



Building Resilience in Contact Centres: Strategies for Tackling Agent Burnout



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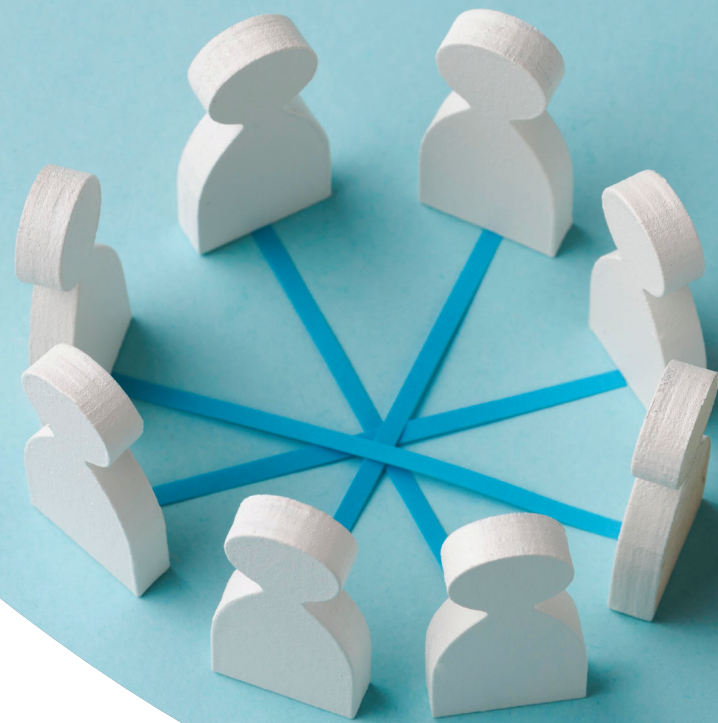


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Foreword from the organisers

Many contact centres are under increasing pressure as contact volumes and agent attrition soar.

While our boards and executive teams emphasise the need for agility and flexibility in responding to the growing customer needs, we must also recognise the human element. Often, we lack awareness of agent workloads and overloads, leading to challenges in retaining staff.

Providing a positive customer experience is crucial for staying competitive, but we're juggling multiple priorities – delivering great service, managing costs, and addressing the signs of burnout among our staff. This whitepaper aims to shed light on strategies and technologies that can help us tackle this issue proactively, preventing or at least delaying high rates of absenteeism.

Creating a culture of care, offering ongoing training, and providing agents with the right tools are key points we discussed in a recent session of the T&I Group. We hope you find the insights in this report helpful as we work towards building healthier and more sustainable contact centre operations.

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Burnout and leading causes

“Look after your agents first. If you look after your agents, your agents will look after your customers.”

Dan Birchall, Head of Customer Operations, Hyper Jar

According to the Institute of Customer Service (2023), the lost productivity in dealing with customer issues costs UK businesses £11.4bn a month.

In 2019, the World Health Organisation (WHO) recognised burnout as a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It includes:



Feeling drained of energy or exhaustion



Developing a negative attitude towards one's job



Experiencing a decline in professional effectiveness

Unfortunately, burnout among contact centre agents is all too common. The demanding nature of customer service roles, requiring significant emotional labour, coupled with the rapid pace and performance-oriented environment of contact centres, can take a toll on agents.



Causes of agent burnout in contact centres

According to the Burnout Report (2024) by Mental Health UK, a significant number of respondents expressed concerns about factors contributing to burnout:

- 40% cited worries about potential redundancy
- 30% mentioned difficulties adjusting to changes in work arrangements, such as transitioning from remote work to a fixed location following the global pandemic

In contact centres, a combination of external factors such as increasing customer expectations, high volumes, and challenging customers, along with internal pressures, significantly contribute to the issue. These internal pressures include:

- Conflicting values
- Feeling disconnected from a sense of community
- Not receiving enough recognition for one's efforts
- Feeling a lack of control over workload or dealing with excessive workloads
- Perceiving unfair workplace practices and being pressured to undertake unappreciated tasks or overtime
- Experiencing stringent monitoring
- Dealing with repetitive task

Combining technology with empathetic leadership

Agents are the backbone of any contact centre, so it's crucial to prioritise their well-being. Being proactive in supporting them is key.

01

Investing in the right contact centre technology can make a difference

Can we detect burnout in our agents solely through contact centre data? By analysing data from various sources like Automatic Call Distribution (ACD), Workforce Management (WFM), and Customer Relationship Management (CRM), can we pinpoint when someone is struggling or likely to leave? Is it feasible to recognise these signs without even having a conversation? Or should data analysis complement personal interactions with employees?

"A simple way to gauge if your workforce is under strain is by observing their post-call activities. For instance, you might notice agents entering an unavailable state after a call, affecting their scheduled adherence to WFM planning. If there are no breaks and agents are constantly fielding calls without downtime, that's the initial sign of strain. Over time, this strain can lead to increased absence rates and sickness among employees. Elevated hold times can also suggest a skills shortage, indicating that the training provided wasn't sufficient. These signs are easily identifiable with the right management information (MI) to back up your observations."

