NICE

Redefining Success

The Impact of Soft Skills and AI on Contact Center Performance

Benchmark Survey Report

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Redefining Success: The Impact of Soft Skills and AI on Contact Center Performance
and Customer Satisfaction Survey Report

Introduction and
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Introduction & Methodology

In today's competitive world, exceptional customer experience is the name of the game. To win, companies must understand and develop the soft skills of their contact center agents. Why? Because strong soft skills, such as empathy, effective communication, and problem-solving, directly impact customer experience. When agents exhibit these positive behaviors, customers feel valued, understood, and are more likely to maintain a long-lasting relationship with the brand.

But let's face it – measuring soft skills is tricky, and as a result, many businesses simply avoid it altogether. This report will delve deep into the world of agent soft skills and reveal the crucial connection between these behaviors and a stellar customer experience. We've spoken to top contact center leaders who have shared their thoughts on assessing agents, the role of AI in the evaluation process, and how essential these soft skills are to boosting customer satisfaction.

In an age where AI is becoming increasingly important, Gartner points out that it's a must-have for contact center decision-makers. This report explores how AI can be integrated into agent assessment programs, creating a more fair, objective, and comprehensive view of agent performance.

Join us on this journey to better understand the relationship between agent soft skills, customer satisfaction, and AI's potential to revolutionize how we evaluate agent performance.

Methodology

We commissioned a survey of 400 senior decision-makers; supervisors, managers, directors and VPs who work in Customer Care, Customer Service or Contact Center departments across all industries. All companies have contact centers with 200+ agents, and all respondents live and work in the United States or the United Kingdom.

This report was administered online by Global Surveyz Research, a global research firm. The respondents were recruited through a global B2B research panel, invited via email to complete the survey, with all responses collected during December 2022. The average amount of time spent on the survey was 5 minutes and 22 seconds. The answers to the majority of the non-numerical questions were randomized, in order to prevent order bias in the answers.

Key Findings

1   **Inadequate Sampling: 65% of Contact Centers Rely on Skewed or Random Data to Make Critical Decisions**

Under a quarter of contact centers are measuring less than 10 voice and digital interactions each month, with the average organization measuring 13 and 6 respectively. As all our respondents work for contact centers with more than 200 agents, this is statistically an insignificant sample size and not representative of agent performance. 65% of respondents choose samples based on post interaction customer satisfaction surveys, which are known for attracting either highly satisfied or highly unsatisfied customers, potentially skewing the sample. In 51% of cases, the sample is chosen at random. Despite the lack of a statistically significant or holistic view, 85% of stakeholders use this data to make critical business decisions.

2   **The Trust Deficit: 42% of Agents Dispute Performance Feedback Due to Unrepresentative Samples**

Without the ability to accurately monitor agent performance and obtain relevant and holistic feedback, agents are left feeling measurements are unfair, and refusing to accept feedback. 42% of respondents say that their greatest challenge is that agents don't buy into their current feedback, likely because 38% say the sample size or random sampling is not representative of agent performance. 38% of respondents say that this drives quality disputes. At the moment, the top metrics being used for agent assessment are customer satisfaction and agent efficiency, while just 41% of respondents are measuring soft skills such as empathy.

3   **Soft Skills Disconnect: 94% Recognize the Importance of Soft Skills, Yet 59% of Companies Fail to Measure Them**

Despite only 41% of companies measuring soft skills, 94% of respondents agree that they are a very important factor for CSAT, which is the top metric being measured today, and where organizations are competing. So, what's standing in the way? The top challenges for today's call centers in measuring soft skills are subjective analysis, for example the inability to be consistent when applying descriptions (42%), and lack of buy-in from operations (41%). The larger the company, the more stakeholders are involved, and the harder obtaining operational buy-in becomes.

4   AI Adoption Surge: 99% of Companies Embrace AI-driven Quality Management to Transform Agent Performance

Almost all respondents either already have, or plan to implement, an AI-driven quality management solution. Most companies want to make this happen within the next 12 months. 51% feel strongly that this kind of solution will help to boost CSAT scores, and 63% of supervisors believe it will provide the objective feedback that they are missing from their current approach. 28% also feel strongly that as AI measures 100% of soft skills, it will provide a holistic view that agents will buy into. The time for AI is now, and it's set to revolutionize the measurement and feedback of agent performance.
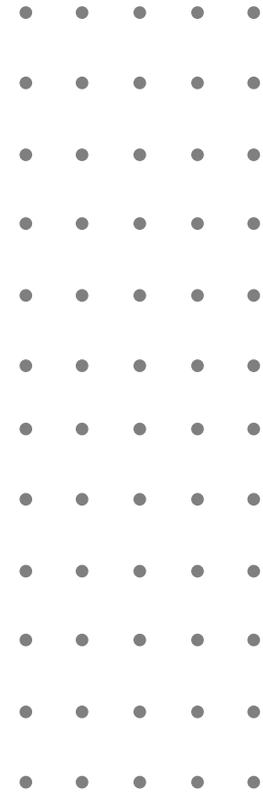
Survey Report Findings

Number of Monthly Interactions per Agent Sampled by Quality Program

On average, 6 digital interactions and 13 voice interactions are being sampled every month by quality programs. In some cases, these results are used to decide on the compensation package for agents, and the data can also drive coaching programs for agent training.

Collecting the data on digital interactions is complex, and the technology is still maturing, which explains why 60% of companies don't know what percentage of their digital interactions are being sampled, compared with just 9% for voice interactions.

No matter what, this is a very small percentage of the overall interactions that are typically handled each month. When a company has hundreds or even thousands of interactions each month, this data becomes statistically insignificant.

