

SPOTLIGHT ON THE SUPERVISOR

RingCentral®

How to better manage teams of
remote contact center agents

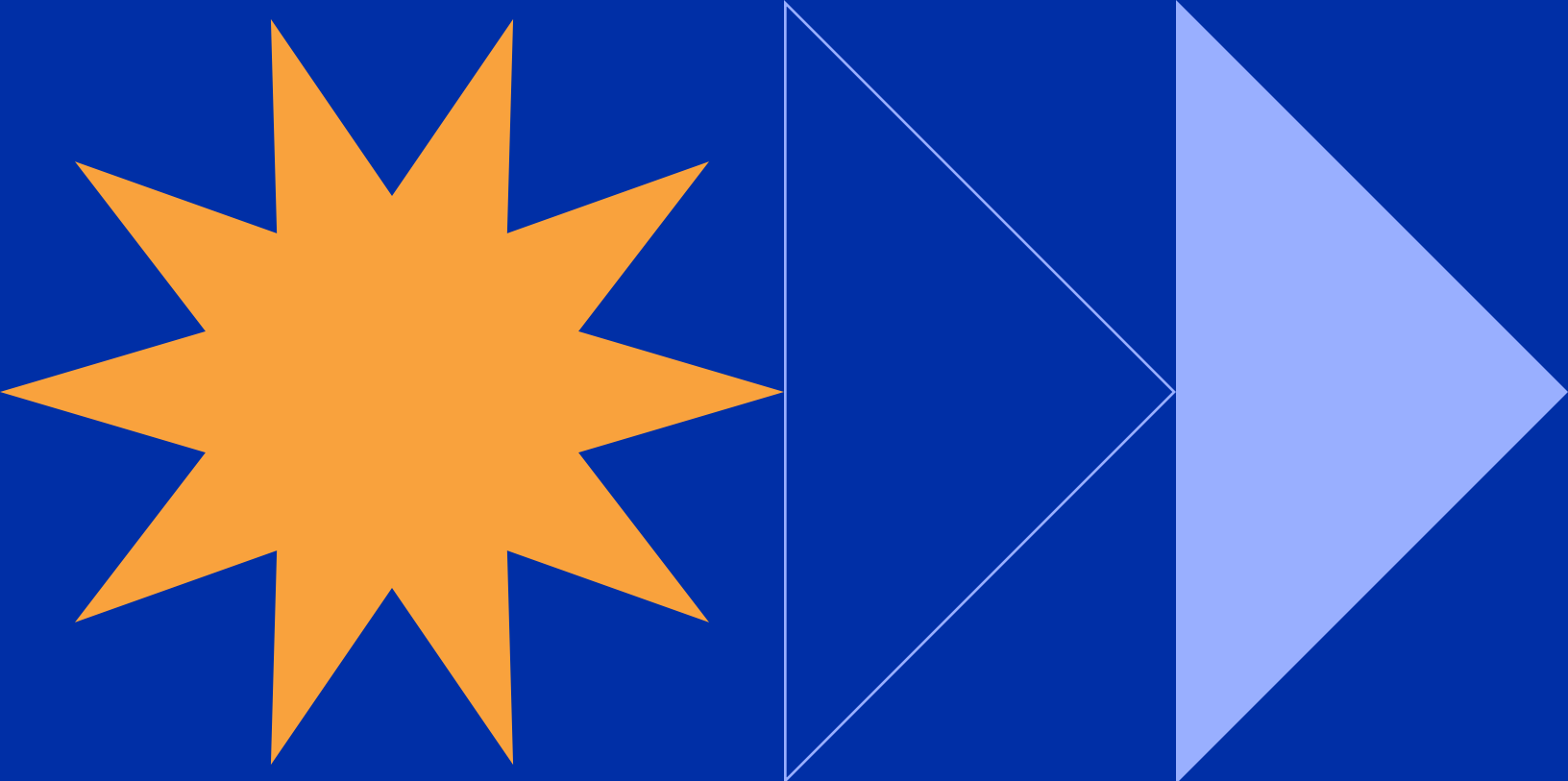


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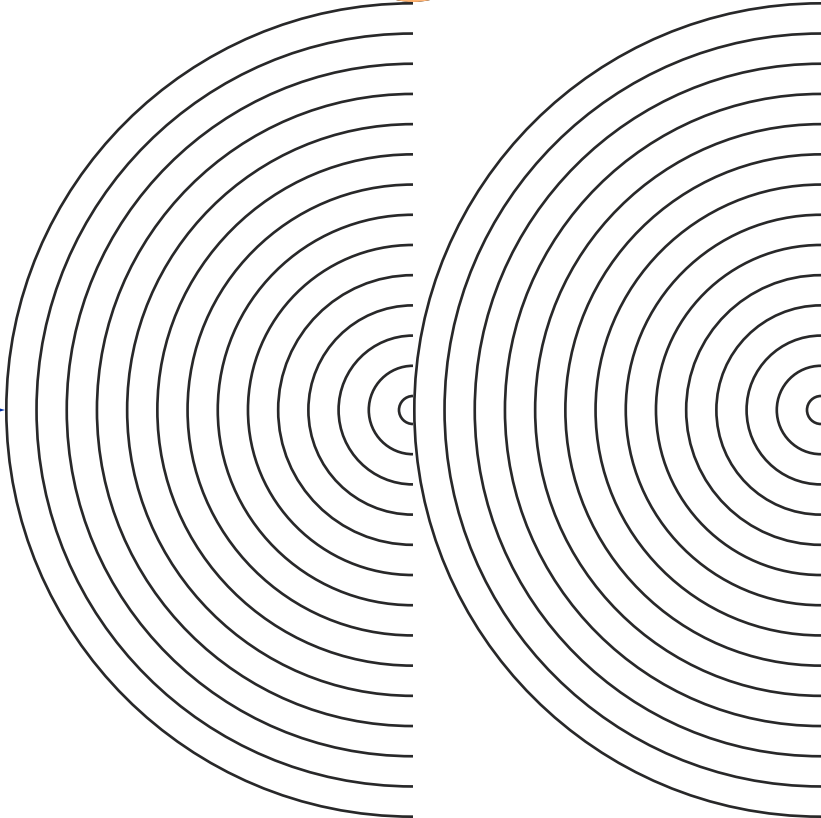
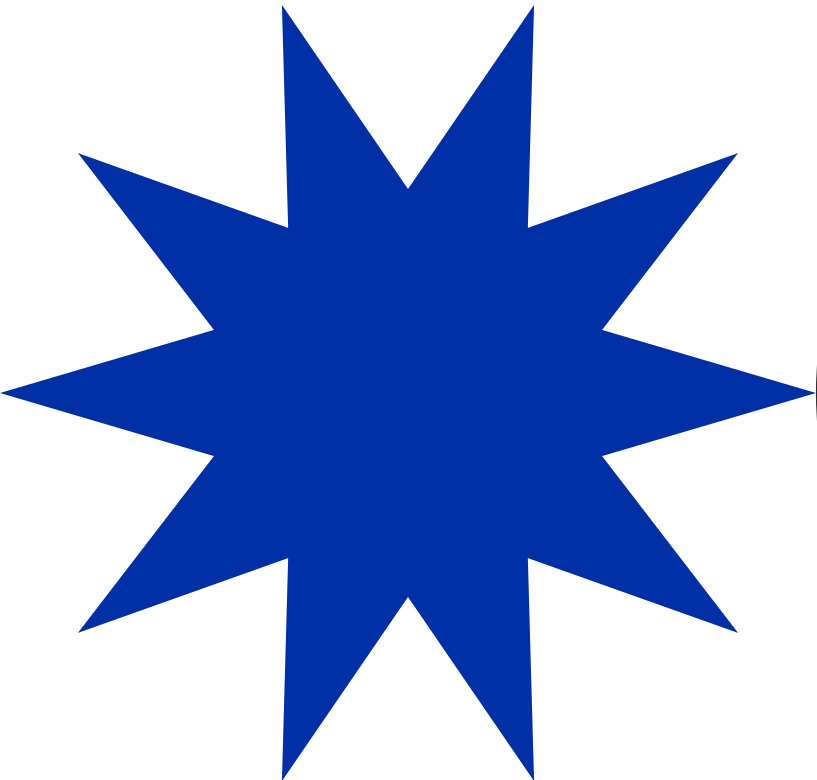
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Managing remotely:
Transitioning from a physical
to virtual contact center

CHAPTER 1



Wait times ballooned as many callers reached out with problems that customer service reps couldn't answer—this new reality meant new, unforeseen issues.

It may seem like ages ago now but think back to those early, chaotic days of quarantine. All of a sudden, your kids were just... home. Like, all the time. That dining room table you otherwise only used at Thanksgiving became a classroom, an office, and a makeshift switchboard. You started ordering your takeout online. Grandma and Grandpa couldn't make it to that birthday party—so you spent the weekend giving them a crash course on video conferencing. If you weren't already shopping for groceries online before, you started, and you got to know that Amazon delivery guy on a first-name basis.

From one day to the next, every interaction with the outside world started taking place digitally—most notably all your experiences as a customer. It was a little strange, but also somehow manageable. Besides, this was all going to be temporary, right?

Customer service contact centers shut down amid virus concerns—even as online shopping spiked. While your internet provider's customer service team figured out how to work from home, you and millions of other customers used more bandwidth than ever. And they weren't alone, pretty much every business, big or small, was scrambling.

On March 11, T-Mobile had 12,000 customer service professionals working at 17 contact centers around the country. By the end of the month, every single one of them was operating remotely. And during this time, the calls they received grew more and more complicated. An AI company, Tethr, studied one million customer service calls made to 20 large companies from various industries over this period, scoring interactions ranging from “difficult” to “easy.” They found that difficult interactions had more than doubled from before the COVID-19 crisis—accounting for a hefty 20% of all calls.

These sorts of interactions became increasingly common as contact center agents and managers grappled with new remote working arrangements. In the early days of the shift, supervisors scrambled to keep their team on the same page using a mishmash of Slack, Skype, and email. It quickly became clear this wouldn't cut it in the long run. Wait times ballooned as many callers reached out with problems that customer service reps couldn't answer—this new reality meant new, unforeseen issues. One company told Tethr that calls related to financial hardship, a sensitive problem at the best of times, more than doubled in a single week.

With the COVID-19 crisis disrupting just about all walks of life, it's clear that commerce, customer service, and working arrangements are undergoing a permanent transformation. From that initial scramble to make do, a new normal is emerging. Whereas most customer service agents used to work in a physical call center with a supervisor on-site, almost all of them are now working from home—and it's likely to stay that way.

Serving customers in this new way demands new tools, tweaks to agents' skill sets, and changed management techniques. Cloud-based contact center management platforms point the way forward in this new normal. They help contact centers transition to the virtual realm, and in the right hands, they have the potential to actually improve the customer experience. You may never have to leave an engagement with contact center service frustrated again.

Learning on the fly

Even before the pandemic, warehouse-sized call centers were already on their way out. A 2019 [Deloitte](#) survey found that 34% of contact centers already had people working from home, and 56% said they planned to move that direction within the next two years. COVID-19 has accelerated that transition, and the rapid pace of change explains the pain points that were so apparent in mid-March. Some companies managed with little disruption; others struggled at first and had to adapt on the fly.

But make no mistake—this is a permanent shift, and now is the time for supervisors to adjust, if they haven't already. Supervisors have always monitored interactions between agents and customers from behind the scenes. As always, good managers help agents maximize performance. But new work-from-home arrangements mean quality customer service increasingly depends on a supervisor's ability to harness technology to manage, motivate, and train people from a distance.

Walking the floor

Supervisors once walked the contact center floor to keep tabs on agents and gauge the general tenor of operations. Stopping by desks to listen in on the occasional phone call or pat an agent on the back for a job well done helped them connect with the team. That need to create feedback loops and stay connected hasn't gone away—now it just has to happen digitally. Cloud-based management platforms allow supervisors to see which calls are active at any given time, drop in for a listen and jump from call to call. On occasion, they might see fit to intervene. RingCentral's platform allows managers to silently monitor agents without the customer ever knowing. A supervisor might even use the whisper feature to speak to the customer service agent while the agent is on a call to improve service in real-time.

While this new normal means supervisors lose out on physical interaction with their agents, technology allows them to cover more ground than they ever could have on foot. Supervisors may not be able to chat with agents around the water cooler anymore, but this increased agility means they can connect with more team members each day. Meanwhile, one-to-one video chats can still help build rapport.

A team effort

In the traditional contact center, each day generally began with the supervisor speaking to the group. That helped give the days structure and create a sense of unity and shared purpose. Now, those meetings take place over video chat, but they remain essential for building a shared feeling of connection. In fact, in an otherwise atomized working environment, it is vital that agents feel that they are valued members of a team. They also need a forum to share collective concerns.

A good supervisor can use meetings like these to motivate their team members and create excitement. They celebrate achievements and keep people feeling good, and that same kind of interaction can continue throughout the day. A good leader might drop occasional messages into a group chat to keep morale up. Meanwhile, agents can use chatting functions to share best practices and tips. Maybe there has been a mixup in the shipping department that affects many customers; keeping customer care agents on the same page helps assure that problems are dealt with in a consistent, repeatable way. Even at a distance, agents have better-than-ever potential for staying connected.

