

FROM STRESS TO SUCCESS: REDUCING COMPLEXITY WITH AI-POWERED CONTACT CENTER SOLUTIONS

Stress is on the rise in contact centers. How can these organizations utilize the latest technology solutions to make the experience better for supervisors, agents and customers?

SURVEY REPORT

Presented by **NICE** and **CMS WIRE**

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Introduction

Contact centers aren't passing the stress test. Both contact center agents and supervisors are facing rising levels of complexity and stress in the workplace, as well as increasing workloads. In an industry where customer experience is everything, work stress leads to many undesirable outcomes, including unhappy agents, rising attrition and frustrated customers.

To further explore trends in contact center complexity and stress, NICE, in partnership with CMSWire Insights, conducted a survey of 366 contact center supervisors and 356 contact center agents across EMEA, India and the United States in September 2023. These findings allowed us to understand recent changes in the contact center workplace and how they've contributed to the trend of rising complexity. Automation, for example, has partially improved the agent experience by taking some repetitive tasks off their plate, but it's also introduced a new challenge. While agents find their work more satisfying and interesting when they're focused on complex customer problems, this very complexity also increases their stress levels.

With this in mind, supervisors and CX leaders have a huge challenge to face in the contact center. How can they ease the stress of agents' jobs while keeping their work interesting and meeting the growing expectations of customers? The answer lies in a common misconception supervisors have about agents. While most supervisors believe agents are very resistant to using AI, agents are generally more open to AI than supervisors believe. In this paper, we will dig into the causes of contact center stress, explore the complexity of agents' jobs and look into the types of technology solutions that contact centers need to decrease stress while keeping an agent's job complex and interesting.



Key Findings

An increase in omnichannel customer communication has increased difficulty according to agents (53%) and complexity according to supervisors (69%). Most agents (81%) agree that they manage more complicated interactions than they used to.

As a result, work stress is increasing. Most agents (72%) say their work stress has increased by 30% or more.

Both supervisors and contact center agents are very likely to say that **agents' work stress is negatively impacting the customer experience** (supervisors 78%, agents 63%).

Contact centers can use AI solutions to address complexity. Most agents (83%) say they want to see AI used to provide real-time assistance when they're solving problems.



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Inside Rising Work Stress

Workloads and work stress are rising throughout contact centers, for both agents and supervisors – an unsurprising trend given how quickly digital experiences rose to prominence in recent years. As customers become more comfortable forgoing physical experiences in favor of quicker, more convenient digital experiences, contact centers face a new, more demanding reality.

Supervisors were much more likely than agents to report an increase in workload over the past two years (81% vs. 69%) (Figure 1). Similarly, they were much more likely to report an increase in work stress. Most supervisors (62%) say their jobs have become more stressful (Figure 2), and 47% of agents say they have more work stress since starting their current role (Figure 3). In addition to their own stress, supervisors must take agent work-related stress very seriously. While it's not rising as quickly as supervisor stress, 72% of agents said that their work stress has increased by 30% or more over the past two years – a significant increase.

How has your workload changed over the past two years?

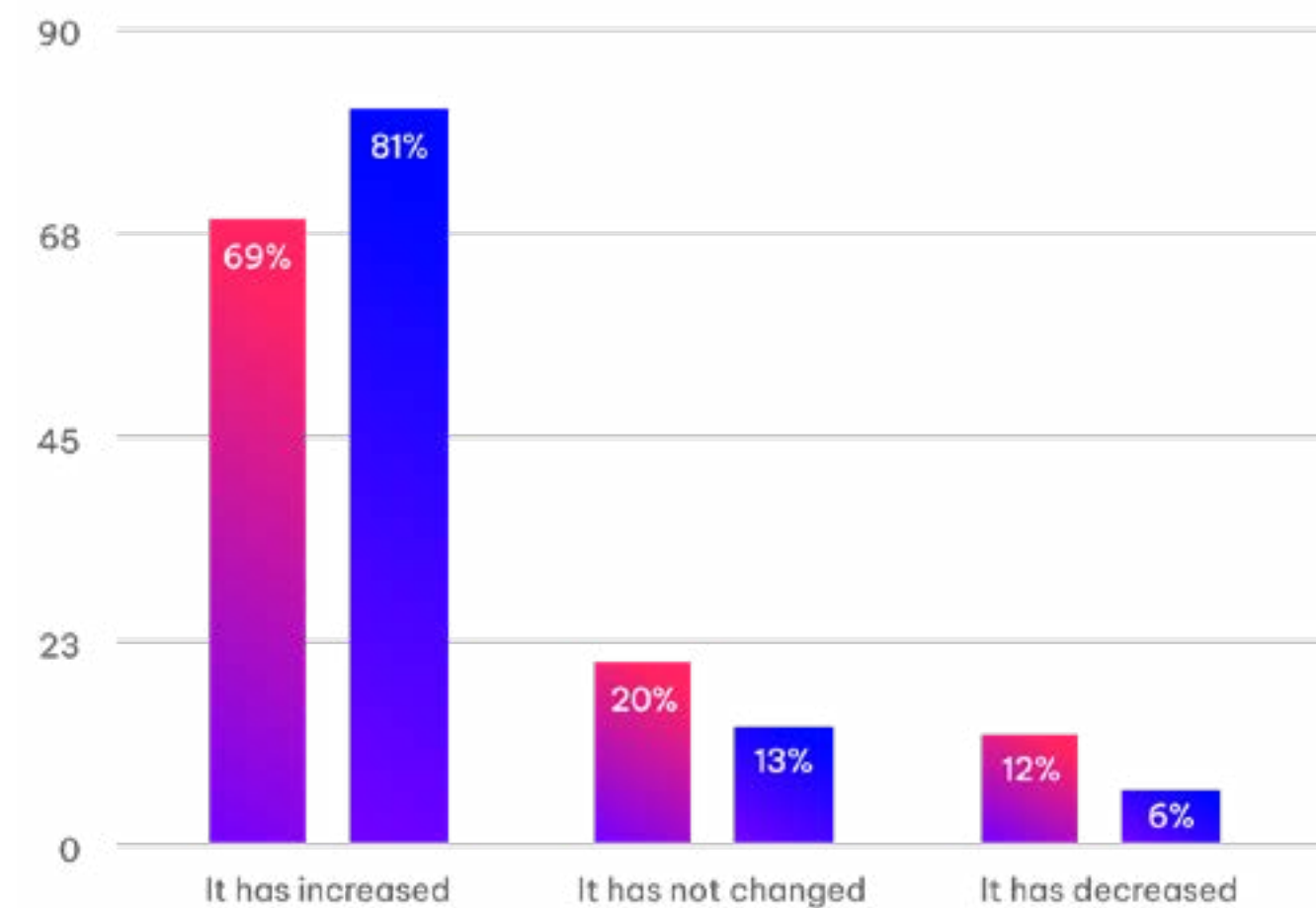


Figure 1 ● Agent ● Supervisor

Is it becoming more stressful to be a supervisor as contact center jobs become more complex? (Supervisors)

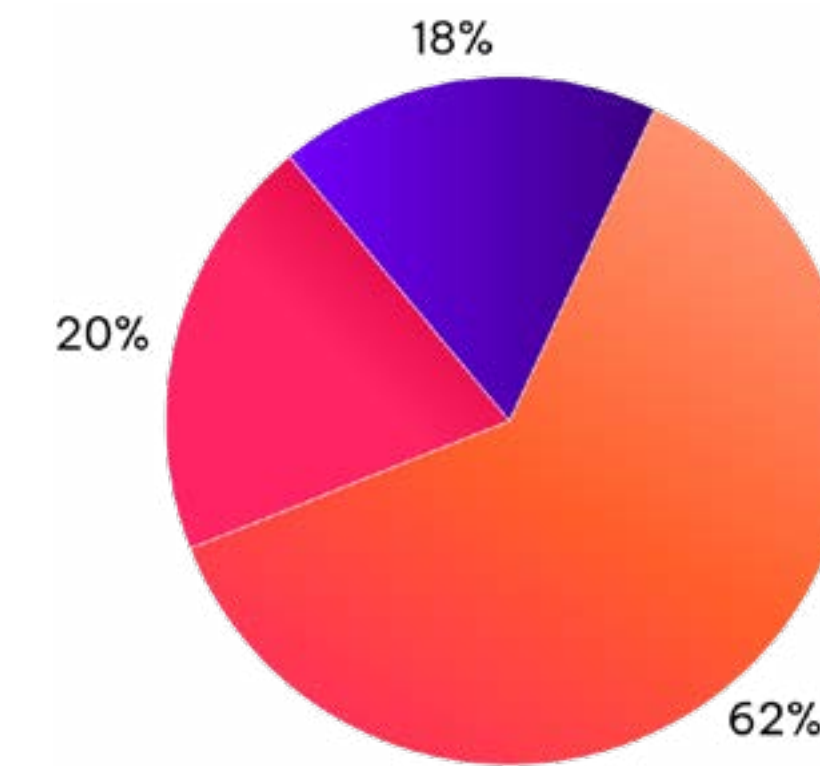


Figure 2 ● It's become more stressful ● No change ● It's become slightly less stressful

