

The 2022 US Contact Center Decision-Makers' Guide

**The Agent Engagement, Empowerment &
Gamification Chapter**

Sponsored by



“The 2022 US Contact Center Decision-Makers’ Guide (14th edition)”

© ContactBabel 2022

Please note that all information is believed correct at the time of publication, but ContactBabel does not accept responsibility for any action arising from errors or omissions within the report, links to external websites or other third-party content.

From Great Resignation to Great Retention

Understanding workplace trends and how a data-driven approach can improve employee experience

Employee experience unraveled

Employee engagement, job satisfaction and well-being is more important than ever. Yet nearly **70% of HR leaders still struggle** with their employee experience efforts. Driven by the pandemic, workforce trends such as The Great Resignation put tremendous pressure on organizations to retain workers. The upside of this trend is that employees are demanding better working conditions and engagement from their management teams. Employers are starting to listen and take action.

That action may come in the form of finding new ways to engage employees, such as providing the coaching, feedback and growth opportunities they need to be successful. A higher level of attention to employees' needs is particularly important in a remote or hybrid work environment.

Many organizations may not look directly or deeply enough at both customer and employee feedback as a resource for employee engagement. When considering analytics solutions, most organizations only see the benefit for Voice of the Customer (VoC) insights, while Voice of the Employee (VoE) is just as important.

Solutions that can mine insights from 100% of conversations that happen between employees and customers give you the data needed to provide coaching opportunities for customer- or prospect-facing employees, such as sales, customer support, and more. This level of coaching and training provides more opportunities for growth and helps your employees see their value to and potential in the organization.



Beyond coaching alone, you can use VoE insights to drive overall business improvements, including:

- **Analyzing feedback to improve experiences:** Collect both solicited (e.g. direct surveys) and unsolicited (e.g. recorded conversations) feedback to identify areas of opportunity to better meet employee needs and expectations.
- **Building cultures of improvement:** Empower employees with clear direction and a path for improvement with real-time feedback and improved department communication.
- **Driving change to increase retention:** Leverage emotion scoring, trend analysis and more to better understand what employees want and take action to improve satisfaction and reduce turnover.

Let's dive in to learn more about the biggest workplace trends impacting employees, and how a modern, data-driven approach can improve your employee experience.

Three trends driving employee experience and engagement

The last few years have turned the employee perception of work on its head, for better or worse. Smart organizations are learning how to adapt to these trends, as work and life become more fluid. With a wave of resignations and a massive labor shortage at hand, the time is now for you to pay attention to the employee experience. Here are three of the biggest trends impacting employees today.

Remote and hybrid work

The pandemic may have changed how some industries work permanently. **One in four Americans** work in a remote or hybrid setting, and nearly 50% of people said they'd take a pay cut to keep working remotely. About 25% of employees also said they would quit their jobs if they couldn't work remotely. While some complain of Zoom fatigue, roughly 70% of people find attending virtual meetings far less stressful than being in an office alongside their colleagues.

Even so, remote work isn't an option for every employee. Location-bound industries such as food service, hospitality, healthcare and more haven't had the option of remote work, bearing the brunt of the first wave of the pandemic's uncertain working conditions and inequities. For companies that can allow remote work, **some employers and employees** have cited challenges caused by a lack of face-to-face supervision, lack of access to information, social isolation, and distractions at home.

Even with its challenges, remote work has ignited a revolution in workplace flexibility, and is expected to remain a significant factor in attracting and retaining talent for years to come.

The Great Resignation

In 2021, employees started leaving their jobs at record rates. In September 2021 alone, **4.4 million people** quit their jobs – a record high. This has resulted in more job openings and fewer people to fill them. Many people have opted to retire on an earlier than expected timeline. For example, in **August 2021**, one million people opted to retire, and an additional 1.5 million retired before the age of 65. Others looked to alternative ways of working, including the freelance economy, which boomed to approximately **\$1.3 trillion** in U.S. economic annual earnings.

While the phenomenon of The Great Resignation is fascinating in and of itself, the more important statistics for you to consider are the reasons why employees quit. According to a **recent survey**, here are some of the top reasons why employees resigned in 2021:

- Burnout: **40%**
- Organizational changes: **34%**
- Lack of flexibility: **20%**
- Instances of discrimination: **20%**
- Contributions and ideas not being valued: **20%**
- Insufficient benefits: **19%**
- Well-being not supported by the company: **16%**

With the right attention to employees' feedback, you can take actionable steps to resolve these issues quickly, before they become a negative part of company culture.

Labor and skill shortages

Many industries are facing major labor and skills shortage, for reasons outside of The Great Resignation. Some industries, **such as healthcare** and hospitality, are impacted more than others. Often these industries are known for hard hours, low pay and poor benefits, meaning mid-career employees (between the ages of 30–45) are leaving their jobs in higher numbers and young adults just starting out in their careers are simply not pursuing these positions. As of September 2021, 10.4 million jobs were open.

If your organization is impacted by labor shortages, you must focus on not only attracting new employees and retaining them, but also making fundamental changes that make certain industries more appealing for those just starting their careers. Identifying the root cause of existing problems and adopting tailored, data-driven retention programs can help keep both newly onboarded and longtime employees happy and successful.

 **CallMiner**

CallMiner is the global leader in [conversation analytics](#) to drive [business performance improvement](#).

Powered by artificial intelligence and machine learning, CallMiner delivers the industry's most comprehensive platform to analyze omnichannel customer interactions at scale, allowing organizations to interpret sentiment and identify patterns to reveal deep understanding from every conversation.

By connecting the dots between insights and action, CallMiner enables companies to identify areas of opportunity to drive business improvement, growth, and transformational change more effectively than ever before.

CallMiner is trusted by the world's leading organizations across retail, financial services, healthcare and insurance, travel and hospitality, and more.

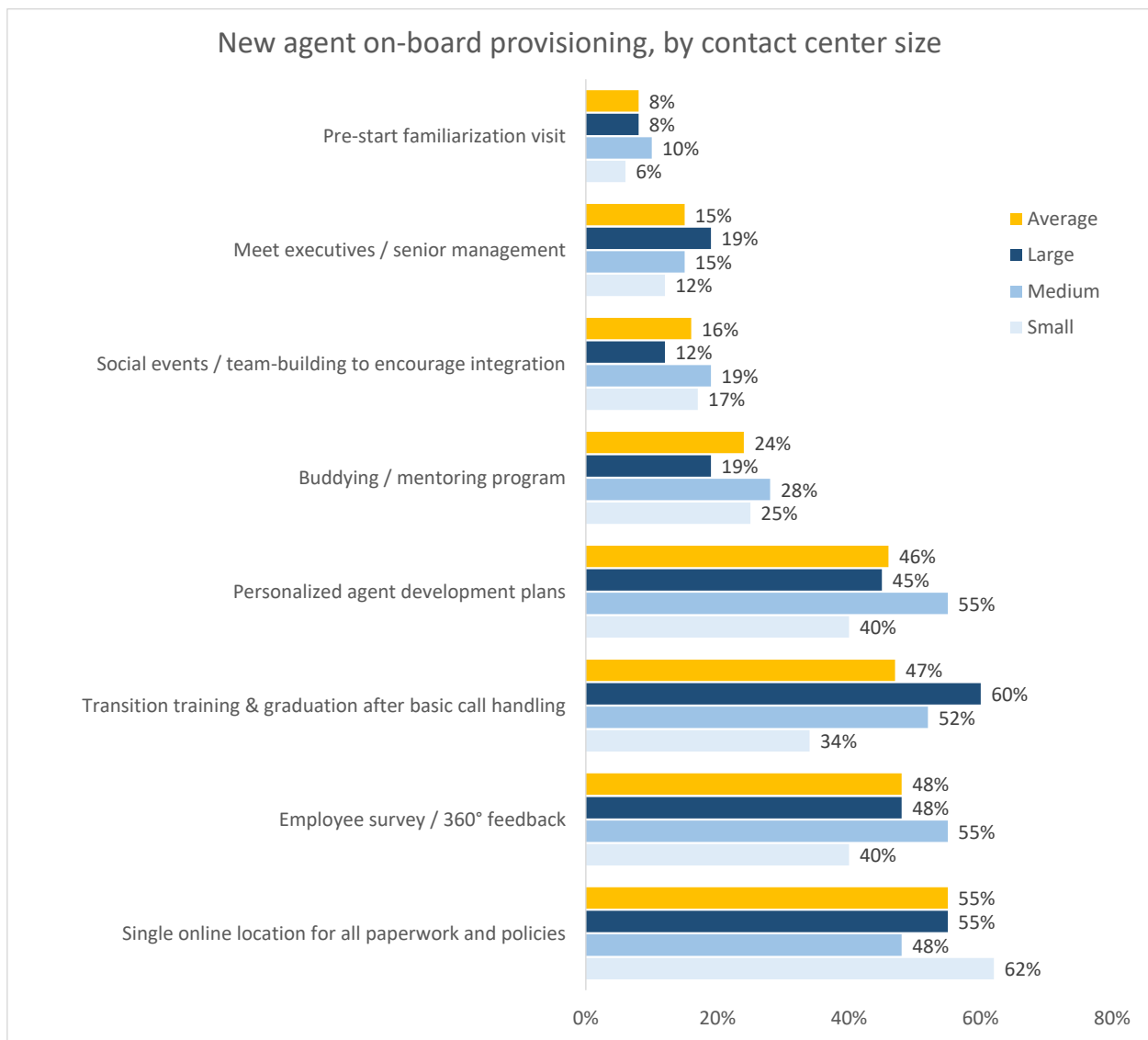
To learn more, visit [CallMiner.com](#), read the [CallMiner blog](#), or follow us on [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#).

AGENT ENGAGEMENT, EMPOWERMENT AND GAMIFICATION

ENGAGING THE NEW AGENT

An agent joining a new organization has a lot to take on board – culture, systems, expectations, new products and services – and this becomes even more difficult if this is the first time that the agent has worked in a contact center environment. Businesses have numerous ways of introducing (or ‘onboarding’) new agents to their work, shown in the following chart.

