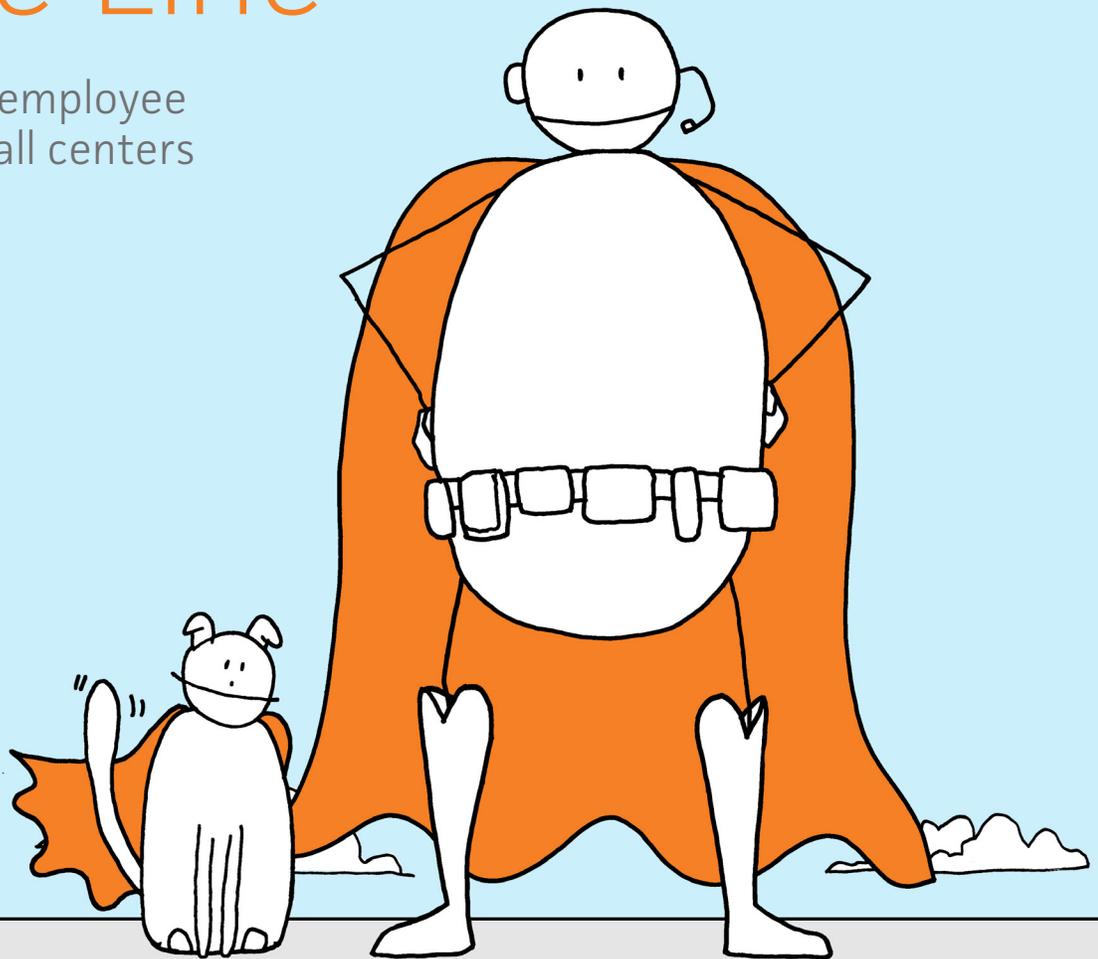


Please Stay on the Line

Rethinking the employee
experience in call centers





Continuum's Space Group engaged in a research project concerning the operation and employee experience of contact centers. The following report is an overview of our findings and the opportunities therein, based on our primary and secondary research.

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Introduction

Contact centers serve a broad range of sectors, and are complex ventures in which agents function as a proxy for the companies they represent. This interaction between caller and agent can be the only human-to-human point of contact for many companies, and although these centers exist to perform a variety of functions, they are not typically leveraged to capitalize on this opportunity for relationship building. The agent is a critical component of the brand experience, but high employee turnover rates in contact centers compromise their operation; 60% attrition per year is considered “stellar” performance.¹

Despite being a major economic contributor and vital component of many businesses, the contact center remains undervalued and unexplored. By rethinking the employee experience we can improve retention rates, positively impact customer experience and enhance brand perception.

