

# THE EVOLUTION OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IN THE CONTACT CENTER

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Challenges and recommendations for building meaningful engagement strategies.

BY BRIAN BURKE, CGC



**A** Google search for “employee engagement” returns millions of pages of content ranging from suggested activities to the impact engagement programs have on productivity, turnover and a company’s bottom line. And while some of the existing information about workforce engagement is valuable, some of it can be misguided, unintentionally convincing managers to invest in programs that offer little ROI.

*Defined by Forbes as the emotional commitment the employee has to the organization and its goals*, employee engagement encompasses the tangible and non-tangible factors that help employees identify with the work they do and the company for which they work. This alignment of individual and organizational goals and values is the bedrock of employee loyalty and engagement. In the contact center, workforce engagement is particularly important since employees represent the face of the company to its customers, and managers face ongoing challenges related to [agent turnover](#).

But it is no longer the case that managers are the only people concerned with engagement. In fact, the millennials and Gen Xers who comprise today’s contact centers have begun to request more authentic engagement initiatives in exchange

for their loyalty and employment longevity. The tactics of old—think free lunches and the occasional “high-five” from a manager—no longer suffice.

While many companies, contact centers included, have made strides in their employee engagement efforts, there is more work to be done. This piece addresses engagement challenges specific to the contact center and lays out recommendations for contact center managers to build meaningful engagement strategies into each phase of employment to create and sustain a more productive and more engaged workforce.

## The History of Employee Engagement

The pursuit of engaging a company’s workforce has been underway in some form for more than 50 years. During the 1970s and 1980s, human resources personnel focused on achieving employee satisfaction, which included fulfilling employees’ socialization and participation needs but did little to connect their values and goals with those of the organization.

The term “employee engagement” was coined and first used by William A. Kahn in the *Academy of Management Journal* in 1990. Kahn’s exploration of how employees incorporate their

personal selves and motivation into their work gave way to a series of surveys by Gallup designed to understand how workplace relationships, employment expectations, and employees’ connection to their employers impacted their productivity. In the years that followed, organizations began leveraging data from the Gallup surveys to demonstrate a business case for engaging employees.

Since then, engagement programs have become the norm across most organizations, contributing in some instances to substantial increases in productivity, reductions in turnover and enhanced employee loyalty.

## Engagement Challenges in the Contact Center

The nature of business in the contact center creates employee engagement challenges that other industries do not face. Obstacles related to turnover, confidentiality and transparency, however, should not be an excuse for limited engagement efforts. In effect, recognizing the challenges is the first step toward overcoming them.



**TURNOVER.** Some amount of agent turnover in the contact center is unavoidable; contact center staffing needs ebb and flow in coordination

with the programs underway at any given time. However, turnover—whether planned or spontaneous—can alter the culture and cause employee engagement to suffer.

**GROWTH + DEVELOPMENT.** Many customer

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service agents see contact center employment as a short-term job as opposed to a long-term career choice purely because they are not aware of the growth opportunities the industry affords. The mentality that a customer service representative is under temporary employ can impact his or her ability to identify with the organization.

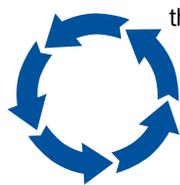
**ACTIVE PARTICIPATION.** The need to react quickly to clients' programming needs creates an environment where managers make decisions and agents execute on those decisions. Oftentimes, there is little room for a participative approach to the work, which can make alignment of personal and professional interests difficult.

**BUSINESS VOLUME.** As business volume increases quickly, and managers are forced to focus their attention on operations, employee engagement efforts can too easily take a back seat.

**TRANSPARENCY.** With contact center programs becoming increasingly sensitive and the data they support more confidential in nature, customer service representatives may be less privy to details about the programs they support, creating a disconnect that adversely impacts engagement.

## Strategies for Agent Engagement

Employee engagement efforts inevitably will vary by industry and organization. But one



thing all effective programs have in common is that they are not one-time events; true engagement doesn't happen following an employee satisfaction survey or in an employee's first week on the job. The most successful engagement programs infiltrate every stage of the employment experience, from recruitment through company exit.

### RECRUITMENT

#### ACCURATELY REPRESENT THE COMPANY.

The most tried-and-true way to ensure a disengaged workforce is to inaccurately represent your company or the work for which you are hiring. Transparency in any employment experience begins during recruitment, when candidates should receive an honest picture of the company so they can evaluate

whether their personal values align. Ensure your recruitment partners understand your values and the programs for which you are recruiting so that they can accurately represent your company to potential employees.