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Since you started your current role, has your stress related to work changed? (Agents)

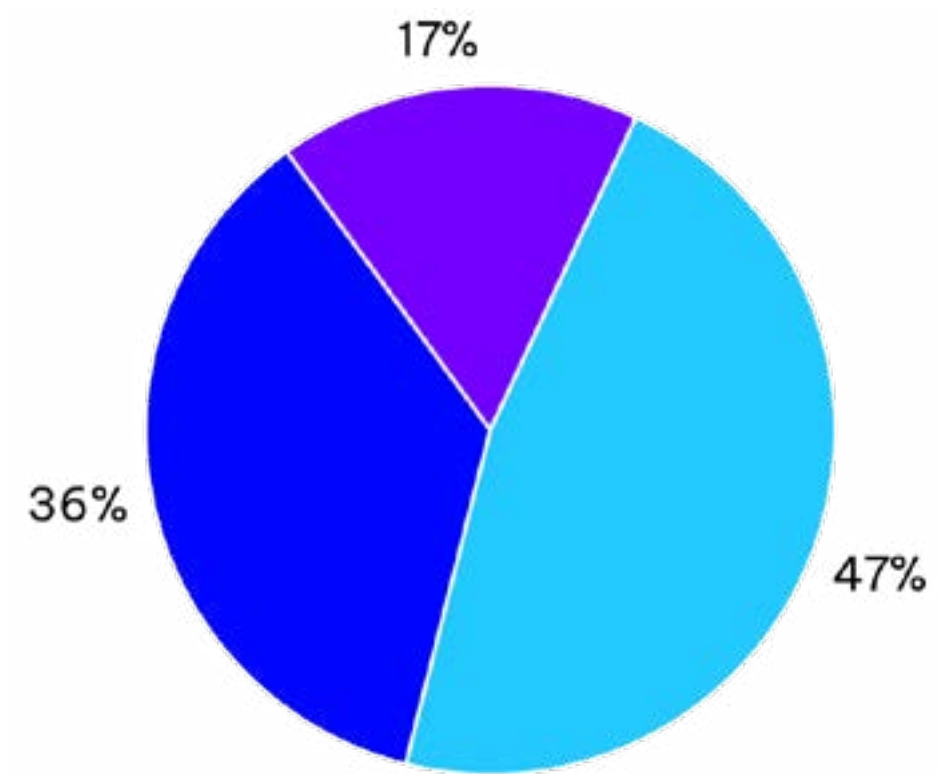


Figure 3

- I have more work stress
- No change
- I have less work stress

Since you started your current role, has your stress related to work changed? (Supervisors)

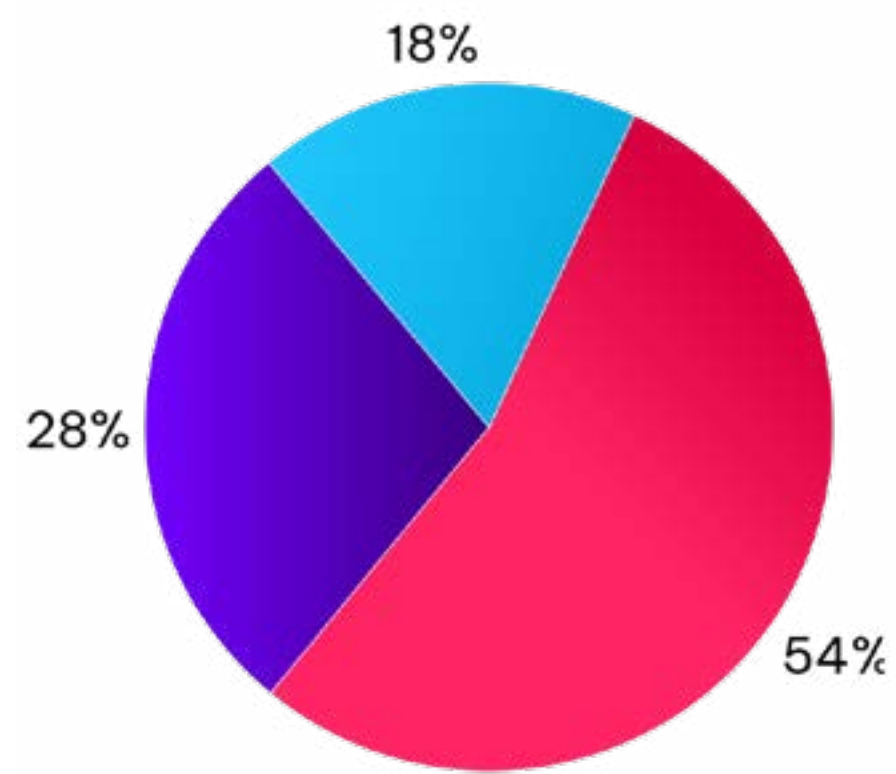


Figure 4

- They have more work stress
- No change
- They have less work stress

One reason that supervisors could be experiencing more of these impacts is that their role requires them to take a higher mental workload. Not only do they experience their own stress, but they also take on the work stress of their agents.

Interestingly, there's a gap between how much agents say their stress is increasing compared to how much supervisors think it's increasing. More than half of supervisors (54%) said the job of a contact center agent has become more stressful (Figure 4), compared to less than half (47%) of agents who said their work stress has increased. While this does not negate the fact that work stress is rising, the situation is not quite as bad as supervisors believe.



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Biggest Stressors in a Contact Center

Agents cited many reasons for stress in their jobs. Their major stressors include too many incoming contacts, dealing with difficult customers, and tech problems (Figure 5). Beyond this, the rise of omnichannel plays a role in their changing stress levels. More than two thirds of agents (67%) and supervisors (72%) say they're using more channels for customer communications. And more than half (53%) of agents said that the adoption of multi-channel customer communication has increased the difficulty of their jobs. To counteract this complexity, contact centers need to find a solution that allows agents to both receive fewer contacts and more effortlessly communicate with the customers that they do interact with.

Supervisors' most common stressors include forecasting contact volumes – a task likely made much more difficult with the rise of omnichannel. A majority of supervisors (69%) said that multichannel communications has increased complexity in their jobs. Omnichannel would likely make forecasting more difficult for supervisors because customers can inbound from any direction and multiple channels must be covered simultaneously.

