



Reducing the problems caused by agent attrition

An independent White Paper by ContactBabel

No.2 in a series of 4 investigating the solutions to the pain points experienced by the UK contact centre industry, commissioned by

AVAYA

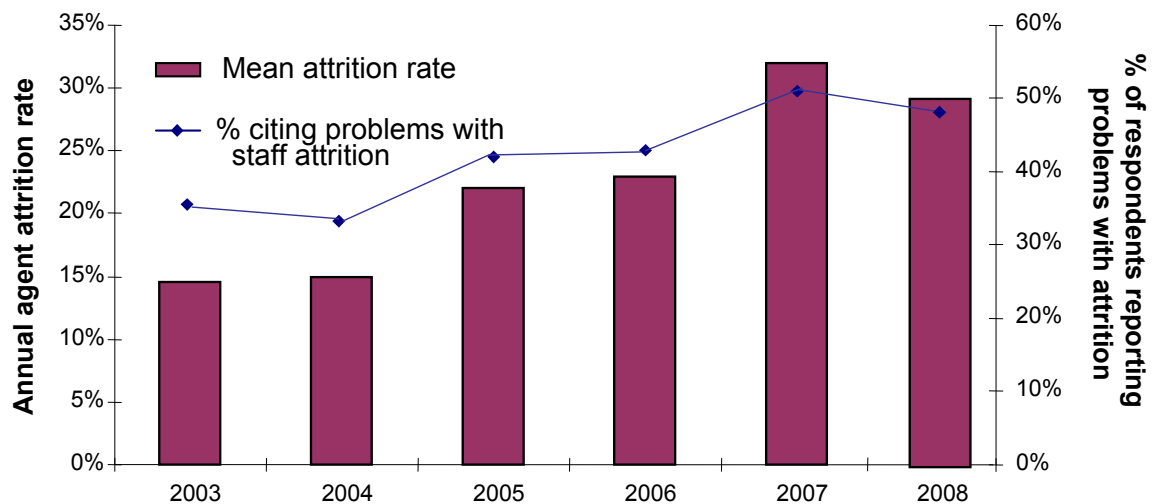
INTELLIGENT COMMUNICATIONS

The Scale of Agent Attrition

Throughout all of the contact centre studies that ContactBabel has carried out over many years, whether in the US or Europe, staff attrition has consistently been quoted as one of the major concerns of contact centre management. Along with staff absences, high levels of unexpected attrition can cripple a contact centre's ability to provide even an acceptable level of service, raising costs and creating a negative customer experience, as well as placing massive stress on those agents who remain at work.

However, a certain amount of agent attrition is seen as inevitable, due to the repetitive character of some of the work, generally low levels of pay and the mercurial nature of the often-young labour pool. Attrition itself isn't the issue – **excessive** attrition is where problems come from.

Chart 1: Agent attrition rates and problems with attrition, 2003-2008



The preceding chart shows that not only has attrition in UK contact centres been on the rise since 2003, almost doubling in fact, but that the proportion of contact centres having problems with attrition has increased as well. However, this increase in problems is at a somewhat lower rate, suggesting that contact centres have had to become more capable of dealing with high levels of attrition as a matter of course.

Looking more deeply at where attrition is hurting the most, it can be seen that larger operations tend to have higher productivity rates, as measured by call throughput, they also have much higher staff attrition levels and problems with this attrition. Furthermore, new agents are almost three times as likely to leave a very large contact centre than a small operation within the induction period or even within the first 6 months¹. The finance industry tends to have large contact centres - an average of 196 agent positions, against an industry average of 123 - so this would tend to exacerbate the other causes of attrition.

Table 1: Staff attrition and associated problems by contact centre size

Agent positions	% of contact centres having a problem with staff attrition	Staff attrition rate
Small (<50 seats)	24%	22%
Medium (51-200 seats)	48%	29%
Large (>200 seats)	71%	36%
Mean average	47%	28%

At a vertical market level, there are very different attrition levels, with outsourcers usually having a very high attrition rate (although many such operations do factor this into their business plans, so there are often fewer problems in this sector than might be expected). However, in 2008, the highest levels of attrition (and also problems arising from attrition) were found in the telecoms and finance sectors. 86% of finance operations state that recruitment is a problem for them as well.