Figure 1: New agent on-board provisioning, by contact center size

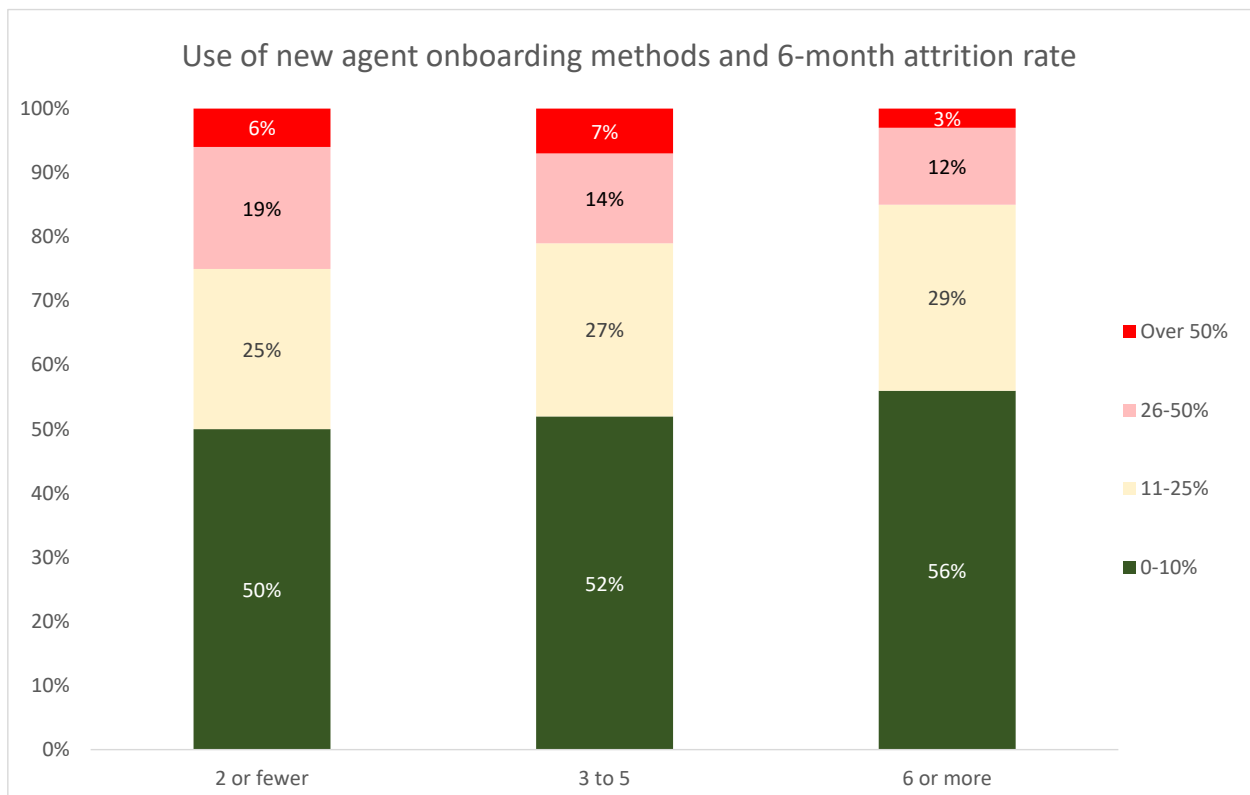


Most respondents have a buddying / mentoring program, and some form of official ‘graduation’, easing new agents into the real work after basic call handling training. Social events and senior management introductions usually feature quite highly, although the pandemic has obviously severely reduced the opportunity for the former. 46% provide individual agent training plans.

48% of respondents seek 360-degree feedback from new agents (which would provide vital information about the reality of the agent onboarding process that could be used for improvement), and 55% offer a single portal containing all of the paperwork and internal administrative tasks that a new employee requires. Only 8% have pre-start familiarization visits (a considerable drop from last year for understandable reasons).

It was hypothesized that high levels of agent onboarding and support would reap benefits through lower new agent attrition levels, as agents receiving more onboarding support in their first few weeks should adapt to the work and culture more quickly, become more confident and feel more empowered. The chart below shows three ranges of new agent attrition – 0-10%, 11-25% and 25%+ – and investigates how many types of onboarding method were used by respondents within each group.

Figure 2: Use of new agent onboarding methods and 6-month attrition rate

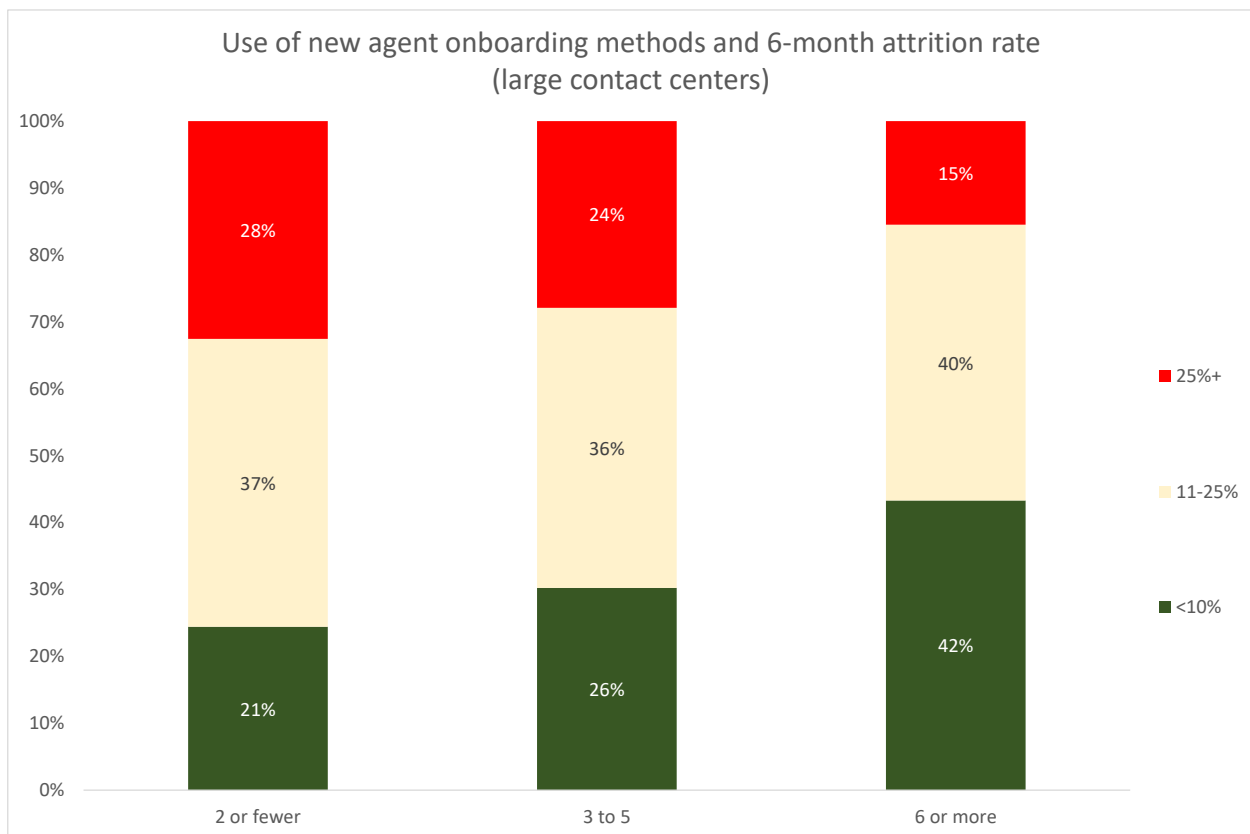


The obvious conclusion from the previous chart is that high levels of onboarding have a relatively small effect on 6-month attrition rate, but there may be another factor in play.

Large contact centers tend to have higher levels of attrition all-round, so comparing only those contact centers from within the same size band will give a clearer view.

There is some noticeable difference in new leaver attrition when looking only at large (200+ seat) operations: 28% of those that use two or fewer onboarding methods report high levels of new leaver attrition, compared to 15% of those that use 6 or more methods.

Figure 3: Use of new agent onboarding methods and 6-month attrition rate (large contact centers)



