

8 ways modern call center agents improve customer experience



How higher-quality agents evolve your customer service organization

Customer service has evolved, and so have consumers' expectations. When they call a company's customer service line, they expect to reach an expert who understands their concerns and solves their problems immediately.

Thanks to advancements in technology, delivering excellent customer service is achievable. Yet companies still struggle with basic satisfaction, poor call handling and long hold times that undermine their businesses.

Why does this occur? Companies are outsourcing customer service work to brick-and-mortar call centers, which have an antiquated approach to talent and flexibility.

Traditional call centers fail to deliver great customer service because they're limited to staffing with local talent, their policies and practices encourage high turnover, and their inflexible staffing model results in longer wait times.

Now is the time to raise the bar on agent quality and evolve beyond prehistoric brick and mortar. This white paper defines the 8 attributes most essential to agent quality, and then demonstrates where to find top agents to help you evolve your organization.

Customer service leaders can evolve their organizations beyond prehistoric brick and mortar by raising the bar on agent quality with virtual agents.



DEFINING AGENT QUALITY

Agent quality is the biggest factor influencing customer satisfaction. But how can you evaluate it?

You can inspect a diamond, smell a melon, or squeeze the Charmin. Agent quality is something every call center claims, but few effectively prove. In fact, most call centers mask their workforces behind stock photos and vague claims, rather than reveal the real data about people taking calls.

We considered these 8 attributes of agent quality:

1. **Talent pool:** Agents sourced based on their skills and background rather than geographical proximity to a call center
2. **Experience:** Work history, industry background, business skills such as sales experience, soft skills such as diplomacy or empathy
3. **Education:** Level completed, communication skills, learning capability
4. **Motivation:** Personal accountability, results-driven, and loyal
5. **Flexibility:** Round-the-clock coverage, able to dive in and out as needed
6. **Trustworthiness:** Protect customer information to prevent theft, larceny, fraud and forgery
7. **Empathy:** Shared language and cultural understanding
8. **Longevity:** Low attrition and substantial tenure to enable accumulated knowledge

FROM PREHISTORIC TO PROGRESSIVE

If the purpose of customer service is to deliver a quality brand experience, the most important question a customer service leader can ask is, "Where can I find the highest-quality agents?"

Our research found that a substantially different type of agent works for different types of call centers. The data shows that employees at traditional brick-and-mortar call centers tend to be less experienced, have fewer formal skills, were more prone to turnover, and produced lower results in sales conversions and satisfaction than virtual home-based agents.

Why? **Traditional call centers attract a person who is vastly different in attitude and skills from a virtual agent.** Traditional call centers:

- Are limited to sourcing workers from the local talent pool, rather than reaching agents with the best skills, regardless of geography
- Set schedules, require commutes, and have employee mandates, which tend to alienate more highly skilled workers who value flexibility
- Lack career growth options and tend to discourage enterprising agents who want to manage and grow their own businesses

ONCE BITTEN, TWICE SHY

It's understandable that customer service leaders are leery about adopting a new paradigm for call center work, especially after seeing so much voice work funneled overseas a decade ago. That cost-driven trend had a disastrous impact on customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Now, many traditional call centers have continually lowered the bar and aren't delivering the best possible customer service. The landscape is changing and organizations like yours are heading back to the drawing board to find better options. It's time to evolve to a more modern approach.

#1 Virtual agents come from a broader talent pool.

There's an incredible amount of great talent outside a call center. When you are geographically unbound to a particular local area, you can identify pools of talent that best fit your needs.

This is key because many customer calls require specialized skills, such as backgrounds in certain industries, insurance licensure, HIPAA compliance, or technology, to name a few.

Drawing from a small pool of workers limits the ability to secure the best talent. Traditional call centers are limited to sourcing agents from the local area where their brick-and-mortar call center is located. People with great skills who live outside a reasonable commute radius simply don't fit this model.

Call centers can only source local talent within driving distance.



Virtual agents are sourced nationwide for the best skills.



#2 Virtual agents are more experienced.

While traditional call center workers have an average of five years of work experience, virtual agents have an average of 15 years of work experience under their belts, according to the 2017 Liveops agent survey.

Frost & Sullivan reports that the average age of a traditional call center worker is just 23. By contrast, the average age of a virtual agent is 38.

With this maturity comes greater life experience and people who are likely to be more empathetic to the caller's needs and problems. Their prior work experience helps them handle difficult situations more diplomatically than their unseasoned counterparts.

Average age of a call center agent:



23 years

Average age of a virtual agent:



38 years

They bring these skills to the table when they become virtual agents, with backgrounds in customer service, retail, sales, insurance, health care, teaching and management.

By choosing the companies they represent, virtual agents are able to match their skills with relevant industries, resulting in much more qualified agents taking calls.

Employees at traditional call centers are less experienced, more prone to turnover, and produce lesser results than virtual home-based agents.

Average years of work experience for a call center agent:



Average years of work experience for a virtual agent:



#3 Virtual agents are more educated.