By the numbers

Listening in on calls is essential for supervisors. But even the most diligent manager can only survey a small sample of the overall call volume, and it can be hard to find larger patterns in this scattershot approach. This makes it essential to balance these anecdotal observations with data. Monitoring key performance indicators (KPIs), net promoter scores, and call volume help supervisors track their whole team to maximize performance. Each agent is an individual and, as such, needs to tweak different elements of their approach.

The right contact center system puts all the data a supervisor needs in the same place. It helps managers look for patterns and eliminate problems before they start. It also helps make dropping in on calls a lot less random, as data pinpoints agents who need extra training. On the positive side, the same datasets allow supervisors to single out top performers and highlight their methods for the rest of the team.

Coach ‘em up

A good coach encourages their team and boosts confidence. They make sure everybody is rowing in the same direction. They know when to push someone to maximize a result, but they also recognize when it's time to pull back.

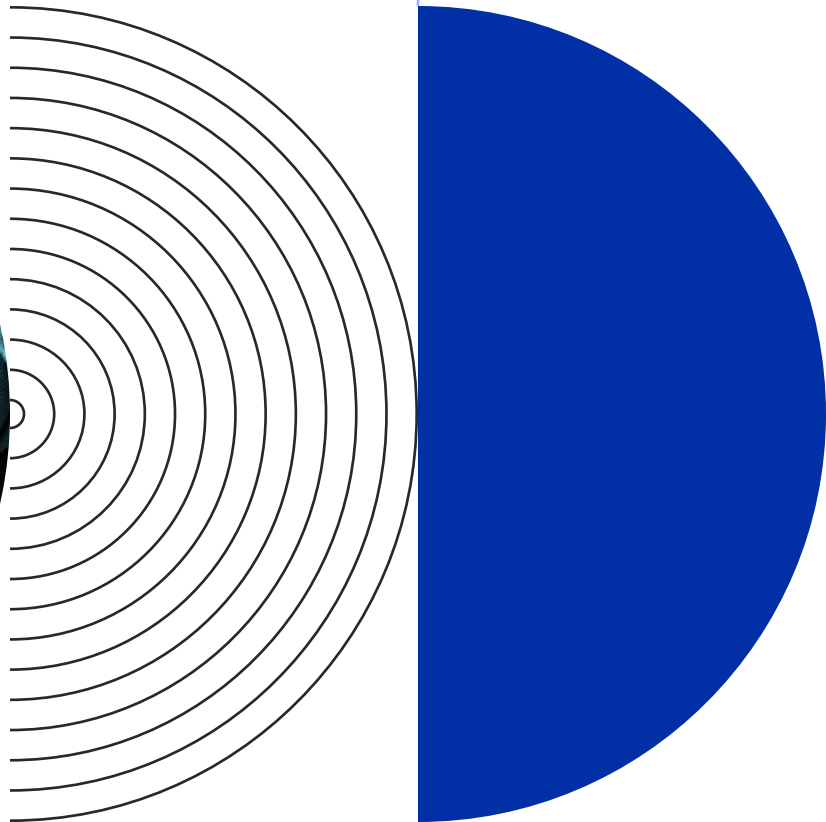
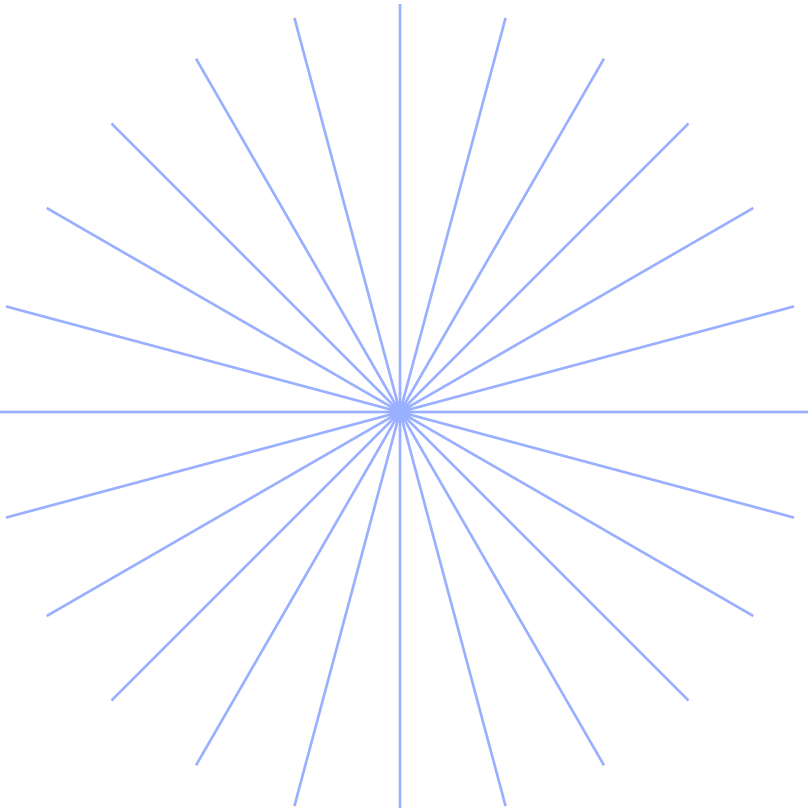
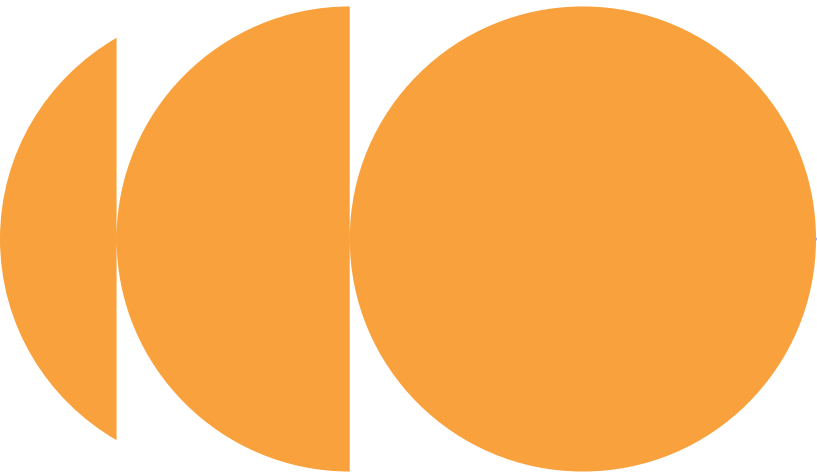
Coaching is now more critical than ever in managing remote contact center agent teams. Utilizing “integrated coaching” throughout the day, like short check-ins by video, for example, make improvement a part of the daily routine. A good coach talks with agents immediately after a problematic call. They engage their agent with open-ended questions. Supervisors learn more about their agents, while agents learn what they need to improve. A good session ends with actionable steps that an agent can take, and the supervisor can use the data mentioned above to circle-back and track improvement.

New tools can make coaching more precise and better integrated with everyday practice. It is one more way that cloud-based platforms facilitate managing from a distance at scale. While translating the best aspects of the old brick-and-mortar contact center into the digital realm is a challenge, this new arrangement offers clear benefits. To be sure, contact center supervisors need to up their game and learn a few new tricks. Still, the combination of technology and a renewed leadership approach makes it possible to boost the quality of customer service. Change can be hard, but it's often for the better.

That's where we come in. RingCentral is committed to building customer engagement platforms that make it easier to manage distributed contact center teams scattered throughout the country or around the world. With RingCentral, you have a platform that allows your managers and super-visors to build a strong remote contact center that gives customers an experience that keeps them coming back.

Can you build a meaningful culture in a virtual contact center?

CHAPTER 2



“Working there was like walking into a kitchen on fire and trying to avoid getting burnt before you finish your shift,” Lee tells RingCentral.

When Jay Lee clocked in for his first shift, he felt optimistic. He'd just begun working as a contact center representative for a popular national fashion retailer and assumed the culture would match the brand's confident-yet-easy-going attitude. But he quickly realized he was wrong.

Supervisors ruled with an iron fist, micro-managing agents and penalizing them for using their initiative or discretion. Praise was rare, and criticisms for missing KPIs were common. Performance targets were unachievable for even the best agents on the floor.

"Working there was like walking into a kitchen on fire and trying to avoid getting burnt before you finish your shift," Lee tells RingCentral.

The culture made Lee feel uncomfortable and scared to come into work. He and his co-workers constantly looked for new positions. Nearly every week, several colleagues would leave, with new faces taking their place almost immediately, making the place even harder to relate to with no true connections .

"There's always rolling recruitment due to the high turnover," Lee says. "I think that sums up how most people felt. They wanted to leave."

Eventually, Lee secured another position and was able to move on. Reflecting on the experience, he heaps praise on his colleagues, who he describes as "friends for life." But he admits the culture and atmosphere wore him down and forced him out the door.

Lee's experience isn't unique. Poor culture has long plagued the contact center industry. Historically, companies treated contact centers as a necessary evil. They cut costs wherever possible and implemented ever-rising expectations. That sort of mentality cultivates a bad company culture, one that drives a raft of organizational woes: agent churn, disengagement, absenteeism, stress, low productivity, and more.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Over the past couple of decades, some organizations have reimagined what the contact center could be. Business leaders started investing in technology, systems, and people. Improving the culture was a massive part of that movement. By building a strong culture, they could re-engage agents, improve service standards, and turn their contact centers into a competitive advantage.

What is culture?

Organizational culture is a tricky concept to pin down. Ask the average worker what they think a great company feels like, and they'll list off flashy benefits like foosball tables, Friday afternoon beers, and regular bonuses. But those perks are only half the equation.

The tangible rewards organizations give to their employees are eye-catching, but they're unlikely to drive real cultural change. Sure, they help create a fun work environment, or help show you value your employees. But rewards alone are not enough to define, nurture, and retain a company culture that keeps employees engaged, productive, and happy. For that, you need to expand your definition of culture past the tangible, more obvious stuff.

People don't take jobs because of foosball tables or regular happy hour sessions. But they will come if a company provides them with a clear career path and they feel connected to its overall mission and other employees.

And those internal psychological rewards come from what's called intrinsic culture, which describes an organization's values and behaviors—what you expect from your employees and what they expect from you. While creating a culture can feel like a daunting challenge, it's not all that difficult to get started. By following a few simple steps, you implement a basic-yet-positive workplace culture.

Craft your values and set behaviors

Organizations often rely on mission statements and purpose documents as their “north star.” Those resources set the ultimate goals for an organization and help employees align their work. Think about some of the best mission statements out there:

- Tesla: “To accelerate the world’s transition to sustainable energy.”
- TED: “Spread ideas.”
- Asana: “To help humanity thrive by enabling all teams to work together, effortlessly.”

But even these don’t tell employees how to act on a day-to-day basis—and that’s important. Your behavior—day in and day out—is your culture. If you’re kind and caring and supportive Monday through Friday, that’s your culture. But your employees need to know what you expect from them, in terms of how to act—and you do that by clearly communicating the company’s values.

Consider the story of Tile, an item-tracking startup that, in the spring of 2019, hired a new CEO named CJ Prober. His first order of business was to review the company’s values. Working with his team, Prober devised five new values for the company: Start with Trust; Bring It; Build What Matters; Better Together; and Power What’s Next. Those values underpinned the company’s ethos, purpose, and mission.

Craft your values and set behaviors

It's what Prober did next that really set his strategy apart: he defined how he expected employees to live each value. Consider Tile's final value: Power What's Next. "We are focused on innovation and pushing the status quo," Tile's VP of Engineering Steve Klinkner wrote. "Tile is data-driven, iterates, and reacts quickly. We stretch our comfort zones to continuously learn and raise the bar. Be curious, be bold."

In other words, Tile does more than simply define a value, it explains what each one looks like in practice. This turns what would otherwise be little more than feel-good exercise into a tangible behavioral change. That's true, no matter what sort of organization you work for. Tile's product managers need guidance on how to act—just as much as your agents, supervisors, and managers.

"Embarking on the values exercise helped us to explore what [Tile] might look like," Prober told culture consultancy, At Your Core. "It enabled us, as an organization, to focus not just on what is core to Tile today but also on those values and behaviors that will get us where we want to go."

The common values contact center managers select—quality, responsibility, collaboration, trust, and so on—could mean any number of things. But when you define them and show employees living them, you create a behavioral template for employees to follow.

Connect agents with their results

In early-2007, Wharton management professor, Adam Grant, joined a team of student fundraisers. Their task was simple: call alumni and convince them to donate money for scholarships. As Grant explained in [Harvard Business Review](#), it wasn't the most riveting work: "These callers, whose sole responsibility is to convince alumni to donate money, face motivational challenges common in many sales and service jobs: repetitive work, low autonomy, and rude customers."