ENGAGING THE EXPERIENCED AGENT

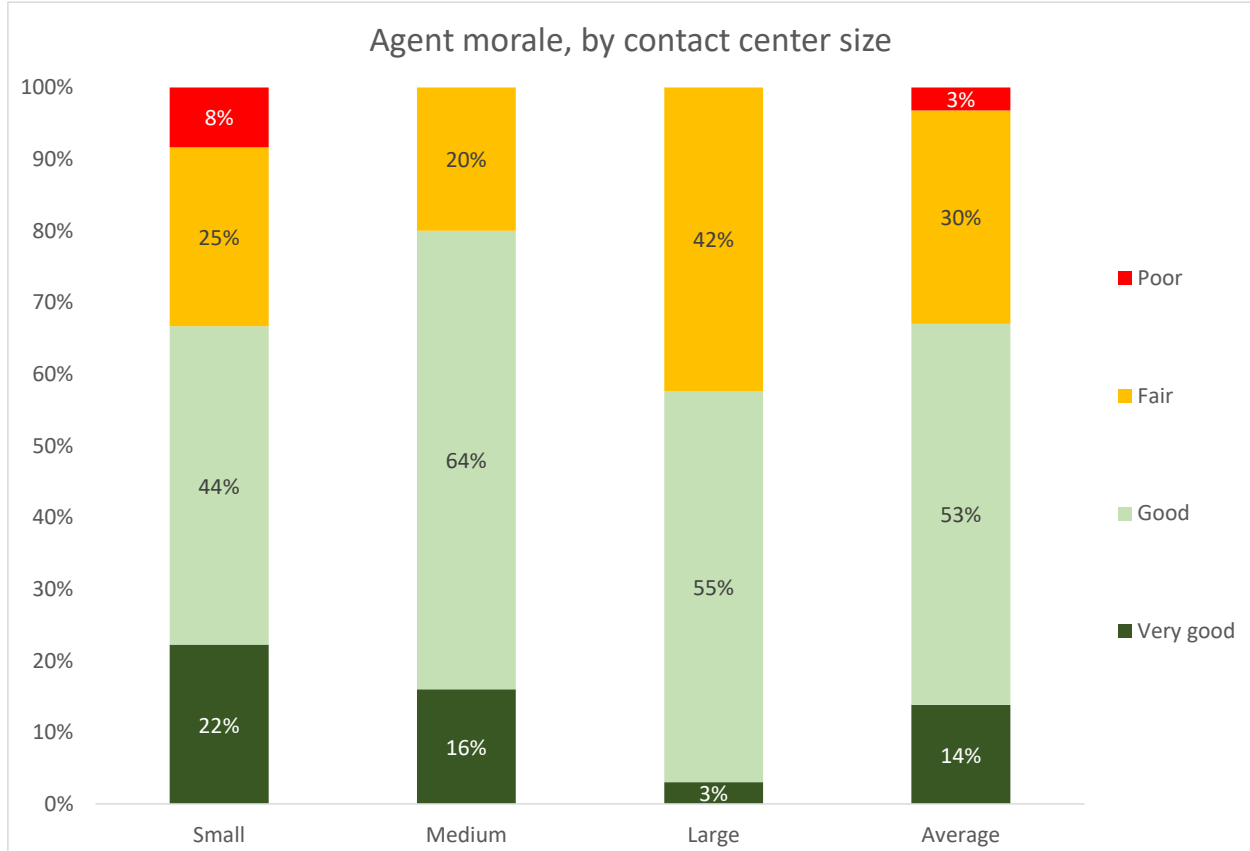
Motivating and keeping good agents in a working environment that is often stressful, sometimes repetitive and usually not particularly well-paid is a challenge the contact centers have had to face since their inception. As the nature of contact center work becomes increasingly complex, and customers' expectations of what constitutes good quality service becomes ever higher, the agent's job is now rarely just reading something off the screen: they have to be empathetic to the customer, use their initiative to solve the issue and remain focused on answering the next call just as effectively.

When considering how attrition and absence issues can be alleviated, bonuses and incentives are generally felt by most businesses to be a possible solution.

AGENT MORALE

Agents with low morale engage with customers less, provide lower quality work, take more unauthorized absences and end up leaving the company. Improving morale is good for business, and also good for other agents and the entire working environment: no-one wants to go to work in a miserable place.

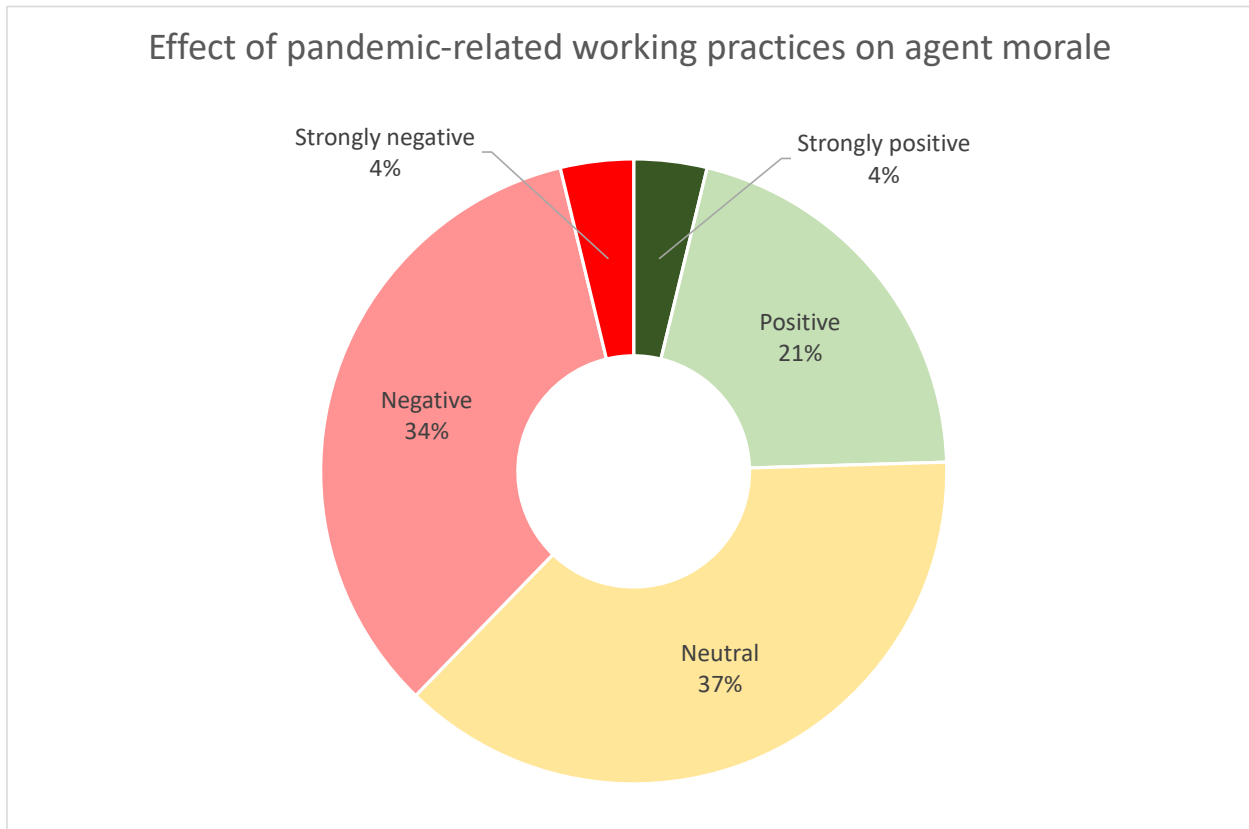
Figure 4: Agent morale, by contact center size



Looking at the previous chart, it seems that contact center morale is generally seen to be quite positive, with 67% of respondents stating that their contact center enjoys “Good” or “Very Good” morale, which is a little higher in mid-sized (51-200 seat) operations. Only 3% of survey respondents reported “Poor” morale this year.

With the widespread move to remote working and its risk of isolation and the attendant difficulty in supporting agents, 38% of respondents felt that it had a negative effect on agent morale, with 25% stating that it had been positive in some ways.

Figure 5: Effect of pandemic-related working practices on agent morale



Eight options to improve morale were set before respondents, who were asked to pick the top three that they thought were most likely to improve morale (although this question does not ask the agents what they themselves think of this). Although the most popular no.1 choice – higher pay – may not be a realistic choice for most contact centers, there is a correlation between salaries and attrition (and by extension, morale). Past research has shown that contact centers with less than 10% short-term attrition (i.e. within the first six months) pay new agents an average of 10% more than those contact centers with a short-term attrition rate of over 25%, a pattern that is consistent over the years.

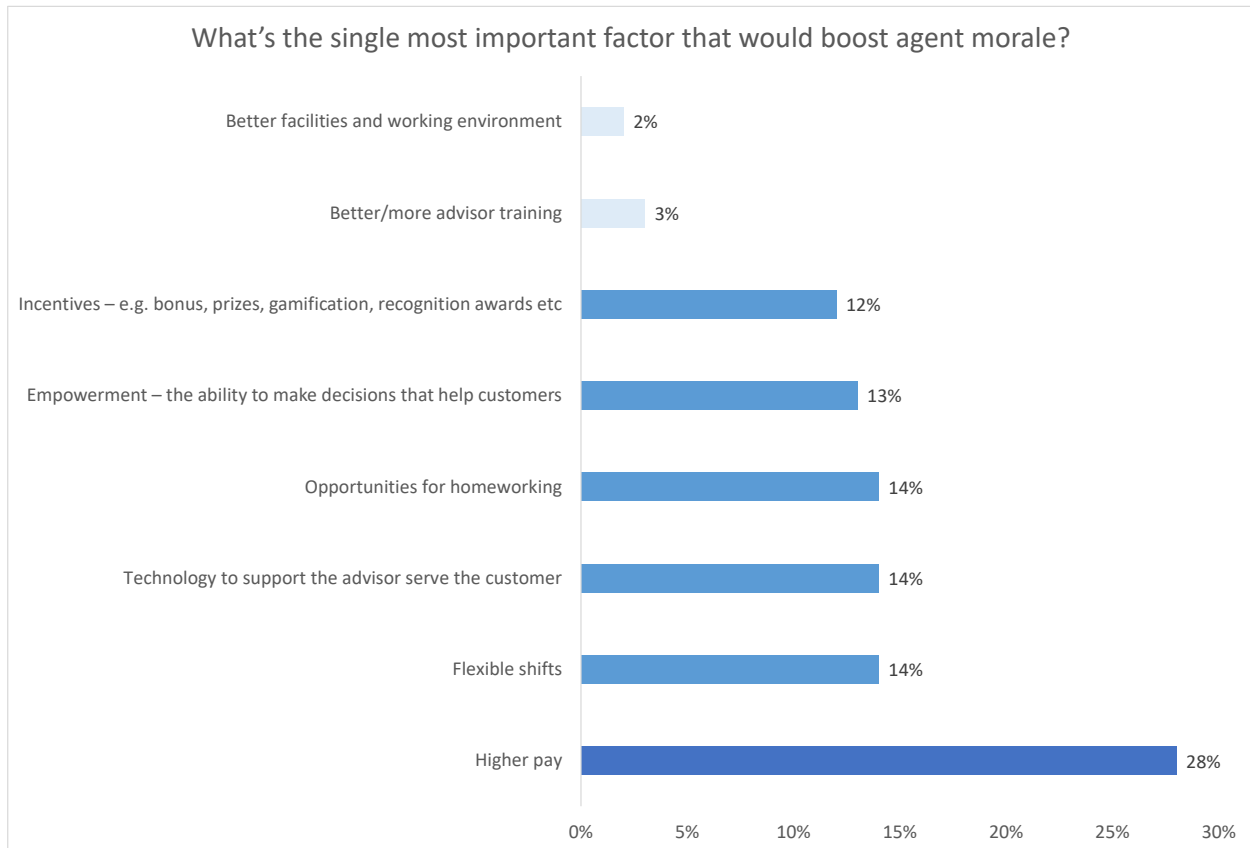
Giving agents the empowerment to make decisions that help customers is seen as having a positive effect on morale: empowerment – the support provided by the systems, processes and organizational culture required to help an agent solve the customer’s query – is closely linked first-contact resolution, which as we have seen is key to customer satisfaction. First-contact resolution rate directly impacts upon morale: if agents are unable to help customers, they become discouraged which leads to higher levels of agent attrition and absence, as well as a greater number of callbacks and call transfers, which impact negatively upon contact center cost, performance, quality and customer satisfaction.