Major stressors for agents

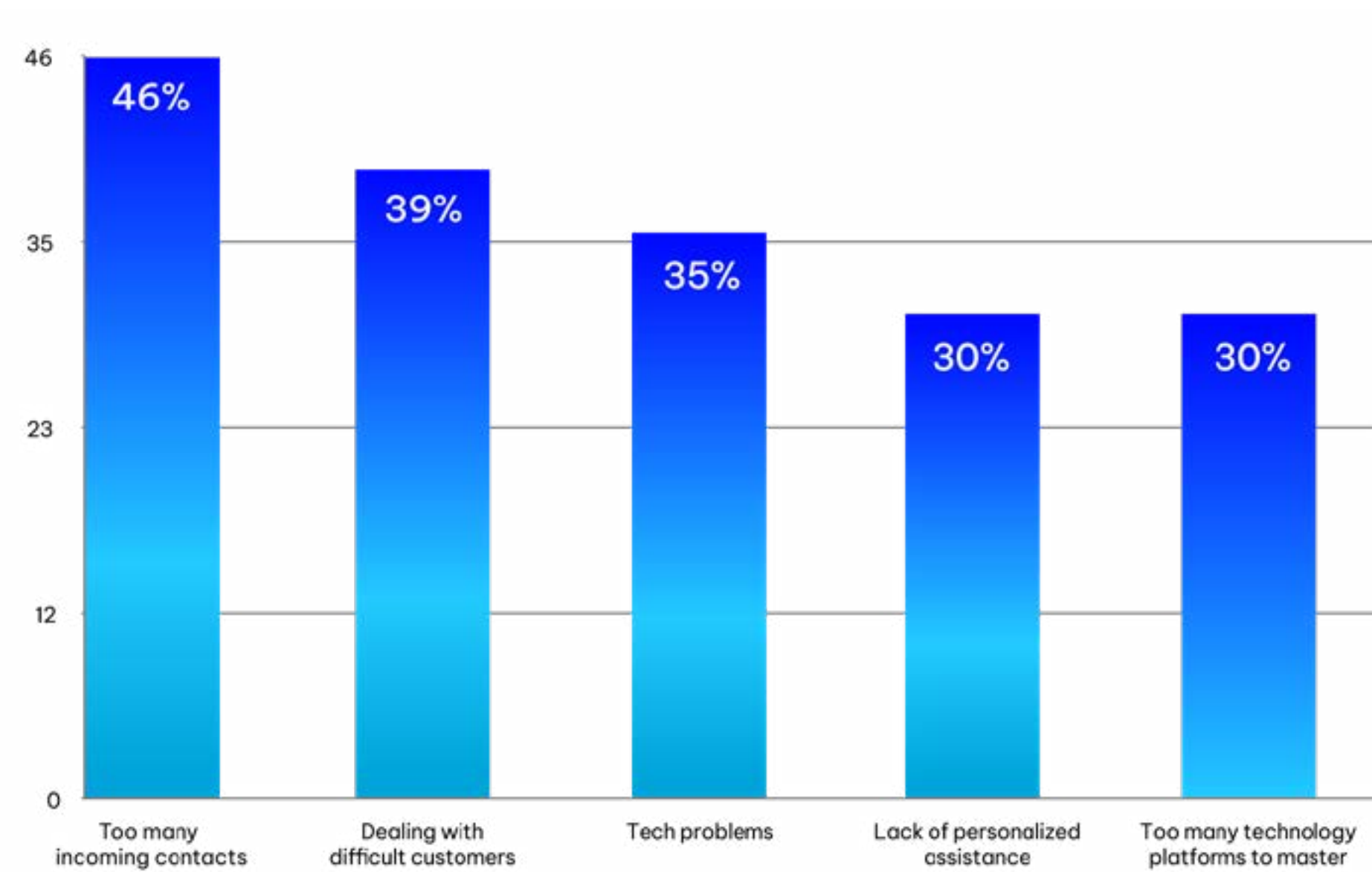


Figure 5

Major stressors for supervisors

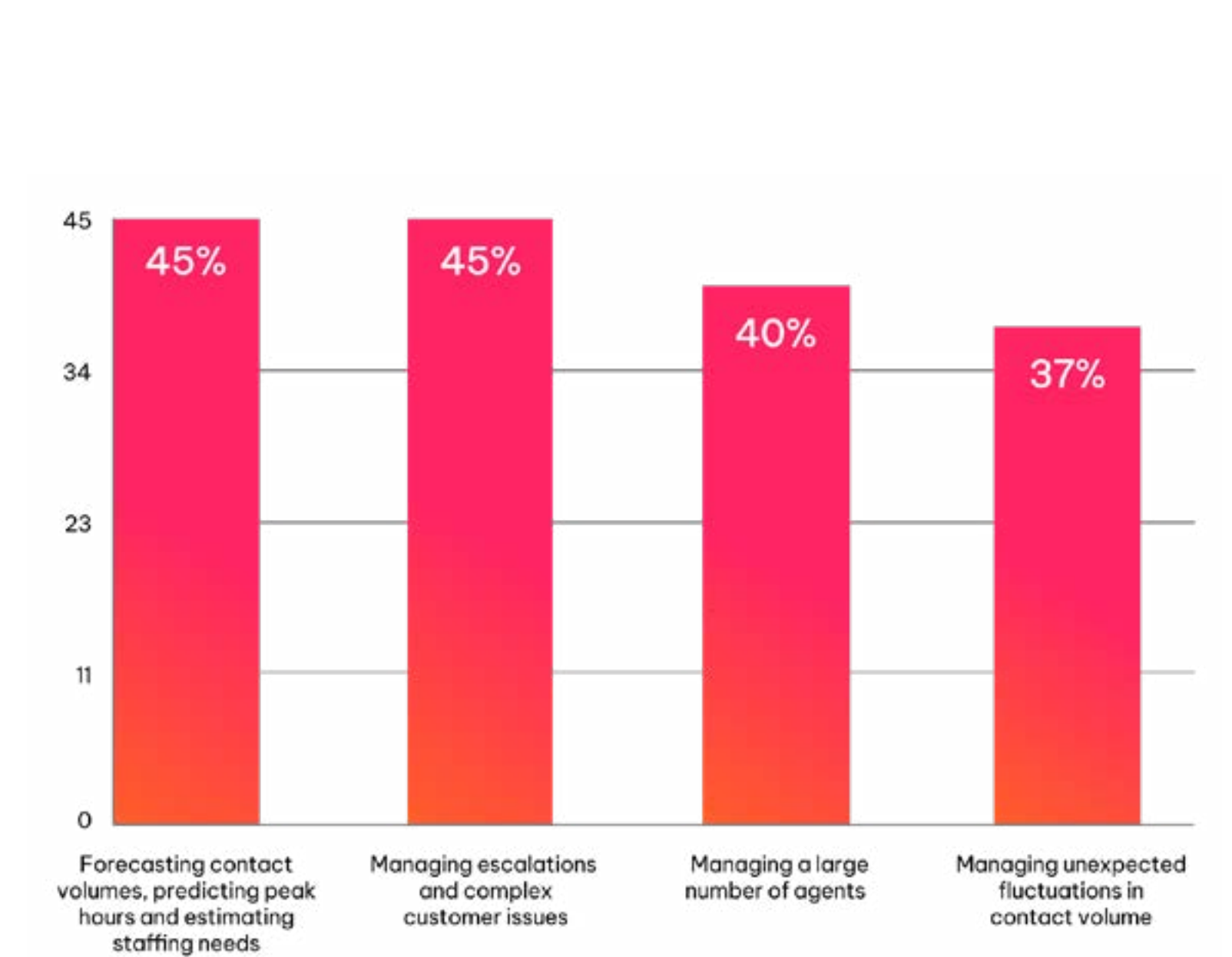


Figure 6

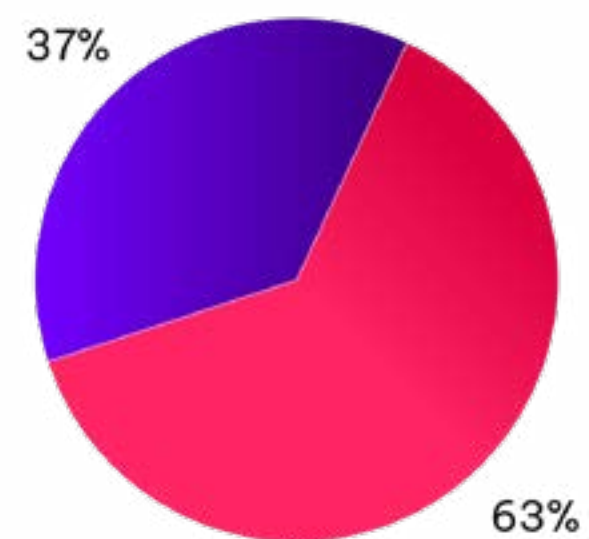
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Impact on Customer Experience

Rising stress levels threaten the health and well-being of supervisors and agents. Beyond that, it also has adverse effects on the customers' experiences. Most agents (63%) agree that increasing work stress has a negative outcome on customer outcomes, and 78% of supervisors agree that agent work stress negatively impacts CX. (Figure 7). In this way, it's important to address the major stress factors in a contact center and offer solutions that help supervisors and agents better deal with stress's main cause: complexity. This creates the potential to make everyone happier – supervisors, agents and customers.

Impact of stress on customers outcomes

on customer outcomes



Supervisor: Work stress for contact center agents is negatively impacting the customer experience

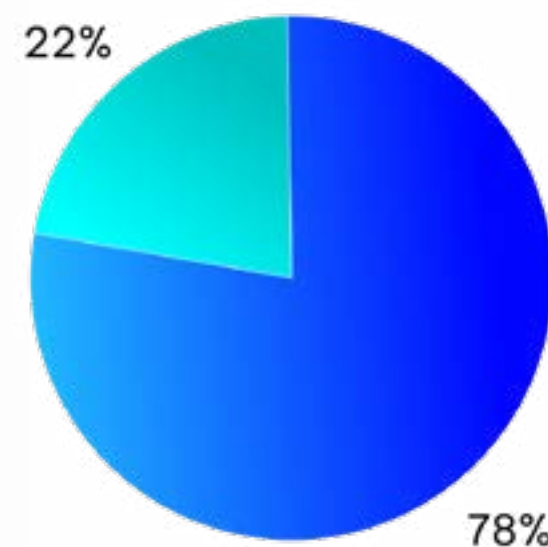


Figure 7

- They have more work stress
- No change
- Agree
- Disagree

It's important to address the major stress factors in a contact center and offer solutions that help supervisors and agents better deal with stress's main cause: complexity.