Weighted Average:
6 Digital interactions
13 Voice interactions

Digital interactions: 3% (1-5), 10% (6-10), 15% (11-20), 12% (21+), 60% (I don't know)

Voice interactions: 5% (1-5), 19% (6-10), 48% (11-20), 20% (21+), 9% (I don't know)

Legend:
- 1-5 interactions
- 6-10 interactions
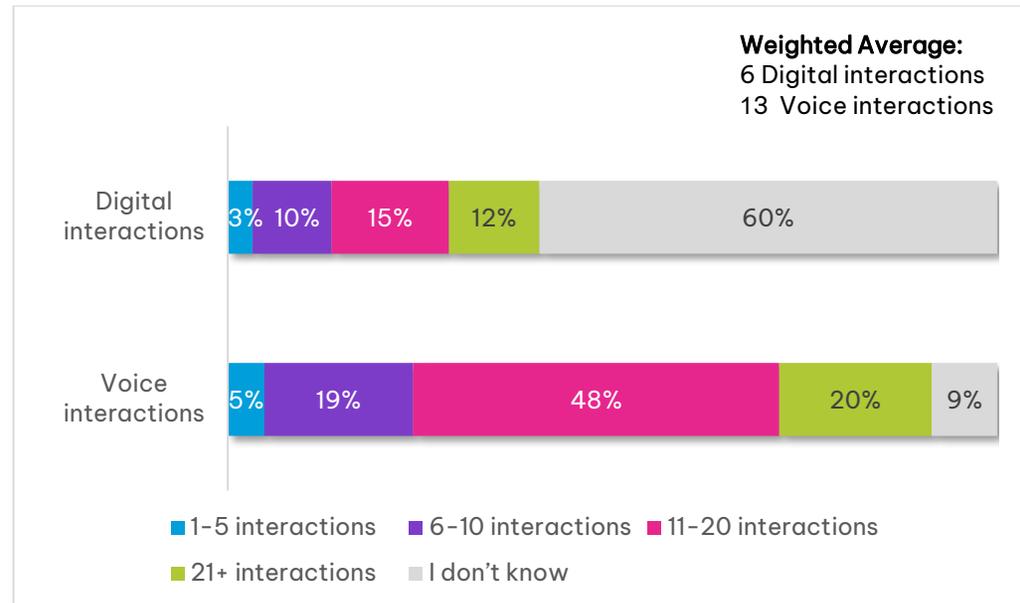- 11-20 interactions
- 21+ interactions
- I don't know

Figure 1: Number of Monthly Interactions per Agent Sampled by Quality Program

Selection Methods of Interactions for Evaluation

We asked respondents how they select interactions for evaluation and found that they mostly get selected by CSAT survey results (65%). The problem with relying on a CSAT survey is that the responses tend towards the extremes, where customers choose to provide feedback when they are really happy with the experience, or really unhappy. CSAT surveys also tend to have a low response rate, representing a small sample of customers. It's therefore important to consider whether the data is statistically valid.

Organizations are trying a wide variety of selection methods, but nothing appears to fit the bill. About half of companies target interactions based on speech analytics (55%) or use an automatically selected random sample (51%). Speech analytics tend to be used to check if the contact center staff followed a process or to make sure they said key phrases or didn't use specific terms. This is useful for checking process but doesn't drive improvements in customer satisfaction.

In contrast to these options, sentiment analysis based on AI offers the ability to analyze 100% of interactions and provides a clear view of customer experience and satisfaction.

*Question allowed more than one answer and as a result, percentages will add up to more than 100%
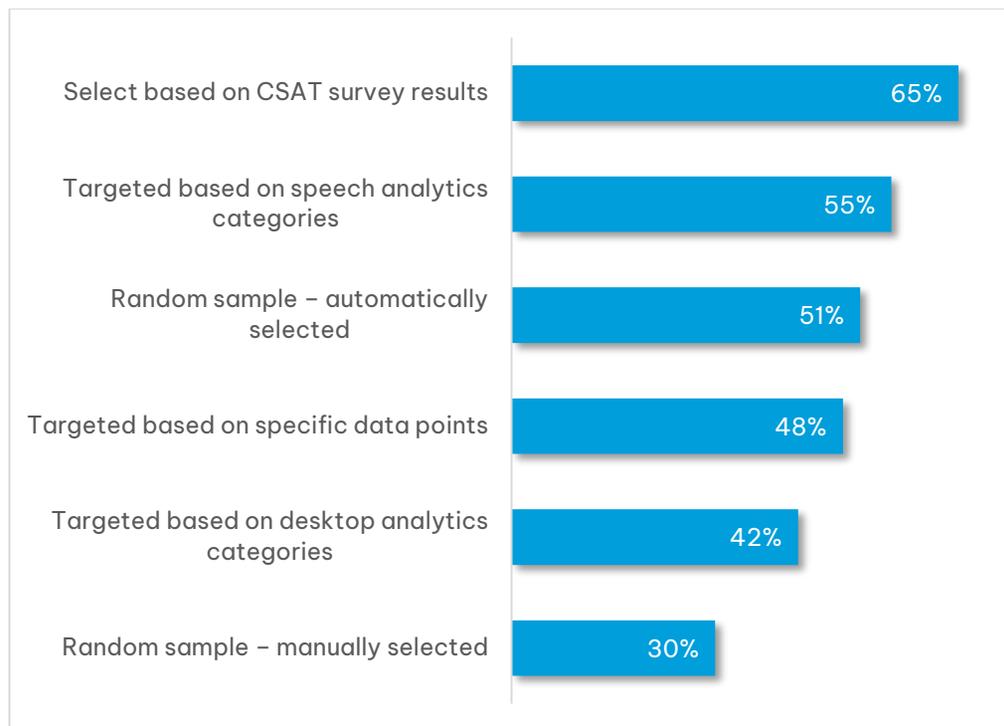

Figure 2: Selection Methods of Interactions for Evaluation

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Agent Assessment & Coaching Metrics in Use

For what skills are agents being assessed? In 52% of companies, agents are assessed and coached on customer experience. Supervisors recognize that customer experience is very important and is influenced by agent performance, which is why they are using CSAT survey results to select sample interactions, as we saw previously.