So how can agents become empowered? A few elements are:

- System support to answer any query, with access to the customer’s history across every channel
- Desktop applications that provide all of the relevant information in one place – regardless of the channel the customer has used – without requiring agents to hunt it down
- Intelligent support to suggest answers to agents, and make sure that they comply with regulations and achieve the quality controls set by the business
- Recurrent queries are identified and answers disseminated via knowledge base / alerts
- Skills and capabilities, via ongoing training
- Trust and culture from senior management, including giving agents the time they need to handle the query without excessive pressure to meet internal metrics at the expense of solving the customer’s issue.

Respondents were also of the opinion that improving the technology available to support agents would make a positive impact upon agent morale. Solutions such as knowledge bases, dynamic scripting, a 360° view of the customer and a single unified desktop also empower the agent to deliver a successful resolution first time.

Figure 6: What's the single most important factor that would boost agent morale?



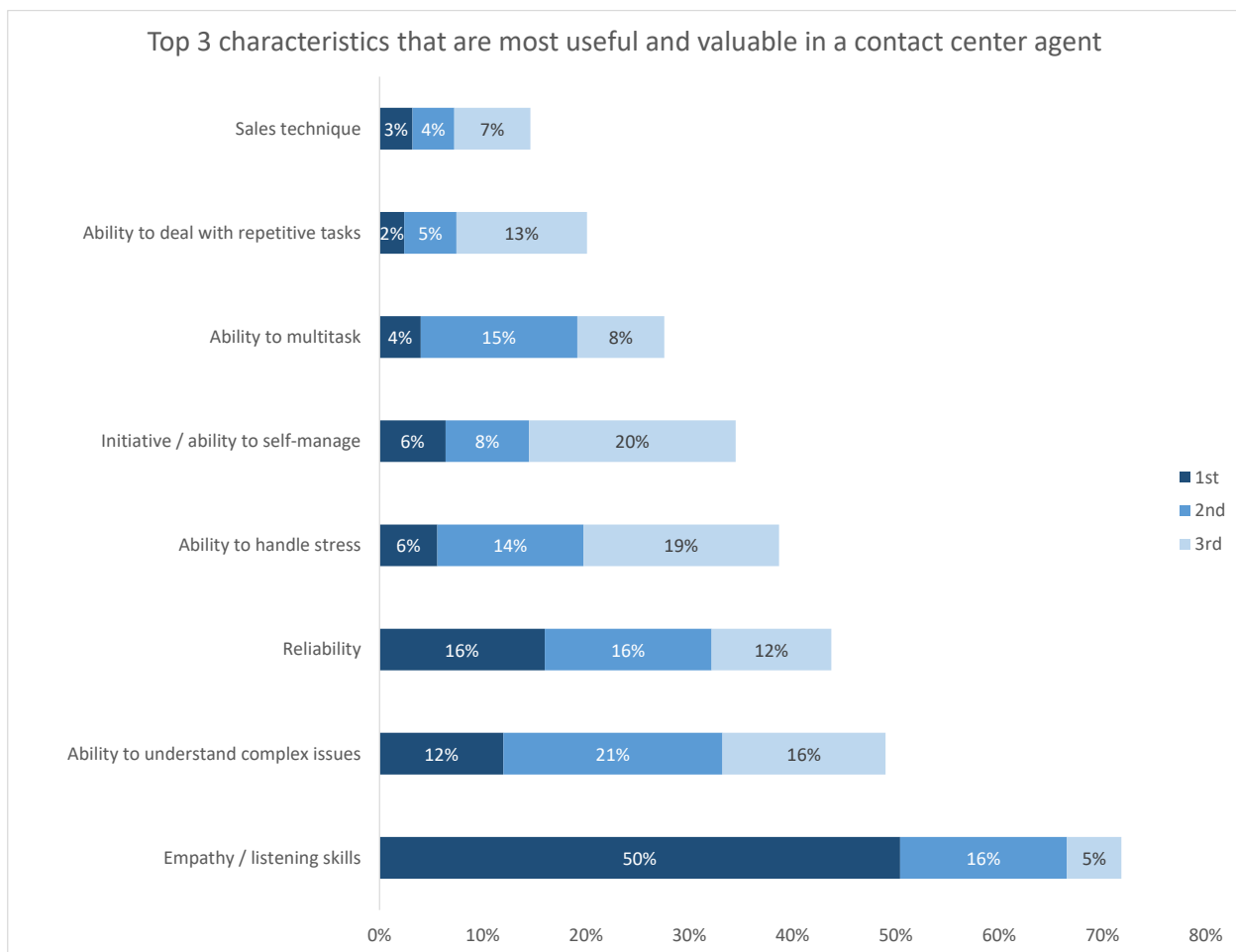
AGENT PERFORMANCE

Survey respondents were asked to rate the attributes that they believed were most useful and valuable in contact center agents.

By far the most important factor was empathy – the ability to listen, understand and help customers – which was placed in no.1 position by 50% of respondents. Of course, empathy is only really useful when the supporting systems and processes allow and empower the agent to handle the interaction as they need to: there is no use in valuing empathy in an agent if they are not permitted to spend the time required to fulfil the customer’s request, or the systems prevent them from achieving their goal.

An ability to understand complex issues is also very valued, and will continue to increase in importance as self-service handles more of the straightforward customer requests, leaving more complex and tricky work for human agents (it’s worth noting that this factor was ranked only 5th most important in 2014). Initiative and self-management are also seen as vital, and are of particular value in remote working environments where self-starting is an asset, and where outside help may be more difficult to access.

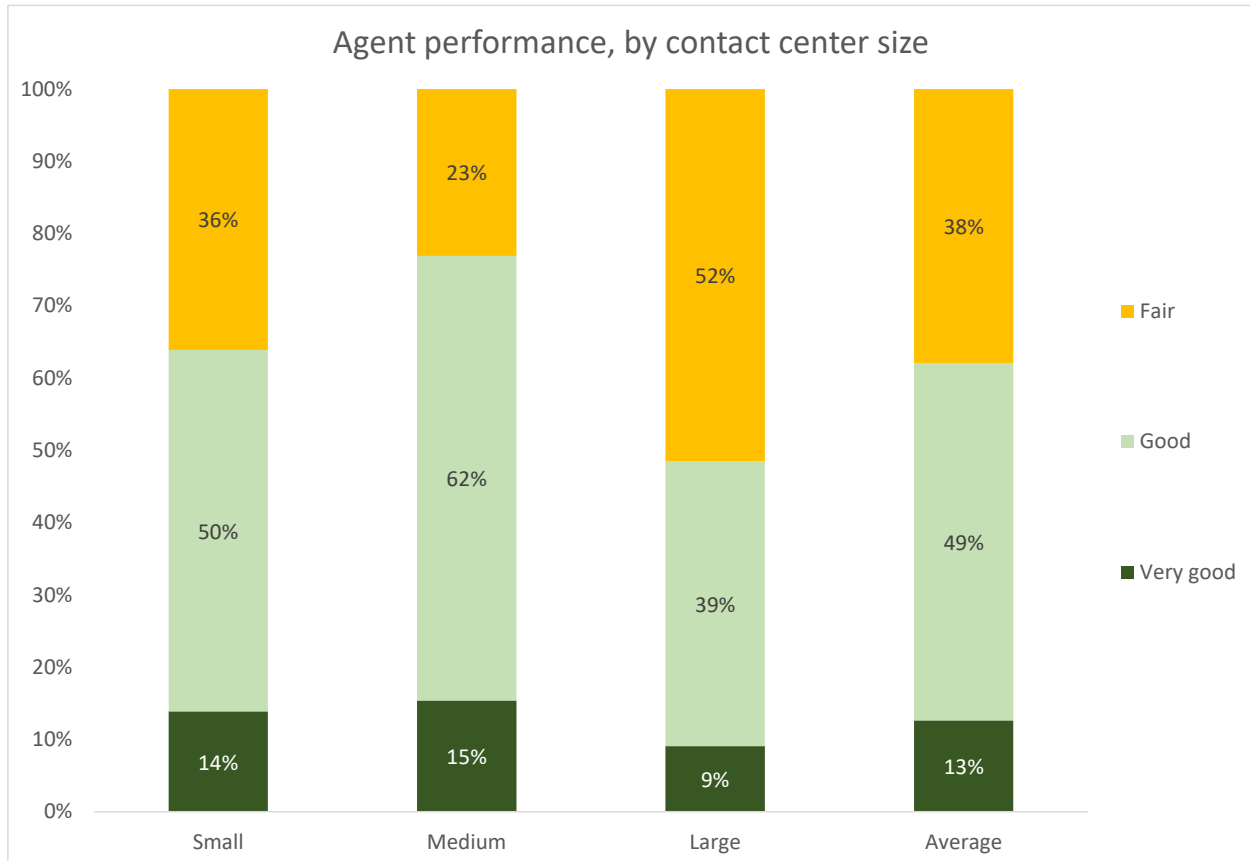
Figure 7: Top 3 characteristics that are most useful and valuable in a contact center agent



Looking at agent performance, survey respondents in large contact centers tend to be more likely to feel that there is room for improvement.

