



4 Key Contact Center Trends for the Post-Pandemic World



A publication by Playvox

As we start to see the COVID-19 pandemic subside, it's important to realize that some things will never be the same, even if in some ways, we are able to breathe a sigh of relief. The pandemic spurred big changes in business practices and created technological advances for all industries. And the contact center industry is no exception.

According to [Forrester's recent megatrends report](#), "The COVID-19 pandemic elevated the importance of customer service to nurture customers, retain and [increase loyalty](#), and grow revenue. Customer service leaders are also accelerating modernization strategies that were already underway in their organizations."

While contact centers have always been the "front door of a business", that role became even more important during the pandemic as call volumes increased, brick-and-mortar stores closed or reduced their hours, and customers needed live support to help with more complex issues. An [ISG report](#) found that many companies had significant increases in resolution times during the pandemic; some went from 18 seconds to 20 minutes which caused them to scramble to service customers' requests and satisfy service levels.

The pandemic has created a new way of doing business for contact centers including the rise of a hybrid workforce, a new emphasis on human connection and empathy for both customers and agents, enhancing the customer experience by cross-selling and upselling products and services, and replacing legacy, on-premises systems with the cloud. This report outlines those trends and offers solutions on how contact centers can embrace them.



Trend #1: Embrace the hybrid workforce

It's a new reality: many contact centers won't be reverting to the majority of their agents working in the office as they did pre-pandemic. The remote agent workforce is here to stay, and a hybrid combination of remote workers and in-office agents will likely be your new normal.

However, there will be challenges as contact center leaders grapple with how to fairly manage and support agents in a hybrid work environment.



Some of these issues include:

Coaching and career development: Work from home (WFH) employees can be at a disadvantage as employees working from the office often have more influence and access to supervisors. Contact center leaders will need to be careful that remote employees don't receive less feedback or fewer coaching and career development opportunities.

Employees' job satisfaction: Retention issues can arise if WFH employees perceive differences in how they're being managed/treated compared to work from office agents.

Management training: Managing a hybrid workforce is a new phenomenon. Your supervisors probably aren't familiar with or trained on how to manage a hybrid staff so all agents, regardless of their location, feel engaged and valued.

Security issues: WFH employees may not have the security protocols in place to protect sensitive customer or corporate information. This is especially concerning for the healthcare and financial industries, but it's also true for a wide range of organizations where agents handle customer information such as credit card payments. For instance, agents working from home are in an environment where it can be difficult to keep information private if a family member overhears a conversation.

5 ways to create an empathetic organization

- Always be learning
- Be a good human
- Change is good
- Do it now
- Enjoy the little things



Create policies that treat all agents fairly—regardless of their location

A unified contact center platform can make the difference in turning a hybrid workforce into one team. With the cloud, your agents can be located anywhere, easily communicate with their managers, and operate as if they're still in the office.

However, it's still important for contact center leaders to develop and consistently apply policies for both WFH and work from office agents. It's critical to level the playing field for all your employees – regardless of where they're located. Agents need to feel that these policies are fair to eliminate backlash. Younger employees, in particular, are even more sensitive to inconsistent work policies.

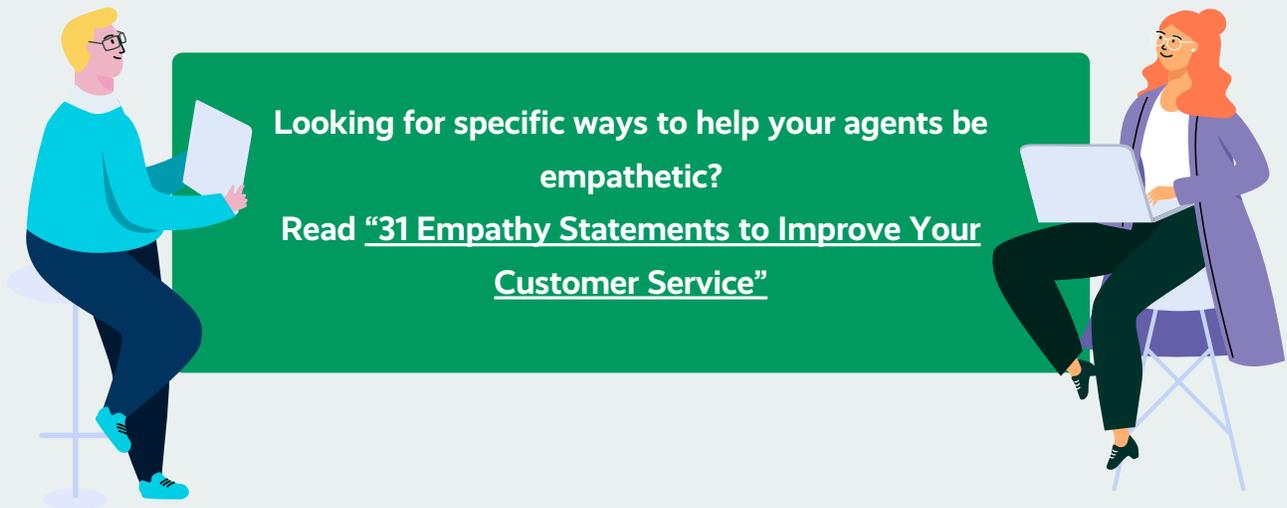
Consider these questions when developing new policies for your hybrid workforce:

