The 10 Most Common Call Center Problems and How to Fix Them

INTRO

In customer service, few jobs compare to the challenge of managing a call center. Picture a battleground, with your call center in the middle, fenced in on every side by several different armies. Most military strategists will advise you to never fight a war on multiple fronts, but as a call center manager, you must succeed at this every day. Your job revolves around fending off rapid-fire demands from multiple competing concerns, including those from:

- **Employees**
- **Customers**
- **Technology**
- **Management**

Chances are, you can trace your call center problems back to the expectations of one of these concerns. In this ebook, we'll identify the 10 most common call center problems, along with helpful fixes for them.

Hiring is hard. Retention can be even harder. The worst is when employees only show up to work when they feel like it. And the ones who do show up and work hard can quickly burn out if you're not careful.

Absenteeism

Unscheduled absences literally cost you money—approximately \$3,600 per year[1] for every hourly employee. They also eat away at your customer service and employee morale. To better manage absenteeism, we recommend you:

- **Look at patterns in absences.** Are they seasonal, or do they correspond with holidays? This helps identify the root causes of absences and will help you:

- **Develop a set policy for absences.** Encourage your employees to give notice or make arrangements in the event of a scheduled absence.

- **Hold your employees accountable.** Once your policy is established and the expectations are clear, then it's up to you to enforce your absence policy.

Attrition

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When you lose an employee, you lose all the time, effort, and training that went into that person. And in an industry where employee turnover is particularly high[2] (between 30 to 45 percent compared to the U.S. average of 15.1 percent), that cost starts to hurt your bottom line. Call centers suffer high attrition rates because it's a high-pressure job that typically offers little reward. A few ways to reduce your call center turnover rate include:

- **More selective hiring.** Look for candidates who have shown longevity and loyalty to past employers.

- **Offer competitive pay and rewards.** You get what you pay for, and sometimes even a modest raise in starting pay can yield a more reliable, productive grade of employee.

- **Provide necessary tools.** Give your employees the software tools they need to excel at their job, like multiple communication channels, call analytics, computer telephony integration (CTI), interactive voice response (IVR), call recording, and call monitoring.

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Engagement

Maintaining employee enthusiasm in any industry is difficult. According to Gallup, 51 percent of the U.S. workforce is not engaged[3] and are looking to leave their current jobs. In a call center, this enthusiasm gap can be even greater. The work is stressful and monotonous, and it's easy for employees to become demoralized, which leads to absenteeism and turnover.
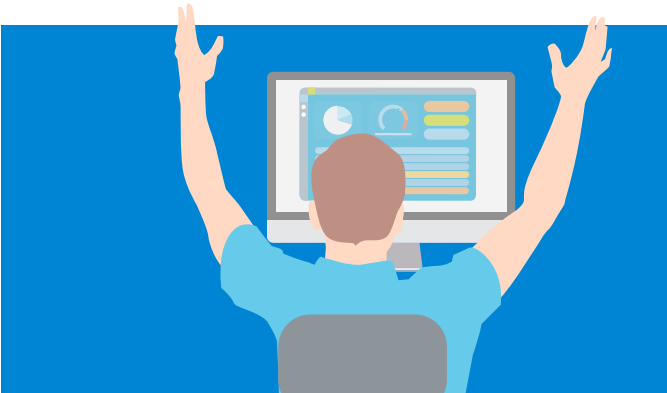
How do you head it off? Here are a few suggestions:

- **Empower employees to help customers.** The vast majority of contact center employees (86 percent) feel that they don't have the resources or authority to efficiently deal with customer needs.
- **Automate where you can.** Free up your staff by using automated menus to answer simple, routine customer questions. This leaves your employees open to handle more complex questions.
- **Incentivize performance.** Offer rewards or perks for meeting goals.
- **Deliver timely feedback.** Let your employees know how they're doing on a regular basis.

Your call center is there for them, but they usually aren't calling unless there's a problem. Which means when they call, they're typically upset and needing help.

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First Call Resolution

Resolving calls on the first try is considered the most telling metric for a call center's efficiency. According to US customer surveys, 20 to 30 percent of your call center's call volumes are call backs from customers with unresolved concerns[4]. But as customer concerns become more complex, it becomes harder to find a solution without multiple touch points. That's why you should:

- **Build a common knowledge base.** Record common questions and populate them with approved responses.

- **Engage in root-cause analysis.** Identify the top reasons for why customers call into your call center. Use that information to populate your knowledge base.

- **Assess key performance indicators (KPIs).** Constantly evaluate the metrics you're gathering and determine whether they're providing the insights you need to improve your customer service.

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Self-Service

The majority of customers prefer to solve problems on their own. They appreciate when a company makes it easy to find solutions without having to engage a customer service representative. Increasing opportunities for callers to serve themselves on their own terms increases customer satisfaction and leaves your employees free to handle more complicated customer concerns. Some ways you can accomplish that include:

- **Creating a customer knowledge base.** Use your employee knowledge base to generate a searchable, customer-facing resource.

- **Implement simple, easy-to-navigate IVR menus.** Set up simple phone menus that include a section with answers to frequently asked questions.

- **Offer multiple communication channels.** When customers can't find what they're looking for in your knowledge base or IVR menu, allow them to engage your customer service using the communication channels they prefer, like chat, email, video, text, or social media.