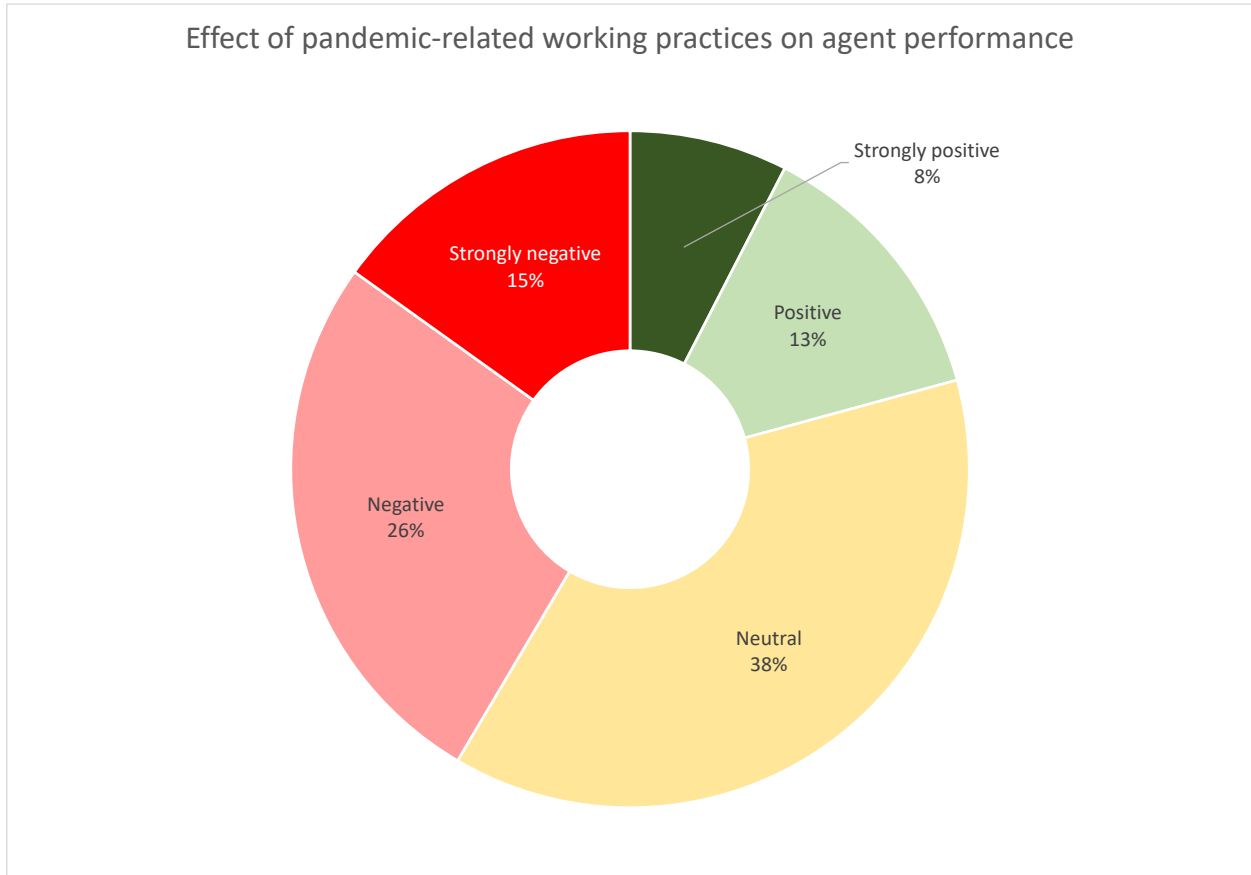
Generally, although 13% of those surveyed felt that their agent performance was “Very Good”, 38% stated that theirs was only “Fair”, which is a decline from the result of last year’s survey.

Figure 8: Agent performance, by contact center size



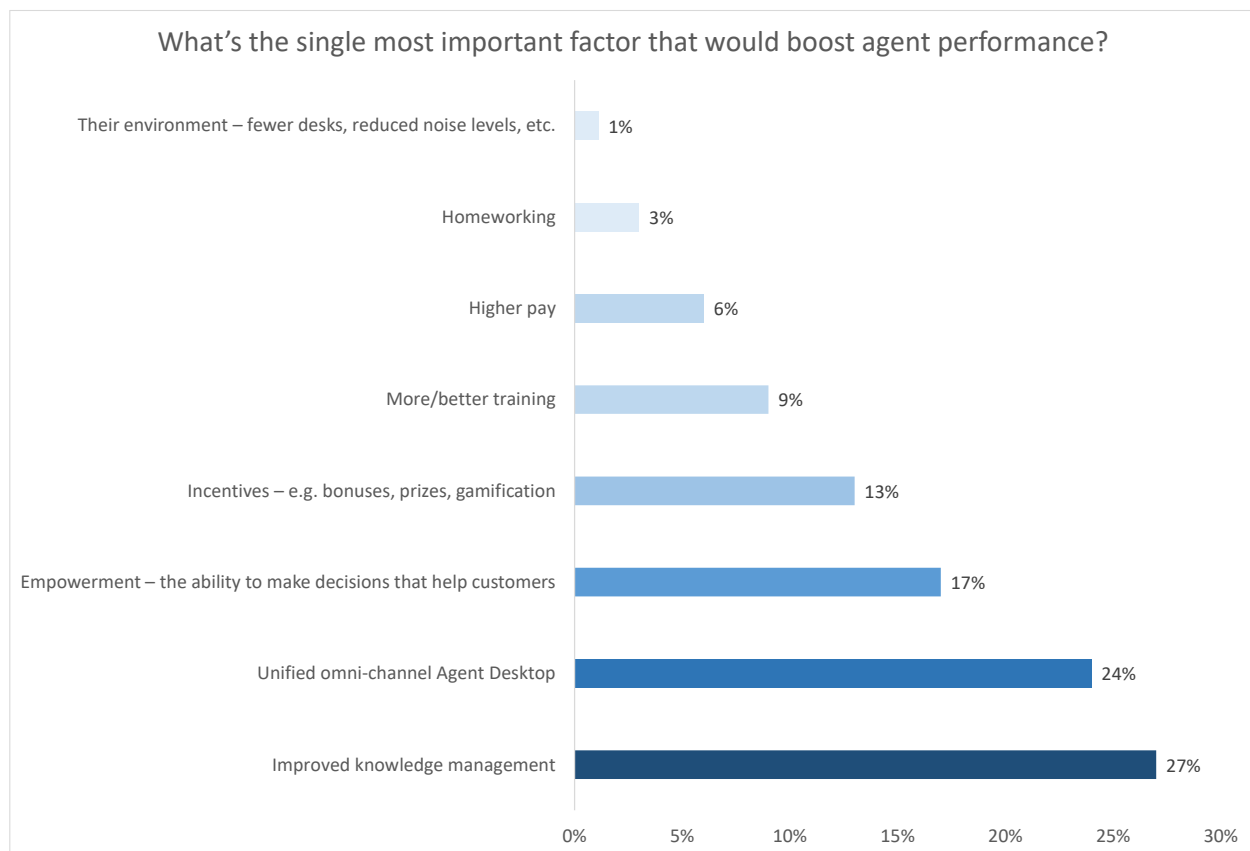
This decline in performance can be in large part attributed to the pandemic: 41% of survey respondents reported that it has had a negative effect on agent performance, although 21% believed that agent performance had improved.

Figure 9: Effect of pandemic-related working practices on agent performance



As with agent morale, respondents were presented with a list of factors that could improve agent performance and were asked to give their top three.

Figure 10: What's the single most important factor that would boost agent morale?



Empowering agents to make decisions that help customers – which increases first-contact resolution rates – was once again an important factor in increasing agent performance. As respondents also stated that this would improve agent morale, contact centers should focus upon the tools, processes and culture that supports agent empowerment. Improved knowledge management applications – the most popular top 3 factor – help with this, as they attempt to provide the agent with the information required to solve the customer's request while on the call, rather than requiring call transfers or callbacks.

A unified omnichannel agent desktop, providing agents with all of the information that they require on a single screen, also empowers agents and help solve the customer's issue first-time.