50% of agents are assessed and coached for the efficiency of their conversations. One metric they monitor is the Average Handling Time (AHT) of interactions. A more efficient agent with a lower AHT means they are better prepared to answer customer questions. This impacts customer satisfaction, but AHT also has cost implications for the business, which is why efficiency is high on the list of assessment criteria.

41% say that they assess agents based on soft skills such as empathy, leaving 59% not doing this at all, likely because soft skills can be subjective and difficult to define.
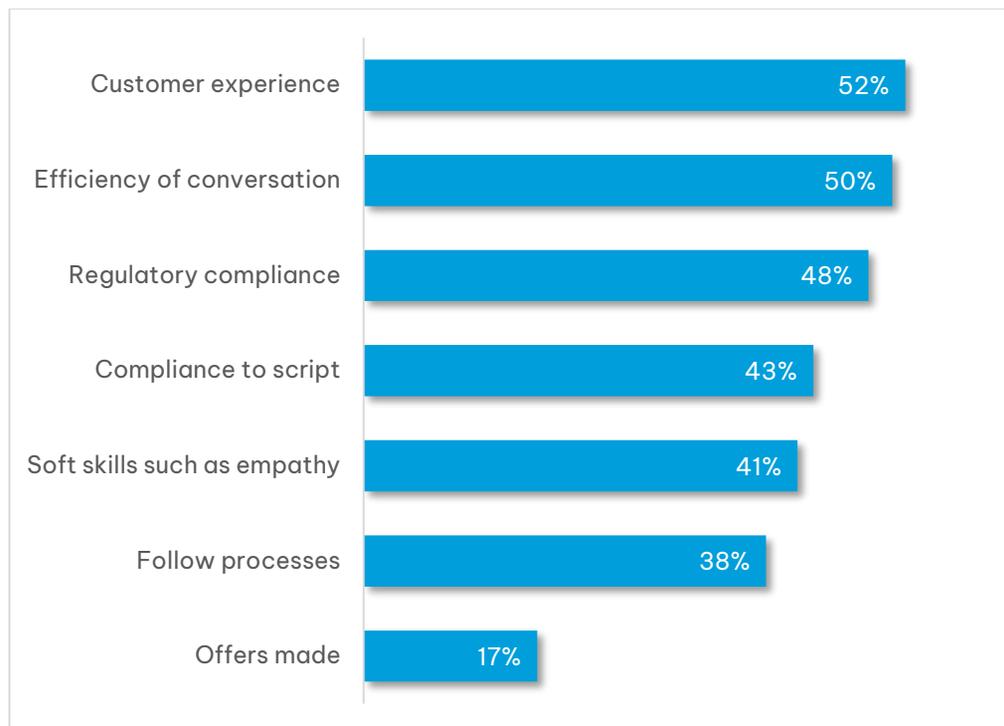

Figure 3: Agent Assessment & Coaching Metrics in Use

*Question allowed more than one answer and as a result, percentages will add up to more than 100%

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Current Influence of Quality Management in the Organization

Since the pandemic, organizations are trying to make an impact with customer experience, and therefore managing the quality of the call center is critical.

Do quality management programs influence business decisions across the organization? 85% of respondents say that they do, but when you look at the programs themselves, you have to ask – how data-driven are the decisions that are being made?

As contact centers don't have a truly holistic view of agent performance data, and are relying on small samples and inconsistent analysis, you cannot call decisions based on current quality management programs data driven. Without being able to judge soft skills, organizations are viewing an incomplete picture.
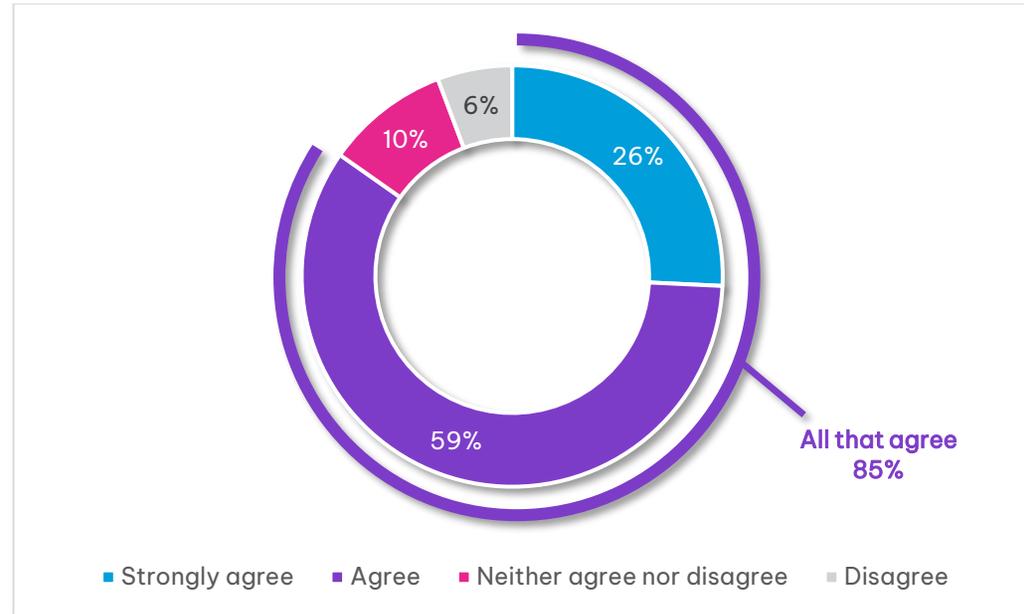

Figure 4: QA Results Drives Business Decisions

Top Challenges of Effective Quality Management

The goal of any quality management program is to assess agent performance and provide feedback. Today's programs are leaving organizations with a wide range of challenges, all of which are felt fairly equally by between 30% and 42% of respondents.