Table 2: Problems caused by staff attrition by vertical market

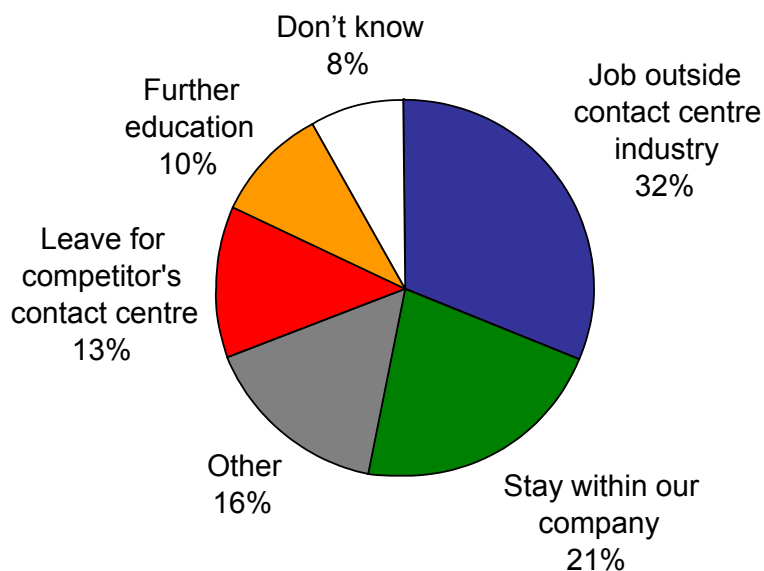
Vertical market	% of contact centres having a problem with staff attrition	Staff attrition rate
Telecoms	80%	41%
Finance	73%	39%
Outsourcing	49%	34%
Services	54%	31%
IT	39%	29%
Transport and Travel	28%	27%
Retail and Distribution	30%	19%
Public Sector	36%	14%
Mean average	47%	28%

¹ “The UK Contact Centre Operational Review - 4th edition, 2006”, ContactBabel

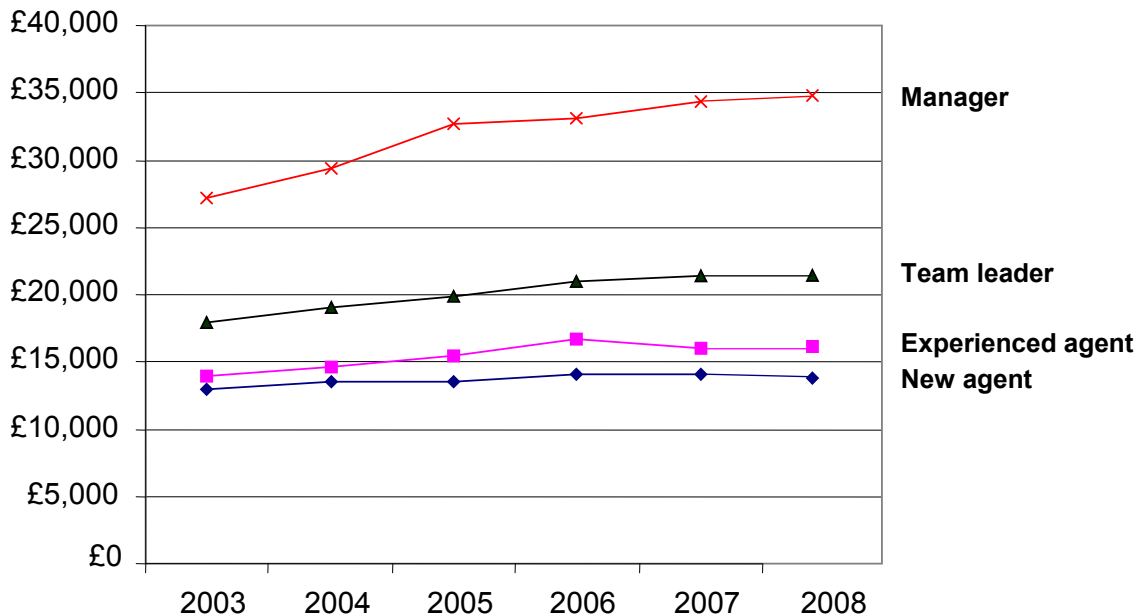
These figures - the steady creep upwards of attrition and its associated problems - are obviously of concern to the contact centre industry as a whole. Worse, there are no signs that attrition will become less of a problem in the future, as the issues that drive attrition upwards are still very much present:

- The demand by customers for contact centre services is still growing strongly. 66% of respondents to the 2008 UK Contact Centre Operational Review were planning to grow headcount in 2009, with the average increase being 10.5%
- The same report found that staffing (recruitment, attrition management and training) was the no.1 area of planned contact centre investment in the next 2 years
- However, the labour pool of available agents is getting smaller. The following chart shows that contrary to popular belief, relatively few agents leave to move to another contact centre (although some large operations in highly-competitive areas do have this problem), so that, more often than not, the contact centre industry loses a departing agent's skills and experience entirely. However, it should be noted that a higher-than-average proportion of financial services agents (29%, against an average of 21%) move into the wider business, meaning that although the contact centre still has to find a replacement, the business as a whole keeps their abilities.

Agent destination after leaving contact centre



The bottom-line is that the contact centre industry needs to continue growing, but the available labour pool is shrinking. Normally, we would expect to see a corresponding increase in salary levels to increase the supply of potential recruits, but this has not happened, perhaps as a result of contact centres not having a free hand to set their own salaries.



As the chart above shows, salaries have not risen in line with attrition, and in the case of the new contact centre agent, even in line with inflation since 2003. The average new agent earns just under £14,000 today, whereas the index of average earnings since 2003 suggests that a new agent salary of £15,200 - £15,500 would be expected. This year, the finance sector paid an average of £13,624 to new agents, against £13,103 in 2003.