The results will feel familiar to all contact center managers: Agents were unengaged and quit frequently. Annual turnover topped 400%, meaning the entire team quit every quarter. Performance, while solid, was nothing to write home about.

Grant learned the usual motivation tricks had all fallen flat. Fundraising managers had previously experimented with pay increases, improved breaks, and free food—but nothing worked. To improve performance, Grant took a different tact. He questioned what drew each fundraiser into the contact center. In other words, what was the why behind their work?

When he interviewed agents, he discovered something startling. Although the fundraisers were doing something virtuous—raising money for scholarships—they felt totally detached from the output.

Connect agents with their results

“Doing a good job here is like wetting your pants in a dark suit,” admitted one caller. “You get a warm feeling, but no one else notices.”

It felt like they were throwing money into a black hole, rather than helping kids attend college, who otherwise couldn’t have afforded it. So Grant devised a strategy to provide visibility into where their work went. He invited a scholarship recipient into the contact center and asked him to give a quick five-minute presentation on how his scholarship had improved his life. Then the recipient took a few questions and thanked the callers for their work.

The result? Performance skyrocketed. Just one month after Grant’s experiment, agents had doubled their calls per hour. Better than that, they’d also increased their average amount raised by 400%.

The reason for the improvement is clear: agents grasped the results of their work. That link is essential for a healthy culture. If you’re asking your agents to act and think in particular ways, they need to understand why. That’s just as true when your agents help customers troubleshoot tech challenges, assist with complicated product returns, or convince alumni to give out generous donations.

Cultivate interaction and engagement

A recent [Cigna report](#) found three in five Americans report feeling lonely at work. Not only is loneliness a problem for employee health, happiness, and productivity, but it stymies culture, too.

To maintain an engaged culture, employees must engage with their immediate teammates and talk to colleagues in different departments. Before the pandemic, it was easy to create environments where people could meet, talk, and get to know each other. You could hold social gatherings, parties, and all-hands events. But with the enforced rise in work-from-home, this challenge has grown even trickier. That doesn't mean it's impossible, though.

To learn how to cultivate interaction between employees in a remote setting, we should look to the organizations who have been remote for years. Consider Ollie Smith, founder of ExpertSure.

Smith founded his fully distributed company back in 2016. For the first few years, everything seemed to be going well. His B2B technology comparison business developed from a scrappy startup into a healthy small business. Once the novelty and excitement of his new venture wore off, cracks began to appear within his organization.

Cultivate interaction and engagement

His once close-knit team drifted apart and arguments over trivialities became common. Previously engaged and committed employees grew distant and distracted. Productivity trended downwards.

“I noticed a dip in productivity, which did not correct itself,” Smith told RingCentral. “This was coupled with a sudden lack of urgency from a number of team members when it came to internal communication.”

He called an all-hands meeting and asked what was up. Many of his employees highlighted the same problem: they’d worked together for eight hours a day for several years, but they still felt like a group of strangers. With everyone working from their own home, there were no chance meetings in the hall, no casual watercooler conversations, no hushed gossip sessions during lunch. Smith’s employees felt isolated and alone.

Smith knew social interaction was essential, and he realized it wouldn’t occur naturally. So the young founder began brainstorming how he could create opportunities for interaction. He considered popular ideas like weekly coffee dates between randomly paired employees and group events like book clubs. But what he landed on was a team-wide call called Team Thursdays.

Cultivate interaction and engagement

Now, every Thursday morning, Smith and his employees log onto a video call and just spend time together. Sometimes they play games. “Last week we played Draw the Picture, which involved a team member describing a set of pictures and everyone else drawing what they think it should look like,” Smith says. But most of the time they just hang out, talk about their lives, and get to know each other as people.

After rolling out Team Thursdays, Smith says he recorded a sharp uptick in productivity. “It is clear that a bond has also developed between my team members since we initiated Team Thursday,” he explains. “That closeness was not evident a year ago.”

All around the world, countless organizations are reliving Smith’s woes. The pandemic forced companies to close their offices and transition to remote work at breakneck speed. Shorn of in-person interactions, their employees began to feel lonely. As Smith discovered, isolated employees aren’t healthy employees. In the immediate aftermath of the pandemic, engagement, knowledge sharing, and productivity all tanked.

For these businesses, the solution is more complicated than Smith’s Team Thursday fix. They often lack the tools and technologies necessary to cultivate healthy remote interactions. Tight-knit distributed teams are built on team messaging, video calls, and other communication channels. Without them, employees will never feel connected.

While contact centers can piece together a technology stack of separate services, the easier option is to invest in a cloud contact center with collaboration and communication tools built-in. When you provide a great working foundation, you encourage relationships between contact center agents and between agents and colleagues in other functional teams.

Build the best foundation for culture

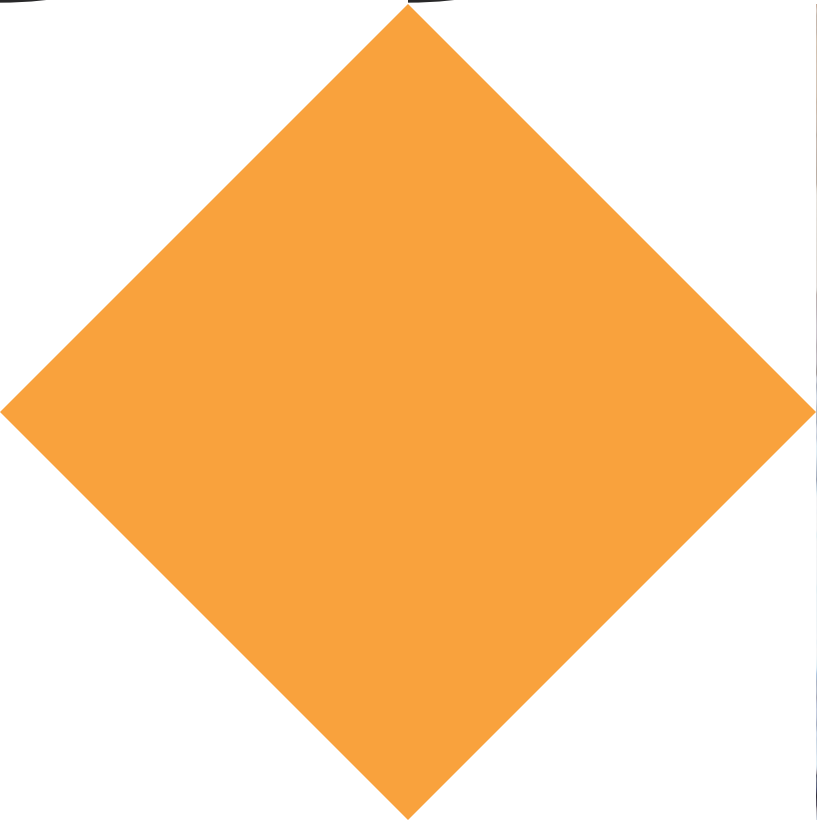
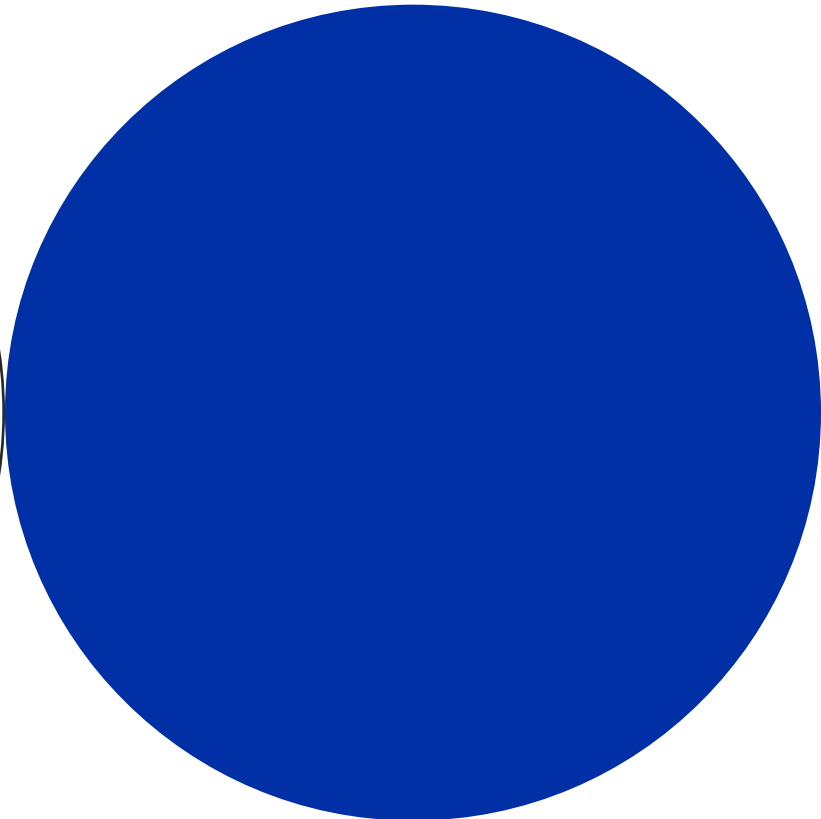
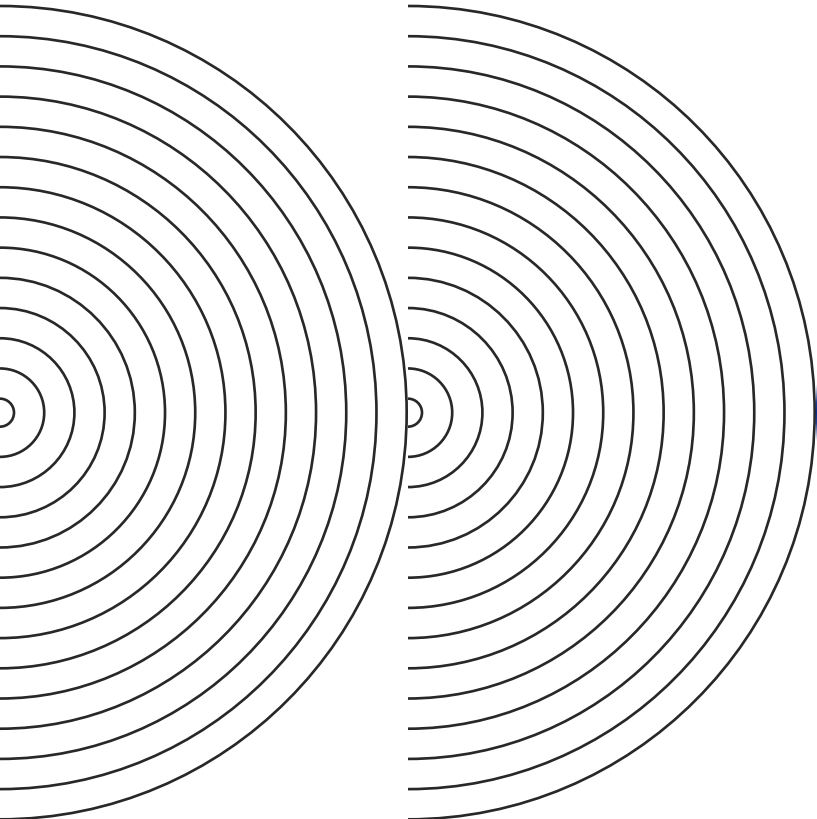
Lee's experiences were extreme and few others will experience an environment quite as hostile as his. More often than not, organizations lapse into weak cultures because they provide a poor environment for their employees. For example, if you provide inferior technology, agents will struggle to work, collaborate, and communicate. Your agents will get frustrated, agitated, and disengaged. Instead of working together cooperatively, they'll argue and butt heads. In that environment, even the strongest culture will disintegrate.

This is especially important right now. If you believe the news reports, the pandemic isn't going anywhere soon. Remote working could be the norm for the next few years. With your workforce scattered across hundreds or thousands of micro-offices, the technology you provide is all the more important.

That's where we come in. At RingCentral, we're dedicated to building platforms that bring contact center employees together. Instead of siloing agents, our collaborative contact center platform connects agents with their colleagues and builds bridges to other functional teams. With RingCentral, you have a platform where culture can blossom, helping your agents do their best work and your organization provide its finest service.

Collaboration and (over) communication at your remote call center

CHAPTER 3



Agents are fielding complex questions, requests, and problems and are expected to solve them as fast as possible—in real-time—by serving as the conduit between the customer and experts from other departments.

Imagine a contact center agent for a large telecom company. Let's call him James. On his first call one morning, James speaks to a customer who had just received an unexpectedly high bill and wants James to explain each charge. He pulls up her account records and discovers a bunch of excess data fees. It turns out she went over her data allowance, and James asks which apps she frequently uses—even when she's not connected to WiFi. After a few minutes, he identifies data-hungry apps like YouTube and TikTok as likely culprits.

Next, he takes a call from an irate customer who ordered a new phone two weeks earlier. It should have arrived already, but tracking shows that delivery is still pending. James puts the customer on hold and reaches out to the company's fulfillment center. The manager explains the pandemic caused delays with their shipping schedule, but the late package is due to go out today. James switches back and updates his customer.