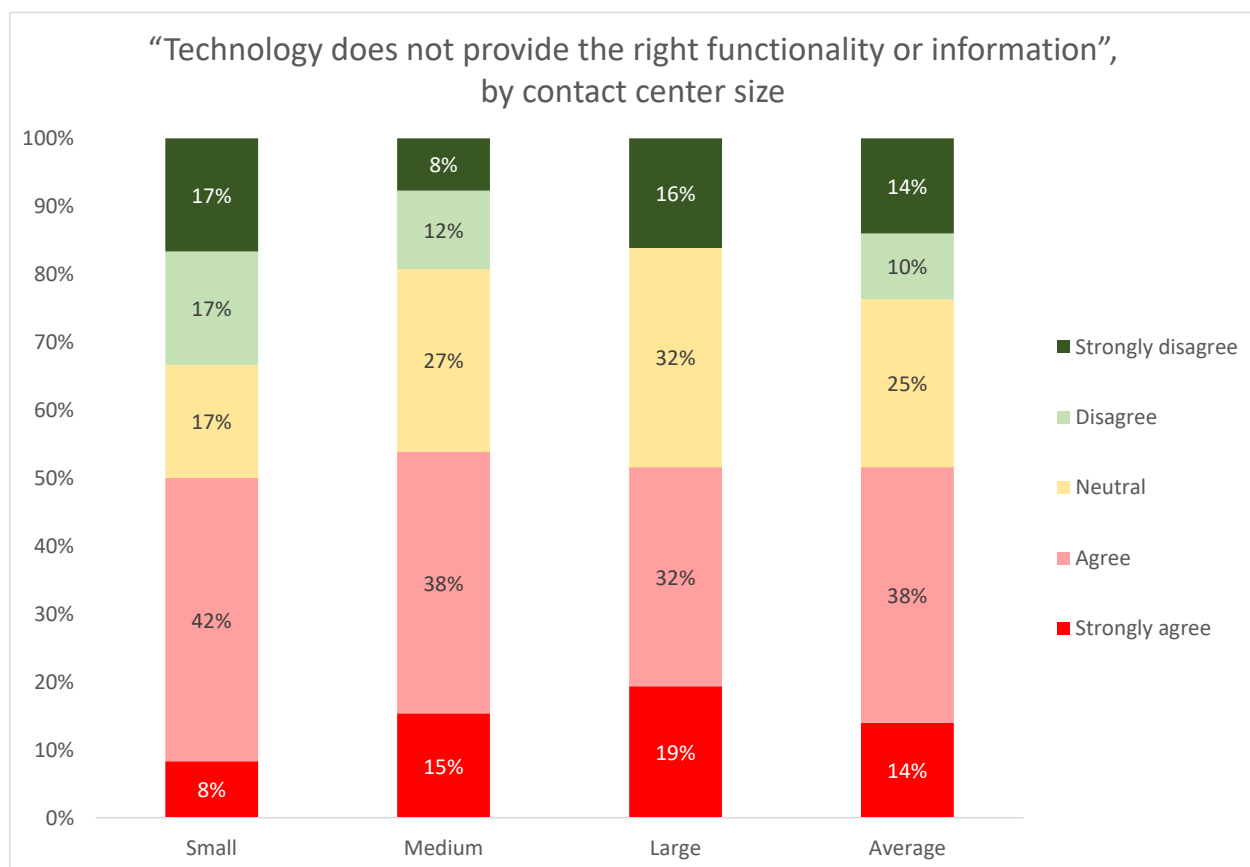
Higher pay, despite being viewed as a major boost to morale, was not seen as an effective way to increase performance: keeping the same staff, technology and processes while paying agents more won't make any major difference to performance. Incentives were also viewed as improving morale rather than performance, although they are useful in particularly high attrition environments such as many of the largest contact centers and those running outsourcing operations.

WHAT'S HOLDING BACK AGENT EMPOWERMENT?

Being seen as one of the keys to both morale and performance, agent empowerment – the ability to make the decisions and carry out the actions that would actually help customers – requires the business to trust the agent to do the job to the best of their ability, supporting them through culture, process and technology as needed, and is closely linked with first-contact resolution, which as we have seen elsewhere in this report is key to customer satisfaction.

Survey respondents were asked what was holding back agent empowerment: by far the most important factor was that the technology used does not deliver the required functionality or information, preventing even the most capable and empathetic agent from reaching their potential, with 52% of survey respondents agreeing that this was the case.

Figure 11: “Technology does not provide the right functionality or information”, by contact center size



37% of respondents agreed that some agents lacked experience and 27% blamed the contact center’s internal focus on hitting metrics such as call duration and throughput, but sub-optimal technology is certainly seen as the major culprit for a lack of agent empowerment.

Figure 12: “Agents lack the experience to go the extra mile”, by contact center size

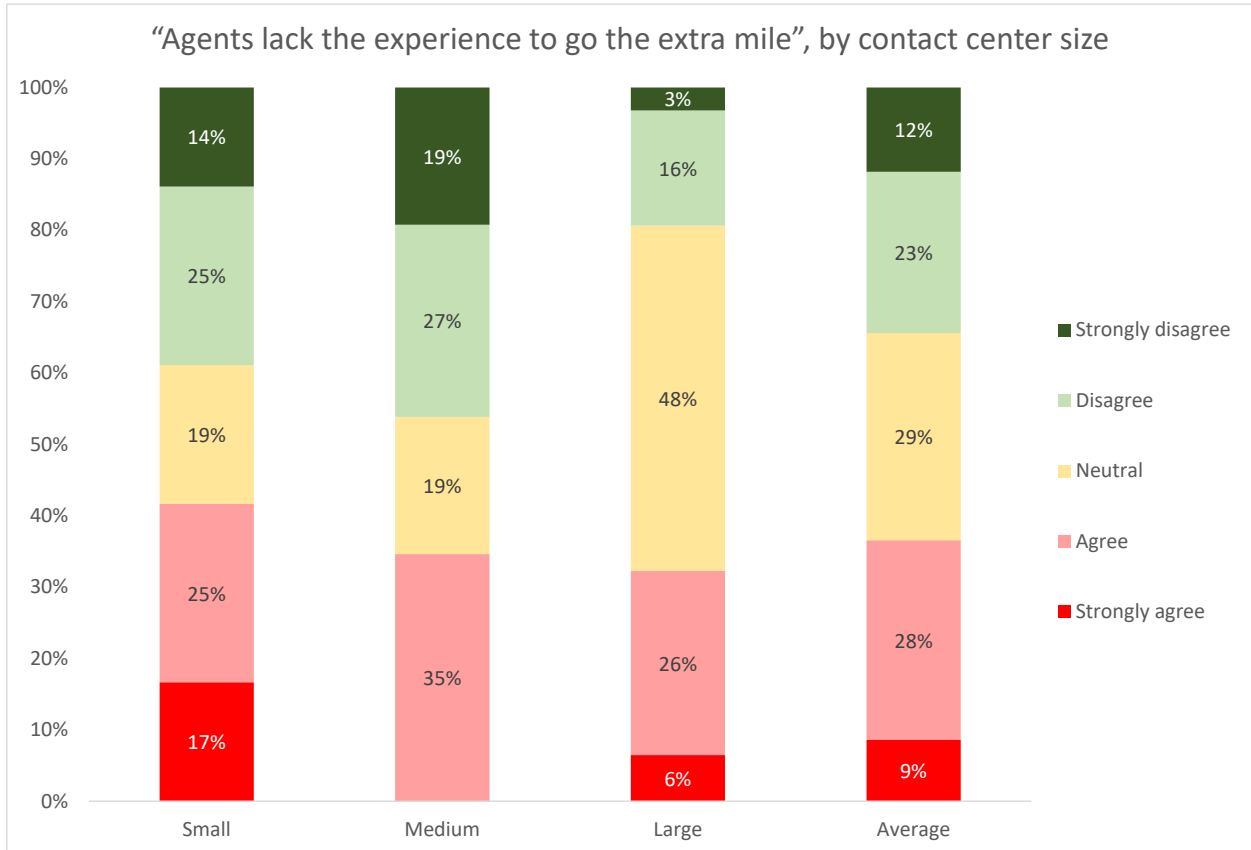
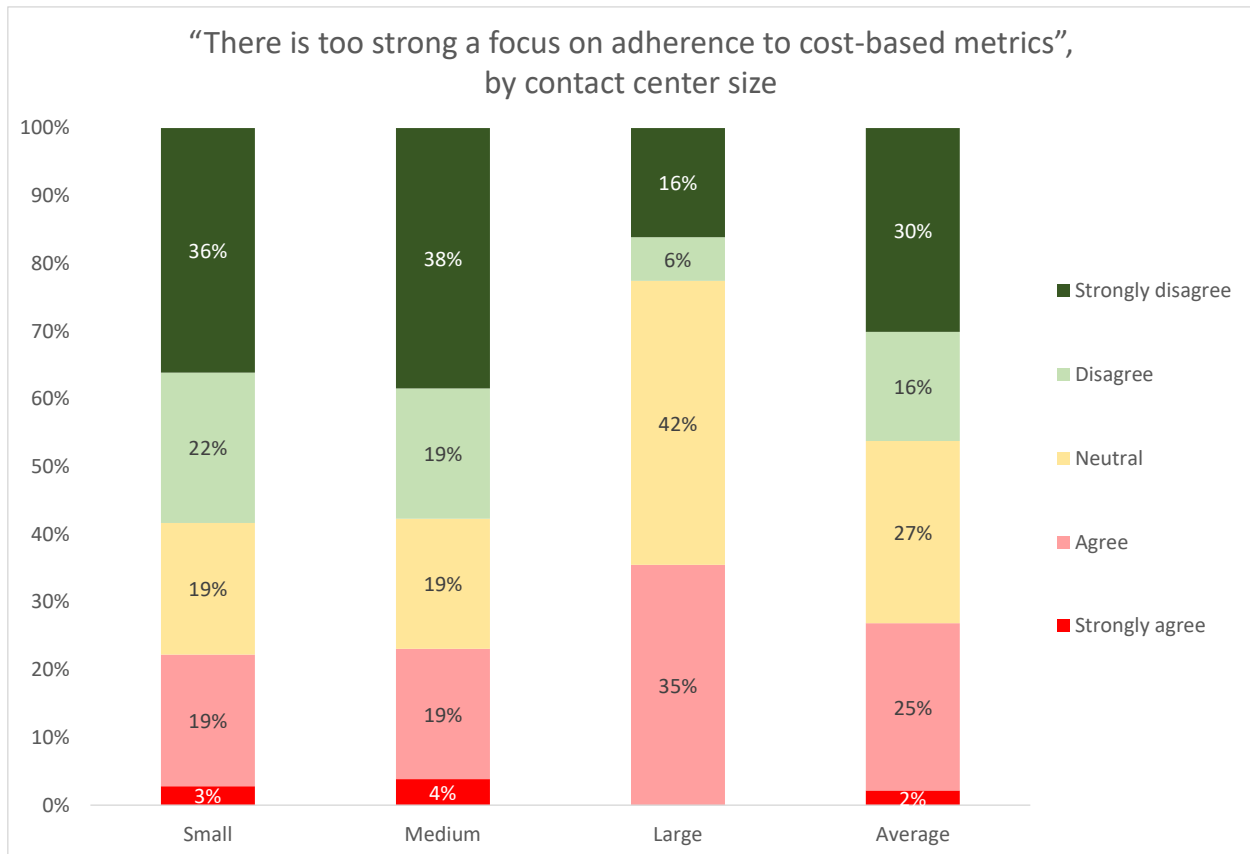