- **How will you determine which agents return to the office or work from home?** You'll need to implement consistent measures of fairness for all employees regardless of their tenure, performance, family situation, location, etc. This is important so that, if agents don't receive their first choice of work location, they'll understand how the decision was made and won't perceive it as favoritism if a colleague's choice is granted and theirs isn't.
- **How will you make sure all agents are performing at their best?** Using cloud-based [quality and performance management solutions](#) means agents can be evaluated similarly regardless of their location. It's also important to use the same [quality scorecard criteria](#) for both WFH and work from office employees so they don't feel the evaluation process is biased.



- **How can you apply coaching standards equally?**

It's often easier for supervisors to meet in-person with a work from office agent, but that shouldn't mean that WFH employees miss out on valuable coaching opportunities. Giving less coaching feedback to WFH agents has far-reaching implications including impacting their performance, training opportunities, and career development. It can also result in job dissatisfaction and resentment.



Take the next step

Treat all your employees fairly by implementing policies and processes that embrace the new reality of a hybrid workforce. Playvox's cloud-based [workforce engagement suite](#), which includes quality assurance, coaching, learning, motivation, and workforce management modules, makes it easier to lead a hybrid workforce. [Learn more](#)



Trend #2: Empathy matters

Considering that the pandemic touched everyone around the world in some capacity, connection matters more than ever. Aligning the customer experience and the agent experience should be something all contact centers strive to do, including emphasizing empathetic communication. While empathy is important for customer communications, it's also critical for supervisor-agent relationships as agent satisfaction influences customers' satisfaction.

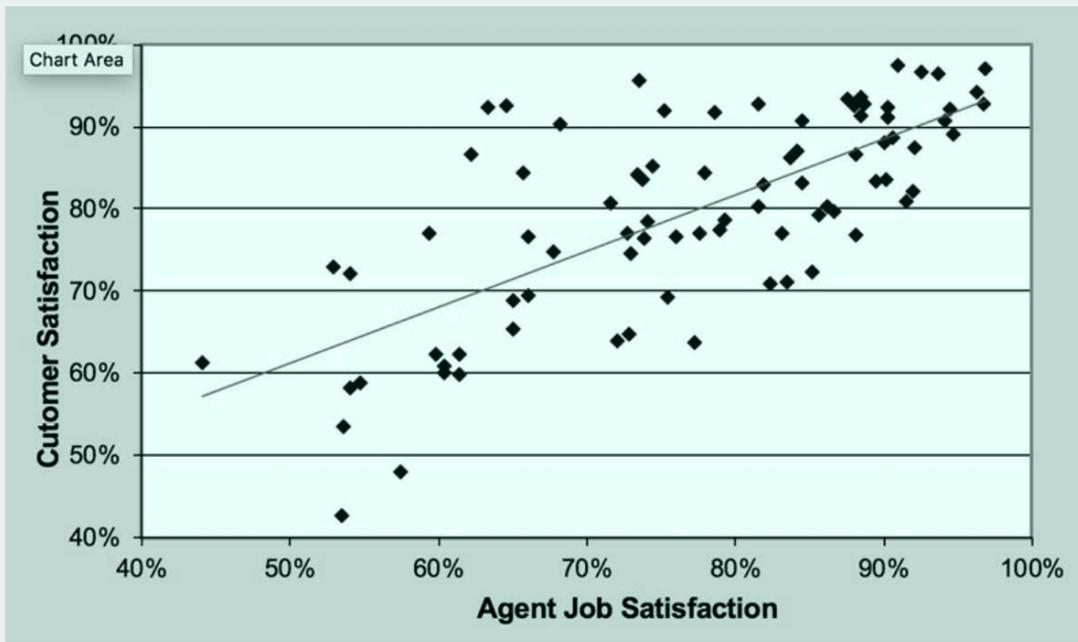
An agent's work -- solving customer problems -- is fundamentally human work. It's full of empathy, resourcefulness, and determination. But it's also demanding, stressful, and complex. Agents can take on a lot of tension from customer interactions, and they may already be under pressure in their personal lives as they work from home, juggle child care, and more.