After that, another call pops up on James' screen. It's from a young tech-savvy consumer who's having connectivity issues. The caller uses a third-party headset James doesn't recognize. He reaches out to colleagues in his company's product department for help. Someone gets back to him and explains that some third-party cases block the antenna. Remove the case, and the connectivity woes will disappear. James jumps back to his customer call and shares the solution.

Calls like these are increasingly commonplace in contact centers. They're no longer the simple customer service desks we've grown accustomed to over the years like password resets and easy transactions. Instead, agents are fielding complex questions, requests, and problems and are expected to solve them as fast as possible—in real-time—by serving as the conduit between the customer and experts from other departments.

Faced with such a rapidly changing role, agents rely on collaboration and communication to succeed. As Steve Jobs once said: "Great things in business are never done by one person; they're done by a team of people." And that's true whether you're designing the next iPhone or finding the nearest mechanic who can fix an issue with your customer's car.

Building an environment in which contact center agents can effectively collaborate and communicate is not always easy—especially when a global pandemic forces you into remote working. But with the right technology and some tweaks to your operations, you can create a collaborative contact center that empowers agents to do their jobs effectively. Happy, engaged, and productive employees inevitably improve customer experience. In fact, organizations that have embraced the collaborative contact center model aren't just meeting their pre-pandemic performance; they're beating it.

The toll of poor collaboration

Many organizations choose not to invest in collaboration tech for their agent teams. Instead, they leave them without cross-functional support, forcing them to battle through problems on their own. This is sometimes because of how they think about contact centers.

In the late-1990s and early-2000s, organizations began to offshore their contact centers to reduce operational costs. They treated contact centers as a necessary evil, rather than a business asset. Other times, organizations are unwilling to invest in the next generation of technology that makes customer support a strategic arm of the business, believing the investment a poor one. Either way, the consequences are the same.

With dated contact center technology, your agents feel frustrated. They're siloed, isolated, and cut off from the rest of your organization. If they can't personally solve a problem or get support from someone else, that's a dead end. All they can do is apologize to the customer and offer to redirect their call or arrange a callback, which is disappointing for the customer and demoralizing for the agent. When agents feel powerless, their stress skyrockets, and productivity plummets.

But it's not only your agents who suffer. Faced with an unsatisfactory experience, those disappointed, disgruntled customers likely won't hang around. According to research from PwC, one-third of people say they'll walk away from a brand they love after just one bad interaction.

These two consequences—bad employee experience and poor customer experience—ladder up into serious commercial losses. In the U.S. alone, businesses are hemorrhaging \$62 billion a year due to poor customer service.

These losses are entirely avoidable. The tools and technologies to power the collaborative contact center already exist. All organizations need to do is seize the opportunity.

Cultivating collaboration in your contact center

Several months into the pandemic, we know that working indoors near colleagues is a recipe for virus transmission. And when you look at the stats, call centers are the most densely packed business—ahead of general offices, supermarkets, and even restaurants.

For contact centers, working from home is likely here to stay. Before the pandemic, 59% of contact centers supported remote working. Now, that figure is up at 74%. Even when offices do open up, only a handful of people will be back at any one time to provide safe social distancing.

Faced with such a long-term change to our workplaces, we need to think about how to build collaboration and communication to support a workforce scattered between various locations. What that means is empowering agents to work on their own. It means bringing the contact center in from the cold and integrating it within your broader organization. And it means helping agents collaborate to solve complex problems.

Let's look at how you can make that happen.

Make contact centers a core part of your company

Contact centers have a bad rap. They have a reputation as a purely functional entity, designed to solve problems as quickly as possible and keep customers away from the organization at large. For years, executives undervalued their company's call centers and kept them siloed from other business units. That mindset might have been acceptable in the past. But now, in the era of customer experience? Not so much.

Consumer behavior has changed—and not by a little bit. With the rise of the internet and the proliferation of online information, people have access to myriad new research options. When your TV goes kaput, you check out YouTube videos for how-to fixes. When your car has a weird sound, you look up owners forums. And when your phone bill runs to a dozen pages, you log onto your online billing.

Modern customers don't turn to contact centers to answer their initial, more straightforward questions. Only when their own research fails do they call up and ask for support. Nowadays, when a customer does reach out, you can be sure their problem is going to be complicated.

As customer queries grew more complex, agents discovered they couldn't solve every problem on their own. Complex product queries require support from product experts; complex billing problems need help from finance, and so on. No matter how good your agents are, they aren't an expert on everything. Increasingly, agents must collaborate with colleagues and experts outside their immediate team to solve complex issues. That requires a rethink of how your contact center integrates with your organization.

With collaborative contact centers, agents can engage in cooperative problem-solving, document sharing, and direct connections with subject matter experts. Instead of wading through tricky problems on their own, they can pull in a specialist and solve the issue together. When you integrate the contact center into your broader organization, you supercharge your agents. You equip each agent with the knowledge of an entire organization and ensure they can solve as wide an array of problems.

Give your agents access to the information they need

Although the complexity of calls has increased, contact centers still deal with many “bread and butter” calls. Simple billing queries, basic technology troubleshooting, upgrade requests, and so on. For these queries, agents can successfully resolve calls on their own—but only when you give them the right tools and information.

For example, if a customer wants help understanding their bill, your agents need access to billing information. That sounds simple, but many organizations still operate under the preconception that contact centers should be kept separate from their core business.

For your agents to do their job, they need access to critical, up-to-date information from all across your organization. That means ensuring you have open APIs to secure access to your CRM and other backend systems. Building those information pipelines means agents can reach information across the company without having to transfer the call or manually ask for help.

When agents have the contextual information they need, they feel empowered to work independently, boosting their engagement and productivity. And if customers get to interact with a single agent—rather than getting bounced around from department to department—they’ll have a better overall experience.

Bridge the gap between remote employees

In-person communication is simple. You walk over to someone, tap them on the shoulder, and start talking. But when your team is working from home, that all changes.

Do you email your colleague? Do you WhatsApp them via your personal phone? If you need a response immediately, how do you know they're at their desk? Is it rude to nudge a colleague if you haven't heard back in an hour?

If you don't put technology in place to support agent-to-agent communication, everything gets messy. And when communication requires effort, people tend to default to what's easiest: working alone.

Rolling out a central messaging platform and codifying a set of procedures around it removes all of this angst and friction. You know when people are around because they have status markers. You know how to reach them because you're all on the same platform.

When agents start working together, your contact center develops a positive network effect, where the sum of the team is greater than its parts. Each individual can draw on the expertise, experience, and knowledge of dozens, hundreds, or thousands of colleagues, aiding both their immediate capabilities and long-term development.

Better collaboration drives a better overall experience— for everyone

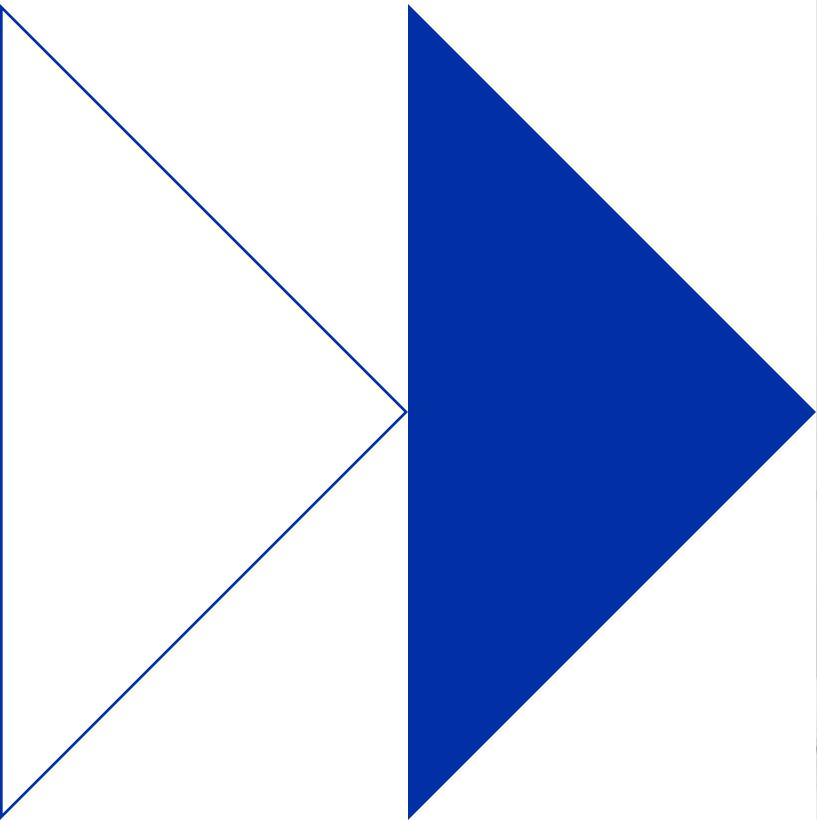
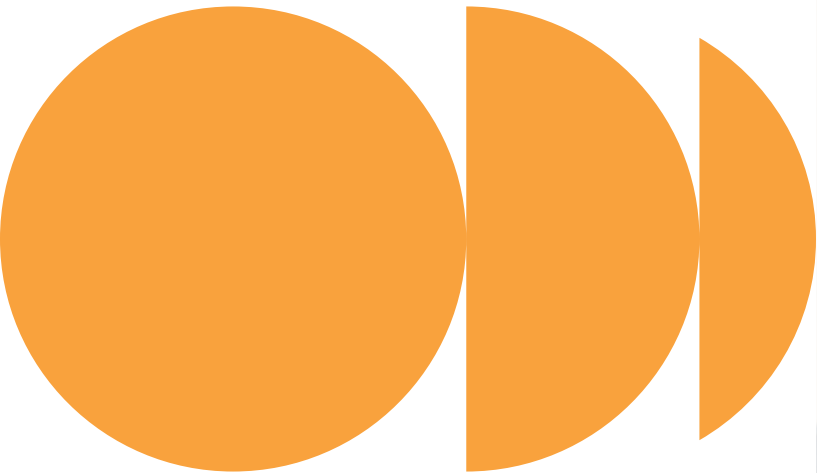
Before the pandemic, organizations often brushed off the collaborative contact center as a nice-to-have. It'd be nice if agents could talk to experts throughout the company. It'd be nice if they could directly access all the information they needed. It'd be nice if they could work together with other agents.

But things are different now. Today, teams exist across hundreds, even thousands, of miles, and communication isn't as simple as dropping by someone's desk. In this post-pandemic world, the collaborative contact center isn't a "nice-to-have" anymore. It's a necessity.

When you support collaboration and communication throughout your contact center, you don't just get back to the service level you were at before Covid-19. Instead, you supercharge your agents and take your employee and customer experience to the next level.

You boost agent productivity by putting the information they need at their fingertips and opening communication channels with the experts they need to talk to. You improve first-contact resolution by drawing on the combined knowledge and expertise of your entire organization. You accelerate complex problem-solving by helping people work together. And you deepen and strengthen relationships with your customers by helping solve their trickiest challenges.

RingCentral understands the value of cross-team collaboration and we are committed to building customer engagement platforms that make it easier to manage distributed contact center teams scattered throughout the country or around the world. With RingCentral, you have a platform that allows your managers and supervisors to build a strong remote contact center that gives customers an experience that keeps them coming back.



The pandemic may ultimately have had little effect on agents, but it has completely upended the workplace for their supervisors.

In early March, as the Covid-19 pandemic swept across the United States, T-Mobile made the previously unthinkable decision to send home its nearly 12,000 frontline employees. Indefinitely.

Almost instantly, the company's massive work-from-home experiment created a logistical nightmare. Executives at the telecom had to figure out how to break apart 17 individual contact centers and distribute the technology and processes to 12,000 houses, condos, and apartments. During a 20-day transformation, employees picked up their new kit at curbside collection points, set up their new home office, and learned to adapt to their new settings.

It was a significant change, but agents quickly adapted to their new environments—so much that the telecom giant's NPS score jumped to a record high, in the ensuing weeks and months.

But for another group of employees, the transition was more disruptive. The pandemic may ultimately have had little effect on agents, but it has completely upended the workplace for their supervisors. Indeed, since the coronavirus crisis pushed teams out of the physical contact center, their job specs have evolved at a breakneck pace.

How to embrace this new “role of roles”

Today, supervisors must manage an organization spread across hundreds or thousands of miles. And they must do so without their usual management tools—floor walks, one-to-ones, and so on. Not only are supervisors performing a different job in the post-pandemic contact center, but they’re doing it in a radically different way.

But it’s not just the practicalities of management that have changed. Today’s supervisors must take on a barrage of new responsibilities. Indeed, their role has become a “role of roles.”

They must act as cheerleaders, keeping their agents happy and engaged, even during these unprecedented times. When contact center performance dips, they must become the enforcer and drive standards. If agents are struggling emotionally, they must step in as therapists, providing sage advice and a shoulder to cry on. And when agents feel stymied in their development, supervisors must act as their coach, supporting their professional development.

For those in the role, it can feel overwhelming. But the supervisor’s new “role of roles” need not be a breaking point. For those willing to embrace the challenge, the change represents an opportunity to elevate supervisors to a new level. Instead of focusing solely on hard data, they can support their direct reports as people.