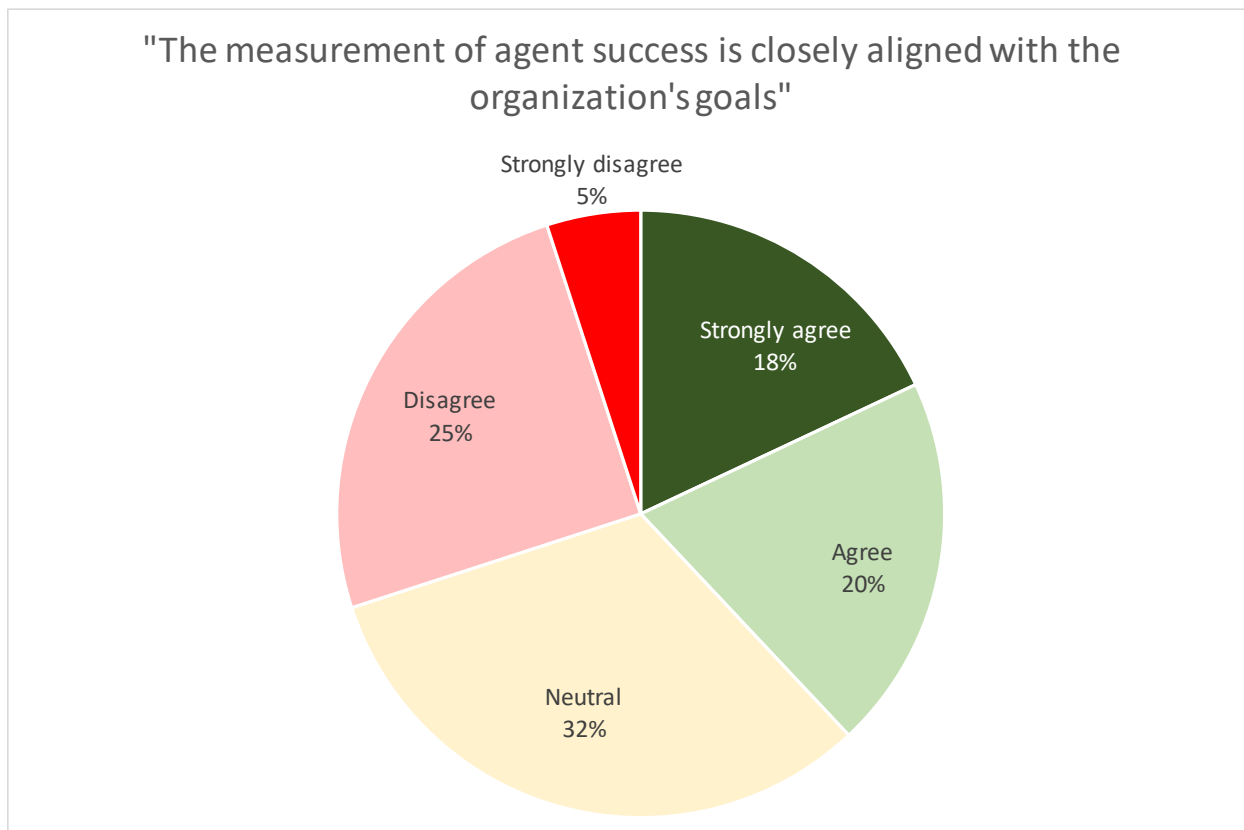
Figure 13: “There is too strong a focus on adherence to cost-based metrics”, by contact center size



ALIGNING THE AGENT WITH THE BUSINESS

Only 38% of survey respondents believe to any extent that agent work is actively aligned with the strategy of the wider business, with almost a half in large operations actively believing that there is a misalignment: that agents are measured on metrics and outcomes that are not in line with what the organization actually wants to achieve with its contact center.

Figure 14: "The measurement of agent success is closely aligned with the organization's goals"



It might reasonably be expected that the agent engagement/reward program will directly support those characteristics and achievements that are most highly valued by contact centers and businesses: specifically, customer satisfaction, attendance and punctuality, and customer service-focused metrics such as first contact resolution rates.

The following table shows this more clearly. The agent characteristics and achievements that are **encouraged and required** are shown, in order of importance, on the left (ranked by the greatest number of top 3 positions). The characteristics and achievements on which **rewards are actually based**, are placed on the right (ranked by the highest proportion of respondents stating that the characteristic was 'greatly' or 'somewhat' rewarded).

It would be expected that the most encouraged and desired characteristic would be that which was also the most important when considering how to reward agents: in this way agents would be rewarded closely based upon how much their performance aligned with the needs of the contact center and the business.

However, this is only partially the case. For example, although high customer satisfaction scores are stated to be the most important, it is only placed fourth in terms of characteristics rewarded.

On the opposite side, operational performance service metrics such as average handle time are seen as only the sixth-most important to be encouraged, but rated as the third most important characteristic to be actually rewarded. In this way, we can see that the characteristics needed and characteristics rewarded are somewhat disconnected, putting them out of alignment with the needs of the wider company.

However, the importance of good attendance and punctuality is both recognized and rewarded appropriately.

Figure 15: Comparison between characteristics encouraged, and characteristics rewarded

Rank	Agent characteristic encouraged	Agent characteristic rewarded
1 st	High CSAT / customer feedback scores	Good attendance and punctuality record
2 nd	Good attendance and punctuality record	High adherence to schedule / availability
3 rd	Other service metrics (e.g. first contact resolution rate)	Other performance metrics (e.g. short average handle time)
4 th	High adherence to schedule / availability	High CSAT/customer feedback scores
5 th	Sales / conversion rates	Other service metrics (e.g. first contact resolution rate)
6 th	Other performance metrics (e.g. short average handle time)	Sales / conversion rates
7 th	Other financial metrics (e.g. high % of promise to pay)	Other financial metrics (e.g. high % of promise to pay)

The difficulty in keeping agents engaged, understanding and focusing upon the behaviors, actions and characteristics that are most helpful for the contact center and the business, and the limited budget which most contact centers have for incentive programs create a situation whereby an alternative approach may need to be considered.

Gamification is an approach taken to improving agent engagement, aligning behaviors and characteristics with those of the contact center and wider enterprise: at the most basic level, it involves making work tasks into games. The contact center is a particularly rich potential environment for this approach, as it contains many of the factors that can make gamification successful:

- opportunity for achievement, reward and recognition at an individual level
- the possibility of team-based and goal-based quantified success
- a large pool of competitors and team members, that can be segmented appropriately to make competition and teamwork more manageable
- clearly defined tasks and metrics that can enable direct comparison between individuals and teams, over time, with measurable improvements possible.

The next section considers gamification in more depth.

CURRENT AND FUTURE USE OF GAMIFICATION

Generally speaking, contact center agents tend to work in stressful environments for relatively low pay, doing work which may sometimes be repetitive. Depending on the nature of the calls, they may be dealing mainly with customers who have negative experiences of the company, which is unlikely to make the agent happier about representing the enterprise, especially over time.

The new agent, while often feeling uncertain about their competence to do tasks, is usually willing to learn and is engaged in their work. As time goes on, their competence will increase but they are more likely to become bored and cynical, which may in the longer term lead to high levels of agent attrition and correspondingly lower levels of operation-wide competence. As such, there is a twofold problem: lack of engagement at agent level leading to lower quality and productivity, and the corresponding costs associated with unnecessary agent attrition.

Gamification looks to meet these twin challenges with two solutions of its own: making work a more fun place to be, while encouraging the behaviors, competencies and characteristics that most closely aligned with the enterprise's own requirements, through giving agents real-time feedback about their performance, the opportunities to improve themselves and to be seen positively by peers and managers with the attendant social and material rewards.

Through the process of awarding badges, points and achievement levels, gamification gives agents an opportunity to show their achievements and compete as individuals and part of the team. The goals in mind are set by the business, and these require a great deal of thought, as any agent behaviors and actions must be closely aligned with where the business wants to go. This is an area of particular potential risk for businesses: taking a simple example, rewarding agents based upon average call handling time so as to reduce cost could obviously lead to them dropping difficult calls or not answering customers fully in order to meet these targets. There is also a risk that the novelty of games will wear off, with rewards having to have a higher and higher tangible monetary value in order to keep people's motivation, so ongoing efforts must be made by management to keep games fresh and goals relevant.

It is also important to note that gamification – while providing feedback and rewards to agents on an individual level – should be used as part of a team or community experience, encouraging high performing agents to share their best practice and for all agents to be continually challenged and pushed to learn new skills and improve their own performance.

Contact centers that use gamification frequently report that most agents go beyond the required training schedule, completing extra units and developing skills further in order to accumulate more points and badges. In a heavily-incentivized sales environment, encouraging agents to take time off revenue generating activity to take training can be difficult, and this is a potential solution.

Gamification looks to increase agent engagement through:

- providing immediate feedback to the agent, who does not have to wait until the scheduled supervisory review to see how they are doing
- improving esprit de corps through the pooling of knowledge and collaboration within a group in order to achieve specific goals for which all will be rewarded
- cut down on the amount of time required for new agents to become competent, providing real-time feedback in order to encourage positive behaviors
- reduce the amount of management time required to run incentives programs, and deliver them more fairly and objectively
- focus upon and reward those characteristics and behaviors that are most closely aligned with the contact center's and enterprise's own requirements.

This final point – encouraging agents to do what benefits the business – is a key purpose for gamification. As seen earlier in this chapter, many organizations are rewarding agents for behaviors which are not closely aligned with where the business needs to go, while ignoring those attitudes and characteristics that would actually support them in their journey, often because these latter are more difficult to measure.

Gamification can help businesses to support their objectives, and to achieve specific results. For example, steps to make gamification assist with achieving a company's business priorities could include:

- clarifying the enterprise's objectives
- identifying contact center metrics that directly impact upon these objectives
- identifying the agent characteristics, behavior and actions that impact these metrics the most
- developing a gamification strategy that can measure and improve these metrics, through motivating the agents to act in ways that support this goal.