Not all jobs require a college degree. However, a person's decision to pursue higher education—and their ability to stick with it through the hurdles of application, class work and degree requirements—can shed light on their mindset and willingness to seek out learning opportunities.

According to Frost & Sullivan, only 34 percent of traditional call center employees have attended some college. However, 81 percent of virtual agents—according to the Liveops survey—have attended college, and some have advanced degrees.

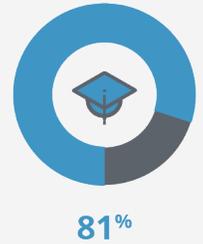
A commitment to learning and willingness to absorb new information are essential ingredients in agent success. While traditional call centers mandate training for employees, they are incentivized to move agents through training and onto the phones as quickly as possible.

By contrast, virtual agents at Liveops take self-paced learning and certification courses. They are self-motivated to learn because they want to be ready to work. After all, they are building their business. And they're empowered by their educational backgrounds to study and learn new material.

Call center agents who have attended college:



Virtual agents who have attended college:



Ongoing soft skills and professional development:



Unlikely
for call center agents



Yes
for virtual agents

#4 Virtual agents are more flexible.

Customer service demands spike in every industry for a wide variety of reasons—seasonal fluctuations, new products or promotions, holidays, natural disasters or weather, time-of-day spikes and unforeseen circumstances.

Overstaffing to accommodate these spikes results in wasted idle time. For traditional call center employees, that means they sit in their cubicles, on the clock, waiting for the next call to come.

But understaffing can create a worse mess. Customers who are stuck in long hold queues often get frustrated, hang up, and many may abandon the brand altogether. American Express research showed that 67% of American adults have hung up in the past year out of frustration because they couldn't reach a real person.

Call spikes are a key reason more and more companies are capitalizing on the flexibility of virtual, on-demand agents. This flexibility benefits both parties: virtual agents cite schedule flexibility as a key reason they are attracted to this work, and businesses achieve a more nimble customer service organization.



#5 Virtual agents are more trustworthy.

One of the most surprising myths in the call center industry is that virtual agents are less trustworthy than traditional call center employees, when in fact the truth is quite the opposite.

According to the FBI Uniform Crime Report, brick-and-mortar call center employees are 300% more likely to commit theft or larceny than an agent who works from home. The same report noted that brick-and-mortar agents are 180% more likely than work-from-home agents to commit forgery or fraud.

This is especially significant considering the lengths many call centers go to for so-called “security”—no paper on desks, all personal items including mobile phones stowed in lockers far from the call-taking cubicles, and supervisors constantly looking over employees’ shoulders.

Brick-and-mortar call center employees are 300% more likely to commit theft or larceny than an agent who works from home.

Virtual agents are far less likely to commit these crimes. Why? With greater maturity and life experience, they understand the real consequences of bad actions. Furthermore, virtual agents are more deeply committed to protecting customer security because if they fail, it's not just a job on the line—it's their business, and they have invested personal time and money to ensure its success.

#6 Virtual agents are more relatable.

When the trend toward offshoring customer service work began, customer service executives initially thought they'd achieved great costs savings.

But those savings came with a massive, but slowly realized, price tag: customer satisfaction and loyalty dropped precipitously because offshore agents weren't as good as domestic agents at answering calls.

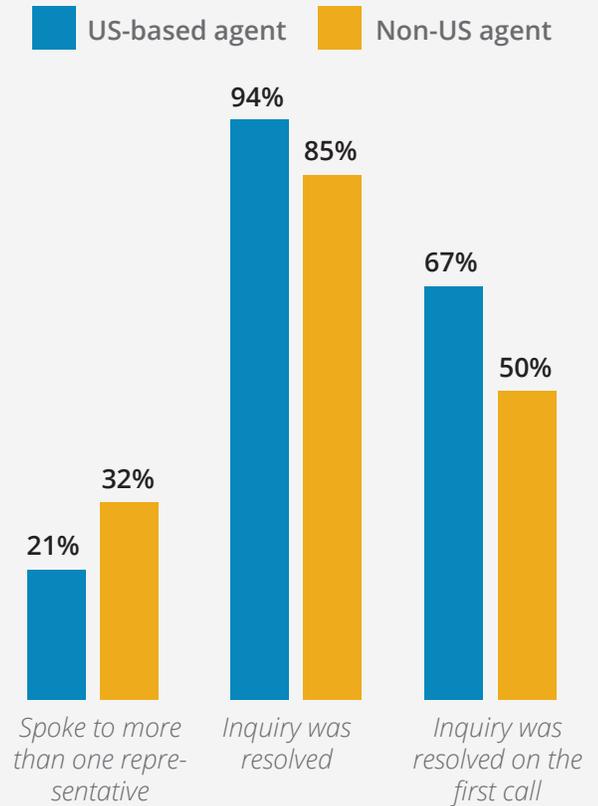
Even foreign agents with excellent language skills might lack the cultural understanding necessary for a nuanced transaction.