What's changing?

Contact centers initially existed as a method for consumers to get in touch with companies to resolve issues, lodge complaints, or purchase products. Recently, the advancement of online shopping and quality web content has supported a shift away from this central purpose. The perception of contact center as mere overhead has changed as well, and companies are looking for ways to turn additional profit when their customers are on the line: hold music has been replaced with advertisements, agents are trained to upsell and cross-sell, and consumer behavior is carefully tracked for use in future targeting.

Existing contact centers are designed around the functional requirements of landline telephone systems, and must adapt to the diverse channels of communication now widely available to consumers. Texting, chat, email, video conferencing, and voice recognition software are changing how consumers get in touch. The Amazon Kindle Mayday button, for example, allows users to speak directly with customer support from their tablet, using the device's camera for face-to-face troubleshooting. Although many companies have begun to integrate these capabilities into their service offerings, the implications on space, tools and protocol are not yet understood. Agents must interface with multiple channels and require an environment that is designed to accommodate these new tools and tasks. We are also seeing a shift towards dcompletely automated customer service. While working with BBVA, one of the largest banks in the world, we collaborated with BBVA and

SRI International, the folks who brought you Siri, to develop LOLA. Lola is an avatar-based banking assistant, designed to work with the customer to create a personal on-line banking experience. She works with you to create the right on-line banking configuration page, makes suggestions along the way and shows different options (she can talk too).

Across the tech industry and in most design-related fields, the traditional model of fixed desks and office hours has been replaced with flexible open plans and the option to work from home. Gensler, a leading commercial architectural firm, probes this phenomenon with research from its 2013 US Workplace Survey, in which they conclude that when given their choice of working environment, employees report higher job satisfaction and exhibit greater productivity.² Flexible office arrangements and furniture allow workers to adapt quickly to new tasks and team structures; autonomy over location and schedule promote trust and agency.

Inexpensive mobile technologies (phones, laptops, wearables) offer opportunities for increased flexibility and connectivity for employees and employers. With greater consideration of family commitments and health, this includes flexible schedules, the ability to work remotely and greater integration of wellness programs, including onsite fitness and healthy meal options. While working with a major insurance company, we have observed increased attention to wellbeing through workplace ergonomics, including desks that move up and down or can be integrated with treadmills to reduce sedentarism.

Many employees and new graduates entering the workforce are more inclined to work and live in the city, where they can easily take advantage of a broad range of amenities and services—more than 80% of Americans now live in urban areas, which are growing faster than any other geography.³ Increasingly, contact centers that are located in rural and suburban areas must work harder to attract and retain a talented and tech-savvy workforce. Twitter, for instance, has recently moved its headquarters to downtown San Francisco to be closer the vitality of the city and where employees prefer to live. Additionally, many candidates have earned advanced degrees or certifications, challenging employers to maintain relevant opportunities that align with their ambitions.

The demand for contact center agents can fluctuate in response to product releases, holidays, elections, and unforeseen events. Companies are challenged to maintain a sufficient workforce to satisfy consumer needs without overextending their payroll during idle periods. Services such as Uber, an app-based taxi dispatcher, have created tools that leverage a distributed and on-demand workforce to satisfy demand spikes in real-time. Companies are also finding value in having highly trained staff answering customers calls. In additional work with BBVA, we explored utilizing staff at bank branches as call center agents. This allows BBVA to better serve their customers by putting them in direct contact with the experts, but also enables them to maximize the use of their employees.

Finally, the manner in which agent performance is captured is beginning to move away from “calls per hour” to an ability to achieve “first call resolution.” This suggests that customer satisfaction, rather than queue clearing, is driving protocol. Some companies, such as Home Depot and Zappos, have no apparent protocol at all: agents may stay on the line as long as is required to resolve a caller’s issue. Although Zappos is perceived as an online retailer, their core offering is actually satisfaction: they describe themselves as a “service company that happens to sell (fill in the blank).”⁴ While working with UHC, a leading health insurance provider, we see them evaluating success based on call volume for an individual patient over the course of an entire disease. We see a shift from focusing on quantity to resolution to looking at the entire customer relationship holistically.