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High Engagement Eases the Challenge of Addressing Stressors

Luckily – and not obviously – contact center agents have relatively high engagement, a fact that can help supervisors unleash their stress reduction efforts on a receptive audience. Almost all the supervisors surveyed (91%) said their agents are somewhat or very engaged (Figure 8), and most agents (89%) said they are motivated to do their best work for their company (Figure 9). Further, most agents (75%) indicated they intend to stay at their current job for over a year (Figure 10). This is a significant finding given that intention to stay is a strong indicator of engagement. Agents who say they expect to stay less than three months tend to be actively looking for a new job, and only 7% of agents surveyed fit this group.

How would you rate the level of engagement of your agents? (Supervisors)

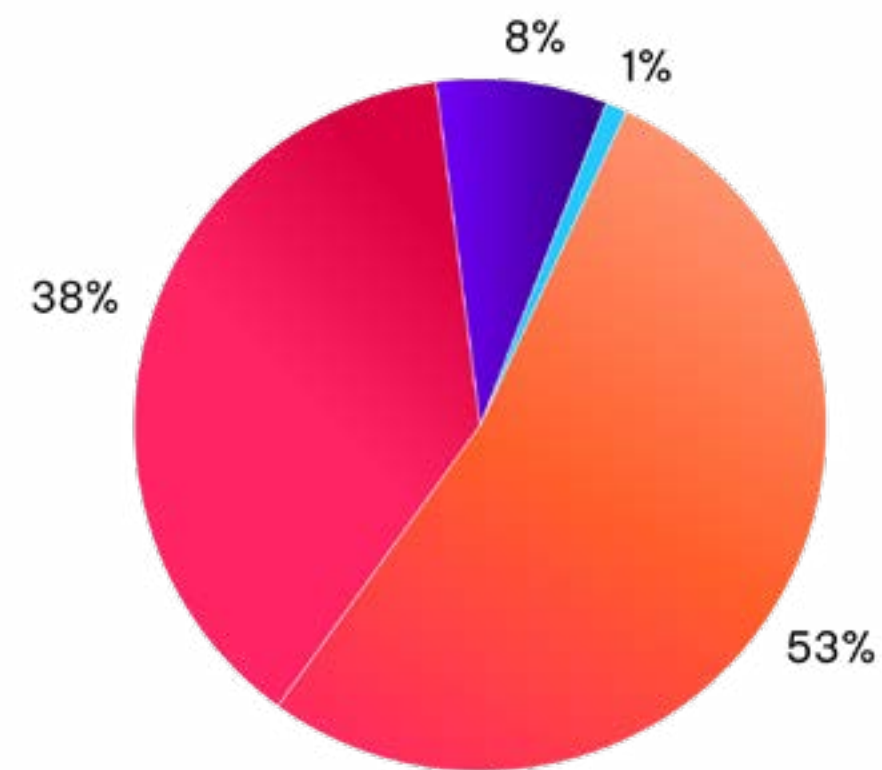


Figure 8

- Very Engaged
- Somewhat engaged
- Somewhat disengaged
- Very disengaged

Employee engagement: I am motivated to do my best work for my company.

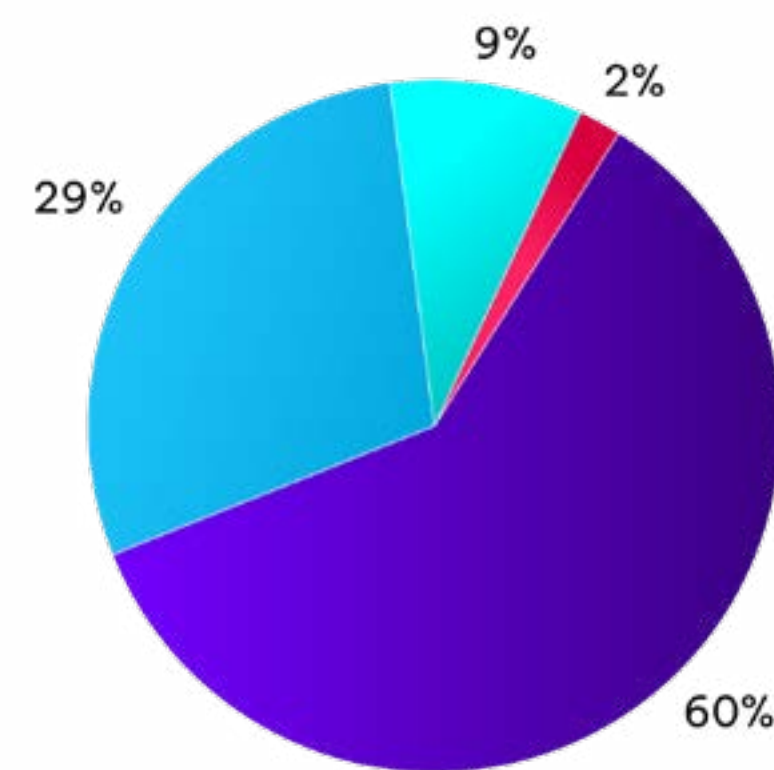


Figure 9

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

How long do you expect to work in this job? (Agents)

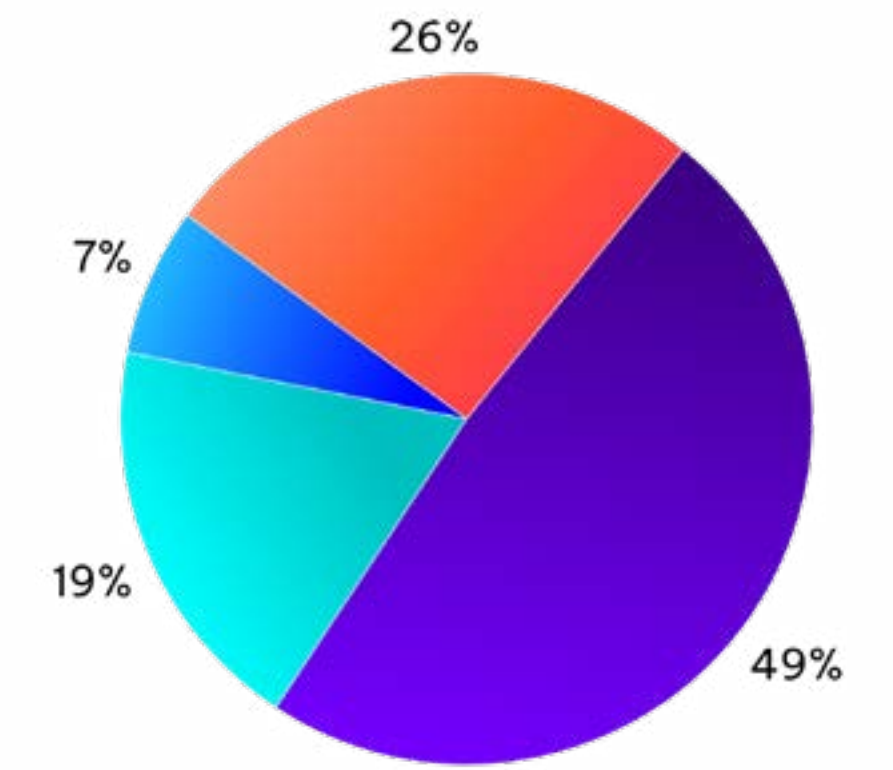


Figure 10

- More than 2 years
- 1-2 years
- 3 months-1 year
- Less than 3 months

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Engagement data also revealed other useful findings for supervisors interested in using technology to improve the agent experience. We wanted to see if there were differences between the most engaged agents and those who are less engaged. Separating agents between those who plan to stay at their current job for at least two more years (49% of respondents) and those who plan to stay less than two years (51% of respondents) allowed us to create a more engaged group and a less engaged group. When asked if their organization makes a serious effort to make their job easier with updated technology, 61% of the more engaged group strongly agreed, versus only 42% of the less engaged group. Agents with the most intent to stay are 19 percentage points more likely to say they strongly agree that their organization makes a serious effort to make their job easier with updated technology. In other words, updated technology that makes agents' lives easier is linked to improved engagement and retention at contact centers.