The top challenges are the inconsistent application of quality management (42%), the likelihood of agents to buy into the feedback they receive (42%), a small sample size that is not representative of overall agent performance (38%), and random sampling that is not representative of agent performance (38%).

If you consider these responses, they are actually quite similar and closely related. If feedback is inconsistent and the sample size is too small, then it stands to reason that agents will not want to accept the results, and therefore won't buy into the program. As 36% call out a lack of dedicated resources for quality management, and 31% have misalignment with organizational goals, it's clear to see that stakeholders are struggling to improve quality management.

*Question allowed more than one answer and as a result, percentages will add up to more than 100%
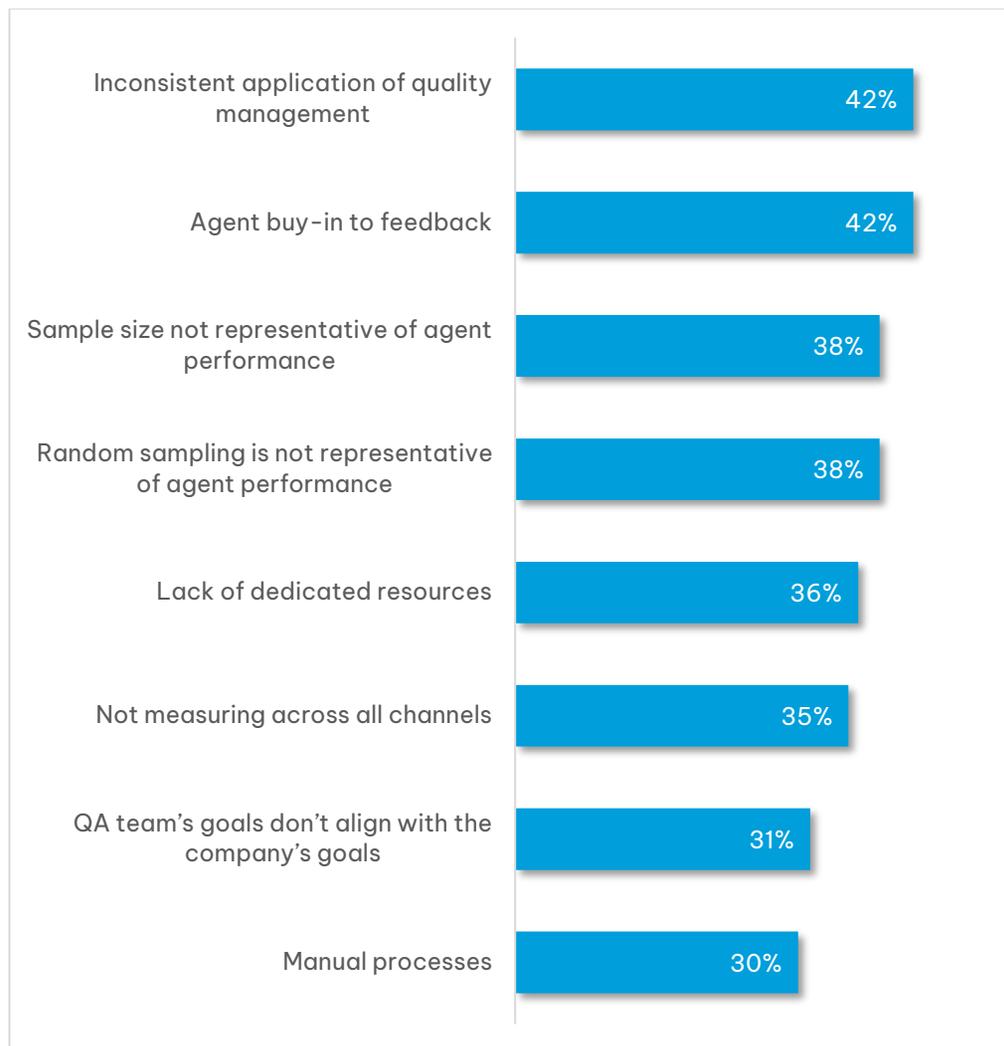

Challenge	Percentage
Inconsistent application of quality management	42%
Agent buy-in to feedback	42%
Sample size not representative of agent performance	38%
Random sampling is not representative of agent performance	38%
Lack of dedicated resources	36%
Not measuring across all channels	35%
QA team's goals don't align with the company's goals	31%
Manual processes	30%

Figure 5: Top Challenges of Effective Quality Management

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Impact of Agents' Soft Skills on Overall Customer Satisfaction

A staggering 94% of respondents believe that agents' soft skills impact overall customer satisfaction. However, as we saw in figure 3, just 41% are currently using soft skills in assessment or coaching.

