fairly. The emergence of Intraday Automation technology has given businesses the tools they need to listen to their agents, and then act on their concerns.

It can identify when agents will have idle time and allow them to use those windows of opportunity to be productive in other ways. Businesses can enable more training and coaching or offer greater flexibility in work schedules. It's this that's giving contact centres the potential to be employers of choice.

And by looking out for the interests of their agents, companies will also be serving the best interests of their customers and their organisation as a whole – meaning everyone wins and is the happier for it.

Thank You to Our Contributors

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About QStory

QStory are the pioneers of Intraday Automation (IDA).

We transform contact centres in ways that no-one else can. We exist to create “a better everyday” for customer service professionals by helping them to work in a happier, more empowering and productive environment.

We do this through a powerful, predictive platform that automates resource scheduling to match on-the-day demand and availability.

With QStory IDA, contact centres can supercharge their existing workforce management system to enhance staff engagement, wellbeing and satisfaction, leading to greater retention, performance levels and results.

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Learn more about Intraday Automation

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