The basic economic theory of supply and demand can be used to suggest two ways in which the attrition problem can be addressed - as it seems that simply paying more money isn't an option for most companies - the demand for the type of contact centre interactions that require agents should be reduced, and/or the supply of high-quality agents should be increased.

The Effects of Agent Attrition

Attrition has costs, both direct and indirect, which filter insidiously throughout the contact centre, affecting quality, performance, cost and revenue.

The effect of agent attrition on quality and performance

Having fewer staff available to take and make calls will necessarily impact upon the performance of the contact centre. Certainly, queues will get longer, and call abandonment rates will rise, which negatively impacts upon customer satisfaction. There may also be pressure on agents to finish the call before the natural end, leading to lower first-call resolution rates and lower customer satisfaction.

Inexperienced agents - the ones brought in to replace those that have left - are also less likely to give the correct answers first-time, may pass more calls to other agents and run the risk of their unfamiliarity with the contact centre's systems causing errors or omissions in data entry and process initiation which will cause further problems down the line. This is particularly the danger in finance contact centres, where legacy systems are still very much used, and agents usually have to find their way around multiple screen and applications, trusting to their experience not to make mistakes.

Additionally, less-experienced agents tend to take longer to be fully-productive meaning that they take longer to deal effectively with each call. On average, it takes just over three months before a new starter is fully-productive, which means that for the first 13 or 14 weeks, an agent is still coming to terms with their job and is not pulling their full weight. This low performance is even more noticeable in businesses where the role is generally more challenging, perhaps as a result of the technical complexities of the role, the legislative requirements or any other business-specific reason for delayed competency. In the case of the finance sector - which is renowned for its complexity - new agents take more than a month longer than average to become fully-productive, and some contact centres even state that it can take more than a year.

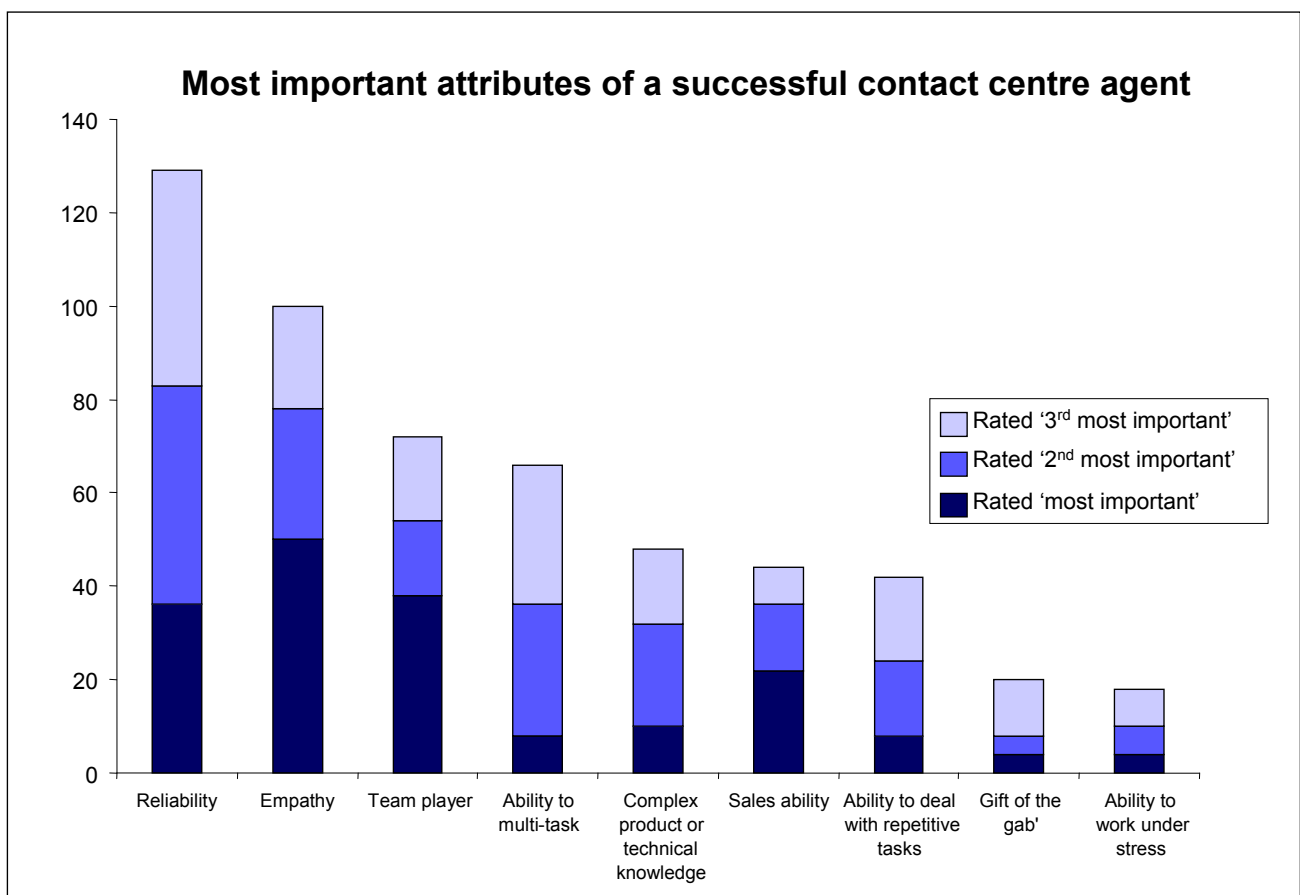
This puts further pressure on the rest of the contact centre to work harder, leading to entire shifts where agents are working flat-out to cope with call volumes. Attrition and absence often come together, as both are linked with poor morale, and the 'temporary attrition' effect of short-term absence can mean that those that come to work feel angry about having to do the work of several to make up for those who can't be bothered to come in every day. The result is often that the overworked agent will leave completely. The increased requirement on team leaders and managers to hand-hold junior agents is also worthy of mention.