Our observations

Call centers can be broadly classified into two categories: inbound (sales, customer service, emergency hotlines) and outbound (telemarketing,

collections). While some businesses have seen success maintaining their own facilities, many rely upon third-party companies to provide capacity as required by fluctuations in demand. To maximize profitability, operation of the contact center has become highly commoditized, and must rely upon strict performance metrics and advanced automation systems to maintain a competitive edge. Where margins are tight, employees make do with outdated spaces, furniture, and protocols.

Agents, for their part, are a resilient group. Teams of 10-20 are overseen by a manager or senior agent and work closely to meet team and individual performance targets. Depending on the type of service provided, contact centers employ multiple shifts (locally or globally) to ensure 24-hour access for consumers. Technology is deployed to support the challenges of working broadly and efficiently: call volume is handled by an automated call distributor (ACD), company-specific greetings and menus are managed through the interactive voice response (IVR) system, and prompts and protocols are delivered through customer relationship management (CRM) software. These advancements greatly streamline the process of connecting a caller to an agent, though their benefits are mostly customer-facing. Caller experience follows a familiar pattern: dial the number, wade through the menu, wait for the agent. Onerous at times, but linear and predictable. On the other end of the phone, agents have only seconds to reset between calls, and depending on the type of center, will handle as many as 30 an hour. The volume of calls can be monitored in real-time on digital tickers distributed throughout the space, displaying logistical information such as queue length and available agents. Agents are motivated to clear the queue and exceed their targets through a variety of performance-and-reward incentives, including cash bonuses, discounts on company goods, or gift cards.

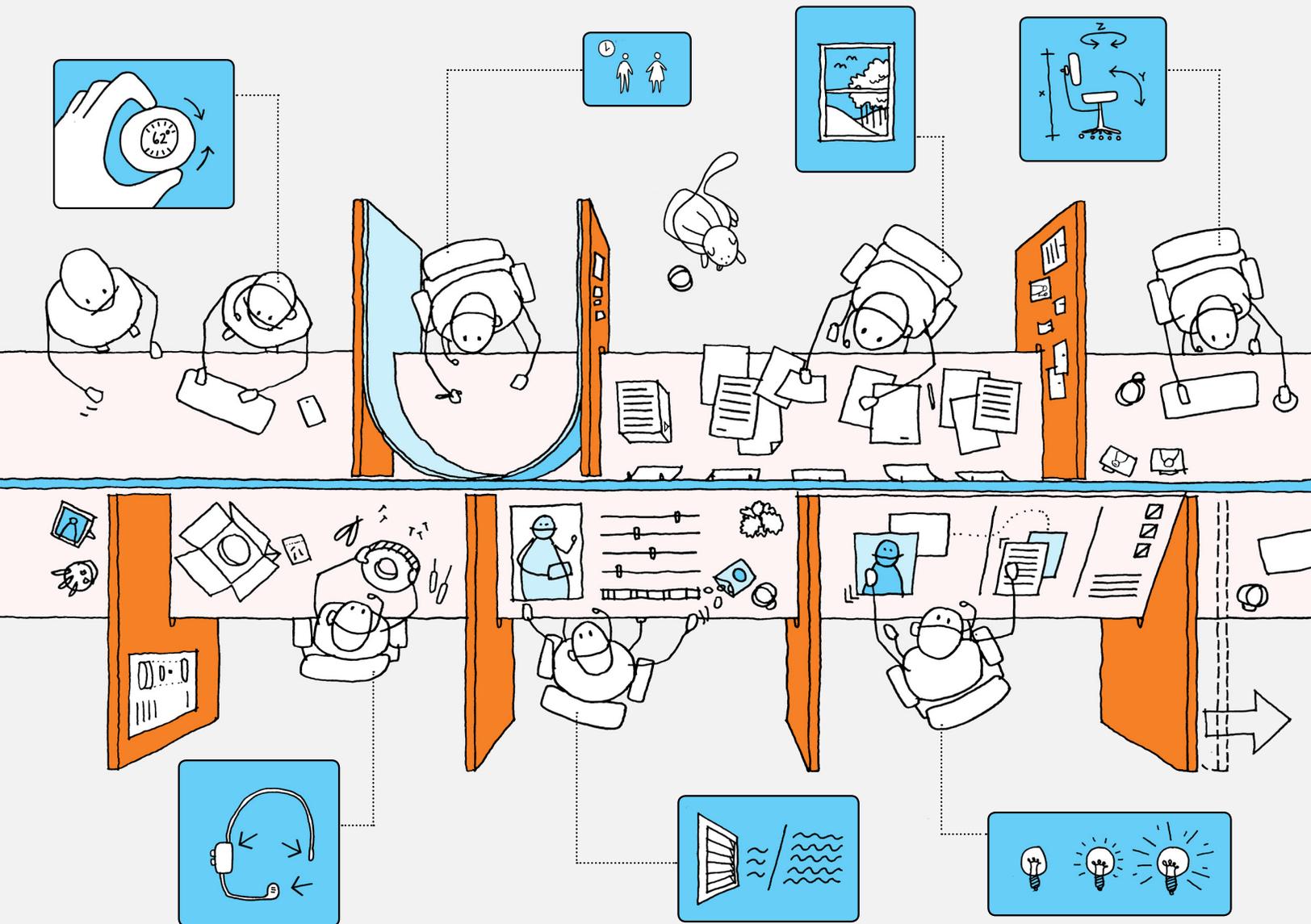
For most agents, this work is tied to their desk. Proximity to managers and other agents is important in the event that a question arises, and any requisite technology (computer, monitor, keyboard, voice-modulating switch, headset) is tethered to their station. The layout of the floor itself is the result of conflicting restraints: densely packed desks maximize efficiency, and shoulder height partitions between stations minimize acoustic transmission while still permitting oversight. Many agents have outfitted their desks with small fans and task lights, symptomatic of a larger issue concerning control over their immediate environment.



