# EXAMINING THE MYTHS AND COSTS OF AGENT DISENGAGEMENT, PART 2

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Contact Center
pipeline

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## What really causes agent disengagement? How can centers keep agents engaged for better ROI?

BY John Goodman, Customer Care Measurement & Consulting LLC

In part one of this three-part series, we discussed (and busted) the two primary myths regarding agent disengagement:

1. Finance believes that great service costs more.
2. Advertising and traditional marketing are more important than great service.

The busted myths discussed above signal what is really important to agents. Yes, being an agent is a job that they are doing to earn money to pay the bills. However, almost all employees are looking for more than just monetary compensation, and if those other needs are met elsewhere, they will take a job paying a bit less to achieve other goals. Call center directors in Florida tell me they can pay a bit less because of the sunshine benefit—no snow, beach and lots of sun. However, this type of benefit only will go so far. There are more substantive aspects of the job that must be met.

**The following are five causes of disengagement:**

**1 PAY AND BENEFITS**
Over the long term, below-average pay will lead to significant agent turnover. As most contact center agent positions are at the lower to middle level of pay, agents are always aware of opportunities. The best companies pay 10% to 20% above the average for their region and are rewarded with much lower voluntary turnover. The financial payoff of paying a bit above scale more than offsets the cost.

**2 LACK OF EMPOWERMENT AND TRAINING**
Empowerment and proper training ensures that the agent has the skills and ability to be successful. In most organizations, supervisors are afraid to empower agents because the compliance department has strong penalties for even small errors. Training is often very constrained, suggesting that there is one (often scripted) way to answer each issue. Customer situations are quite varied, thus training can never convey the perfect remedy for all issues. Proper training can provide guideposts, but the employee should be expected to think through what is appropriate in each situation. This flexibility does not exist in most companies.

**3 UNFAIR EVALUATION AND MONITORING**
Most call monitoring and satisfaction surveys fail to identify defective response rules or problems not caused by the employee, leading to agent frustration. The evaluation process is probably the single most damaging process in most companies. The evaluation process is based on a series of compliance prohibitions with little allowance for special customer needs. Some of the "customer focus" requirements actually create further dissatisfaction. For instance, CCMC's 2015 National Customer Rage Study found that customers are incensed by a query at the end of the call—"Is there anything else I can do for you?"—when the original reason for the call has not been effectively addressed.

**4 LACK OF INCENTIVES OR RECOGNITION**
When I ask contact employees what their incentive is to do outstanding work, most wryly say, "I'm permitted to keep my job. At most, I get a Starbuck's card." Such incentives wear thin quickly. What employees most want is recognition from management and peers and a feeling of progress in their career. A critical part of the recognition process is that it must apply to most employees, not just to the top 5% or an employee of the month award.

**5 LACK OF CONTROL OVER WORKLOAD**
CCMC's research found that one of the biggest frustrations of service employee groups is handling the same preventable issues again and again—especially when there are obvious actions (at least to the agent) that would prevent many of these repeat interactions. An effective solution is an employee input process to an effective continuous improvement mechanism. Such reductions are a win-win for the customer, the employee and the company. An input process can be as simple as an email box directed to the lead root-cause quality analyst, either in the contact center or in a performance improvement department.

## Strategies for Engaging Agents and Preventing Turnover

The four strategies for engagement mirror the last four causes of disengagement listed above.

### EMPOWERMENT AND TRAINING

Agents will be significantly more effective and happier if they are empowered to handle most, if not all, issues without supervisor intervention. This empowerment must be coupled with ongoing training for the products or programs being supported. Further, the training and empowerment can be reinforced by a technique called Victory Sessions.

**EMPOWERMENT AND FLEXIBILITY.** Your objective should be to empower agents to handle at least 95% and ideally 99% of all

requests on first contact without assistance. The best approach is to look first at those transactions where a supervisor's approval is needed. Examine how often the supervisor reverses the agent's recommendation. If it is less than 10% of the time, empower the agent to take immediate action and then have the supervisor retrospectively review a sample to provide coaching on what should have been done differently. You'll double productivity on that type of transaction and achieve 20% higher customer satisfaction via immediate resolution.