Let’s examine each of these roles a bit more closely:

How to embrace this new “role of roles”

CHEERLEADER

The first role of the modern supervisor is to support their agents emotionally as they navigate this new work environment. It's the supervisor's responsibility to motivate people, generate excitement, and keep agents engaged.

Sometimes, this is easy. When your NPS score is setting records, and your first-call-resolution rate is sky high, you just feed that back to your team. You quantify their excellent work and celebrate their achievements.

But other times, it's tougher to find reasons to celebrate. Right now, tough times are more common than ever. For example, since the pandemic, the rate of “difficult” calls to contact centers has more than doubled, heaping pressure on already-stressed agents. Yet it's times like these that your employees most need support.

“During these tumultuous times, it is important for supervisors to acknowledge efforts with praise wherever possible,” Michelle Dennis, Chair of Department of Leadership and Applied Psychology at Adler University, tells RingCentral. “Encouragement serves to reduce feelings of uncertainty and can nurture the confidence necessary for employees to go above and beyond expectations.”

Dennis highlights the importance of positive feedback for remote employees. Working alone in their own homes, agents often feel disconnected and isolated. Reaching out to provide thanks or rewards is a prime way to re-engage colleagues and cultivate feelings of inclusion.

“I make use of technology to send quick notes of appreciation to the members of my team,” she says. “I also make sure to deliver accolades during meetings so that all members of the team can join in the praise.”

How to embrace this new “role of roles”

ENFORCER

For top managers, everything always comes down to results. The same goes for supervisors. Executives and managers judge contact center performance on a battery of standard metrics—customer satisfaction, first-contact resolution, quality scores, service level, and so on.

When performance dips, supervisors must drop the niceties and play the role of enforcer. When providing performance evaluations, Dennis stresses that respect is critical.

“It is important to avoid feedback practices which could potentially cause harm, such as department-wide shaming for failure to meet deadlines,” she explains. “Practices such as this serve to demoralize the direct report in question and the entire team.”

She recommends supervisors highlight performance opportunities in one-on-one meetings. These conversations should go deeper than solely identifying issues and problems. Instead, Dennis advises supervisors to provide direction, feedback, and encouragement. In other words, show agents how they can fix the problems you highlighted.

Supervisors also can have a much broader impact on performance. They should set the tone with a morning kickoff call, drop in on calls throughout the day, and wrap the shift in the afternoon. While most modern contact centers provide agents with a performance dashboard, supervisors need to stay involved, providing a qualitative assessment on what’s working and what must improve. But that’s hard to do without the support of your technology.

To work at their best, supervisors need collaboration tools within their contact center platform. That way, they stay connected to employees and their work. From one platform, they can check performance data, send team-wide chat messages, and drop in with agents via video meetings.

How to embrace this new “role of roles”

THERAPIST

Journalists love to describe the Covid-19 pandemic as unprecedented. While it's become a cliché, it isn't any less true. Never before has the modern world experienced such significant and intertwined health and economic shock. No one knows what the future holds and that's scary.

This is especially true for remote employees. Now only are they dealing with the uncertainty of the world, but they're doing it alone. Shorn of their workplace interactions, remote employees often struggle with isolation, loneliness, and disengagement.

A good supervisor will recognize that we're living through a rough period of history and they'll acknowledge the stress it's heaping on agents. Not only that, but great supervisors will also step into the role of therapist, helping their direct reports care for themselves.

“I firmly believe that supervisors must take regular inventory of the needs of their direct reports,” says Dennis. “One strategy to ensure awareness of employee needs is to pose questions during one-on-one meetings. A simple “How have you been?” may allow the supervisor to assess the level of stress. In cases where rapport has been established, and the supervisor is perceived as genuine and transparent, most employees will share their support needs.”

Managing agents means taking an interest in them as people and helping them work through problems. This is particularly true for distributed organizations. When a supervisor worked shoulder-to-shoulder with agents in the office, it was easy to pick up on problems. But now, when colleagues see each other for five- or ten-minute video calls a day, those issues tend to stay hidden.

How to embrace this new “role of roles”

COACH

All workplaces have underlying tensions. A hint of office politics here, a heated debate there. But when you suddenly flip from in-person to remote work, those small moments of friction can grow. If supervisors don't step in, tensions often escalate into full-blown conflicts.

“Effective facilitation skills are invaluable when working remotely,” Dennis explains. “When leading online teams, it is important for the leader to fully engage, set a positive example, and provide regular feedback and encouragement along the way.”

When setting a positive example isn't enough, supervisors must step in and act as a coach. Good supervisors will jump into the fray, separating parties and facilitating compromise between them. But the best coaches will treat every moment of conflict as an opportunity for improvement. They encourage agents, boost confidence, and provide employees with the tools they need to solve conflicts on their own.

Building a new normal

Distributed organizations require a new leadership approach. To unite a scattered team, align them behind a single goal, and keep agents working at their best, supervisors must embrace their new role of roles.

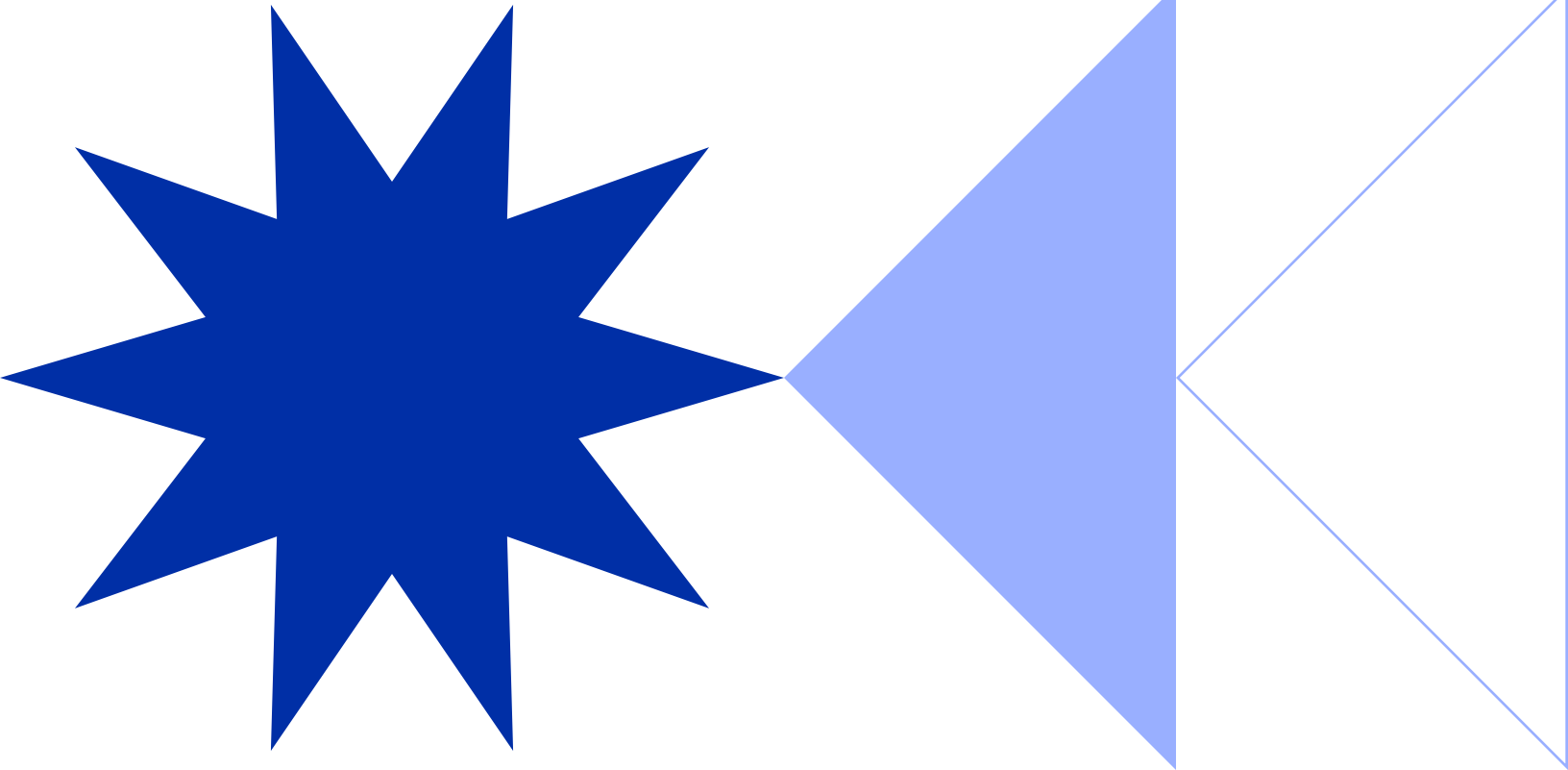
That change is only possible because of technology.

If the pandemic had struck a decade ago, it may not have been possible to transport the contact center from the physical to the virtual world. The technology and infrastructure weren't sophisticated enough. But now, we have everything we need to efficiently and securely run a distributed team.

At RingCentral, our system is designed and built for distributed teams scattered throughout the country or around the world. With RingCentral, you have a tool that allows your supervisors to switch from one cheerleader to coach to therapist to enforcer—all without leaving the platform.

What is the key to your digital expansion?

CHAPTER 5



Today, more commerce takes place via an array of digital channels, giving customers frictionless ways to connect, pay, and, most of all, follow-up.

It wasn't so long ago when getting a pizza meant physically going to a brick-and-mortar location, placing an order with some teenager behind the counter, and waiting while it cooked. After that, we spent the next several years ordering all of our pizzas by phone. It was quicker than ordering in person, but on a busy night, you still may have had to wait an hour or more.

But these days, it's possible to get a pizza delivered in minutes via text, email, apps, or social media. A simple voice command on Google Home—or even a pizza emoji in Facebook messenger—and that large pie with extra cheese is on its way. If Domino's is doing it, is it any wonder customers have come to expect the same kind of responsiveness from their internet providers, mobile phone companies, utilities, grocery stores, and clothing retailers?

Good businesses meet customers wherever they are, and these days that's online. Today, more commerce takes place via an array of digital channels, giving customers frictionless ways to connect, pay, and, most of all, follow-up. While the means that customers choose may vary by audience and industry, the commonality is that those choices are more diverse than ever before and continue to evolve. Flexibility now translates into adaptability later, and all indications are that this a multi-faceted approach to customer engagement will only gain momentum in the years ahead. A study by Deloitte found that 79% of millennials already expect brands to service customers through multiple digital channels.

But this shift is not just limited to retail. And as customers express a preference for engaging digitally, it becomes more urgent for business to cater to this new normal. Whereas customers with an issue with a product or service once dialed up a massive brick-and-mortar call center, teams of remote agents now serve clients through various channels. Excellent service strengthens your brand, builds loyalty, and has a direct impact on revenue. The average value of an online transaction has increased 74% over the past year, and the COVID-19 crisis continues to push shopping, work, and socializing further into the digital domain.

Put simply: digital engagement is no longer an addendum to your core business—it is your business. In 2020, chat, messaging, and voice form the trifecta of optimal customer service. In an environment where contact center agents work remotely, striking the right balance comes down to improved training, adaptable supervisors, and a robust cloud-based management platform that aggregates calls, tweets, and, yes, emojis.

Find your customers and go to them

In a sign that early investment can pay dividends down the road, Domino's saw its market share double since it transitioned to digital-first customer engagement a decade ago. From better website design to chatbots, apps, and AI robots that simulate human conversations, improved digital engagement reaches out to customers on their terms, boosts efficiency, and gathers data to improve other aspects of your company.

MEETING THE CUSTOMER

A cost-conscious 22-year college student with mobile service problems can be a customer for life. In contrast, a comparatively wealthier 65-year-old might be looking to add additional services to a business they own. Both customers offer an opportunity for growth, but they have different needs and are likely to engage their service provider in distinct ways. Whereas the student might only have time to drop a quick WhatsApp message on her way into a lecture hall, that mature entrepreneur would prefer to talk through a variety of options for integrating their old office landlines into their existing digital infrastructure. Any company hoping to serve both needs a customer service strategy that addresses each of their needs.

SELF-SERVICE

A good number of customers prefer to solve their own problems. One survey found that 67% of customers would prefer not to speak with a customer service representative at all. Well-designed websites can preemptively answer queries about return policies, shipping times, and service disruptions. Meanwhile, FAQ pages are a traditional way of helping people help themselves. But both channels tend to lack the specificity needed for addressing more complex issues. Automation features and chatbots can support customers looking for answers on their own. In addition to pleasing these customers, this has the added benefit of reducing call volume and freeing up agents to focus on the most complicated cases. Why patch a customer through a series of agents for a simple question about where they might drop off a return? Better to point them to an answer they find themselves.