Revolutionize human scale ergonomics

The agent's immediate workspace has not been considered since the introduction of the telephone. We can explore the requirements for furniture (desk, chair, storage) and design them through careful consideration of what tasks are being done now. Agents are trained to shift fluidly between inbound and outbound roles, as well as master several contact channels: furniture systems and the layout of space must be reconsidered to match this demanding standard set by its users.

Environmental design (lighting, temperature, air quality) should be explored with the understanding that individual productivity is impacted by user comfort. These requirements may change from agent to agent, and across multiple shifts. Contact centers are comprised of multiple program spaces; physical proximity to management, technical support, restrooms, and break-rooms can be calibrated to build stronger teams and increase efficiency.

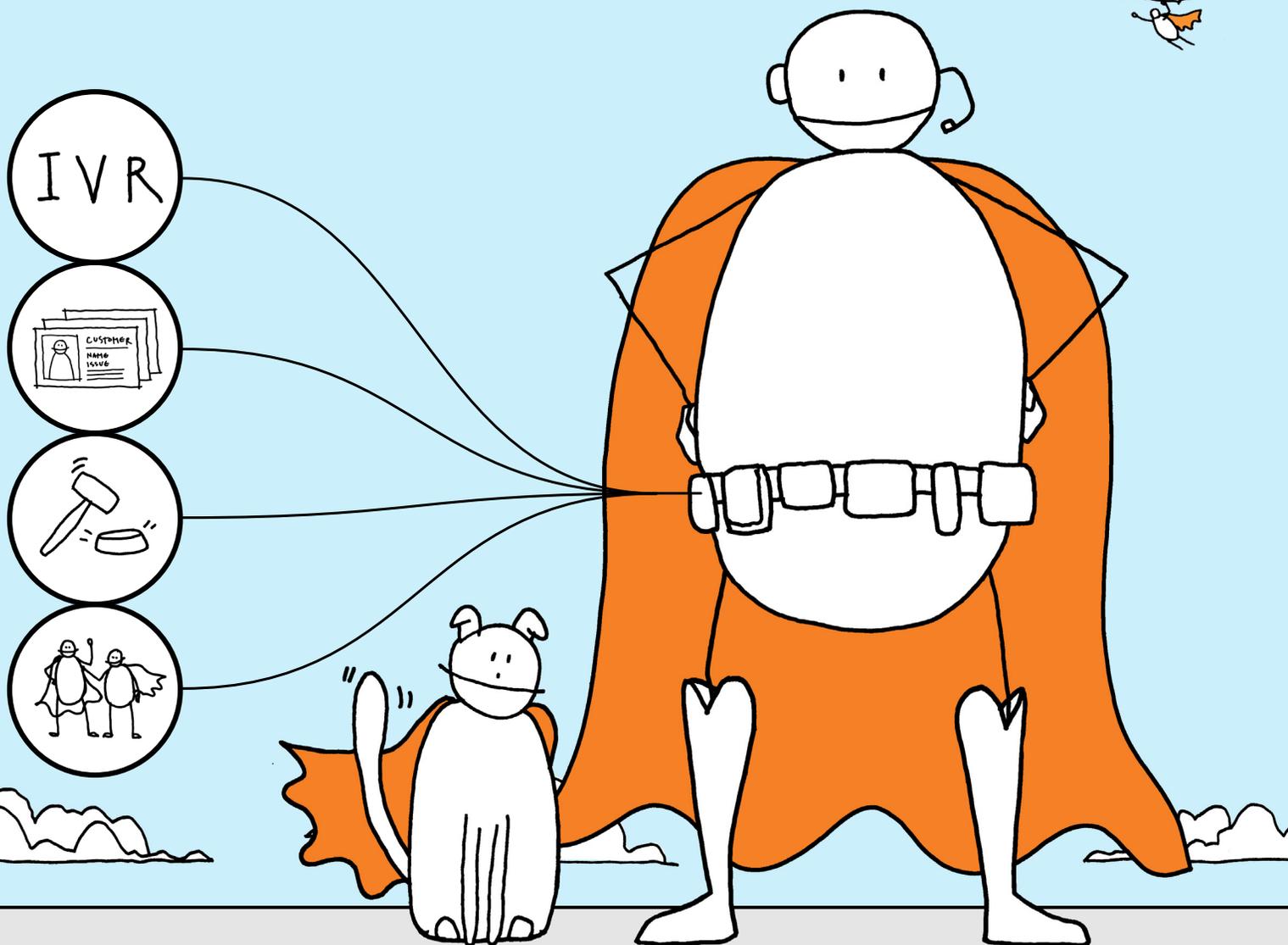


Elevate the role of the agent

The agent represents your brand. Put mechanisms in place that connect the agent to the mission of the company and the purpose they serve. Retention rates will improve when employees feel connected to their job and that their work serves a greater purpose. For most consumers, the conversations had with contact center agents will be the most meaningful human contact they'll have with that company.

Train and trust agents to become brand ambassadors. Consider which elements of the job can be automated through innovation, allowing agents to focus on the quality of interactions rather than the quantity of exchanges.