Even for agents who are satisfied with their job, working in a high-attrition environment is bad for general morale. Quite apart from the need to work harder to make up for the gaps left by inexperienced or absent staff, no-one likes to feel that they are being left on a sinking ship, and having new faces come and go without being able to get to know fellow-workers can be dispiriting.

The effect of agent attrition on cost

There are significant direct costs associated with attrition, in terms of recruitment and training. Induction courses for a finance contact centre cost an average of £2,159 per head, with recruitment costs estimated at over £2,500 per agent. At a minimum of £4,500 per new finance hire, attrition gets expensive very quickly, but things are even worse than this, as a high proportion of new hires never make it to full productivity, costing thousands of pounds while delivering very little.

Understanding the 0-to-90 day attrition data is critical to being able to reduce attrition, as most organisations believe that 50 to 60% of their annualised attrition occurs in the first 90 days after recruitment. This strongly suggests that there are often errors made in the type of people employed, who are all but doomed to failure by their unsuitability for the task. Businesses should collect information on the sorts of behaviour and characteristics of people likely to do well in each role - preferably analysing the people who are successful in the roles already - and pre-screen applicants against those criteria.



The preceding chart investigates the attributes that contact centre managers believe are most important for a successful contact centre agent to have. While each vertical market, contact centre size and activity has different ideas, some key areas emerged.

28% of respondents stated that **empathy** - the ability to see another's point of view - is the no.1 most important attribute for a contact centre agent to have. This is a characteristic which is hard to learn, and which is ripe for identifying in the recruitment phase. Empathy is important for an agent to display in order to make the caller feel that someone is listening to and understanding them, and that they are trying to solve their issue, rather than just seeing the caller as a nuisance. As such, empathy is vital for improving customer satisfaction and loyalty, cross-selling and up-selling.

However, the attribute of **reliability** appears most often in the top 3 agent requirements. Reliable agents have low absence rates and keep working away at their tasks, a trait which the process-focused contact centre prizes highly.

Perhaps surprisingly, 21% of respondents stated their no.1 requirement was for the agent to be a **team player**. Making and answering calls is by its nature, a solitary role, albeit one usually surrounded by other people, but the impact upon morale, and thus performance that a team player can have is prized highly.

Amongst other traits, **sales ability** of course was rated no.1 in most sales-focused environments, and the **ability to multi-task** was often placed no.2 or 3.

Having the '**gift of the gab**', the **ability to deal with repetitive tasks** or **stressful working environments** did not feature particularly highly with most respondents, despite the average contact centre agent having to display these traits many times in a normal working day.

The picture painted of key attributes of successful contact centre agents is one of a versatile, reliable good listener - nothing flashy or highly-strung, nor a simple automaton which is happy to plod on doing the same thing for hours. Many such candidates could be found in the relatively untapped labour pool of middle-aged women who are currently outside of the workforce, rather than in the younger generation which makes up a very considerable part of the contact centre industry: the average age of a contact centre agent is only around 27.

The effect of agent attrition on missed revenue opportunities

In high-attrition operations, the ability to turn potential revenues into real sales are affected in several ways by high attrition rates:

- fewer sales calls are able to be taken
- the extra time needed on a call to attempt cross-selling and up-selling is less likely to be available
- less-experienced agents are likely to stick to what they know, rather than picking up on a cue from a caller about potential new sales, and in any case may not even know enough about suitable products and services to sell them.

The Causes of Agent Attrition and Possible Solutions

It would be narrow-minded to believe that the cause and solution of agent attrition starts and ends with the agents themselves: attrition has its roots in many places, which is why it has been so difficult to solve. Contact centres should look at the wider industry, the contact centre and also the agent to see why attrition is being caused, and where any process or technology-focused solutions can be placed. Of course, considering the more HR-centric issues, such as remuneration, bonuses, rewards or training techniques, is vital too, but these elements fall outside of this document's remit.

Attrition as an industry-wide issue

To recap, where prices (here, agent salaries) are effectively fixed by businesses' intransigence, there needs to be an increase in supply and/or a drop in demand for agents' services to create a sustainable point at which attrition is manageable.