My organization makes a serious effort to make their job easier with updated technology.

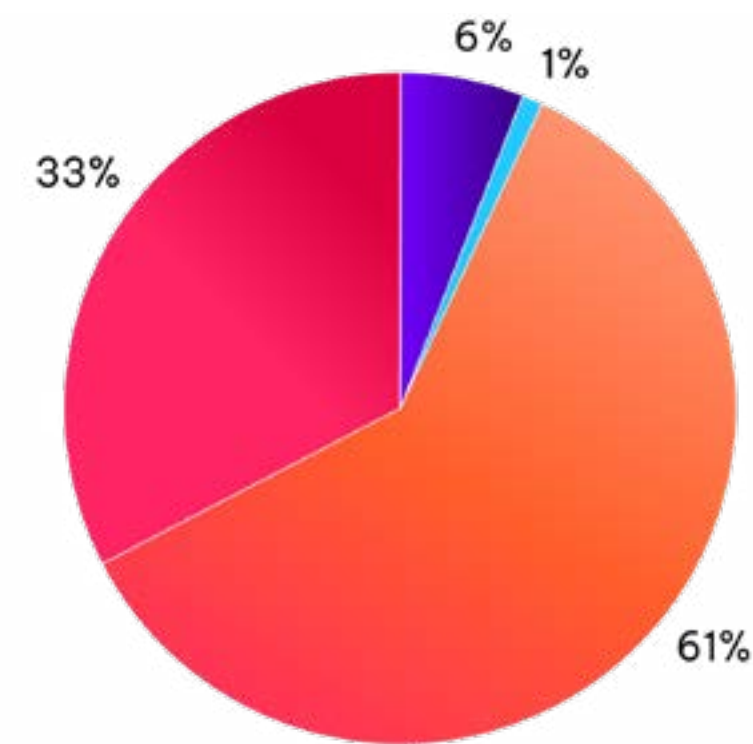
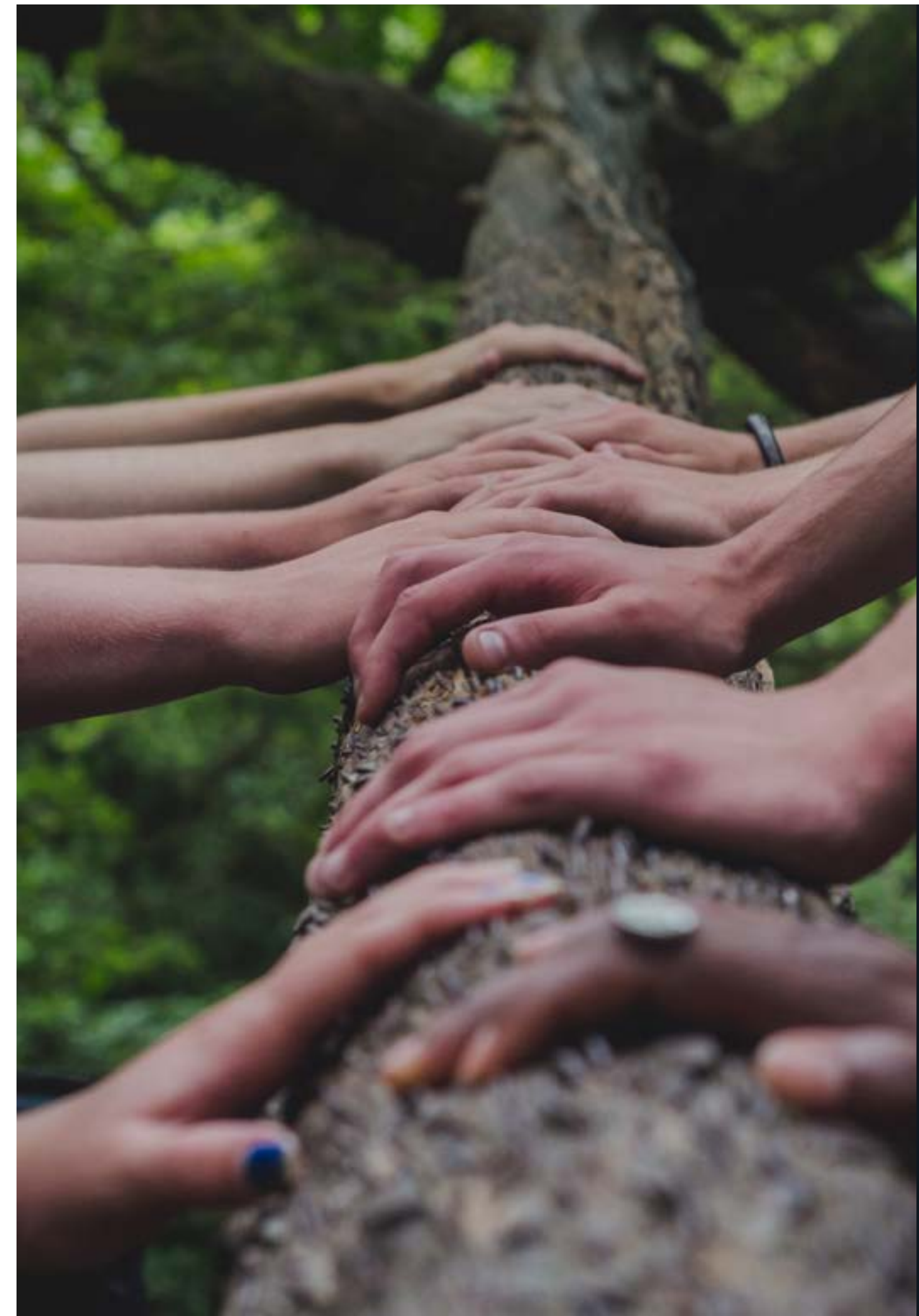


Figure 11

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly disagree

This finding is key because it shows a connection between feeling supported at work and access to the right technology. It seems likely that agents who intend to stay longer are influenced by the fact that their organization puts effort in continually making their job easier. It also seems likely that organizations that provide agents access to better, more modern technology also try to make the workplace better in other ways, helping them retain agents for longer. Whatever the reason, the connection between technology and feeling supported is significant.



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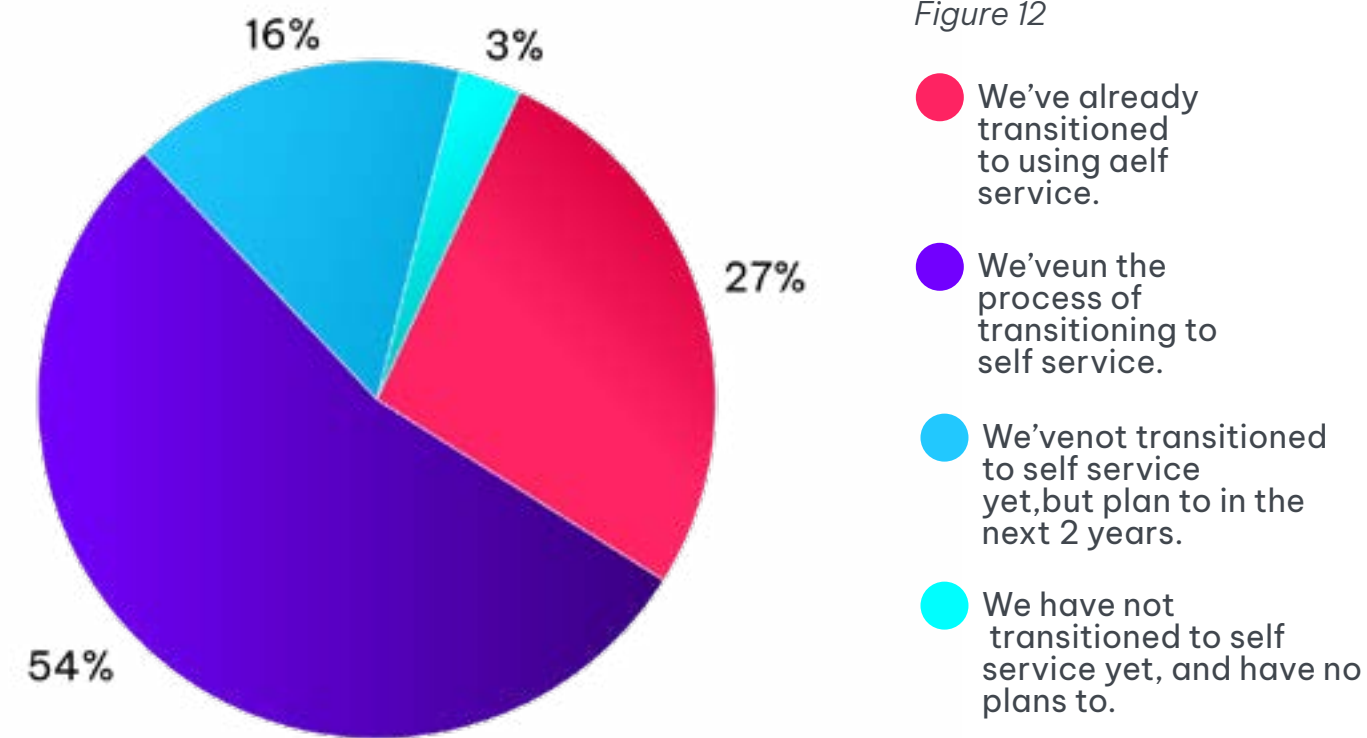
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The Relationship Between Complexity and Self-service

When analyzing agent stress, it's important to explore trends in how contact centers are operating. One recent trend has been the growing application of self-service to solve customer issues.