Find your customers and go to them

INCREASED EFFICIENCY

The advent of interactive voice response (IVR) has helped direct phone calls more efficiently. But customers often complain that IVR-heavy interactions trap them in a maze of automated operators. A digital-first approach tends to get to the heart of the customer's query quickly. A good goal is to funnel 80% of incoming traffic through a digital channel to start. Chatbots are useful for simple questions and triaging initial contact, which frees up agents to deal with cases requiring more attention. Such sorting saves time and reduces the likelihood the customer gets passed from one agent to the next. It also quickly contends with the most common customer issues. Once a customer does connect with an agent, chatting offers a host of other benefits. Agents can generally handle more than one customer at once—so-called concurrency. Each agent gets more done, which reduces initial wait times and frees up more time to deal with the most complicated customer issues.

ROBUST DATA

Dealing with customers in any sort of volume requires a platform with real-time reporting and analytics. In fact, it's pretty much the only way to make adjustments and improve performance. Digital channels collect a lot of information. An agent can likely access a history of past contacts with the customer. More data means you know your customers better. It's also an opportunity to share that data with other departments across the company. Domino's generates feedback loops that track order history, follow a pizza from the oven through delivery, then share bits of data with other departments. "Our marketing and IT groups actually work together," Denis Maloney, Domino's chief digital officer told Forbes. "Everyone on both of those teams is trying to achieve the same goals."

How to take the digital-first leap

A recent undercover examination of Apple's tech support showed that even innovative, resource-rich, tech giants could experience hiccups as they move toward digital-first customer service. Not only did Apple not offer a Facebook option for engaging customers, but agents also struggled to communicate with customers through Twitter and other digital channels. The benefits of pushing calls to digital are clear, but when it comes to getting it done, the devil remains in the details.

In fact, digital-first customer service begins even before the customer has a query. A well-designed strategy alerts the customer to their options before they place a phone call—how else would they know that they can make contact digitally? Once the customer does reach out, it's all about leveraging technology to keep things simple. Even top performing agents need access to the right tools.

First, you need a single platform to aggregate all the channels where your company has a presence. Working from home, contact center agents rely on technology to help them interface with clients coming to them in a variety of ways. As questions come in via social media, messenger, or live chat, agents must receive them in a unified stream. This lowers the technical learning curve. Rather than worry about the quirks of one channel or another, this streamlined approach allows agents to focus on delivering actual service.

For their part, companies get the bonus of collecting, cross-referencing, and merging profiles of individuals who reach out in a variety of ways. Last month a customer wrote about a billing issue via email. Last week they used Facebook to alert you that their service had been disrupted. After an agent responded promptly, that customer wrote a complimentary review. Now it's easy to keep all that information in one place, offering a 360-degree picture of an individual customer.

How to take the digital-first leap

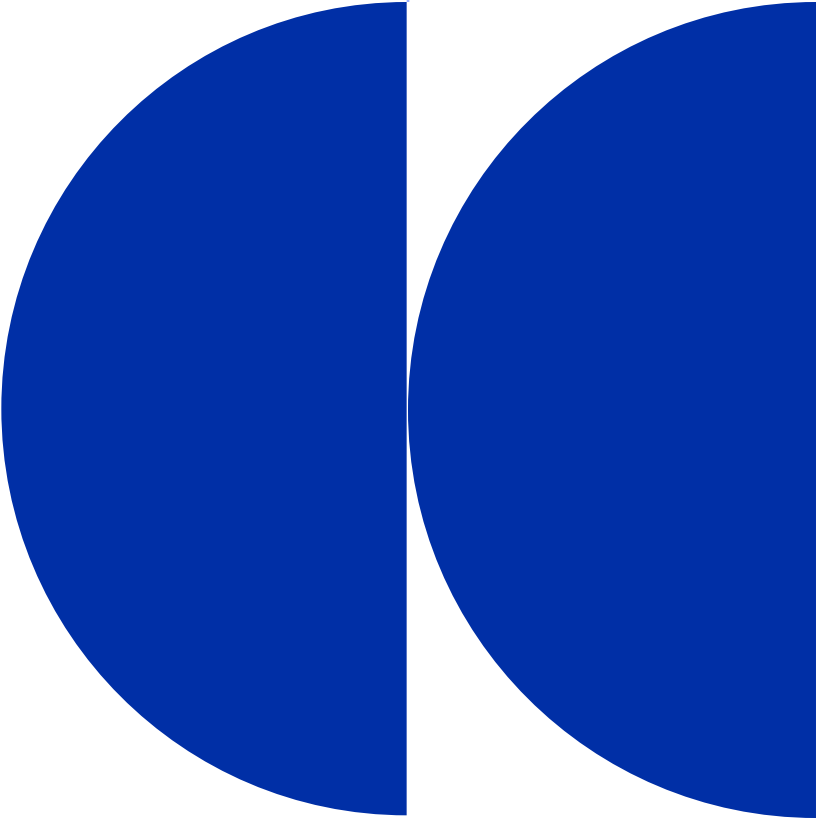
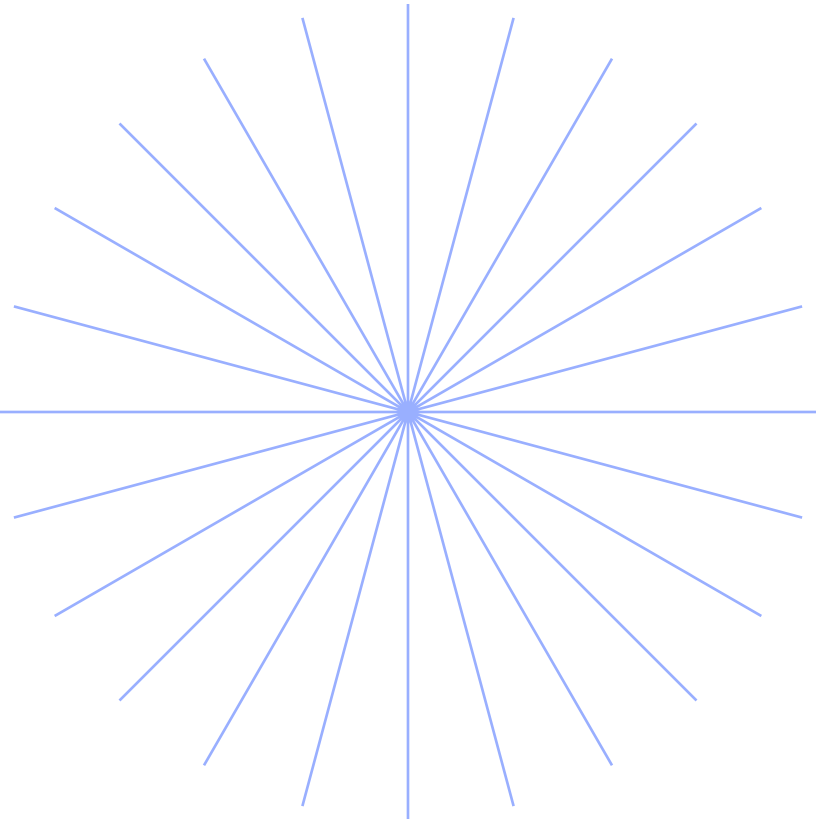
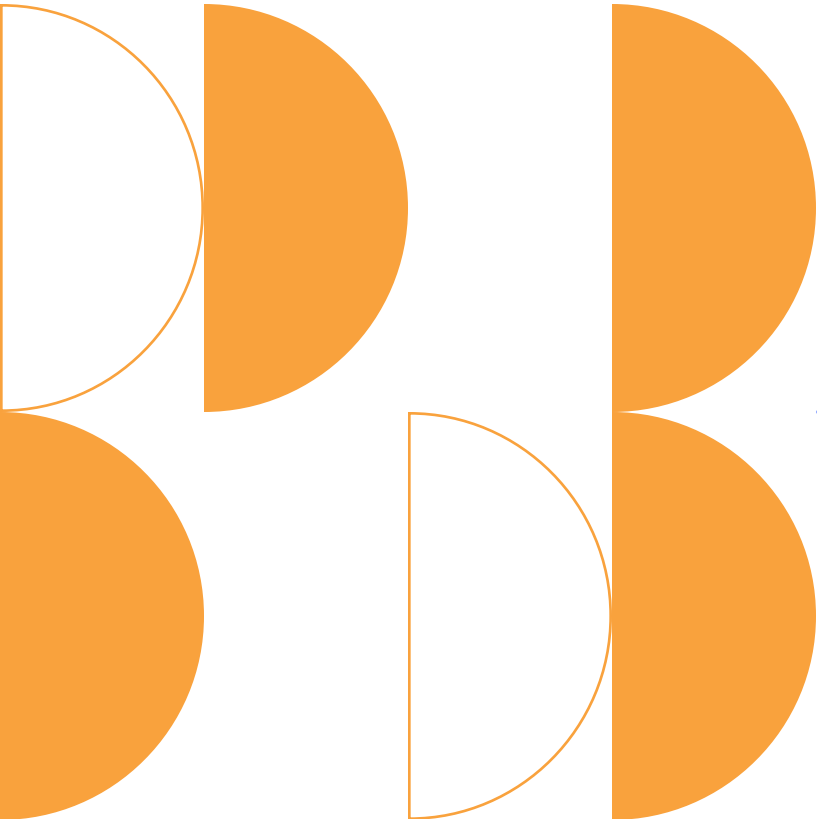
Simple, frictionless contact with customers is the primary advantage of digital interfaces, but contact center platforms also must keep agents connected. It is essential to maintain morale on a work-from-home team, but it facilitates problem-solving by keeping agents in touch with supervisors and experts from across the company. Managers use the same platform to coordinate from a distance and maintain a community bridging management, agents, and customers.

The right platform makes an agent's job more manageable, and happier agents deliver better service. RingCentral's cloud-based systems help managers organize, motivate, and coach remote agents. This makes it easier for them to meet customers wherever they are. New tools make it simpler to connect customers with the person best positioned to offer help and allows them to reach out via their channel of choice, while making sure agents stay connected with other departments and one another.

Good business was always about meeting customers wherever they are. Amid declining face-to-face interaction, customer engagement now takes place in digital space. The coronavirus crisis has accelerated this transition, forcing businesses to adapt. RingCentral's easy-to-use systems help you make the leap and set you up for continued success in the years to come. This shift to digital channels is not just another challenge to overcome, it's an opportunity to serve people better.

The perfect storm: How to adapt your CX to meet the moment

CHAPTER 6



The company's new cloud platform was simple enough to work with—she had little trouble answering customer calls or solving queries in a live chat as management had given her a laptop and a headset and nothing else was needed to perform her work technically—but how could she get some extra help if she needed it?

For the past couple of years, Suzy has more or less kept the same routine. By day, she serviced customers at a large brick-and-mortar contact center. Three nights a week, she attends classes at the nearby college. Between work and school, she has little time to herself, but the contact center job has always worked well with her schedule.

Then came the COVID-19 crisis, and almost overnight, her busy, but familiar, routine started to get complicated. Suzy's supervisor told her she would need to start working from home. Her college classes moved online and before she knew it, she'd spent an entire week without leaving her apartment. And after two years of doing things the same way at work, she started fielding calls from a small desk in the corner of her bedroom.

The company's new cloud platform was simple enough to work with—she had little trouble answering customer calls or solving queries in a live chat as management had given her a laptop and a headset and nothing else was needed to perform her work technically—but how could she get some extra help if she needed it? Amid the scramble to keep the contact center up and running, the company managed to get calls routed to her at home, but little training on how to run her day was provided.

To make matters worse, customers seemed to have all sorts of new problems that Suzy never had to deal with before. A person with a broken smartphone used to walk into the Verizon store, but now that shop was closed, and they needed to troubleshoot hardware over the phone. A second customer called in worried that her automatic bill pay would try to withdraw funds from her bank account before she received her first unemployment check.

Call volume was up. Callers had new problems. Suzy was working on a new platform, and she was isolated from her friends and colleagues. Like everyone else in the contact center industry, Suzy found herself in the eye of a perfect storm.

Are your managers prepared?

While the details undoubtedly vary, tens of thousands of contact agents dealt with similar transitions starting in March. Companies that were already dabbling in remote work could make a relatively smooth transition, but so many more were caught flat-footed. Any contact center that hadn't invested in technology or training found themselves even less adaptable. Lucky for them, it's not too late to pivot—although the time is now.

The right technology solutions make community management easier, but this still depends on supervisors adapting to the new remote working reality. Good leaders can harness the power of these tools to benefit agents and customers. That means building encouragement into the everyday schedule to keep the team powering forward. It demands that supervisors recognize the unique challenges facing individual agents.

In the old office setting, Suzy's supervisor started and ended the day with a stand-up meeting. In a remote working environment, shared video meetings can fill a similar role. They structure the workday, bring the remote team together, and offer agents a forum to talk about the day ahead. Similar meetings to close out the day end things on a high note, celebrate successes, and build camaraderie.

The right supervisor might tweak her working hours to help adapt to the inconveniences at home or simply hear Suzy out while offering some extra words of encouragement. Taking an interest in people and helping them work through problems is all the more important when workers feel disconnected from the rest of the team.