This is a huge challenge for today's call centers. Agent soft skills are important across all industries and contact types, but in some interactions – they are critical. Consider complex technical support interactions or follow up calls where customers are already frustrated before they pick up the phone. In these situations, soft skills such as empathy can make all the difference to customer experience.
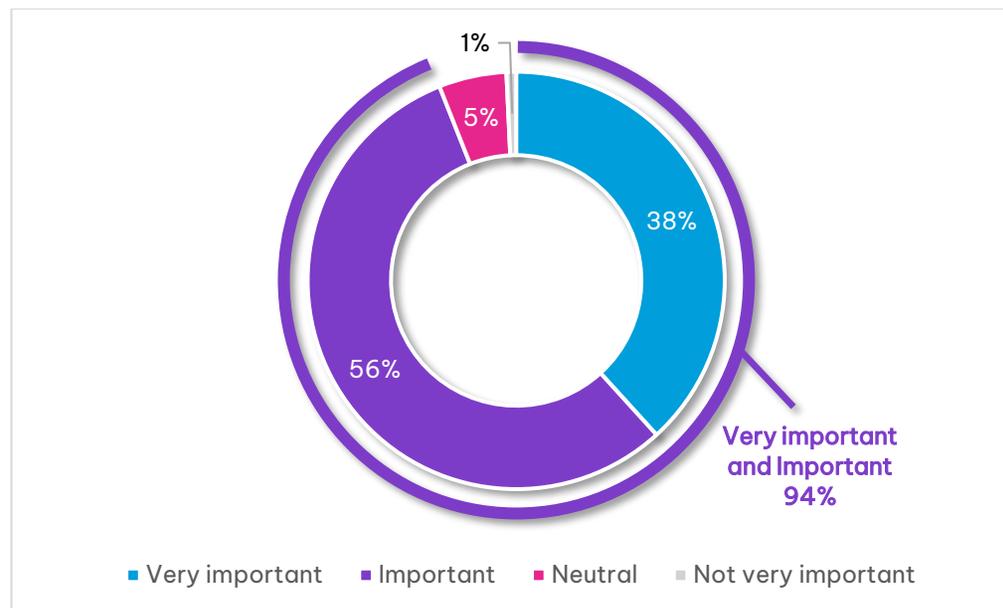

Figure 6: Impact of Agents' Soft Skills on Overall Customer Satisfaction

Greatest Challenge in Assessing Agent Soft Skills

When it comes to assessing agent soft skills, 98% of respondents admit to challenges. The greatest problems organizations are facing are subjective analysis (42%), lack of buy-in from operations (41%), and driver of quality score disputes (39%).

Other critical challenges include a lag time between the interactions and the feedback agents receive, and that agents feel the feedback is unfair. This makes sense considering the small sample sizes and lack of a holistic view that we uncovered earlier in the report.

When delving deeper into the data in Figure 9, we see that bigger companies (500+ employees) reported receiving a lack of buy-in from operations at higher rates than small companies. The larger the company, the more stakeholders there are, and therefore the more difficult it will be to get agreement on a definition of soft skills and how these should be applied.

Figure 7 Greatest Challenge in Assessing Agent Soft Skills

Subjective analysis — 42%
Lack of buy-in from operations — 41%
Driver of quality score disputes — 39%
Agents think it is unfair — 37%
Skills that are important agreement — 36%
Lag time between interaction & feedback — 35%
Calibration alignment — 31%
Creating good definitions like empathy — 28%
We don't have any challenges — 2%

*Question allowed more than one answer and as a result, percentages will add up to more than 100%
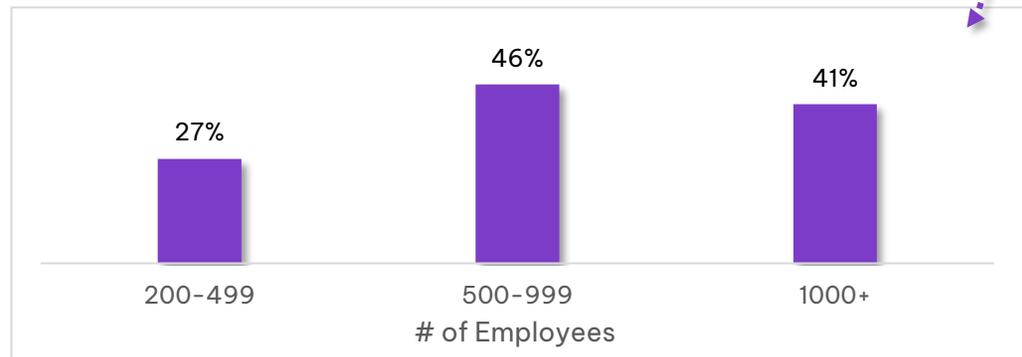
Figure 8: Lack of Buy-in From Operations, by Company Size

200-499 — 27%
500-999 — 46%
1000+ — 41%

# of Employees

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Benefits of Automated Agent Soft Skill Behavioral Analysis

We spoke to respondents about how they would benefit from applying an automated solution for soft skill behavioral analysis. Our results display the items which were chosen by decision-makers as a strong benefit. We found that the top benefits would be the ability to improve metrics like CSAT (51%), obtain objective feedback (42%), and improve agent perception and buy- in that the feedback is fair (28%).

For supervisors, receiving objective feedback is more important than it is for any other role, (63% compared with around a third of VPs, Directors, and Managers.) As supervisors are the ones who are completing assessments and coaching, objectivity is top of their wish lists. In contrast, it stands to reason that executives will care more about the impact on CSAT scores, as customer satisfaction is an important part of how they prove their worth.