6 Integrations

Much of your day-to-day operations rely on multiple software applications. This means your employees are constantly switching between multiple databases. This becomes a problem when 60% of failed first-call resolutions are because of an employee's inability to access data[5]. Don't let your employees fly blind or leave them juggling multiple tools. You can help them if you:

- **Adopt software that integrates with existing call center applications.** Newer software often comes with options to integrate with the tools you're already using.

- **Pick platforms that feature multiple systems integrations.** Look for services that advertise integration with CRMs, sales order processing, and automated voice response systems.

- **Look for vendors that have consolidated their tools into one system.** A range of integrated tools is easier to manage, especially when you have a customer on the phone and every second counts.

TECHNOLOGY

From customer relationship management (CRM) software to predictive dialers, the modern call center is swarming with technology and tools. The difficulty is getting them to cooperate with each other and to work reliably.
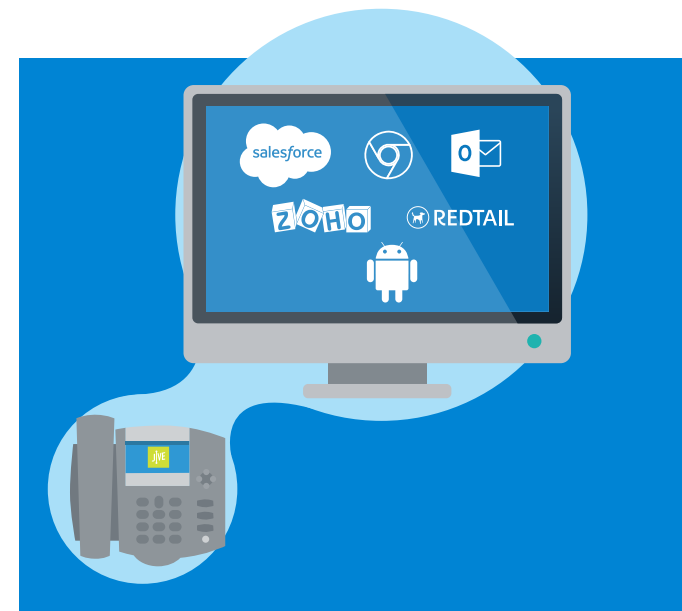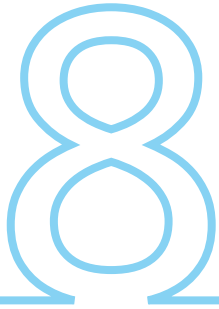
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Scaling

Call volume can spike from one season to the next, forcing you to increase or cut staff. This leads to constantly adding and removing seats from your phone system. Modern call centers are turning to cloud-based call center software that allows managers to add and remove seats through an online portal, usually with a few clicks of your mouse.

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Metrics

Call center managers rely on historical and real-time data to make decisions. Traditional call center metrics include first-call resolution, speed to answer, and average handling time. But these don't always give you the whole picture. If you're looking for more insight from your metrics, consider taking these steps:

- **Look at nontraditional metrics.** Evaluate your standing using indicators like net promoter scores and social network comments.

- **Provide customers with helpful metrics.** When customers call in, help them make their own data-driven decisions by giving them metrics like wait times and their queue position.

- **Customize your metrics to suit your needs.** Make sure your phone system provider offers call detail reports that allow you to take a high-level look or drill down into an important area.

MANAGEMENT

You've got key performance indicators (KPIs) to meet, usually mandated by upper management. The problem is when these metrics focus on the quantities of customers served, not the quality of service.
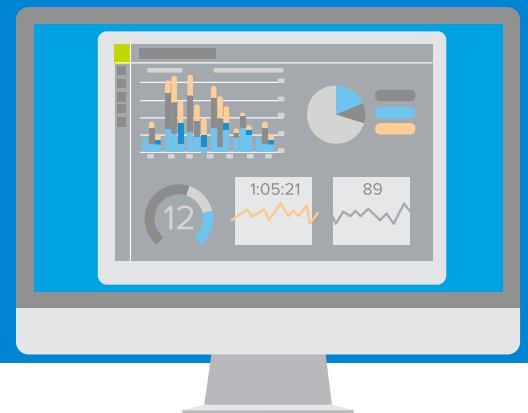
9 Improving Performance

There's always room for improvement, and your best-performing employees will be on the lookout for ways to advance their skills and careers. Unfortunately, most contact centers have flat structures with little upward mobility. In fact, less than a third of call centers have an established career develop path[6] for their employees. A lack of career opportunities can lead to lost motivation and declining performance among staff members. You can avoid this by:

- **Managing expectations.** Be upfront about what opportunities exist in your organization—or may exist later on. If you don't see any opportunities arising in the immediate future, be honest about that.

- **Look for opportunities.** Give high-performing employees a chance to head up a new initiative or tackle a project. Offering them responsibilities gives them a chance to acquire skills and experience that may benefit them later.

- **Focus on the right metrics.** Evaluating staff performance and identifying areas of improvement may require looking beyond quantitative numbers. Try gaining additional insights from qualitative metrics, like net promoter scores and real-time feedback.

Collaborating Across Departments

Like any business, call centers require the support of multiple departments. When it comes to problems outside answering phones—like shopping issues or defective products—your employees can only do so much.

In those situations, it helps to recognize your employees' limits, but to also look for opportunities to improve relationships between departments. One way to accomplish this is to integrate databases across departments so every employee has a comprehensive view of your call center's interactions with a customer.

DON'T GET OVERWHELMED.

Call centers are the front lines for customer service. Now that you've reviewed these 10 common problems, you'll start to see where your call center might be vulnerable and how you can shore up your defenses.

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