Amid this new normal, supervisors must err on the side of over-communication and maximize the tools they have at their disposal. Video conferencing helps leaders speak to the whole team at once, but is equally valuable for making eye contact during a one-on-one meeting. The chat functions on a cloud platform are adept at mass messaging or checking-in on an individual agent that is having a particularly bad day. Personal connections do not necessarily occur in-person.

Are you staying connected?

Companies with a remote working culture and platform already in place more easily adapted amid the COVID-19 crisis. While everybody else was left playing catch-up, technology—well-deployed—can accentuate and scale-up a company's primary strengths.

The credit card company Discover already had 23% of its contact center agents working remotely before the coronavirus outbreak. While other contact centers were still scrambling to adjust, at the end of March, Discover boasted an average response time of 74 seconds. In fact, their remote working culture was sufficiently robust to absorb the literal shock of a 5.7 magnitude earthquake that struck their Salt Lake City contact center in the middle of shifting 8,000 agents to their homes.

Bank contact centers, meanwhile, saw a 36.2% jump in call volume between January and March—while average customer wait times ballooned to 40 to 90 minutes. Given no choice but to adapt, banks and other businesses have adopted many of the platforms and practices already operational elsewhere. In more recent months, the average customer wait time has plummeted.

Are you staying connected?

Adapt or die is the mantra of the day—and that goes for agents and supervisors alike. Technology brings the best management practices from the physical to the virtual world. Supervisors who use video and messaging tools keep everybody on the same page and transmit company culture to agents off-site. Well-connected agents can consistently respond to customers without reverting to overly-scripted answers or needlessly passing problems up the chain of command. The right cloud-based platform also keeps agents integrated with the rest of the company, allowing them to quickly reach out to colleagues in product design or technical support with specific questions.

Remember Suzy? Like many of her real-life counterparts, a week or so into her work from home transition, things began to settle down—and a new sense of normality set in. It turned out one of the extra functions on the new cloud platform facilitated an internal live chat that helped her keep in touch with fellow agents. And she came to find that a good number of her colleagues were also dealing with customers who had new, more complex problems. The group was able to share suggested responses on the message board. Suzy got a tip for how to solve a particular customer issue—a colleague had already dealt with the same thing. A few hours later, when that woman waiting on her unemployment check called, Suzy hooked up with the billing department to move monthly payment dates back a week. Problem solved.

Could working from home be... a good thing?

Remote contact centers enable people to work from the comfort of home—and happier agents means happier customers. COVID-19 or not, workers value the increased flexibility, while companies save big on office space. While customers are unlikely to realize they are speaking with a contact center agent working from home, they recognize excellent service when they get it. Suzy's client wanted to pay his mobile phone bill. With a team rowing in the same direction, the solution was simple enough.

A [Stanford University](#) study found that contact center workers were 13% more productive working from home. Meanwhile, a [recent experiment](#) at an Italian utility company found that remote workers took fewer days off and met deadlines more consistently than colleagues still working in the central office. The remote agents themselves reported higher levels of satisfaction, increased ability to focus, and said they slept better and felt less stressed.

In the hands of a skilled supervisor, a cloud-based platform means agents working from home can enjoy these benefits and more. Happier, productive agents lead to more satisfied customers. A remote work model cuts out their daily commute. Once on the clock, a cloud-based system platform lets agents jump seamlessly from phone calls to chats with customers, check-in with colleagues on an internal message board, and stay connected with the team. A video meeting to start the day builds momentum, and a wrap-up meeting helps everyone sign off on a high note.

Could working from home be... a good thing?

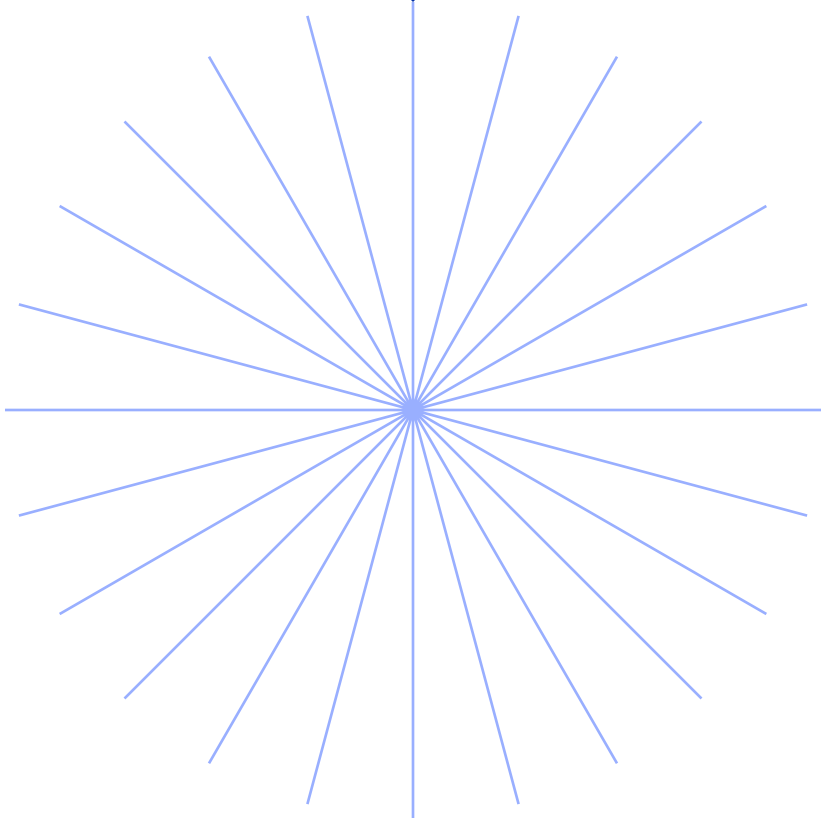
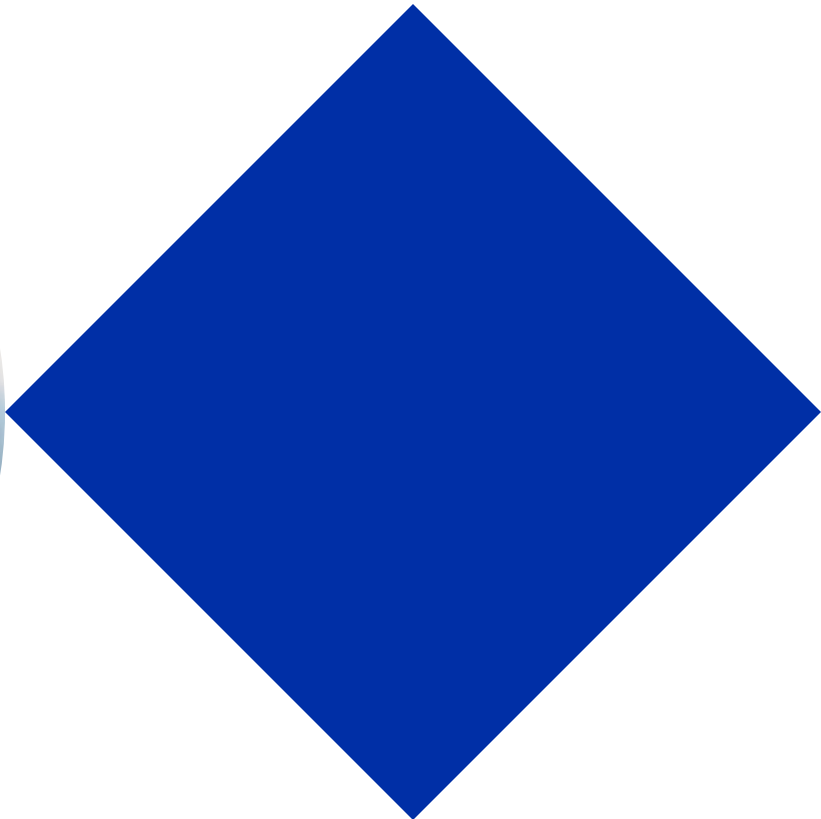
The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the shift of commerce and customer engagement to the digital space. While this transition was already underway, a wholesale evolution in customer behavior that might otherwise have taken years, instead changed in a matter of weeks. More than five months into social distancing, these habits have codified into the so-called new normal. Now is the time to adjust.

The formula remains the same for the businesses already making the digital leap or the ones now playing catch-up. Serving customers of the future demands that supervisors develop new skills and leverage technology to manage remote agents.

RingCentral is committed to building customer engagement platforms that make it easier for both supervisors and agents to work from anywhere. Managers and supervisors can manage distributed contact center teams scattered throughout the country or around the world. With RingCentral, you have a platform that allows your teams to build a strong remote contact center that gives customers an experience that keeps them coming back.

Analytics and agents: Empowering employees in distributed teams

CHAPTER 7



Without a lot of their old in-person analytical sources, supervisors and managers had to rethink how to monitor and manage their teams.

Before the pandemic, contact center supervisors had their schedules down to a science. Let's follow your average supervisor through a typical day:

Jayne gets in early and reviews her notes from the previous shift. There was a spike in calls about a new software update. When agents arrive, Jayne calls them over for a pre-shift huddle. She highlights the issues that came up the day before and asks them to read up on the update.

Later, once calls are coming in, Jayne walks the contact center floor. She overhears one call that goes well. On another, she hears an agent struggling. She makes notes for their weekly one-to-ones.

In the afternoon, Jayne opens her analytics dashboard. A screenful of metrics pops up, revealing everything from abandoned call rates to average speed of answer. Everything looks good so she jumps into a couple of calls.

That's how things used to work. But the pandemic has shuttered most contact centers. It's forced teams out of their comfort zone and into impromptu remote working transformations. Without a lot of their old in-person analytical sources, supervisors and managers had to rethink how to monitor and manage their teams. While it's a significant challenge, it's also an opportunity for change.

Organizations can use the pandemic as a catalyst point. They can overhaul their performance management and design systems that empower agents.

A new era of autonomous working

Contact centers have the highest employee density of any industry. Agents worked shoulder to shoulder with their colleagues. Supervisors could hear a dozen conversations at once by standing up. Workplaces were personal, and information flowed by osmosis.

But the pandemic upended everything. Agents now operate across hundreds or thousands of home offices. Supervisors can't listen to calls by standing near agents. Neither can they tap someone on the shoulder and jump into an impromptu coaching session. And all of that can feel scary.

For agents, it's like their support system disappeared overnight. Before the pandemic, supervisors were right behind them. Now, they're a floating head on a video call. The shift affected supervisors and managers, too. In the office, they could watch agents, walk the floor, and hear calls. It was easy for leaders to keep their finger on the pulse when they could walk the floor. Now, not so much.

A decade ago, contact centers couldn't have adapted. Remote technology just wasn't there. Today, it's a different story. Organizations have cloud-based contact center platforms that work wherever agents have an internet connection.

But when it comes to analytics and performance management, we need a new approach. Today's agents need to learn to work more autonomously. Leaders must adapt their analytics and monitoring to distributed work. Let's look at how organizations can adjust their analytics to the post-pandemic world.

Leaders set the direction

Humans are social animals and we look to those around us for guidance. If a crowd of people laughs at a joke, you're more likely to laugh, too. In the close quarters of a contact center, this is especially true. If your colleagues go the extra mile for their callers, you'll try extra hard too. But when you're working from home, there's no one there.

In the era of distributed work, your supervisors must step forward and set the direction for their agents. As before, they should kick off each day with a pre-shift meeting. But unlike in-person huddles, everyone joins via their computer—and that's something you can work to your advantage. With everyone joining the call virtually, supervisors can run productivity reports from the previous day and share their screen. Before, you'd have dozens of people crowded around a monitor or passing a piece of paper between them. Since your agents are now remote, they can all see the report on their screen and interact with it.

Because video meetings are quick and simple, you don't have to keep them to the start and end of the day. If a supervisor notices performance dipping in the middle of the day, they can call agents onto a quick update call and share stats with them. And if it's too busy for a video call, they can drop the report into team chat. It makes feedback more real-time and reactive. Instead of waiting until the end of a shift, they can drop in whenever there's an issue and sort it out.

The 30,000-foot view is half the equation but it misses out the personal angle. As well as setting the direction, supervisors need to highlight strong performers within their team. Say an agent has the highest customer satisfaction scores in their team and even received a few post-call emails with praise. Your supervisors need a way to give recognition remotely—and publicly. That's where video meetings come in. For significant events, supervisors can tack on an announcement to the pre-shift huddle. With video, their team can see their enthusiasm and feel the pride coming from celebrated agents. It turns a simple moment of recognition into a powerful motivational driver. However, video calls aren't always an option. For smaller achievements, highlighting wins in team chat is usually enough to celebrate strong performances.

Agents manage the journey

The reality of distributed work is that agents are working on their own with less supervision. Yes, supervisors have access to their calls and performance data. But they aren't looking over agents' shoulders, keeping a close eye on them. In this new environment, you need to give agents more responsibility—and make that clear to them.

Handing the reins to your agents will feel scary, but it'll pay off in the long run. The [Academy of Management](#) recently ran a meta-analysis of 319 studies and 151,000 participants to unpack the benefits of employee autonomy. They found that granting people more of a say in their work resulted in better job performance by “enhancing work motivation and reducing mental strain.”