Secondly, provide 10 "stakes in the ground" that are recommended solutions for a range of challenging customer requests. For each issue, outline the ideal approach—and two or three other possible approaches depending on circumstances—such as premium customer versus unprofitable customer. The rationale for each alternative approach should be conveyed. Using these "flexible solution spaces," a veteran agent should be able to decide the best approach and implement it on the spot. We find this approach provides flexibility that compliance and legal are comfortable with, even in highly regulated areas.

**TRAINING.** There are three types of training that every agent needs: (1) Initial training to provide all key skills, product, or program knowledge so they are comfortable with the product context; (2) ongoing reinforcement training to keep those skills sharp; and (3) remedial training where skills have degraded.

The *initial training* should include how to use systems, soft skills such as dealing with difficult customers, and guidance on how to response to the top 10 most difficult customer issues. The item missing in most initial training is the inclusion of the guide to the top 10 tough issues which should contain:

▸ A short answer with links to further information.

▸ A longer answer with background—this section explains the rationale for the answer the agent has provided, written by the same department that formulated the policy in the first place.

▸ The top three expected challenges or "yeah-buts" to the basic response. For instance, at an auto company, when told there was no recall on an issue, the consumer would respond with "the dealer told me he has repaired 20 of these this month, and the Internet says you have a defect!" The agent needs to be prepared to address that challenge. Ask your current agents for the top challenges they receive—they will be able to provide you with a list—your job is to develop clear, believable replies to each challenge that leaves the customer treated fairly and the agent comfortable that they have fairly presented the situation.

Additionally, every contact center should provide *periodic reinforcement and remedial training,* for both top and struggling agents, respectively. Agents' good habits can go stale, and they need to be reminded. The weak agents need to learn what they failed to master during the initial training. Companies like USAA and Toyota refresh training for everyone quarterly, if not monthly, using a modular training approach.

Finally, agents should be familiar with the company's product and ideally have used it. At Toyota, every agent drives even the high-end cars at least once so they can sound

# Tools to Deliver Great Service

There are four tools that will delight both agents and customers if they are provided. Each leads to higher agent and customer satisfaction.

● **ACCESS TO INFORMATION NEEDED TO RESOLVE ON FIRST CONTACT.** This must include customer history and, for all standard issues, complete response guidance supported by a clear, believable explanation including rationale for the decision. If identical explanations are provided on the website, especially the homepage, the number of calls on those issues will plummet. For more complex issues and one-offs, answers should be available from a more detailed data base and/or from subject matter experts. They can also be crowdsourced from other agents in a knowledge system and external customer communities.

● **EASY USER INTERFACE (UI) FOR LOGGING, AUTO-RETRIEVAL AND EXECUTION OF CUSTOMER TRANSACTIONS.** This functionality will allow the agent to focus on the customer rather than the screen, which is evident in the agent's tone of voice and level of interest. Also, it will empower the agent to give relevant updates to customer inquiries, instead of being the victim of a back-office process or unmet service level.

● **MAKE EDUCATIONAL VIDEOS FUN TO CREATE DELIGHT AND EMOTIONAL CONNECTION.** Customers seldom want to read an article or even a page of text. However, everyone is willing to watch a one-minute video, especially if it is funny. If the agent offers a video explaining a solution, the customer will likely watch it and will have it available as a future reference, which will reduce call-backs. This ability to revisit the solution is critically important in any situation where there are multiple steps or any complexity. When customers are on the phone, they generally do not record, absorb, or remember all that they are told and often must call back. The video eliminates the need to call back. We recommend humorous videos as they are more fun to watch. Note that even airline safety videos are all now humorous—the regulators even encourage them, as they are more likely to be watched.

● **EASILY USED CHANNEL FOR INPUT TO THE CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT (CI) PROCESS**—e.g., Chatter. As the National Rage Study showed, customers want to be assured the problem will not recur. While many agents cannot assure that the problem will not recur, they can make the customer feel more reassured if they have an effective channel for providing input to the corporate continuous improvement process. The agent can confidently describe the system, and the customer will feel that the company cares enough to provide the agent with such a channel. However, the channel must be credible.

confident. I've seen very poor service result from having agents who have never driven a car handling calls from auto owners. These agents simply have no frame of reference to know what it is like to have a car break down.

