



LOW-COST (AND NO COST) STRATEGIES FOR RETAINING AGENTS

STRATEGIES FOR KEEPING TALENTED AGENTS THAT WON'T STRAIN THE CALL CENTER BUDGET

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One of the toughest challenges contact centers face is agent turnover. Whether the cause is burnout, dissatisfaction with opportunities, the boss or the pay, well-trained people are leaving contact centers faster than they can be replaced. No matter the economic conditions, good contact center agents are hard to get and

harder to retain. And as the economy improves and employment opportunities increase in other fields, contact centers can be expected to face even greater retention challenges.

Consider the cost of this talent loss. There is no doubt that losing a well-trained contact center agent is expensive. Industry studies indicate that it costs an average \$15,000 to replace a contact center agent.

That figure doesn't include the loss of productivity and other costs that are incurred following a talented person's departure and last throughout the orientation and training of his or her replacement.

INEXPENSIVE NEW-HIRE RETENTION STRATEGIES

Given the expensive price tag of unwanted turnover, most managers want to do what they can to keep their best people for as long as they possibly can. The good news is, there are many no-cost or low-cost strategies managers can use to engage and retain talent. These approaches have consistently worked in contact centers across industries — and sometimes despite difficult jobs (with challenging customers) and less than ideal compensation packages. Of course, we're not saying pay doesn't matter. In fact, it is important that you pay agents competitive and fair salaries. But our research tells us that, beyond pay, there are many other reasons people stay with an organization. Focus on the following strategies and you'll increase the odds of keeping your best agents and supervisors.

- **Managers (from the top down) must be retention-focused.** A key staff engagement and retention driver often involves developing a new managerial mindset (for some managers and executives). Company leaders must believe that their people are their most critical assets, and that they, as leaders, have more power and influence than anyone else in the retention equation. One company lived this concept particularly well by making employee retention “part of the company DNA.” The organization held to that belief by making managers at all levels accountable for engaging and retaining talent.
- **Make sure hiring processes are designed to identify the right agents.** If you hire the right person for the job in the first place, you'll increase your chances of keeping him or her. This means identifying the critical factors that spell success for the job, such as skills, motivations, attitudes, even work

style. Many managers interview their top-performing veteran agents to create a baseline. You can then develop interview questions that will reveal whether a candidate does or does not possess those attributes. During the interview, it's important to ensure that the questions are posed by several people who represent varying management levels and responsibilities. This will ensure that you get different perspectives and input on each candidate. Regardless of the tough employment market, it's critical to have the courage to reject applicants who, by all indications, won't make it in the long run (even if they're desperately needed in the short run).

- **Develop an effective orientation and welcome process.** The risk for losing call center talent is highest during the first six months of employment. Recognizing that, once they're hired, you'll want to do what you can to “extend the handshake.” An effective method is to develop a solid orientation process with the call center manager in charge of the proceedings — it's not HR's job. The focus must be more involved than simply informing employees where the supplies and break rooms are located. Instead, this is the time for managers to begin developing a meaningful relationship with each new agent. During orientation, managers should highlight potential career paths (within the contact center and companywide), as well as all learning and enrichment possibilities that are available. The goal is to help each carefully selected new team member to quickly get connected and to visualize his or her future in the organization.
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RETAINING AND ENGAGING VETERAN AGENTS

What about the agents who are already on the job? How do you retain and engage them? Over the past many years, our two organizations have surveyed more than 20,000 employees from a cross-section of industries about what keeps them on the job. Following are a few instructive findings from our “What Keeps You?” survey:

- **Retention drivers are under the manager’s control.** The top five reasons employees stayed with an organization are (in descending order of frequency):
 - Exciting and challenging work
 - Supportive management/good boss
 - Being recognized/valued/respected
 - Career growth, learning and development
 - Flexible work environment.

Notice pay is not on the list of top five. Pay does show up in the number six spot. Although many managers believe it is the most important “stay factor” of all, research (ours and many other industry studies) reveals that money consistently falls below other retention drivers. In fact, for decades, researchers have described money as a “hygiene” factor when it comes to employee retention — and it’s a dissatisfier when viewed as insufficient, noncompetitive or unfair. But competitive pay will not retain skilled agents if they’re bored, see no career path, dislike their colleagues or dislike their bosses. Significantly, all of the top five “stay” factors just mentioned can be influenced by the manager. In fact, most retention drivers are under the manager’s control. One survey found that 50 percent of job satisfaction depends on the employee’s relationship with the manager. It is because of this incredible influence that organizations are increasingly holding managers accountable for hiring, developing, engaging and, yes, retaining talent — even tying

managerial compensation and bonuses to retention success.

- **Make the job more interesting.** When the thrill is gone, so are your skilled agents. Job enrichment — making the work more interesting, fulfilling and/or challenging — is a critical retention strategy. It can help you to retain agents, not just physically, but mentally and emotionally, as well. Even if they’re physically at their workstations, when agents get bored with the job, they can leave mentally, or “disengage.” This surfaces through counterproductive activities, such as high absenteeism and mediocre performance. Managers, however, can offer various job enrichment opportunities that can help to prevent physical departure and/or disengagement. Enrichment strategies often take the form of tasks and responsibilities agents can take on in ways that promote personal autonomy and creativity. Or managers might consider offering veteran agents extended training or cross-training opportunities, or a rotation of work assignments to increase job variety. Other possibilities include agent participation in project management, brainstorming sessions to focus on how jobs can be enriched, or agent input on team and/or individual rewards and recognition.
 - **Give agents career growth and development opportunities.** Many contact centers are developing career paths for their people and are getting creative in considering multiple career options (sometimes “upward” positions are in short supply). It’s critical for the manager to be involved in this process — agents want their managers to partner with them in discovering and pursuing opportunities at work. Managers, in turn, need to consider questions like: What’s available and what do people want? Would a lateral move be useful or interesting? How can the agent’s career goals and the organizational goals
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and plans mesh? And how can an employee's career goals be accomplished within the context of the contact center structure?

- **People don't leave companies, they leave managers.** Therefore, it's important to show interest and become adept at holding "career conversations" on a regular basis with each agent you hope to keep. These conversations are critical to your agents' development as well as to their sense of belonging and importance to their manager and organization. Regularly touching base with your agents this way will keep them from looking around for greener pastures — and for a boss who cares.
- **Develop a sense of camaraderie among staff.** Rounding out the top ten reasons on why people stay from our "What Keeps You?" survey is the ability to work with great co-workers or clients. Co-worker relationships are critical to job satisfaction — and managers who can create a team that works well together and vigorously supports each other are well on the way to building a retention culture. But doing so requires your time and effort. Successful managers take the time to listen carefully to the needs of each individual, and do what they can to help that person feel fulfilled and satisfied in

the job. They also create an atmosphere in which people's needs, opinions, values, work-styles, and accomplishments are respected, valued, and rewarded. The contact center environment presents some special issues when it comes to work/life balance and the importance of schedule adherence. Savvy managers will recognize their employees' needs and creatively partner with them to find solutions that work. That kind of caring will engender loyalty in an era when many think loyalty is dead.

THE REWARDS ARE WORTH THE EFFORT

The tremendous need for more contact centers, coupled with a competitive labor market, means that managers need to hire skillfully, and then help their talented agents to grow, develop, and flourish within the contact center environment. It's a tall order. But it's one that retention-focused contact center managers can efficiently and cost-effectively fill to perfection.

*Beverly Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans are co-authors of **Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay** (Berrett-Koehler, 2014). Beverly is the founder of Career Systems International (www.careersystemsintl.com). Sharon is the president of The JordanEvans Group (www.jeg.org).*