“If we're expecting agents to demonstrate empathy for their customers, how can we not be demonstrating empathy for the agents in terms of consistent QA and how we're scoring everything?”

Susan Mihalick, Customer Experience, QA Manager, Freshly



Your contact center needs to recognize this and create an enjoyable, engaging, and rewarding agent experience. It pays off in many ways as a more positive agent experience boosts job satisfaction and **reduces attrition rates**. An **ICMI article** illustrates the positive correlation between agent satisfaction and customer satisfaction: Happier agents perform better, take the time to understand the customer, and care about the interaction's outcome (Figure 1).



And there's a real cost when agents are dissatisfied. **Research conducted by McKinsey & Company** found that engaged and satisfied contact center employees are nine times more likely to stay than leave within a year, 16 times more likely to refer friends to their company, and three times more likely to feel extremely empowered to resolve customer issues.

“Engaged and satisfied contact center employees are nine times more likely to stay than leave within a year.”

McKinsey & Company



Much of this comes down to being flexible with your agents. Considering that 15.9 million people moved during the pandemic, according to [U.S. Postal Service data](#), it's important to retain agents wherever they choose to live. Cloud-based contact center solutions are key to [supporting remote agents](#), but so are implementing processes that support agents' need for flexible schedules, such as giving them shifts that work best while they work from home.

[ICMI research](#) also finds that the most reliable drivers of agent job satisfaction are training hours, coaching hours, and a formal career path. This means supervisors need to implement high-quality training, a standardized quality management process, and an empathetic, targeted coaching process to motivate and inspire agents.

Travel Company Improves CSAT 17% with New QA Process

Scott's Cheap Flights implemented a quality assurance process with a standardized scorecard that resulted in immediate improvements including CSAT jumping 17% in the first month.

[View Scott's 15 scorecard questions here](#)

Keys to doing this include:

- **Implement standardized quality assessments:** Be transparent and positive, not punitive, with feedback. Implement a standardized scorecard to fairly evaluate all employees. Track progress and performance in real-time so agents get immediate feedback. [See this article about Scott's Cheap Flights for their scorecard criteria.](#)
- **Offer empathetic coaching feedback:** As [ICMI research](#) found, well-delivered coaching feedback can have a positive impact on agents' job satisfaction. The key is teaching supervisors to deliver comments that are motivating and not demoralizing. Saying something similar to "Hey, I just listened to your call, let's make sure this is a focus," works better than "You need to change this".

- **Conduct training regularly:** Creating high-quality training takes time but it pays off. Good training answers agents' questions or fills them in on new information, such as new product offerings. It keeps them from feeling unprepared when answering customer questions and correlates to positive job satisfaction.
- **Give agents regular insight into their performance:** Regularly share important metrics with agents so they understand how they're performing especially if the metrics are part of their performance plans.
- **Measure agents' job satisfaction:** Only **30% of contact centers** measure their agents' engagement and satisfaction, which is a lost opportunity. By surveying agents regularly, you'll know exactly what's working well and where improvements are needed to boost job satisfaction. Agents will also feel valued that you're asking for their feedback.

“One of the main pillars of our program is empathy for customers. If we're expecting agents to demonstrate empathy, how can we not be demonstrating empathy for the agents in terms of consistent QA and how we're scoring everything? So we've been trying to keep that in mind, and the Playvox dashboards are essential to this task.”

Susan Mihalick, Customer Experience, QA Manager, Freshly



Supervisors need training, too

One of the important keys to giving agents a better experience is helping supervisors learn the right management skills. Often, contact center supervisors have little formal management training, which makes their jobs difficult. Offering them training, coaching, and feedback so they aren't making it up as they go can pay dividends across the contact center.