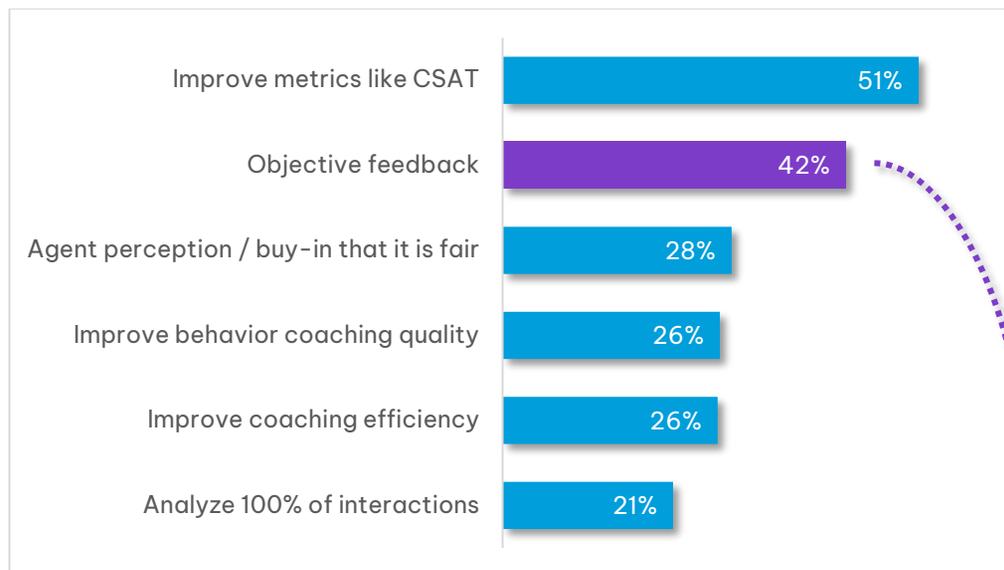*Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding up of numbers

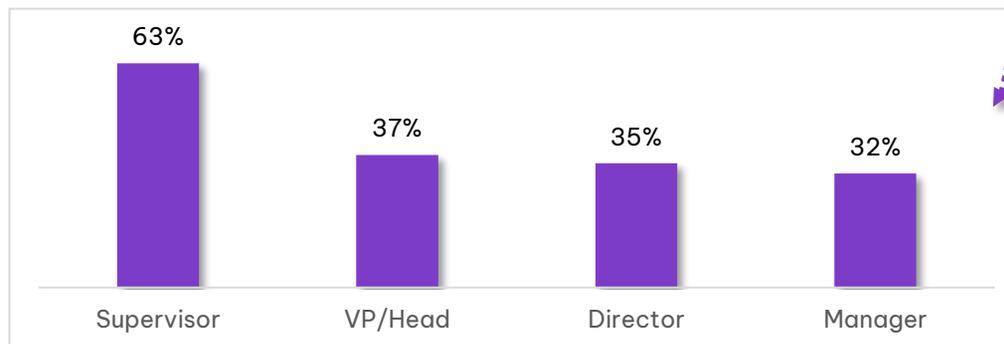Figure 9: Benefits of Automated Agent Soft Skill Behavioral Analysis

Figure 10: Objective Feedback, by Job Seniority

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Plans to Invest in AI Analytics-Driven Quality Management

Nearly all (99%) companies have or plan to invest in AI analytics-driven quality management. Most companies plan to make this investment over the next 12 months (45%).

This shift has been a long time coming, and today's organizations clearly see the value of assessing agents objectively on all of their work, rather than a specific sample.

AI and analytics have been proven to drive agent performance and customer satisfaction, improving buy-in for feedback, and offering a holistic view of customer sentiment and experience.
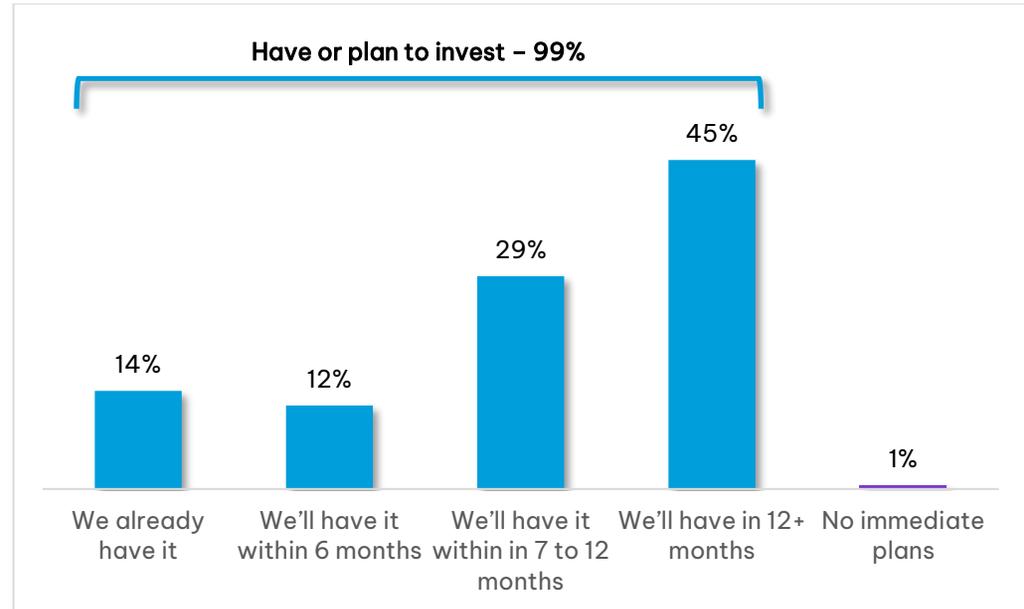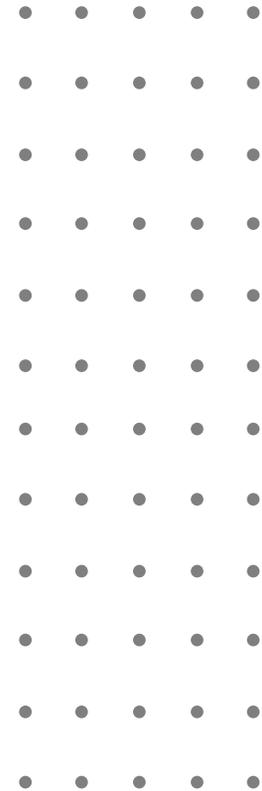