Self-service is not yet the norm for many contact centers, but supervisors indicated that contact centers are quickly moving in that direction. While only 27% of contact centers have already transitioned to using self service, more than half (54%) are still in the process of transitioning (Figure 12).

To what degree does your contact center use self-service to simplify customer interactions?



Self-service has many positive impacts on a contact center. For example, customers can avoid wait times, message a chatbot immediately and easily solve simple issues. More basic chatbots will mostly be able to resolve the most simple customer queries, but bots enabled with AI capabilities such as natural language processing and sentiment analysis will be able to understand customers better and give them a more effective experience. They'll also be able to improve the workload of agents.



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A Fine Line Between Good Complexity and Bad Complexity

Self-service allows agents to receive less simple, repetitive interactions and more complex, interesting interactions. Most agents (81%) say they manage more complicated customer interactions than they used to. Interestingly, this reality is a double-edged sword. It creates both more stress and more engagement in agents. Seventy-six percent of agents said complex interactions make their job more stressful, and nearly as many (73%) said these complex interactions make their job more exciting (Figure 13).

Agents' attitudes on simplicity and complexity

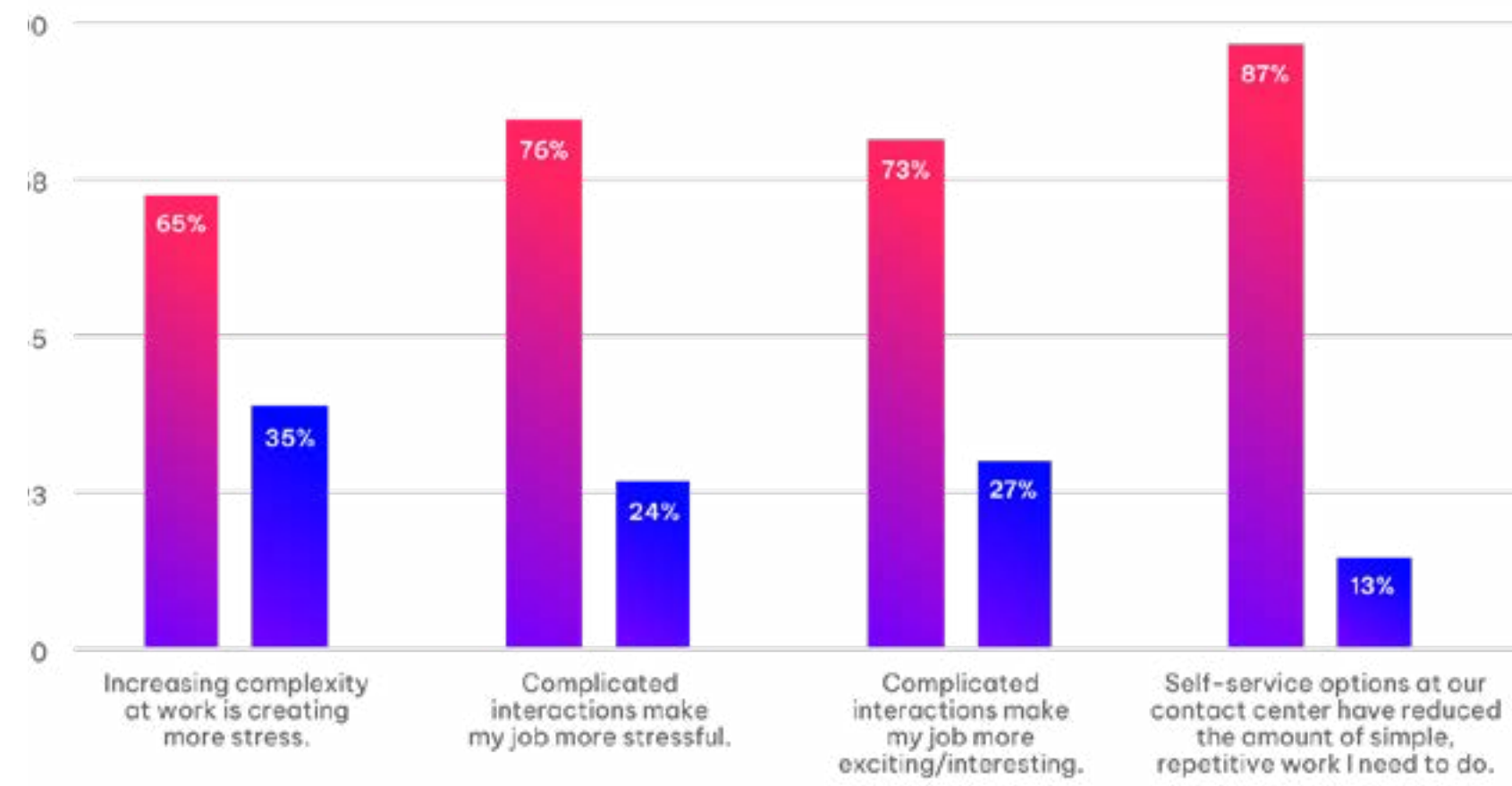


Figure 13 ● Very Engaged ● Somewhat disengaged

Despite the confusion created by this situation, it is ultimately better for agents. Most agents (64%) said they spend too much time on repetitive tasks, and most supervisors (63%) agree that agents spend too much time on this type of work that should be automated. Both supervisors and agents generally want more automation to decrease the amount of simple, repetitive work for agents.




Most agents (81%) say they manage more complicated customer interactions than they used to.

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The Connection Between Complexity, Self-service and Stress

Self-service increases complexity for contact center agents, and complexity increases stress. This introduces a unique situation for contact centers that want to glean the benefits of self-service while also reducing stress. They need to find a technology solution that specifically targets stress-inducing aspects of complex interactions while maintaining the aspects that add excitement to peoples' jobs.

Self-service also relates to stress in the way it can impact levels of customer frustration. Most (86%) of agents said that when self service fails to solve a customer issue, it makes customers frustrated – which also contributes to their rising stress levels. In fact, 58% of agents say that 30% or more of their interactions are with customers not able to resolve their issue through self-service. What's needed here is a way to improve self-service so it's more effective.

 **58% of agents say that 30% or more of their interactions are with customers not able to resolve their issue through self-service.**



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Technology Solutions That Reduce Complexity