It's also important to note that even experienced supervisors might be challenged to [manage remote employees](#) because it requires a different skill set than managing an in-office team. Supervisors will need to proactively set up one-on-one meetings with remote agents so they can share feedback regularly. They'll also need to be conscious of not giving in-office agents more coaching or career development opportunities so all agents benefit equally.

Another issue managers will need to contend with is how to shift agents to handle channels they may be unfamiliar with. As contact centers drive more traffic to web self-service, supervisors will need to figure out how they can transition phone agents to learn new skills and service digital channels like chats or emails.

Take the next step

There are multiple ways to boost customer service empathy including soft skills training and customer service scorecards. [Get more examples in these articles.](#)



Trend #3: Enhance the customer experience with cross-selling and upselling

Since customer service representatives (CSRs) are the front line to answering customers' questions and solving their issues, there's a golden opportunity for them to engage in cross-sell/upsell conversations. If you're looking for more ways to connect with your customers, cross-sell/upsell is an excellent way to educate them on your products and services.

While many contact centers like the idea of implementing cross-selling/upselling, few are doing it now. In a recent survey of 100+ contact center leaders, Playvox found that 27% aren't currently cross-selling/upselling, although 64% plan to start this year.

It's a common assumption that contact centers' motivation for cross-selling/upselling is generating revenue. Surprisingly, that's not the case, as the majority of respondents (72%) said their main goal is to offer their customers outstanding service while 61% are most concerned about generating revenue.

For those that are currently cross-selling and upselling, there are challenges to address. Some of the most common issues include CSRs' discomfort with the idea of selling, difficulty motivating them (57%), and training them in cross-sell/upsell skills (42%).



“Understand your purpose for your customer and what you’re there to provide them. Once you understand that, you’re going to only cross-sell and upsell things that would be of value and you’re going to respect whatever decision customers make.”

Head of client experience quality at a major financial company

Ideas for cross-selling/upselling

If you’re not sure what types of products or services your CSRs could cross-sell or upsell, a recent Playvox qualitative survey of contact center leaders identified many examples:

- An e-commerce clothing retailer’s CSRs suggest a shirt or jacket to match a pair of pants.
- An online stationery company’s CSRs suggest additional items for customers who are planning weddings like invitations, favors, and decorations.
- A subscription home-meal service makes recommendations for diets that match customers’ health requirements. For customers that want additional help, CSRs suggest they speak with a wellness expert.
- A financial services company helps customers that need additional financial advice by scheduling a time for them to meet with a financial advisor for investment help.

8 best practice recommendations

If you’re contemplating adding cross-selling/upselling to your CSRs’ responsibilities, then it’s important to learn from those who are already doing it successfully.



- 1. Focus on the customer's needs first:** CSRs must solve the problem the customer is calling about before bringing up additional products/services. The goal is to educate and advise rather than making a sale.
- 2. Don't be pushy:** Successful companies reinforce to CSRs that they want them to be trusted advisors to customers, not pushy salespeople. The primary focus should be educating clients about helpful products and services rather than trying to meet a sales quota. Companies that overemphasize selling risk driving customers away and losing CSRs who aren't comfortable with it.
- 3. Recognize some CSRs will be uncomfortable:** Not all CSRs want to cross-sell/upsell. They may feel selling is at odds with assisting customers. One company in the survey calls cross-selling/upselling "being outgoing." Rebranding cross-selling/upselling to a similar term sounds less intimidating.
- 4. Hire CSRs who are open to cross-selling/upselling:** Retail experience, for example, can be helpful. Assess whether prospective hires are open to cross-selling/upselling during the interview process.
- 5. Train frequently:** Training is a top priority (58%) and also a frustration (42%) for contact center leaders as they often feel their training doesn't hit the mark in teaching CSRs how to cross-sell/upsell. Best practices to address these issues include having a well-thought-out training plan in place. Training also needs to be conducted regularly to reinforce cross-selling/upselling behaviors, teach CSRs about your company's products and solutions lines, and how to spot opportunities.
- 6. Offer feedback:** Assess interactions with a [quality assurance solution](#) to understand if CSRs are identifying cross-selling/upselling opportunities. Offer feedback when you recognize areas where they can improve. Meet with them frequently, one-on-one, for coaching.



7. Motivate CSRs with rewards: Rewarding CSRs with awards was frequently mentioned as a successful technique for reinforcing desired behaviors. 90% of respondents said gift cards are the most motivating. Gamification challenges can also promote healthy competition among CSRs and reinforce the importance of cross-selling/upselling behaviors.