Figure 11: Plans to Invest in AI Analytics-Driven Quality Management

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Demographics

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Country, Industry & Company Size

Figure 12: Industry

- Health & Pharma — 12%
- Information Technology — 12%
- Financial Services — 11%
- Telecom — 9%
- Banking — 8%
- Technology — 5%
- Industrials — 5%
- Insurance — 5%
- Retail & eCommerce — 5%
- Energy & Utilities — 5%
- Software Development — 5%
- Food — 4%
- Transport & Logistics — 4%
- Education — 4%
- Travel & Hospitality — 4%
- Public Services — 2%
- Media — 2%
- Professional Services — 1%

Figure 13: Country

- United Kingdom 25%
- United States 75%

Figure 14: Company Size

# of Employees

- 200–499 — 14%
- 500–999 — 43%
- 1,000–4,999 — 36%
- 5,000+ — 7%

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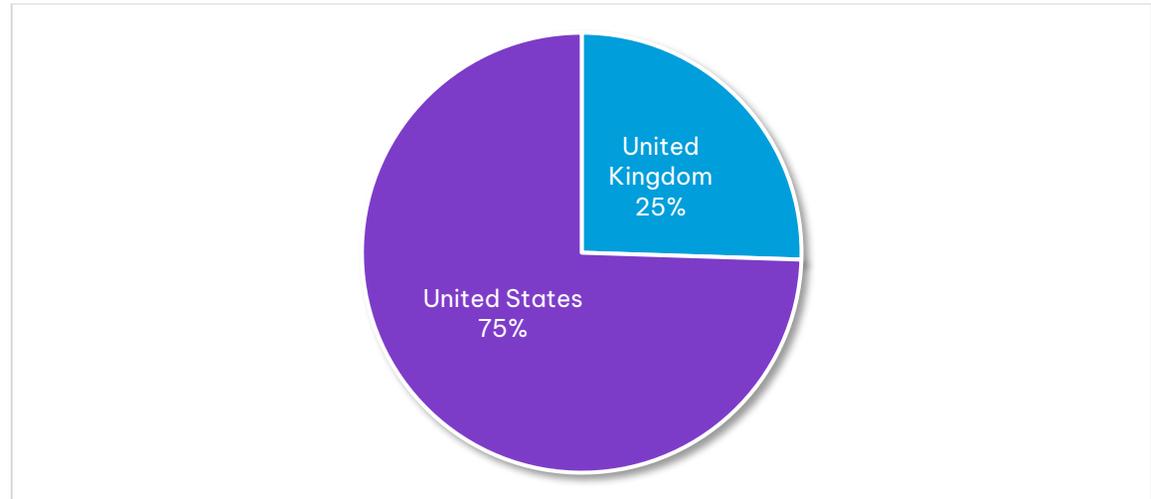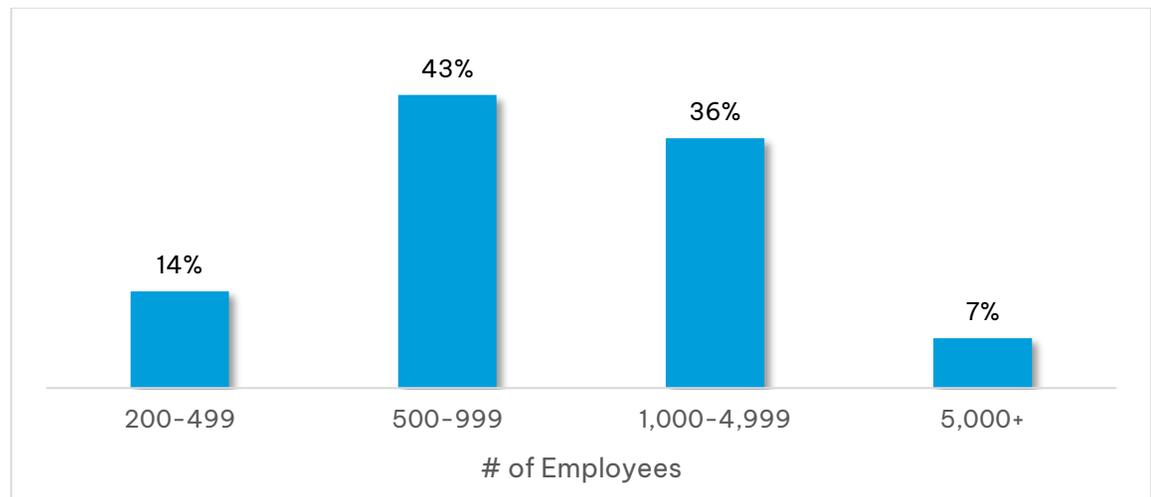
Customer Contact Interactions Type, Job Seniority & Role
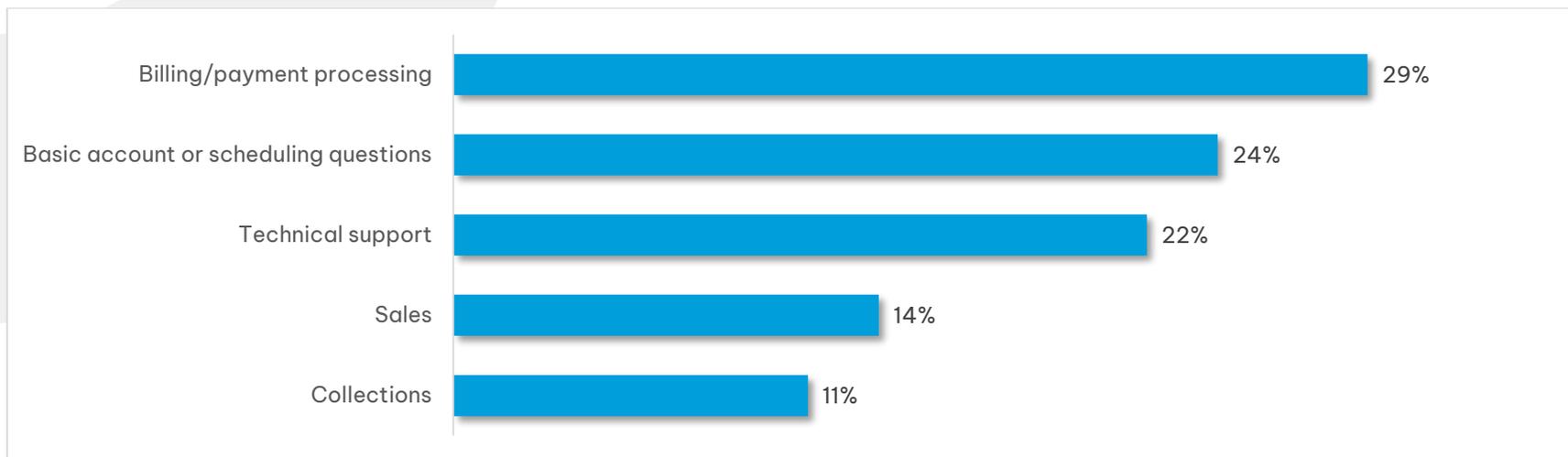
Figure 15: Majority of Customer Contact Interactions Type