According to the CFI Group in a call center satisfaction study of 1,500 adults, customers who reached foreign agents were 52% more likely to have to speak to more than one representative, 10% less likely to resolve an inquiry, and 25% less likely to resolve the inquiry on the first call.

It is often a challenge for traditional call centers to find US-based workers, because they are limited by their geography to recruiting only from the pool of available workers willing to drive to their brick-and-mortar centers.

However, virtual agents can be sourced from anywhere in the US, including from rural communities where employment options are limited, but language and cultural knowledge are second nature.

CALL HANDLING, US-BASED AGENTS VS. AGENTS OUTSIDE OF THE US



Source: CFI Group study of 1500 adults, reported by NPR.

#7 Virtual agents have greater longevity.

High agent turnover has been a leading source of frustration in call centers for decades. According to the 2016 US Contact Center Decision Makers' Guide, the average 'lifespan' of a US call center worker is approximately three years, with a turnover of 33 percent.

Agent turnover remains a tough nut to crack, saddling companies with the massive costs associated with hiring, training, and supervision of so many new employees.

Attrition is a fact of life when low pay, little flexibility, and few opportunities for advancement exist in the traditional call center model. Age also influences attrition. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median job tenure for workers aged 20 to 24 was shorter than 16 months and only three years for

those 25 to 34. This trend continues with greater maturity: older workers stay in jobs much longer.

Virtual agents work in an entirely different model that rewards longevity and performance through call optimization. In fact, the group of virtual agents working for a major pharmaceutical client of Liveops had less than 10 percent annual attrition, a statistic unheard of in the call center industry.

With virtual agents, the customer service model has been reinvented. Agents love their work, they have flexible hours and can enjoy the comforts of home. Happier agents equal happier customers.

For example, one disabled military veteran, Anthony, said it is essential that he be able to stand, walk and take regular breaks while working as a virtual agent. His former job required him to be seated at a desk for too many hours in a row.

#8 Virtual agents are more productive and motivated.

At a traditional call center, it's a nine-to-five job. Employees can't control much about their work, schedules, pay or the companies they represent. However, virtual agents at Liveops have control over all of these factors through their choice of call types, which companies they represent, their performance on calls, and the volume of work they choose to do. Virtual agents are more invested in the success of their calls. They invest their own money and time in building their business.

When traditional call center agents sit idle in a cube farm, they aren't productively serving customers. These overhead costs are a drain on the bottom line. Contrast this with a virtual agent model, who are typically paid on a per-talk-minute basis, and therefore no minute is wasted.

The more calls agents receive, the more money they can earn, so they're motivated to make the most of every interaction.

A traditional call center can't afford to "bench" its lowest-performing agents, because those employees will continue to cost money without producing results. Yet firing the low performers is a recipe for more business disruption, not to mention increased hiring and training costs.

Also, with a limited talent pool to draw from, replacing that agent might be tough. So traditional call centers keep routing calls to lower-performing agents, and agents continue to fumble them and potentially lose loyal customers.

In the virtual agent model, call optimization creates a competitive marketplace for work by routing calls to top-scoring agents first. The more calls an agent receives, the more money they have the potential to earn, so they're motivated to make the most of every interaction.

Evolution made easy: How to evaluate your organization's agent quality

Given the massive differences in quality between virtual, on-demand agents and traditional call center employees, it's surprising that some companies still have not embraced a more flexible customer service model with virtual agents as a competitive advantage.

But change can be tough. There is perceived risk both in making the leap from the known to the unknown, and from moving to a controlled employee model to working with virtual agents who work outside brick and mortar walls.

Before you launch a proof-of-concept or pilot program to test how virtual agents will work for your business, ask five key questions:

- How is my call center **quality** measured and reported?
- How **flexible** is my workforce to respond to fluctuations in volume?
- How **productive** is my workforce, both in terms of top-line revenue and bottom-line utilization?
- What percentage of my call center work is **distributed** in-house vs. traditional call center vs. virtual agents?
- Could I run a **test** to determine which type of agents deliver the best quality and results?

Find out if your call center work is distributed to the best quality agents by developing a proof-of-concept program that tests whether virtual agents deliver better quality than traditional call centers.

Whether driven by a need for better customer satisfaction, greater business agility, or lower overhead and attrition, virtual agents can help your customer service organization evolve.



Real Liveops agents like Shirley (top), Rebecca (center), and Mary, all from Georgia, exemplify the experience, empathy, and professionalism that are the hallmark of our agents.

Liveops offers an on-demand skilled workforce of onshore virtual agents for customer service and sales. More than 400 organizations across service industries including retail, health care, insurance and telecom trust Liveops to deliver an enterprise-grade workforce, with faster program readiness, increased revenue, and greater customer satisfaction scores than traditional call centers. Visit liveops.com or contact sales@liveops.com to learn more or talk to one of our solutions experts.