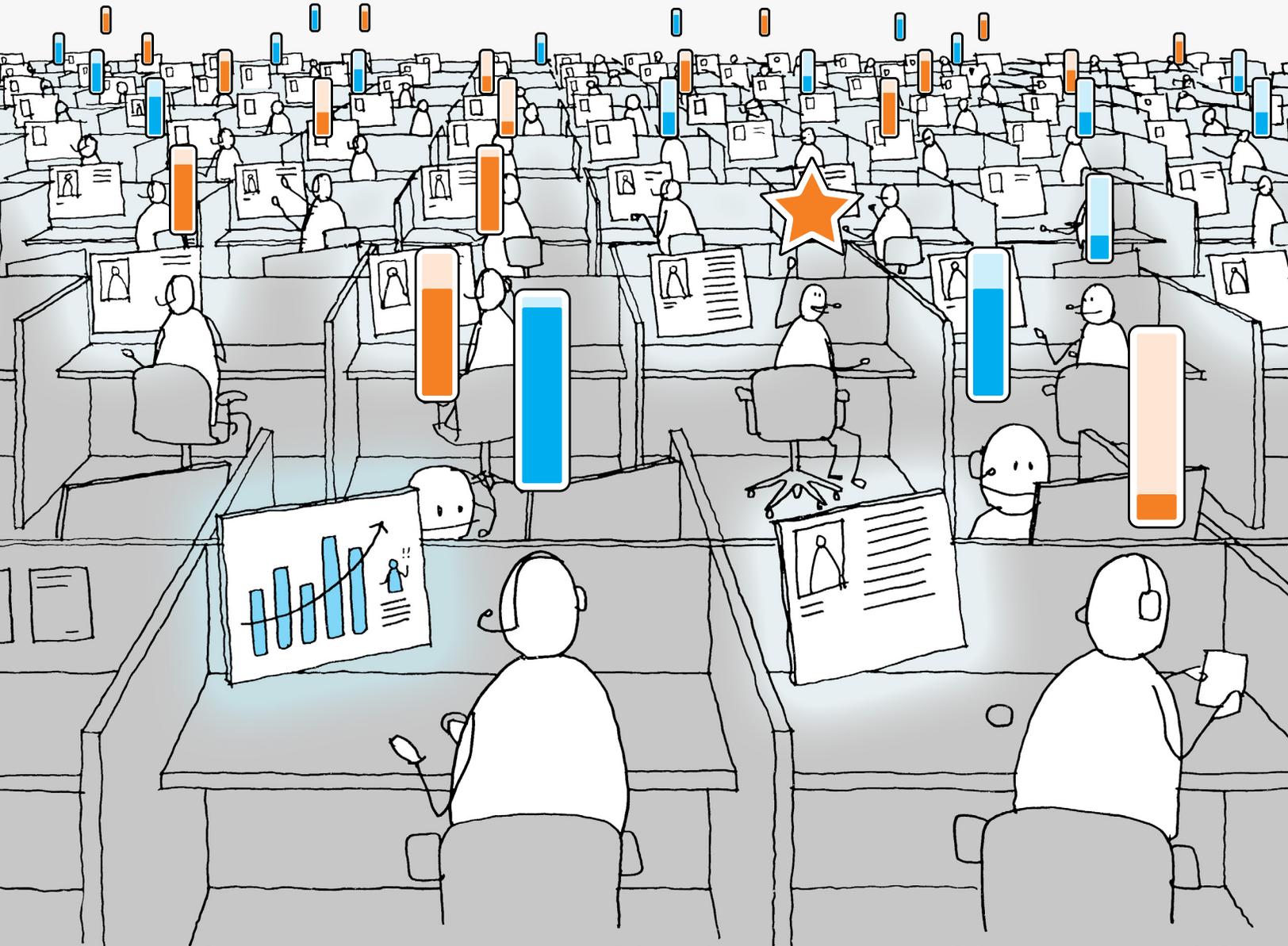
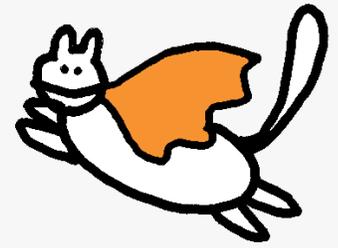
Empower agents with the necessary tools and information to make decisions on the spot, without the need for supervisor intervention.



Personalize recognition

It is important to keep people engaged, especially when tasks are repetitive or monotonous. Managers can work closely with employees to determine systems of recognition, incentives, and feedback that are meaningful to the individual. Establish metrics, track performance, and reward exceptionality.