Increase supply: improve working conditions to bring in new labour pools

As the previous section shows, successful agents require reliability and empathy, traits which are often associated with older people with more experience of the world. However, the contact centre industry employs a relatively low proportion of these people, and the generally negative PR that the industry experiences (tales of having to raise a hand to go to the toilet, of warehouses full of thousands of people, or as negatively depicted in the contact centre battery-hen advert) are enough to put off many people for whom a job working with the public might otherwise be attractive.

Remote working is becoming a real option that people are talking about and in some cases, actually using today. Although there are real concerns about remote management of agents - and obviously, not all agents are suitable for this type of environment - remote working opens the door to the sorts of people might never seek employment in a typical contact centre (as the industry does not have a good reputation as a whole) but who would happily work in their own home or small telecottage taking calls. For an industry facing a crisis in recruitment - but which refuses to pay more to keep or attract more staff - this opportunity to deepen the labour pool should not be ignored. The contact centre could also use limited homeworking (for example, one day a week) as a reward for its top agents, encouraging their loyalty and offering a tangible promise to others. Obviously, with the finance industry being particularly careful about customer data, any such initiative would require considerable risk assessment.

Remote agents, whether working at home, or in a telecottage (small, remote sites), can be a part of the larger virtual contact centre by being linked to the main operation via ADSL, ISDN or a leased line (in the case of telecottages). Some solutions permit least-cost routing and redundancy, where if the IP voice quality deteriorates, the call can be switched onto a back-up ISDN connection until the IP quality improves sufficiently to move it back to IP. Agents need only a PC which may act as a softphone, a headset (or IP phone) and a data connection.

12% of respondents to this year's UK Contact Centre Operational Review were using homeworking in some way (up considerably from 3% in 2007), and overall, 0.68% of agent positions in this survey were based at home (up from 0.13% last year), which equates to an industry-wide figure of around 4,000 - 5,000. As comparison, last year 22% of US contact centres were using some form of homeworking, with 3.2% of agent jobs in the industry being based at home, amounting to around 100,000 home-based agent positions.

Decrease demand: reduce the number of customer communications through self-service

The negative effects of staff attrition can be alleviated to some extent by reducing the proportion of inbound calls that are dealt with by a live agent, by moving them to a self-service option where suitable, whether through touchtone IVR, speech recognition or through a website.

Self-service is prevalent across all industries: there is often at least one function that self-service is suitable for, regardless of what a company actually does.

Table 3: Self-service and business types

Self-service activity	Typical business type which would offer this form of self-service
Problem reporting and resolution	IT helpdesk
Account access	Banking
Product information	Retail
Online registration	Any
Order entry	Retail, travel
Balance enquiry	Banking, credit cards
Dealer or store location enquiries	Car sales, retail
Ticket booking	Cinemas, other entertainment
Real-time punctuality checks	Airlines, trains
Status checks	Retail (esp. online), IT helpdesk
Address changes	Subscription services, utilities
Form filling	Any
Brochure request	Travel, retail
Password reset	Finance, IT

Some calls are not suitable for self-service, as they may require multiple requests within the same call, be of a complex nature or be from a caller who feels that they need to speak with a human agent. Additionally, some small businesses may have such a low volume of calls that it is not cost-effective to implement self-service. However, self-service is currently very under-used: currently 6.5% of calls into UK contact centres are dealt with through self-service, although businesses estimate that 31% are suitable for automation.

It is worth noting that the finance industry has the highest levels of 'zeroing-out': cases where the caller presses zero to escape from the self-service session and join a queue to talk to an agent instead. 29% of finance self-service interactions

are not completed successfully, against an industry average of 14%, suggesting that finance customers are more likely to feel that they would prefer to have the reassurance about speaking with a real person than trusting a machine.

Decrease demand: reduce the number of customer communications through proactive outbound customer service

Increasingly, businesses are using outbound channels such as SMS, email and voice for communications that are more about service than sales, as had traditionally been the case. Such activity is a strong brand builder as well as an effective call avoidance tactic, as customers are informed about deliveries, delays and upcoming issues which may affect them. This reduces the number of inbound calls that are made, and thus, the demand for live agent time, as well as increasing customer satisfaction, and reducing costs associated with missed appointments or delivery reschedules.

Attrition as a contact centre issue

Decrease repetitive work

Repetitive work is consistently seen as one of the major reasons for agents to leave - basically, they get bored of the job. Removing the more repetitive and low-value calls from the equation can be done through self-service, as in the previous section, and reducing the more mundane elements within the call itself should impact positively upon agent attrition rates.

One of the more prevalent repetitive tasks occurs right at the beginning of many calls: taking the caller through the security process. Voice biometrics offers an alternative to this manual process, being a secure, cost-effective method of identifying and verifying callers automatically. Half of all calls require a caller to prove their identity, and currently, 93% of these use an agent to carry out at least part of the process, taking around 28 seconds per call (the finance sector takes an average of 40 seconds). A contact centre taking 10 million calls per year would spend almost £3,000,000 asking callers their name and a security question.

Voice verification systems use spoken words to generate a voiceprint, which can be compared with a previously enrolled voiceprint to verify a caller's identity. The most sophisticated systems are not affected by factors such as the caller having a cold or using different types of phones, or aging, and voice verification systems are now delivering levels of accuracy and security that have proven robust enough for use by banks and insurers.