8. Improve interactions with quality assurance and coaching: Regularly assess CSRs' performance, including if they're identifying opportunities for cross-selling/upselling. Contact center leaders suggest providing regular opportunities for coaching such as reviewing quality results in weekly or monthly one-on-one sessions. It's also important to perform quality checks across channels to coach agents on spotting upsell/cross-sell opportunities.

Take the next step

Learn more about the research that describes how contact center leaders are implementing cross-selling and upselling at their companies. This on-demand webinar details five proven strategies for cross-selling and upselling. [Watch webinar](#)



Trend #4: Embrace the cloud

To support a hybrid workforce, contact centers will need to embrace cloud-based contact center solutions to scale operations quickly, ensure system reliability, and replace non-integrated solutions with a unified platform.

In fact, a Logic Monitor study found that “87% of global IT decision-makers agree that the current COVID-19 pandemic will cause organizations to accelerate their migration to the cloud.” (Figure 2).



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Figure 2: The majority of IT leaders say they'll be moving to the cloud due to the pandemic.



Add stat on how % of contact centers still using on-premises solutions. But, as many contact centers found during the pandemic, when they needed to quickly move agents to **working from home**, a cloud solution was the best, and in some cases, their only choice, for supporting a remote workforce.

The challenges of traditional on-premises solutions include:

Expensive upgrades: On-premises solutions require frequent charges for upgrading software and hardware. System maintenance needs to be performed by you, which can require knowledgeable IT staff or hiring outside resources.

- **Limited support for WFH agents:** It's challenging to **support remote agents** wherever they're located.
- **Lack of unified solutions:** On-premises systems often aren't able to integrate with other solutions, such as **workforce management** or **quality assurance**. This impacts reporting and getting a unified view of agents' performance and KPIs.
- **Inefficient operations:** Many contact centers are still using spreadsheets to manually schedule and score agents, which is inefficient and time-consuming. The lack of real-time quality assurance data impacts supervisors' ability to quickly step in and **coach agents** when needed.
- **Rarely supports true omnichannel:** Chat, email, and phone are often separate solutions that require agents to login and out which impacts utilization metrics.
- **Poor reliability:** Frequent downtime can impact service levels, frustrate agents, and result in poor customer satisfaction.



“The Playvox quality assurance solution integrates with our ticketing system with ease. No customization, no outsourcing of integration efforts, no unnecessary costs. It just works!”

Prasun Choudhury, Director Global Customer Support and InfoSec Support,
BrowserStack

Benefits of a true cloud solution

By replacing your on-premises system with a **digital-first, true cloud solution**, you'll be up and running in days, not months, which enables fast speed-to-market. You'll also shift the capital expenditures of an on-premises system into predictable operating costs.

One of the most important benefits of a cloud solution is that agents can be located anywhere: they only need an internet connection and login information to start working. During the pandemic, when it was critical to quickly move agents to working from home, cloud solutions enabled contact centers to continue servicing their customers while **agents shifted to remote work**. A cloud solution also means you can hire the best agents regardless of where they're located, which is a boon to contact centers in rural areas, when unemployment rates are low, or if your agents need specialized skills.

An integrated cloud solution also gives you a unified view across contact center locations of performance, queue status, and important metrics. It enables the delivery of a great customer experience and makes it easier for agents to do their jobs. With an off-the-shelf cloud solution that doesn't require customization and has built-in integration with other systems, you won't need to hire expensive consulting resources to develop integrations. You'll also be able to share data across quality management, workforce management, learning, and gamification solutions, which streamlines reporting and gives you real-time visibility into important metrics.



Take the next step

Playvox's cloud-native [workforce optimization suite](#) provides the complete agent experience, increasing customer loyalty, and satisfaction. It's fully omnichannel with an integrated suite of products that offer operational efficiencies and improve the customer-agent experience. [Learn more](#)

Conclusion

Times of crisis result in new business practices and technology advancements, including these four trends. As contact center leaders adapt, they'll need to embrace the hybrid workforce, respond with empathy to both customers and agents, consider adding cross-selling and upselling to agents' responsibilities, and make the move to the cloud. The contact centers best prepared to adopt these trends will be the ones that come out on top.





How to Effectively Manage a Hybrid Work Environment for Customer Service Agents

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