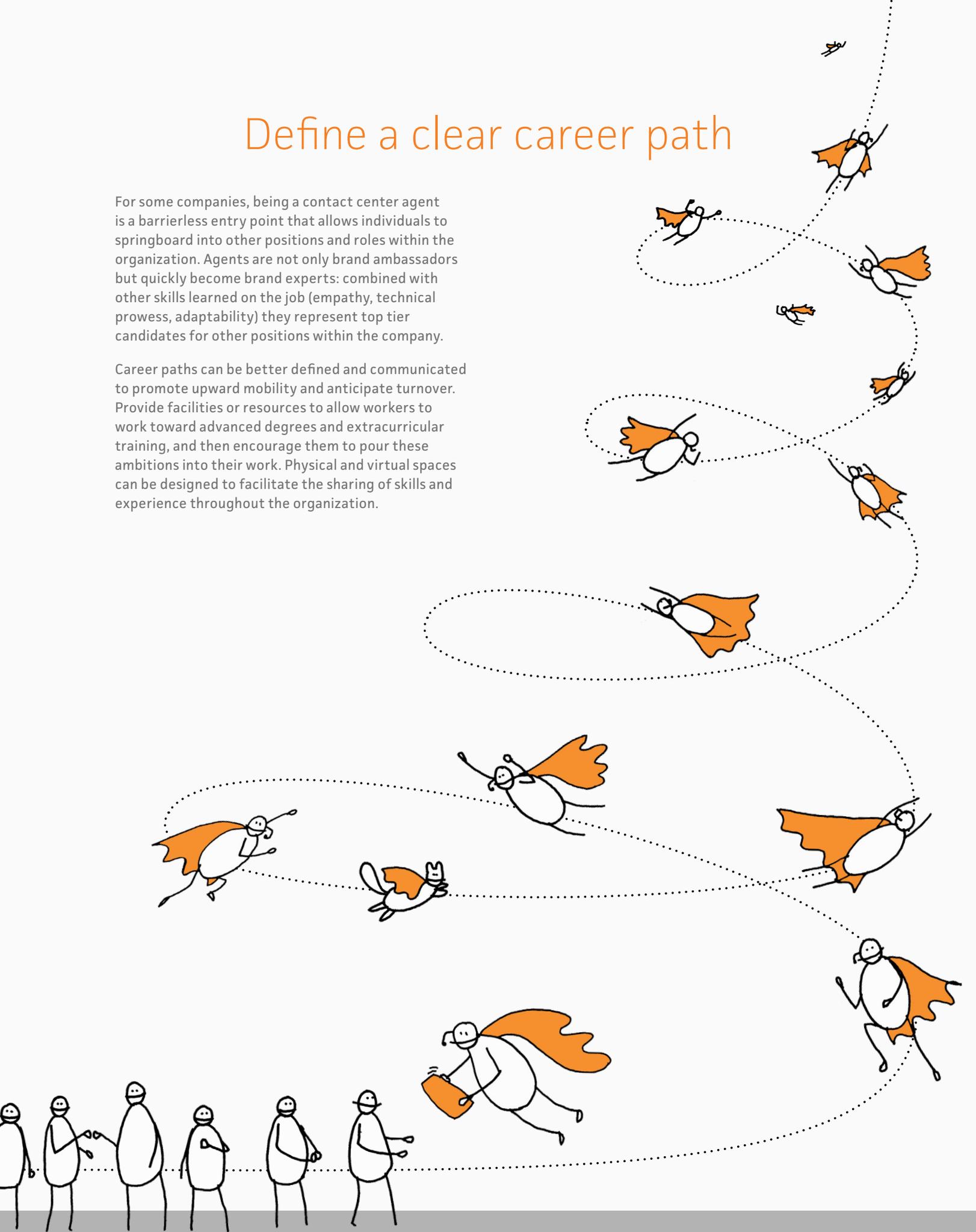
Design systems that allow individuals and their managers to learn from performance data and make decisions about when and if this information is broadcast. Encourage competition between groups: employees want to work on a team with collective goals, with peers that encourage them to succeed.



Define a clear career path

For some companies, being a contact center agent is a barrierless entry point that allows individuals to springboard into other positions and roles within the organization. Agents are not only brand ambassadors but quickly become brand experts: combined with other skills learned on the job (empathy, technical prowess, adaptability) they represent top tier candidates for other positions within the company.