The benefits to voice verification are multiple - the business saves money, callers are less likely to have to queue (as agents are spending less time on each call), and secure automated identity verification means that callers can then be offered a broader range of fully-automated self-service options. Additionally, a chunk of boredom is taken out of the agent's daily schedule, which should go some way to reducing attrition rates.

Deal with common issues away from the agent

Whether driven by external factors such as economic concerns, or internal factors such as a new marketing campaign, contact centres will sometimes find that they suddenly have to field large volumes of similar questions from callers. These types of calls can also quickly become repetitive for agents, causing boredom if the same answer is given on each call, stress if the answer isn't known and thus, attrition in either case.

Identifying such issues can be assisted by call recording solutions which through natural language recognition can identify common areas of enquiry. Answers to these issues can be put into the IVR announcement at the front of the call, as well as on the website and also pushed out through proactive customer service, (especially email and SMS) if appropriate. Even if self-service is not deemed suitable in these cases, communication of hot topics and correct answers can be passed through to agents on an ad-hoc basis through broadcasted desktop announcements.

It is worth commenting upon the role of SMS in proactive outbound customer service. Banks such as First Direct, Lloyds TSB, NatWest and Nationwide offer their customers a paid-for automated SMS service which tells them when they are getting close to their overdraft limit. Quite apart from improving customer satisfaction, this of course also has the benefit of reducing the number of low-value inbound calls about account balances, the types of call which agents do not find particularly stimulating and which add to attrition. It should also be noted that even if checking a bank balance via self-service is presented as an option to customers, 41% will still prefer to speak with an agent², so a great number of low-value calls will still have to be dealt with.

Managing stress

In a stand-alone multiple contact centre environment, there is a very real risk that agents in one contact centre will be overworked (leading to stress and increased queue times), whereas those in another may be underused yet unable to help their colleagues. The ability to overflow calls between physical locations is a key advantage of virtual contact centres, which can improve both customer and agent experience, and can work across multiple large sites, between central and satellite operations (telecottages) and also for homeworkers.

Virtual contact centres allow agents from other locations to be made available to deal with a different queue, being seamlessly moved back to their original work when the spike has flattened or the length of their own primary queue triggers a move back to their original work. Dealing early with such call spikes can often remove the issue before it becomes a real problem, and such movement between call groups can be done automatically by setting thresholds in each queue. Such flexibility of agents means that there is a fairer agent utilisation, as the situation of a set of agents sitting idle while others are under great pressure is less likely to happen. As the following table shows, the benefits of fairer agent utilisation are prized highly by those who have implemented a virtual contact centre environment.

² "Your call is important to us..." ContactBabel research commissioned by Vicorp, 2007

Table 4: If you have a virtual contact centre, what benefits have you gained?

Benefits gained from implementing a virtual contact centre	Mean average (from 10)	Proportion of respondents marking at 8, 9 or 10 from 10
Ability to deal with peaks	8.0	76%
Fairer agent utilisation	7.7	76%
Greater flexibility on when agents are online	6.9	53%
Wider range of skills available to callers	6.0	40%
Savings on call costs between sites	5.9	37%

The best of both worlds: large operations' efficiency, and small operations' attrition

Some years back, the term "call centre" started to become replaced by "contact centre", especially within the industry itself. Despite the fact that non-telephony contacts usually account for no more 10% of a contact centre's inbound activity, the term has become mainstream, with "call centre" now sounding a bit old-fashioned.

Soon, the importance of the second word in the phrase "contact centre" will be questioned more closely: the necessity of having a central location where contacts are dealt with is already under scrutiny. With the uptake of IP, which enables data, voice and applications to be sent along a single wire, businesses are no longer presented with the *fait accompli* of needing a large, centralised contact-handling location.

Great steps have been made in past years to virtualise multiple site operations, in order to benefit from economies of scale around planning and call handling. In the UK, 50% of multiple-site contact centres are currently linked to others within their business to form a single virtual operation³, and the expected round of financial services industry consolidation is creating a number of 'super-banks' which will have even more branches and contact centre locations. Yet much of the virtualisation we see today is tame in comparison to what is technically possible: agents can work at home, or in small, local offices that require less commuting. However, there are commercial decisions on both sides of the argument that need to be considered, not least the overpowering impression throughout the industry and beyond that contact centres are *supposed* to be large warehouses full of people, run along mass production lines.