**HIRE FOR FIT.** Whenever possible, hire for "fit," which entails recruiting people who are



already committed to the work you do and how you do it. For example, if you're ramping up for a program that centers on victims who have been displaced from their homes due to a natural disaster, evaluate candidates on their history empathizing with callers in distressing situations. Hiring for "fit" enables employees to more easily incorporate their personal selves into their work and, thus, engage with the company.

**GET INVOLVED.** Managers who make time to conduct interviews or otherwise meet with candidates during the recruitment process create an early connection with those agents, which facilitates increased job confidence and may create an environment where agents feel more comfortable approaching leadership with concerns. Opening these communications channels will build loyalty over the long term by allowing employees to become active participants in the company.

### TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT

**TRANSPARENCY.** Transparency is essential to building trust, and the best place to create a sense of organizational transparency is during training. Whenever possible, avoid the propensity to train agents solely on the specific programs they will support in the near-term. Rather, provide trainees with a 360-degree view into both your business and your clients' programs, providing as much background and insight as possible. Not only will this approach improve their interactions with callers, but it will demonstrate your trust in their capabilities and build their confidence, both keys to engagement.

**PARTICIPATION.** Customer service agents on the front line are among a contact center's greatest assets; they know the company's day-to-day operations better than anyone. Training events represent a perfect opportunity for managers to recognize their high-performing agents by asking them to

participate in the design and deployment of new hire training. Their expertise will be beneficial to both trainers and trainees, but more importantly, they will appreciate the recognition and the chance to participate in an important company function.

**PRIORITIZE CROSSTRAINING.** Demonstrate the career potential your contact center affords its customer service representatives by enabling them to learn new skills through cross-training. Start an ongoing dialogue with agents to discover what they find interesting or compelling about the contact center. Then, as business volume allows, set aside time for agents to shadow employees or managers doing that kind of work. The new skills they pick up will mean more depth for your talent bench, and the activity itself will help agents envision their next career steps with your organization, increasing the potential for employment longevity.

### DAILY OPERATIONS

**MANAGEMENT VISIBILITY.** Management visibility and accessibility is a key driver in employee engagement—if employees don't feel they are a vital part of the company, they have little reason to fully commit themselves to that company. Open-door policies, scheduled availability for "drop-ins" with senior leadership, and a consistent management presence on the floor go a long way toward helping employees recognize that they are a top priority for the company.

**MENTORSHIP.** A good mentor can be the difference between engaged and disengaged



employees, so instituting a strong mentorship program is an important component of any engagement strategy. Consider assigning all new-hires a peer mentor whose job is to answer questions and help the new agent ease into his or her role. Then, build time for those mentor-mentee relationships to develop, as these social connections in the workplace will help foster engagement.

**COACHING AND RECOGNITION.** The concept of coaching comes with a negative connotation, but it shouldn't. In fact, managers should use coaching techniques in both positive and constructive situations, pulling

lessons and key takeaways out of daily events to help develop their agents' skill sets. The public recognition of a job well done can be one of the most powerful tools for building employee loyalty, but it must be organic and consistent to be effective. Aim to recognize at least 3-5 people every day for their positive contributions, and make public recognition a part of all town halls and team meetings.

**QUALITY CONTROL**

**EMPLOYEE ASSESSMENTS.** Undoubtedly your contact center has quality control



mechanisms in place to ensure high-quality customer service, but how do you ensure a quality employment experience? Consider leveraging

suggestion boxes or management evaluations, where agents can provide confidential feedback and suggestions for improving their experiences in your contact center. The

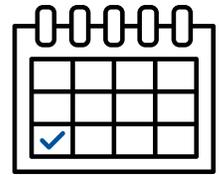
opportunity to contribute feedback—and to see that feedback seriously considered and acted on—enhances participation and creates loyalty.

**EMPLOYEE EXIT.** Planned turnover in the contact center must be handled carefully and with transparency to ensure that its impact on the organization's culture is minimal. Employees should hear news of staffing changes as soon as possible and directly from managers before that news hits the grapevine or watercooler. In addition to providing support for exiting employees, be mindful of the remaining employees, particularly as it relates to the extra workload they will carry and their own concerns over job security, which can create a tense working environment and cause disengagement.

**It's a Daily Commitment**

Employee engagement as a concept has come a long way since 1990, and it is fair to assume it will continue to evolve in the

following decades, perhaps in ways we can't imagine today. But what likely will not change is the commitment managers must make to incorporating engagement efforts into every facet of employment as a way to create a more meaningful professional experience for every employee, every day. ●



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