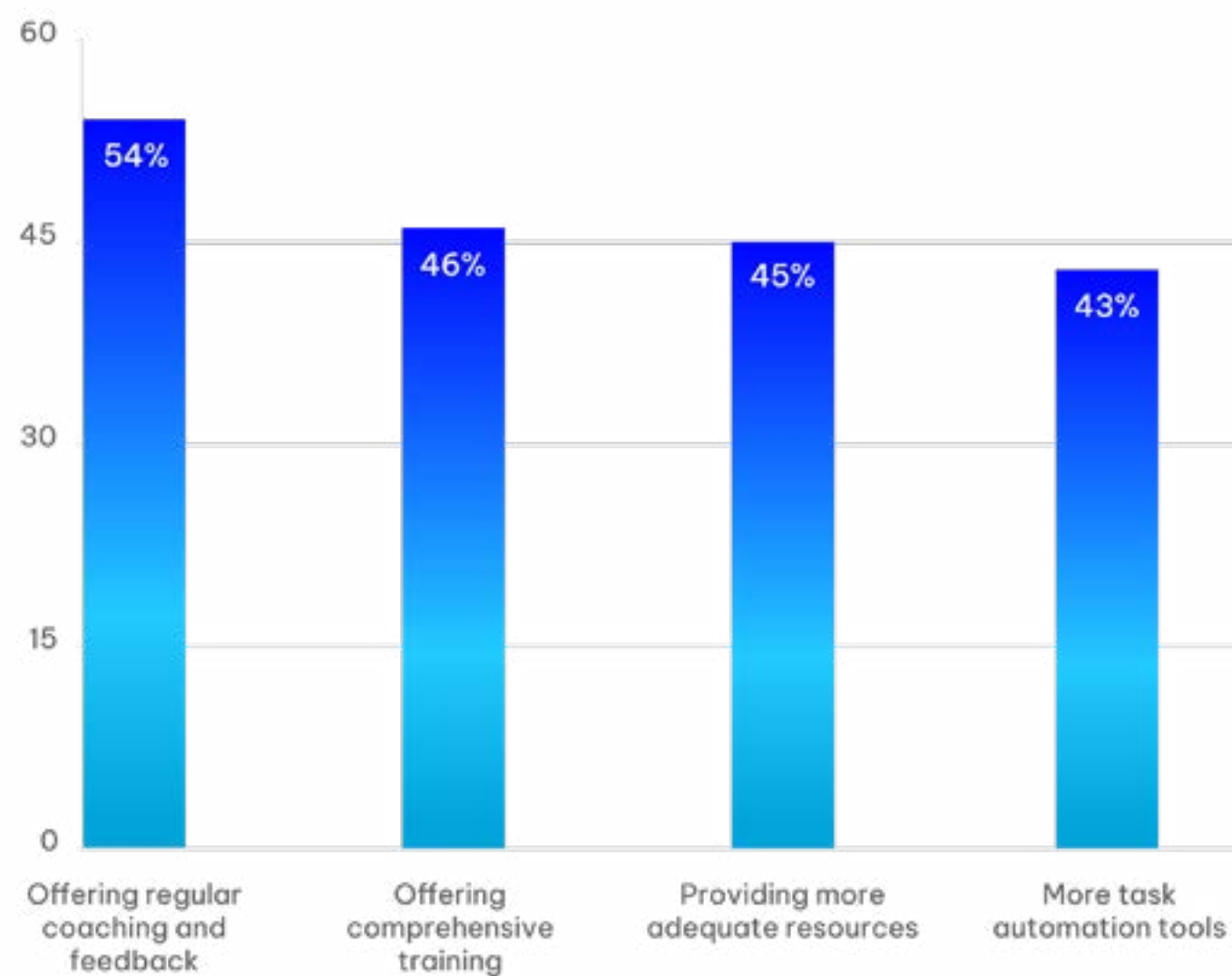
Complexity is on the rise, but contact centers can address it by choosing the right technology strategy. Agents generally feel engaged and supported by their organizations, and in this environment, supervisors have a solid opportunity to improve both the employee and customer experience.

Supervisors cited what changes they're making in the next year to ease the challenges of agents' jobs, and in general, the most common answers related to training and access to resources (Figure 14). While it is true that improved training can be helpful for agents, these more traditional solutions aren't necessarily taking advantage of the most up-to-date technology.

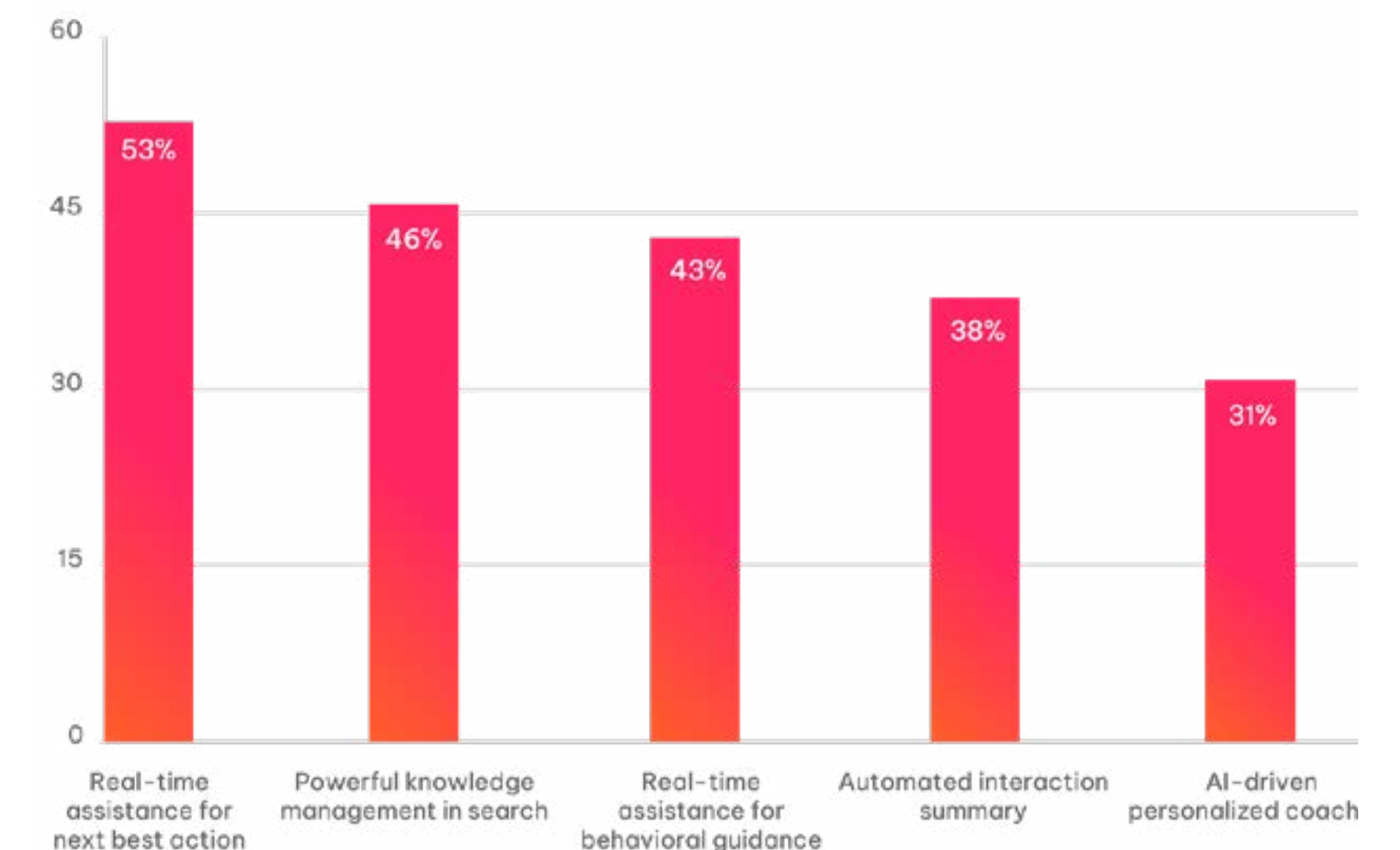
Supervisors' planned changes don't line up with the most common changes agents said they'd like to see. These tend to be more in-the-moment solutions driven by modern technology like AI. One of agents' big challenges is that most (66%) say they often cannot find the information they need to address customer issues. Powerful knowledge management in search is one of their top asks from their employer (Figure 15). In comparison, only 35% of supervisors said they plan to adopt a more efficient way to search for information in the next year.

Similarly, while 53% of agents said they want real-time assistance for the next best action, only 38% of supervisors said they plan to adopt more real-time assistance for successful interaction handling in the next year. This disconnect in answers here can perhaps help supervisors understand more accurately the more immediate needs agents want met.

Which of the following innovations would you like to see in your workplace to make your job easier? (Agents)



What changes are you planning to make in the next year to ease the challenges of agents' jobs? (Supervisors)



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Employee Attitudes Toward AI

Real-time assistance and knowledge management are great examples of places where AI can be used to improve the employee experience. However, there's a common misconception that employees are resistant or, worse, vehemently against the addition of artificial intelligence in their workplace. Interestingly, data from this survey painted a very different picture for contact center agents. Supervisors are under the impression that agents are more resistant to AI than they actually are.

Most (77%) supervisors say that their agents are resistant to change when it comes to AI, but only 23% of agents say they believe AI is a threat to their job (Figure 16). Many agents (42%) said they think AI will make their job easier, and only 23% say it makes them uncomfortable. Interestingly, 83% of agents say they want to see AI used to provide real-time assistance when they're solving problems. And 84% of agents want to see AI used to decrease the complexity of daily work and decrease workload. Despite common misconceptions, both supervisors and agents want more AI capabilities.