Leading industry commentators seriously question this assumption:

"Automated call-routing led to the creation of the command-and-control system's sleekest, most modern avatar, the call centre - the office environment built as a mass-production factory...mass production offices have led to the alienation of workers, high staff turnover and low morale...in call centres it produces poor customer service and high turnover of staff."⁴

³ "The UK Contact Centre Operational Review - 5th edition, 2007", ContactBabel

⁴ *Freedom from Command and Control: A better way to make the work, work*, John Seddon, 2005

The mass production approach to contact centres involves task repetition, low levels of autonomy or responsibility at the agent's level, a strong focus on efficiency-enhancing technology, a focus on call length duration and high levels of tight scripting. The alternative provides higher levels of agent autonomy and empowerment, focused on creating tailored interactions between customer and trusted agent. Research claims that 'production line' management is root cause of absenteeism and attrition in 84% of UK contact centres. ⁵

The aim should be to have a contact centre environment with the best of both worlds - the economies of scale that are possible with large contact centres, while retaining the human benefits of having a smaller, more empowered operation. It can make sense - operationally, financially and environmentally - to have agents working at home, or in small satellite telecottages close to their homes, if full homeworking is frowned upon because of the perceived difficulty in managing someone remotely. As the success of such operations are proven, more businesses will consider this as a viable option, particularly as this opens up a new labour pool to the businesses, specifically people who are unable to work away from home for long periods, or at all.

A more radical challenge to the ultra-centralised contact centre model is having the entire enterprise act as a resource to solve customers' issues, drawing on the knowledge and skills of people not directly within the contact centre. There has often been the acknowledgement within many companies that they should strive to have the right person answer the right call, as this saves money, reduces time taken to solve the issue and keep the customer happier.

Attrition as an agent-focused issue

There is no single homogeneous answer to the question: "what do contact centre agents want from their job?", but it's probably fair to say that most will want to be competent, busy (but not overworked), have a variety of work to do and be supported and rewarded by their managers according to their actual performance.

Play to an agent's strengths

Looking at how attrition can be reduced by improving agent competency, it's clear that matching the right agents with the right calls can work well for both agent and caller. To do this, a contact centre needs to know:

- 1 Who the caller is
- 2 What they have called about before
- 3 What they are calling about this time
- 4 What skill-sets are suitable for answering this query and customer
- 5 Which agents have those skill-sets
- 6 When will those agents be available to help?

The first point - customer identification - can be automated in a number of ways, through caller line ID, and/or through typing in or saying an account number or name. The second point (caller history) can be popped automatically through CTI to an agent's screen - indeed, it may make sense to try to put the call through to

⁵ CM Insight and Aston University Business School, 2004

the same agent, to encourage ownership of the issue and to reduce the amount of time the caller has to spend going through the issue again. The third point is harder to automate, although touchtone IVR is often used to route calls based on service, sales or helpdesk, with some success. Greater power and flexibility is provided by speech recognition, which encourages callers to use natural language to explain their issues, with a far greater number of routing options available in a shorter amount of time based on their input. Financial services contact centres are ahead of the game with speech recognition, with around one-third of self-service being carried out by speech rather than touchtone.

Points 4 to 6 move away from the caller's requirement, and look at the ability and presence of the agent. Point 4 identifies the skills required to deal with, for example, a query about a tracker mortgage. Point 5 - the agent skill-sets - are a straightforward look-up against the capabilities of the agents in question (assuming their skills are accurately and frequently updated), and finally - Point 6 - the routing of the call to the next available virtual pool of suitable agents can be done at either an operation or network-level. The suitable 'agent' may not be an agent at all, but a resident expert based outside the contact centre but whose presence and availability has been registered.

Call recording as a training identifier

Managing these agent skill-sets can be time-consuming, and worse, not as accurate as is needed for truly effective skills-based routing. Call recording can greatly assist in understanding and gauging the quality of agents and their skills, offering pointers for training as well as understanding their true capabilities. Call recording pattern analysis identifies instances where too many long or short calls are happening at an agent level which respectively may indicate lack of knowledge and excessive transferring of calls to other agents.

Respondents to the 2008 UK Contact Centre Operational Review generally agreed - vehemently - that call recording was most of use when reviewing an agent's specific performance and skills (and thus, their training needs), offering the chance to improve the agent's capabilities and competency, and reducing the likelihood that they will leave because of an incapability to do their job as well as they would wish.

Using workforce management to empower agents

52% of UK contact centres use workforce management to allow agents to request the shifts and holidays that suit them, a big increase from previous years' findings.

Quite apart from the benefit of reduced management administration, this functionality helps to get direct buy-in for workforce management from the people whom it will affect. Employees can get defensive about change, and may perceive workforce management solutions as something which is being introduced to keep a tighter rein on them: explaining the tool is there to help everyone get a fair amount of the right work, and point out the empowering aspects to it (e.g. the ability to request specific shifts/holidays) is more likely to get a positive response. 70% of the contact centres which allow agents to request shifts and holidays state that agent morale has been increased as a direct result of doing so.

Additionally, treating multiple contact centres as a single virtual contact centre allows great efficiencies can be made through economies of scale as well as the single queue across sites allowing real-time resourcing which leads to greater agent shift-choices. All agent competencies are displayed to the scheduler - regardless of agent location - who can be more flexible, simply because the available resource pool is so much more deep.

Variety of work and staff attrition

Contact centres should consider allowing service-focused agents to move between inbound and outbound activity as the queue dictates. It is generally not considered possible for most service agents to move seamlessly and happily between inbound service and outbound sales, but outbound service - proactive customer service calls that the customer is happy to receive - is quite another matter. As such calls are welcomed, there is a positive boost to agent morale, as well as the attendant operational benefit of fewer further inbound calls about the issue.