But you can't whip away their supervision and expect agents to step up to the challenge. Sit down with them, explain the changes, and outline what you expect from them.

Today's contact centers can provide open access to performance data for agents. They can click into team-wide dashboards and see how they're performing compared to their team averages. Say an agent logs on and sees their customer satisfaction score is lower than their team average. Now, they know something is wrong, and they can take steps to fix it—but only if you've made it clear that self-evaluation is part of their new role.

Granting agents more autonomy is about giving them responsibility for their work. Instead of relying on a supervisor to pull them up on poor performance, you give them the tools to evaluate themselves. When you create a culture of self-analysis and continuous improvement, your contact center only gets better.

Supervisor support... when-needed

No matter how well trained your agents are, they won't nail every call. They'll come across demanding customers, complex issues, and brand new challenges. Before, supervisors could sense which agents were floundering just by looking. But now, they have to rely on data.

Supervisors must dig into the data at the agent level, unpacking performance, and searching for red flags. If an agent has a spike in abandonment rates, it's clear something's up. That's a prime opportunity for supervisors to drop into their calls and monitor how they handle them. Is the agent struggling with technical aspects? Are they finding it difficult to deal with particular callers? Whatever the issue, supervisors need to get involved and sort it out.

But support is a two-way street. Supervisors are only human and will inevitably miss worrisome metrics, so agents need a way to call for help. Again, this was easy before. Agents could wave or catch a supervisor's eye as they passed. Now, you need to formalize support requests. Do agents ping their supervisor via chat, bring up concerns during their one-to-one, or ask their peers for assistance? Whatever you decide, tell your agents what to do when they need help. Because if they don't know how to ask for support, they'll sit in silence and continue to struggle.

Adapt, overcome, thrive

In the early days of the pandemic, service disruption disclaimers popped up on every company website. “During these challenging times, we expect to have fewer colleagues available to take calls,” they read. “Please only contact us if it is essential.”

Contact center execs spent the early scrambling to work out what was going on. Once they had a feel for the landscape, they worked out how to get back to a minimum level of service. Organizations acquired new software, bought new gear from their employees, and learned how to work remotely. After a while, service levels climbed back to where they were before the pandemic.

It’s tempting to stop here—precisely where we were before the pandemic. But as we mentioned, this crisis is also an opportunity. For many organizations, the coronavirus crisis turned into a hard reset. It tore down the status quo and challenged people to rebuild their businesses. While you could settle for getting back to where you were, you could also strive to build something better.

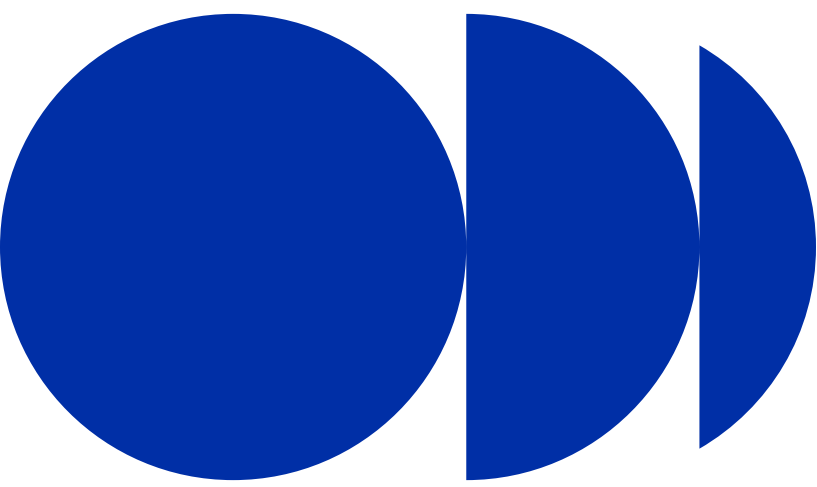
By overhauling your analytics, you can enhance information access across your contact centers. By granting your agents more autonomy and providing access to their performance data, they’ll no longer sit in the dark, waiting for supervisors to assess their work. Instead, they can click into their performance dashboard to see how well they’re performing. They can take control of their own work lives and kickstart a process of self-improvement.

As Steve Jobs once said: “It’s not the tools you have faith in—tools are just tools—they work, or they don’t work. It’s the people you have faith in or not.”

That’s where we come in. At RingCentral, we’re dedicated to building platforms that work, allowing you to concentrate on your people. Our collaborative contact center empowers agents to take control of their work and manage their own improvement. Instead of micromanaging every task, your supervisors can step back and think bigger. When you grant your employees trust, tools, and autonomy, they’ll amaze you with their work.

How can customers benefit from your remote contact center?

CHAPTER 8



Those rankings are but one of many signs that point to a growing correlation between remote customer service agents and happier customers.

It's nearly impossible to find someone who doesn't have a nightmarish story about airline service. Remember when they refused to let you board with a bag that was half-a-pound over the weight limit? Or how about that time your phone was dead, you couldn't check-in, and they gave away your seat instead?

Even in the best of times, flying is stressful. Between unpredictable weather, lost luggage and missed connections—to say nothing of the uncomfortable seats, terrible food, and expensive upsells—a good deal of customer interactions occur in less than ideal conditions. So it's no wonder airlines consistently rank low in customer satisfaction surveys.

Quality airline service used to mean lots of help desks at the airport, a pair of pin-on wings for the kids, and a bag of honey-roasted peanuts. But the bulk of communication with airlines now takes place via phone, app, or live chat. Customers often spend more time interacting with a contact center agent before and after they fly than with all the flight attendants, pilots, and gate agents combined. Need a vegetarian meal and can't find that option on the booking website? Place a call. Stranded in Buffalo because of a blizzard in Chicago? Jump on a live chat and see if there is another connection to get you back home to Denver tonight.

It might shock you to learn that [Jet Blue](#), the airline that consistently tops J.D. Power's customer satisfaction rankings, has had customer service personnel working remotely since 1999. Those rankings are but one of many signs that point to a growing correlation between remote customer service agents and happier customers. That contact center agent helping you reroute through Dallas used to work in a brick-and-mortar call center, but he or she is now talking you through the changes sitting at their kitchen table due to COVID-19 restrictions. They sound relaxed, and amid the free-for-all outside gate 24B that offers a kind of calming influence.

Feel the difference

Airlines, retailers, tech firms, and just about any consumer-facing business, are transitioning away from traditional warehouse-sized call centers. These once-buzzing hives of activity had become endangered even before the COVID-19 crisis. Now, new social distancing norms are making them extinct. T-Mobile had 12,000 customer service professionals in 17 contact centers around the country on March 11. Within two weeks, every one of them worked from home. Meanwhile, the consulting firm Gardner estimates that 71% of contact centers will exclusively employ remote workers even after the coronavirus disruption ends.

Amid this change, evidence suggests that a combination of the following translate into an improved customer experience:

- New management techniques
- Improved cloud-based UC and CC platforms
- Digital-first engagement strategies

One survey of contact center leadership saw 72% respond that this potent cocktail is markedly improving customer service, while 70% noted agents are more efficient, and 71% cited improved scalability. More importantly, customers say similar things. A study by Microsoft saw 59% of respondents say this new approach has led them to expect better customer service from just a year earlier. That number rises to 70% in the 18–34 demographic, meaning younger generations have even higher expectations during key brand-loyalty development years.

Those numbers make it clear that customers are benefitting from remote working customer service, empowered with new digital tools. The improvements are such that expectations continue to grow, raising the bar ever higher. While that's great news for consumers, it keeps the onus on businesses to continue evolving. Failure to keep pace means losing customers to competitors.

Getting it done

The consulting firm [McKinsey](#) found that successful digital-centric contact centers have seven common characteristics: simplicity, convenience, interactivity, consistency, value, desirability, and brand. Cloud-based contact centers, specifically those with unified communication integrations give remote workers the chance to deliver in all these areas. But the remote working model built on these platforms also directly impacts the customer experience in several ways:

SUPERIOR TALENT

Operating a remote contact center broadens the potential hiring pool. Whereas physical call centers could only recruit agents within commuting distance of the building, remote workers know no geographical bounds. Likewise, skilled people with disabilities who might otherwise have been discouraged by a challenging commute or rigid office conditions face no such misgivings. The same goes for working parents with tight schedules, military spouses who frequently relocate or students looking for part time work. More people competing for a single position gives you more opportunities to hire the best possible agent—and better agents lead to improved customer satisfaction.

SATISFIED WORKERS

Not only do customers prefer interaction with remote agents, but agents also prefer working that way. A [Stanford study](#) found that contact center workers were 13% more productive working from home. Remote agents report higher levels of satisfaction, increased ability to focus, better sleep, and less stress. By cutting out that morning commute and arranging their workspaces themselves, agents are more satisfied with their jobs. And since happy workers are less likely to change jobs, the “new normal” means less agent churn in notoriously high agent-specific roles and more experience on your call-center team. And who benefits the most from a happy, experienced team of call-center agents? The customers who call them.

Getting it done

IMPROVED AESTHETICS

Remember when you called for help with your cable television bill a few years ago? You could hardly hear your agent over the murmur in the background. It was hard to place your finger on why, but the agent felt like they were rushing to get you off the phone. While you eventually solved the problem, the whole experience was stressful and disorienting. It sounded like you were calling a massive call center because you were. But these days, remote agents are likely sitting at home in a comfortable chair. The background noise is limited. The agent's voice is calm. There is no rush. If you weren't calling because they overcharged you for HBO (again), you might even consider the whole experience conversational and pleasant.

STRONGER CONNECTIONS

Agents now use chat functions to share best practices with each other. Maybe a mixup in the shipping department has created confusion for several customers. Staying connected and keeping the team on the same page helps ensure agents can deal with those issues in a consistent, repeatable way. Despite their new physical distance, technology keeps agents better connected than ever before. They may not sit side-by-side anymore, but improved tools mean more opportunities for collaboration. For customers, that means faster, consistent results even if the agent needs to reach out to an expert in another department.

SUPERIOR COACHING

So-called "integrated coaching" happens throughout the day. Short check-ins by supervisors integrate improvement in the daily routine. Management by walking around a physical call center had limitations, making it difficult for managers to cover lots of ground and jump between agents. Agile cloud-based management platforms do away with many such barriers, allowing supervisors to seamlessly move from agent to agent and call to call. A good coach might talk with an agent immediately after a call and engage their agent with open-ended questions. Agents learn what needs improvement and the actionable steps they can take to get there. Those improvements lead to an improved experience for the next customer.

Getting it done

HARNESSING DATA

Listening in on calls has long been essential for supervisors, but the sample size can feel scattershot and random. Cloud-based systems allow managers to balance anecdotal observations with data. Monitoring key performance indicators (KPIs), net promoter scores, and call volume mean supervisors maximize team performance. Each agent is an individual and, as such, needs to tweak different elements of their approach. A sound contact center system puts all the data a supervisor needs in the same place. Good managers look for patterns to eliminate problems before they start. They also highlight top performers to share their methods with the rest of the team.

Added flexibility. Not every business operates at full speed for the entire year. Retailers and shipping companies often see increased sales during the Christmas season. Meanwhile, travel companies, airlines, and hotels may see increased interaction with clients during traditional summer vacation months. A remote workforce has the added advantage of allowing a business to adjust the number of agents to seasonal swings in traffic. For instance, extra help for UPS, Amazon, and the U.S. Postal Service during the holidays means grandma's present gets to her with a minimal hassle. And if there happens to be a problem, it means customers spend a lot less time on hold.

Getting it done

BIG SAVINGS

A remote workforce means less office space and lower overhead costs. Businesses can reinvest savings to further improve performance. Instead of spending on desks or copy machines, companies emphasize training, product development, and innovation. Unlike that new microwave in the break room, all of these latter items produce direct benefits for customers. In some cases, it even enables hiring more customer care agents to limit customer wait times.

Less time waiting, smoother interactions with agents, a proliferation of channels that allow customers to connect on their terms, and better-trained teams lead to improved experiences. RingCentral is proud to offer cloud-based platforms that deliver all of these features in a single package. We help managers stay connected with remote agents, agents in touch with one another and the contact center integrated with the rest of the company.

Data shows that remote working arrangements accelerate the shift to a digital first customer service. More importantly remote teams deliver better service. The improvements are such that customers are already demanding more. Businesses that hope to keep up have little choice but to innovate with the times—and we're here to do our part.

For more information, please contact a sales representative. Visit ringcentral.com or call 855-774-2510.

RingCentral, Inc. (NYSE: RNG) is a leading provider of global enterprise cloud communications, collaboration, and contact center solutions. More flexible and cost-effective than legacy on-premises systems, the RingCentral platform empowers employees to Work as One™ from any location, on any device, and via any mode to better serve customers, improving business efficiency and customer satisfaction. The company provides unified voice, video meetings, team messaging, digital customer engagement, and integrated contact center solutions for enterprises globally. RingCentral's open platform integrates with leading business apps and enables customers to easily customize business workflows. RingCentral is headquartered in Belmont, California, and has offices around the world.



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