Head of Resource Planning, Towergate Insurance

02

Prioritising empathy as a company goal is also a great place to start

In 2023, mental health issues stemming from workplace stress affected a significant number of people across various industries, not just in contact centres. Burnout was reported to affect 1 in 5 individuals (Menta Health UK, 2023). Managers can help their employees cope in several ways. For instance, they can allow agents to take mental health days or provide them with adequate time between shifts to relax. Moreover, it's essential for professional support for mental health and training on mental health in the workplace to be readily available, ideally operating in the background.

"Getting to know your team well is crucial because it enables you to recognise individual behaviours and body language cues for burnout. Keep an eye out for mood shifts, hesitation to start tasks, and changes in performance. Our management actively engages with employees by walking around the contact centre and having informal chats, fostering a personal connection. Identifying small issues early can prevent them from escalating into larger problems."

Service Manager, Western Provident Association

Preventing burnout in contact centres

Leaning on the latest CX technology can help spot some of the early signs of burnout but it cannot replace the human touch and connection, especially for agents who are working remotely.

01

Interaction Analytics: Voice of the Agent (VoA)

We often talk about using interaction analytics to understand the voice of the customer, but there's another important aspect to consider: tuning into the sentiment of the employee. A properly structured VoA programme can involve weekly pulse checks with agents. During these check-ins, agents can provide honest feedback on their ability to create positive customer experiences. This feedback not only provides valuable insights for improving the customer experience but also helps agents feel valued and respected.

02

Using WFM tools to identify behaviour changes

By monitoring whether agents are sticking to their assigned tasks during shifts, identifying if certain calls are particularly challenging, or determining if more break time is necessary to provide agents with breathing room, WFM tools can help mitigate burnout risks. However, it's essential to recognise that merely identifying burnout early isn't sufficient; it's equally important to establish effective support processes. This may entail formal check-ins with managers and fostering open conversations once triggered by indicators within your WFM system.

03

Adapting Quality Management (QM) processes to identify agent stress

Measuring the quality of interactions your agents are having with customers can reveal insights into mental health issues, stress levels throughout the day, and potential training needs for agents. However, for this process to be effective, it must prioritise supporting the well-being of your employees rather than solely concentrating on customer satisfaction. Failing to do so can result in decreased productivity and foster negative sentiments of feeling micromanaged.

“It’s crucial not to view data solely as a tool for customer service, but rather to analyse trends in how individual agents feel over time. Examining the language agents use, whether it’s positive or negative, can provide valuable insights. For instance, are they expressing themselves articulately or using more monotone language?”

I also believe in complementing technology with personal interaction. This includes “floor walking” and having informal chats with employees over coffee. By doing so, you can get a sense of your agents’ mood, how they present themselves, and whether they have a positive attitude. This human element is crucial. And if your agents are feeling happy, it will contribute to making customers feel valued long-term.”

Claims Manager and Clinical Lead, Healix and HX Global

04

Using AI Tools to lighten the workload of your agents

By incorporating chatbots and virtual assistants, contact centres can redirect high-volume, low-complexity enquiries away from agents. Additionally, automated agent assistance features like real-time prompts and auto-summary functions can help agents handle more complex cases efficiently. This not only allows them to focus on critical tasks but also gives much-needed breathing room during busy periods.

88%

customers have had at least one conversation with a chatbot

19%

companies have implemented chatbots already

62%

companies are planning on adding a chatbot

Agent Assist AI Tools can also aid agents in managing complex interactions more effectively. By analysing messages or conversations in real-time through transcription, agents can extract valuable information more quickly. Language identification capabilities help them understand customer intent, ensuring they are directed to the appropriate resource and reducing negative feedback. AI generative technology also provides prompts to assist agents in responding to unhappy customers, reducing their emotional strain.

Prioritising mental health in contact centres

The well-being of agents and reducing attrition are crucial for business success. Poor mental health costs the UK contact centre industry over £990 million in lost productivity annually.

- 95% of staff report that mental well-being issues are affecting their productivity, leading to an average of nine lost working days per year
- Dealing with frustrated customers has affected the mental health of 67% of frontline customer service employees in the past 12 months

“Customer expectations have undergone significant changes in recent years, driven by factors like the pandemic. To meet these evolving demands, it’s crucial to prioritise resilience among agents. This means equipping them with the skills to handle increasingly demanding customers and providing appropriate training to ensure those expectations are met. When it comes to training, the focus should shift towards dealing with challenging situations, not just on handling unhappy or irate customers. This includes learning how to deliver difficult messages and decline unreasonable requests that cannot always be accommodated.”

Customer Service Manager, Western Provident Association

Summary



Understanding burnout

Burnout among contact centre agents is influenced by various factors, including concerns about job security, adapting to post-pandemic work changes, rising customer expectations, and internal pressures such as conflicting values and heavy workloads.



Financial impact

Overlooking the mental health of agents carries significant financial consequences, with UK businesses losing billions monthly due to impacts on absenteeism, staff turnover, and service quality.



Early detection

Monitoring post-call activities and leveraging tools like WFM or interaction analytics can help detect early signs of burnout among agents. Detecting these signs early allows for timely intervention to prevent agents from leaving the organisation.



Supportive leadership

Employing empathetic management strategies, such as offering mental health days, ensuring sufficient breaks between shifts, and providing professional mental health support, is essential for assisting agents in managing workplace stress and avoiding burnout.



Balancing technology and human touch

While advanced CX technology like AI can assist in reducing agent workload and cognitive strain, it's vital to complement these tools with personal interactions and attentiveness to verbal or physical cues indicating agents require additional support.

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