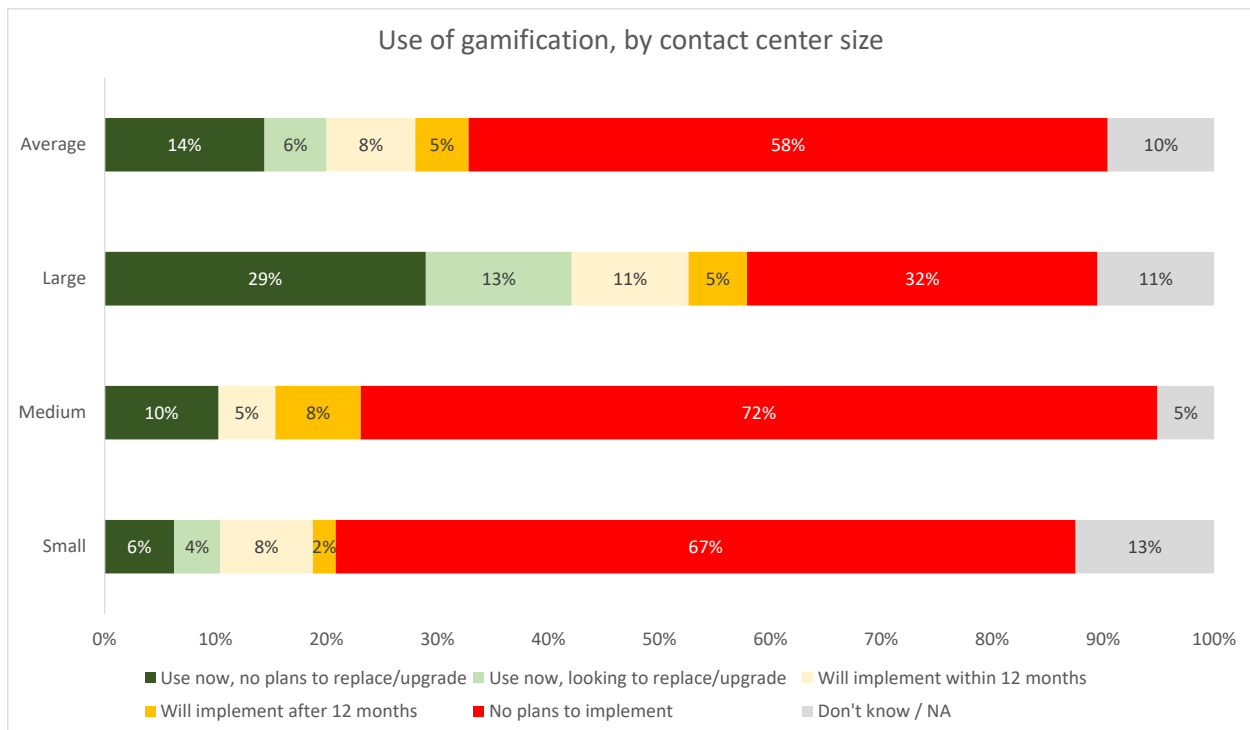
For businesses which want to achieve specific results, gamification can assist through:

- increasing the skills and competencies of new agents more rapidly, decreasing time to productivity by switching from formal, classroom lecture-based training into structured real-life work tasks
- further developing the skills of agents through encouraging and rewarding the completion of extra training courses and activities beyond what is required
- cutting agent retention through increasing agent engagement, and recognizing and rewarding positive behaviors and characteristics.

20% of respondents currently use gamification within their contact center operations, and a further 8% believe that they will implement this within 12 months.

The use of gamification is much more prevalent in larger operations, but there is some intention to implement it in the short-term in medium and large operations.

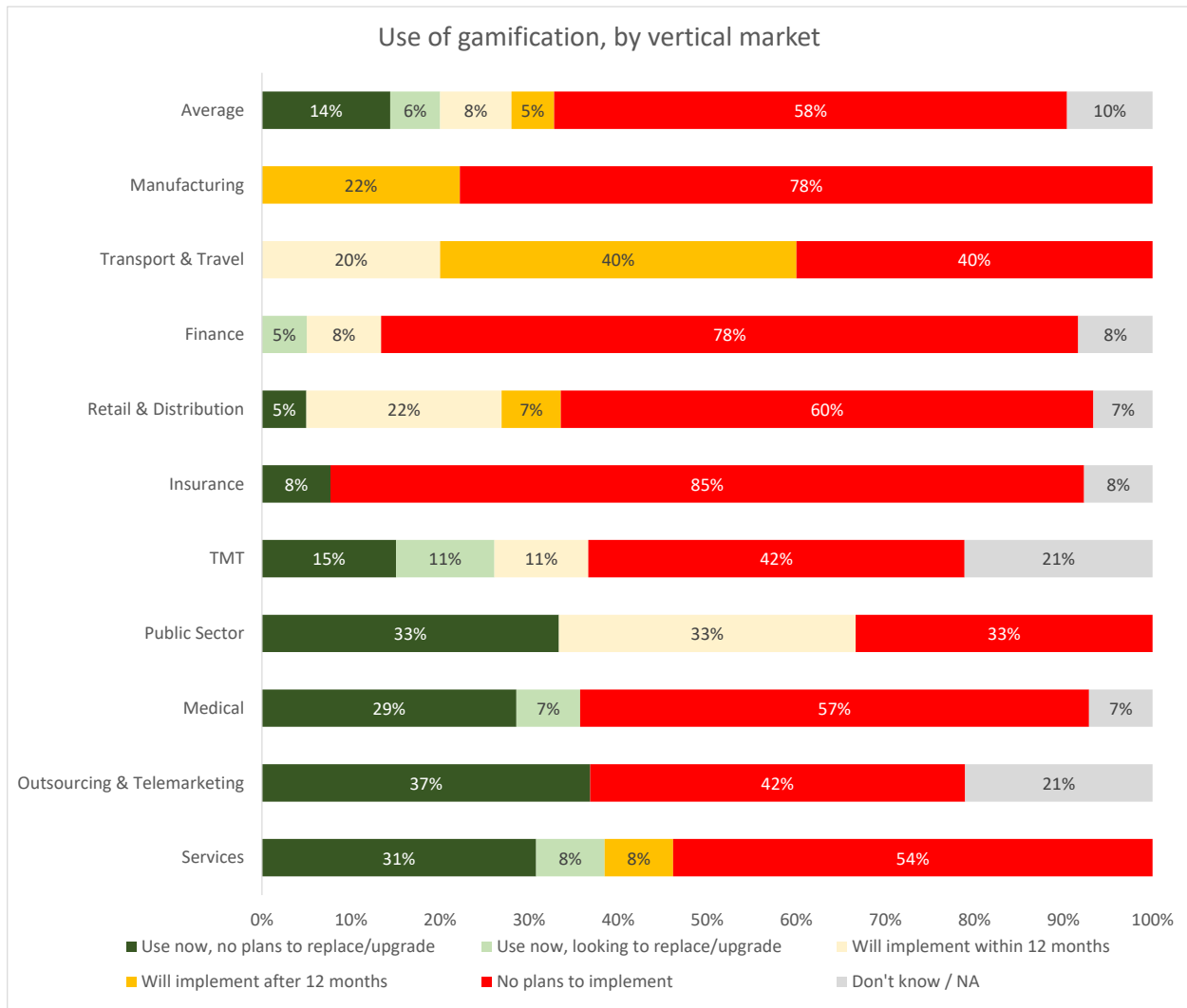
Figure 16: Use of gamification, by contact center size



There is a danger in over-analyzing data where the segments are too small, and this can be the case when considering vertical market implementations of an emerging solution.

However, it is interesting to note that the services, outsourcing and medical respondents from this year’s survey are the highest current users of this solution, and the transport & travel, public sector and retail respondents report a strong interest in implementing gamification in the short-term.

Figure 17: Use of gamification, by vertical market



Looking at the activity type of respondents, those with some sales activity – which are already culturally used to the public, competitive practice of sharing sales targets and achievements – are usually more likely to be using gamification.

ABOUT CONTACTBABEL

ContactBabel is the contact center industry expert. If you have a question about how the industry works, or where it's heading, the chances are we have the answer.

We help US and UK contact centers compare themselves to their closest competitors so they can understand what they are doing well, what needs to improve and how they can do this.

The coverage provided by our massive and ongoing primary research projects is matched by our experience analyzing the contact center industry. We understand how technology, people and process best fit together, and how they will work collectively in the future.

Email: info@contactbabel.com

Website: www.contactbabel.com

Telephone: +44 (0)191 271 5269

Free research reports available from www.contactbabel.com (UK and US versions) include:

- The Inner Circle Guide to Agent Engagement & Empowerment
- The Inner Circle Guide to AI, Chatbots & Machine Learning
- The Inner Circle Guide to AI-Enabled Self-Service
- The Inner Circle Guide to Cloud-based Contact Center Solutions
- The Inner Circle Guide to Contact Center Remote Working Solutions
- The Inner Circle Guide to Customer Engagement & Personalization
- The Inner Circle Guide to Customer Interaction Analytics
- The Inner Circle Guide to Fraud Reduction & PCI Compliance
- The Inner Circle Guide to Omnichannel
- The Inner Circle Guide to Omnichannel Workforce Optimization
- The Inner Circle Guide to Outbound & Call Blending
- The Inner Circle Guide to Video & Next-Generation Customer Contact
- The Inner Circle Guide to the Voice of the Customer

- The European Contact Center Decision-Makers' Guide
- The UK Contact Centre Decision-Makers' Guide
- The US Contact Center Decision-Makers' Guide
- The UK Customer Experience Decision-Makers' Guide
- The US Customer Experience Decision-Makers' Guide

- UK Contact Centre Verticals: Communications; Finance; Insurance; Outsourcing; Retail & Distribution; Utilities
- US Contact Center Verticals: Communications; Finance; Healthcare; Insurance; Outsourcing; Retail & Distribution.

To get the full "2022 US Contact Center Decision-Makers' Guide" for free, please visit www.contactbabel.com/research