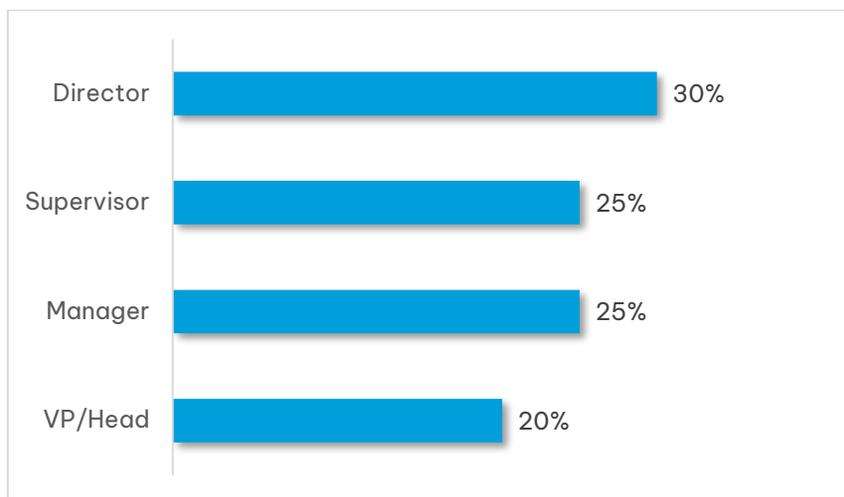| Type	Percentage
Billing/payment processing	29%
Basic account or scheduling questions	24%
Technical support	22%
Sales	14%
Collections	11%

Figure 16: Job Seniority

Seniority	Percentage
Director	30%
Supervisor	25%
Manager	25%
VP/Head	20%

Figure 17: Role

Role	Percentage
Customer care	72%
Quality assurance	21%
Contact center operations	4%
Call center services	4%

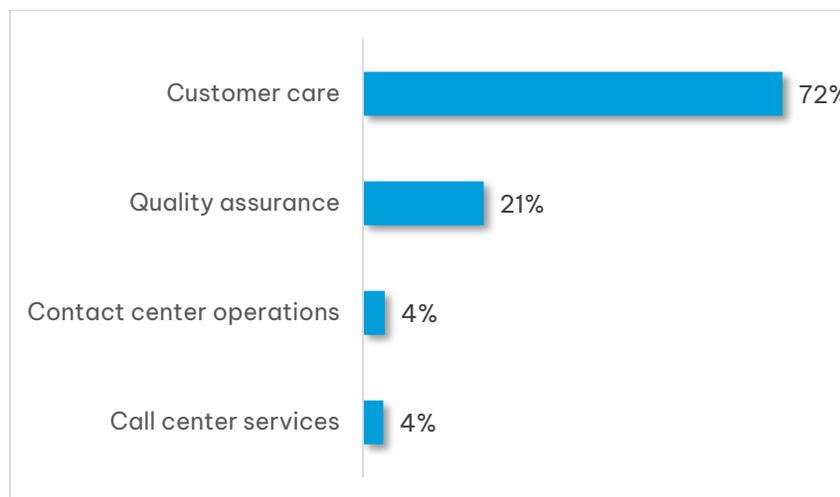Redefining Success: The Impact of Soft Skills and AI on Contact Center Performance and Customer Satisfaction Survey Report

About NICE

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.

Enlighten AI for Customer Satisfaction is a complete out-of-the- box solution which analyzes agents' soft-skill behaviors that impact customer sentiment on every interaction. To deliver an accurate and consistent analysis at scale across all industries, innovative purpose-built AI technology is derived from a massive CX dataset and over 20 years of AI and analytics expertise. These AI-driven insights are embedded into NICE analytics driven quality and coaching applications, providing agents with the opportunity to positively impact their performance by objectively highlighting the behaviors needed for achieving their goals.

Request a Demo

For more information, please visit us:

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