Agents' real and assumed attitudes toward AI

Supervisors: Contact center agents are resistant to change when it comes to using AI.

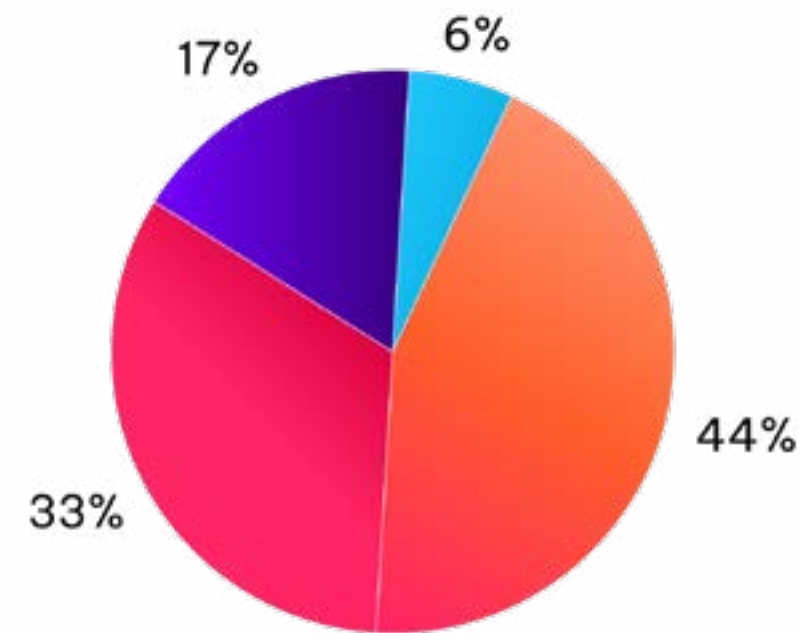
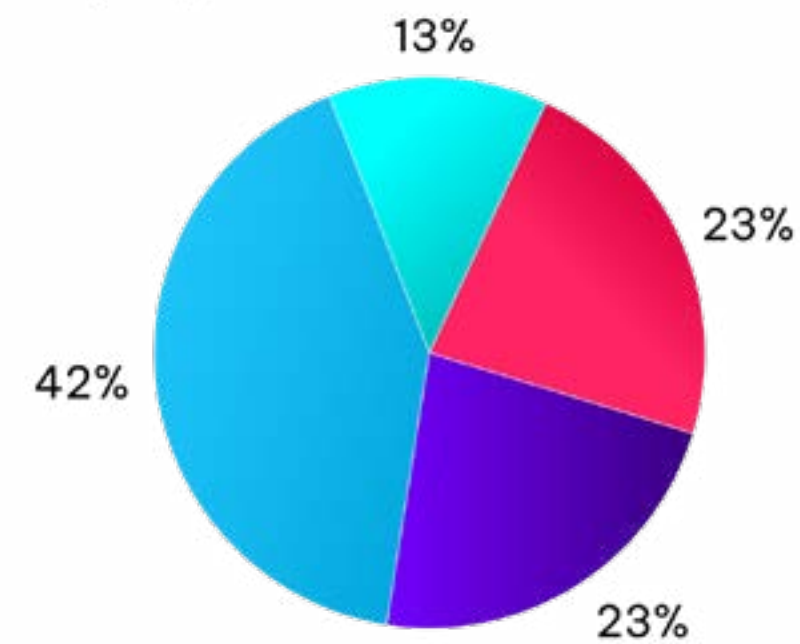


Figure 11

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly disagree

Agents: Overall, how do you feel about the impact of AI on your job?



- AI is a threat to my job
- AI will make my job easier
- I feel uncomfortable using AI on the job
- I'm not sure



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Opportunities to Utilize Technology Better

Seventy-six percent of agents agree that they need to know how to use their organization’s technology solutions better, and 52% of supervisors agree that it is difficult to navigate their organization’s technology ecosystem to manage their daily work. There’s an opportunity to improve the ease of use of technology solutions for both agents and supervisors. Finding a technology solution that is instinctive and easy to learn is a great first step.

Another opportunity here is further training/coaching for agents on these solutions. Supervisors generally believe that agents need more coaching – and are planning on doing something about it. Offering more regular coaching and feedback is the most common change (54%) supervisors are planning to make to ease the challenges of agents’ jobs.

Agents were asked to explain in their own words what changes they’d like to see to reduce the complexity of their work, and some of the most common answers revolved around improved technology, better training and simplified processes. Concerning training, one agent said, “Proper training should be provided for various digital platforms, as the new ones are difficult to understand.” Another said they’d like to see their employer “enhance ongoing training processes for contact center agents to reduce complexity.”

As AI becomes increasingly more important in the operations of contact centers, agent assist options with training focused on AI will help agents more effectively use the technology. Improving the ease of use of AI technology, for example, by combining it with conversational AI solutions, can further help humanize the experience and reduce complexity and, therefore, stress.



Conclusion

Complexity and stress are on the rise, but there's no reason contact centers should fall in a trap of doom and gloom. Comparing agent and supervisor responses allows us to see how agents are responding to changes in the workplace and what contact center innovations excite them.

With this information, organizational leaders and supervisors can make informed decisions on the technologies that impact their agents' work, workloads and stress levels. Ultimately, with the right solutions, contact centers can keep agents' jobs just as interesting while reducing the stressful parts of complex interactions. This in turn engages agents in their work and makes them feel supported by their workplace. And since they're more enthusiastic about AI than supervisors believe, there's a great opportunity to take advantage of AI solutions to make agents' jobs less stressful.

AI helps make agents more engaged and excited about their work. It allows them to focus on more exciting queries rather than getting bogged down in tedious, simple interactions. AI solutions are currently transforming the contact center industry, and forward-thinking organizations are doing their part to keep their technology stack growing with the times. Dealing with the challenging parts of complexity doesn't need to slow your organization down. Investing in AI that simultaneously addresses complexity and stress will make everyone's contact center jobs better – both supervisors and agents alike!

How NICE Can Help

Recognizing the impact and influence of employee experience on driving strong CX, NICE CXone offers innovative solutions tailored to address the growing complexities and stress faced by contact center staff. CXone offers dedicated workspaces, real-time assistance, advanced self-service tools for performance and quality management, and self-scheduling.

On top of all this, it also offers Enlighten Copilot, a purpose-built AI solution, harnessing the power of large language models (LLM) with NICE Enlighten AI models. Enlighten Copilot for agents and Enlighten Copilot for supervisors amplifies skilled labor at a reduced cost, promoting efficient work with fewer repetitive tasks and faster access to knowledge. It's a collaborative solution designed for agents and supervisors with advanced tools that promote efficient work with conversational knowledge, on-demand guidance and task automation. To learn more, visit the NICE website and ask to meet a sales representative.

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Appendix

Demographics

Supervisor Survey:

Title

“AI and Contact Center Complexity, Supervisor Survey”

Survey dates

September 2023

Respondents

366

Number of contact center agents the organization employs

50-199 agents: 53%
200-999 agents: 32%
1,000+ agents: 15%

Geography

United States: 36%
EMEA: 27%
India: 37%

Statistics may not total 100% due to rounding.

Agent Survey:

Title

“AI and Contact Center Complexity, Agent Survey”

Survey dates

September 2023

Respondents

356

Number of contact center agents the organization employs

50-199 agents: 36%
200-999 agents: 33%
1,000+ agents: 31%

Geography

United States: 42%
EMEA: 28%
India: 30%

Statistics may not total 100% due to rounding.



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About

NICE

With NICE (Nasdaq: NICE), it's never been easier for organizations of all sizes around the globe to create extraordinary customer experiences while meeting key business metrics. Featuring the world's #1 cloud native customer experience platform, CXone, NICE is a worldwide leader in AI-powered self-service and agent-assisted CX software for the contact center – and beyond.

Over 25,000 organizations in more than 150 countries, including over 85 of the Fortune 100 companies, partner with NICE to transform – and elevate – every customer interaction.

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CMSWire, a native digital publication from Simpler Media Group, serves a global audience of sophisticated digital customer experience professionals.

Simpler Media Group

SMG is a B2B technology information and research services company serving a 3 million+ strong community of global digital business leaders.

Our flagship publication, CMSWire, is complemented by our Reworked publication and our CONNECT conference. Our research division produces a range of annual state of the industry reports, quarterly market segment guides and a range of focused industry insights briefs. We offer performance marketing, custom research, content development and custom event production services directly to our clients.

Our obsessions: next generation digital customer experiences, navigating the r/evolution of work and advancing enterprise learning.



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