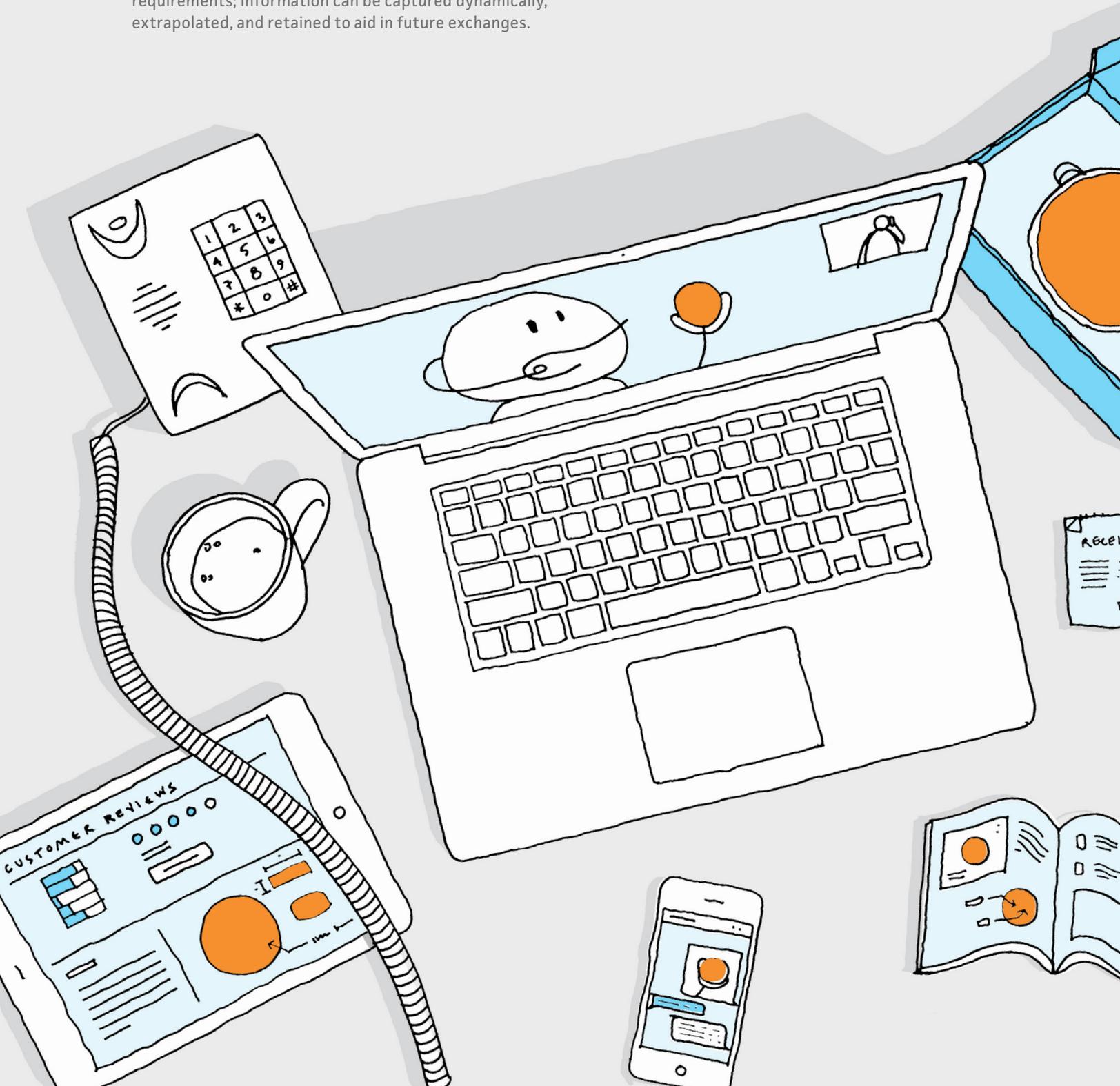
Career paths can be better defined and communicated to promote upward mobility and anticipate turnover. Provide facilities or resources to allow workers to work toward advanced degrees and extracurricular training, and then encourage them to pour these ambitions into their work. Physical and virtual spaces can be designed to facilitate the sharing of skills and experience throughout the organization.

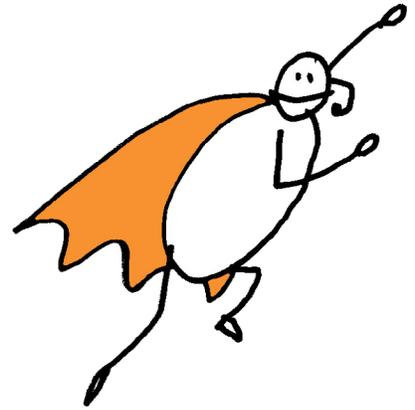


Multi-channel experience design

We can redesign the use of multiple channels for both agents and consumers. By clarifying when and how certain channels might be used, we can maximize each medium's potential and increase service quality. Interactions can be mass-customized, allowing each user to define a suite of tools and interfaces to meet their personal use requirements; information can be captured dynamically, extrapolated, and retained to aid in future exchanges.

Agents are the key component of navigating and maintaining a multi-channel experience, providing both high-level guidance for users of the system, as well as targeting advice drawn from personal experience and training.





Citations

¹ Lohr, Steve. "Big Data, Trying to Build Better Workers." The New York Times, April 21, 2013. Page BU4.

² Hoskins, Diane. "Employees Perform Better When They Can Control Their Space." Harvard Business Review, 1/16/2014. See also: Gensler 2013 US Workplace Survey, Key Findings. http://www.gensler.com/uploads/documents/2013_US_Workplace_Survey_07_15_2013.pdf

³ United States Census Bureau. "Growth in Urban Population Outpaces Rest of Nation, Census Bureau Reports." https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/2010_census/cb12-50.html

⁴ Edwards, Jim. "Check Out The Insane Lengths Zappos Customer Service Reps Will Go To." Business Insider, January 12, 2012. <http://www.businessinsider.com/zappos-customer-service-crm-2012-1>



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