**VICTORY SESSIONS** are an outlet for stress, as well as for learning and recognition. A Victory Session is a 30-minute meeting every two weeks where a team goes around the room with each member telling about the wackiest customer or toughest situation that they successfully handled. Four things happen in this meeting. First, the agent gets recognition for a job well done. Even the lowest performer receives peer and supervisor recognition. Second, education occurs: the agent describes how she explained the warranty to the customer so that the customer accepted it. Everyone now has a new word track on that issue. Thirdly, empowerment is reinforced. When a team member describes how they used empowerment and gets a round of applause from peers, it reinforces with others that the empowerment is real. Finally, the process creates an informal incentive to "go the extra mile." The next time the agent encounters a difficult customer, she thinks, "this customer would be a great story for next Thursday—I'll be able to talk about this call only if I can successfully handle it."

### EVALUATION THAT MOTIVATES

**FAIR EVALUATION.** The problem with almost all call monitoring and customer satisfaction surveying is that front line agents do not view the monitoring and surveys as valid measures of the customer satisfaction they are delivering. The dimensions being measured are often based on compliance requirements or a manager's idea of what is important, and they are not linked to reality by any research or customer feedback. Such measures are one of the strongest drivers of disengagement and burnout. To avoid this pitfall, two actions should be taken:

▸ Conduct the research to find the attributes of service that truly drive customer satisfaction (your agents will rapidly corroborate the findings) and make these dimensions the key items for which your supervisors monitor and incentivize staff.

▸ Include a question on your monitoring form asking the monitor what score the consumer would give the call. Then

correlate the supervisor ratings with the results of actual customer surveys for the same calls. If the supervisor ratings are off, it is the supervisors who need to be retrained, not the agents.

**SUPPORTIVE SUPERVISORS FOCUSED ON POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT.** Most supervisors are trained to be quality control managers with the goal of minimizing defects. Even if an agent does things right 95 percent of the time, if they get dinged for the one error and not recognized for the positive actions, their overall feeling is negative. At companies like Blinds.com, management intentionally finds a great call daily for each agent and publicly congratulates them. Therefore the majority of feedback is positive and the atmosphere becomes positive. The negative is fed back once a week, while the positive is fed back at least daily.

### INCENTIVES CREATING EXCITEMENT

**RECOGNITION.** Recognition includes the above behavior of catching people doing things right but also includes positive coaching by supervisors and gamification. It is critical that recognition go beyond the top employees to the entire workforce. In many companies, only the top 10% are recognized. The bottom 90% are demoralized, thinking "why try?"

Gamification is the process of setting targets for improvement on a particular dimension for each employee and then monitoring and recognizing employees when they achieve the goal. The critical aspects of gamification are identifying an achievable goal, creating a reward that includes both recognition and some small value-add, and then giving the employee both feedback and recognition on their progress.

The challenge is to identify one area of improvement needed for each employee, even the lowest performer, then setting an improvement target, and finally giving the feedback and recognition. There are complex software systems that do this, or individual supervisors can construct their own informal systems. The key to success is that all levels of employees are addressed with recognition for achievement. The monetary reward is helpful, but ultimately recognition is the gravy on

top. For a more in-depth look at gamification, check out my full article.

**FEELING OF PROGRESS IN THE CAREER.** One of the strongest incentives is a feeling that progress is possible. The three things that reinforce this dimension are:

▸ An obvious career ladder with clear skill requirements and ability to get needed training

▸ The ability to achieve certifications showing enhanced skills even within a particular job

▸ Promotion based on clear criteria and skills—you do not have to wait for someone to die

One barrier many call center executives encounter is the argument that "we cannot promote anyone until someone leaves." If additional skills allow agents to give better service and create additional value for customers, executives should be able to argue that a better customer experience leads to more revenue and WOM.

### DEVELOPMENT PLAN

One of the most effective call center executives I know would ask new agents, "Where do you want to be in five years?" This gave the agents a sense of progression within the company and avoided the feeling of being doomed to be an agent forever. This executive required the HR manager to work with the employee to develop a plan and provide the agent with exposure to their area of interest. For instance, if the agent wanted to get into marketing, the agent would be asked to go along on a briefing to the marketing staff on what the call center has been hearing from customers. This exposure was contingent on superior performance, which created a strong incentive to learn and perform.

In part three, we'll learn strategies for how to present the case for agent engagement to the CFO and get buy-in. ⦿

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