It is not just voice blending that can impact upon agent satisfaction and attrition. While there is no general agreement within the industry on how best to deal with email and other forms of multimedia such as instant messaging / text chat, and web collaboration, there are genuine reasons connected with agent attrition to encourage operations to look seriously at multimedia/voice blending.

On one side, there is a case made that letting agents answer email makes the job more interesting for them, lowering attrition and improving skills. The other side to this says that the skills required by email agents are different from voice agents, and that it is difficult to find the agents to do both jobs. Both sides make sense logically, but of those contact centres which use voice/email blending, only 30% have experienced problems finding the right staff for these types of role.

For some operations, multimedia blending is a strategic decision which has been invested in with the right levels of technology and training being provided. For others, it is a necessity, with agents encouraged to answer emails in slack call times. Smaller operations - which may not have sufficient email volumes, or the investment available to formalise the blending by forming a universal queue to deal with all types of interaction - are much more likely to deal with emails on an ad-hoc basis, although this is the case to a lesser extent with large contact centres too.

Multimedia and staff attrition rates

On comparing attrition rates and staff churn problems against the amount of multimedia/call blending that agents are allowed to do, there is evidence to suggest that staff attrition is eased by multimedia blending.

- In contact centres where fewer than half of staff were involved in multimedia/call blending, the average attrition rate was 33%. In contact centres where more than half of staff answered multimedia and calls, average attrition was 20%
- This pattern is even more pronounced when looking at contact centres which do not allow *any* agents to deal with both telephony and multimedia. In such environments, average annual attrition was 45%, compared to 19% in operations where *all* staff dealt with both email and telephony
- In contact centres where staff attrition was said to be a problem, an average of only 23% of agents dealt with multimedia and telephony. Where staff attrition was said not to be a problem, an average of 49% of agents dealt with multiple channels.

Summary: How can contact centres reduce the problems caused by staff attrition?

Contact centres face the twin problems of needing to grow headcount to deal with the increased demand for their services, while being unable to raise salaries to a level that would encourage the required number of new entrants to the industry. Additionally, agent attrition rates are generally heading upwards, although the current economic uncertainty is likely to encourage people to stay in their job.

There are some practical steps that a contact centre can take in order both to reduce its attrition rate and also the pain caused by any attrition that is being experienced:

- *"Reduce repetitive, low-value calls"*
 - offer self-service options
 - get rid of the tedious element of calls (e.g. security)
 - use proactive outbound customer service, especially automation
- *"Improve training"*:
 - use call recording and pattern monitoring to understand the agent's capabilities fully and improve their morale through increasing their competence
- *"Fair distribution of work"*:
 - a virtual contact centre environment (whether multiple large sites, satellite telecottages or homeworking) spreads work fairly across the workforce
 - workforce management systems that allow agents to request shifts and holidays are seen as positive to morale
- *"Play to agents' strengths"*:
 - Skills-based routing allows agents to deal with the types of calls that they are likely to deal with best
- *"Vary the type of work to make it more interesting"*:
 - In studies, contact centres using multimedia blending consistently experience lower attrition rates
 - Blending inbound and outbound service calls offers variety as well as reducing the future inbound load and its attendant stress
- *"Improve the contact centre environment"*:
 - Use homeworking as a reward for top agents, as well as casting the recruitment net wider for people who would make good agents, but who do not wish to work in what they believe is a typical contact centre environment.



About ContactBabel

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

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

We help the biggest and most successful vendors develop their contact centre strategies and talk to the right prospects. We have shown the UK government how the contact centre industry will develop and change. We help contact centres compare themselves to their closest competitors so they can understand what they are doing well and what needs to improve.

If you have a question about your company's place in the contact centre industry, perhaps we can help you.

About the Author:

ContactBabel was set up in 2000 by Steve Morrell, a leading expert on the contact centre industry. He has written over 200 reports on the future of technology, people and business processes surrounding the contact centre industry, and is widely-quoted in industry journals and the international media as the author of key studies of the UK, US, Irish, South African and Indian contact centre markets.

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About Avaya

Avaya delivers Intelligent Communications solutions that help companies transform their businesses to achieve marketplace advantage. More than 1 million businesses worldwide, including more than 90 percent of the FORTUNE 500®, use Avaya solutions for IP Telephony, Unified Communications, Contact Centres and Communications-Enabled Business Processes. Avaya Global Services provides comprehensive service and support for companies, small to large.

Worldwide, Avaya has almost 4,400 patents issued and pending for business communications that companies use to keep their operations running and their customers satisfied. Avaya helps companies of every size, large and small, map real-world business processes in a way that allows companies to better interact with their customers and to grow their business.

Avaya is best known for making communications a business advantage and has helped customers in every industry, including financial services, hospitality, retail, public sector, travel, technology and telecommunications. Companies rely on their communications to ensure they can best collaborate across the value chain, and many businesses can both enhance and advance their competitive market position by using the right mix of software, services and hardware to create truly “unified” communications across employees, customers and partners rather than just relying on the status quo of telephony systems.

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