NICE

MANAGING THE MODERN CONTACT CENTER: CURRENT EMPLOYER TRENDS

Understanding how to best align front office and back office workers to alleviate stress and reduce attrition

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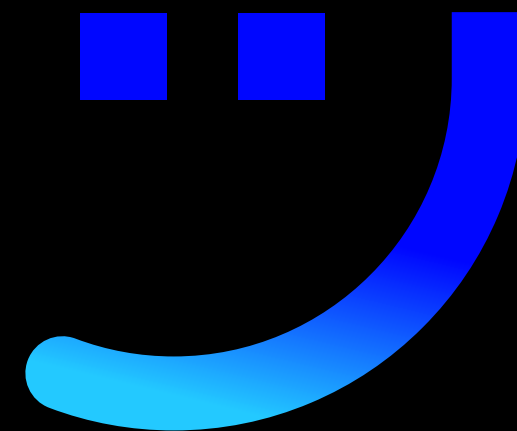
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

NICE

Introduction

The contact center continues to experience rapid changes, which has been happening for several years. The switch to a multichannel contact center work environment was hinted at in 2023 but is quickly becoming the norm.

However, although organizations are embracing multichannel, they aren't necessarily updating the metrics that assess agent performance. This, coupled with a lack of visibility into agents' own performance compared to their peers (possibly exacerbated by the switch to a hybrid work model that's also becoming the norm) is creating agent stress and increasing attrition.

Despite conventional wisdom, attrition isn't inevitable and attrition rates don't have to be as high as they currently are. Agents want to stay at their current companies, if they could only get more training and visibility into their performance. Agents are also looking for more flexibility in their jobs.

At the organizational level, leaders are spearheading retention efforts with better pay and benefits. However, training and career pathing is currently underused as part of a retention strategy. Creating more cross-training opportunities between contact center agents and back office employees could help reduce attrition and boost agent and employee engagement.

To better understand the proliferation of new support channels and its effect on agent workload and attrition, NICE, in partnership with Simpler Media Group (SMG), surveyed more than 400 contact center managers and agents across North America and Europe. This report explores these findings and looks at data from last year's survey for year-on-year workforce management trends. Also, we review how contact center leaders approach back office work, to identify potential opportunities for collaboration to reduce workload and attrition in the workforce.

Key Findings

- **Multichannel and hybrid work is now the norm.** Continuing trends from last year, more agents than ever before are working in a multichannel environment. Hybrid work is also the norm.

- **Organizations need to rethink the metrics they use to assess performance.** The expansion of duties in a multichannel environment hasn't led to updated performance metrics.

- **Attrition isn't inevitable:** Although leaders are experiencing high attrition rates, a majority of agents expect to be with their current employer for more than 2 years. Also, agents believe their organization is putting forth a high amount of effort into retention.

- **Visibility is crucial (and currently lacking) in hybrid environments:** According to agents, two top challenges to remote work are that they don't know how their manager feels about them and they have no idea how they compare to their peers. This is something leaders must address, particularly as 69% of leaders work at organizations with a hybrid location model.

- **Back office employees and back office work remains an untapped resource.** While many organizations have as many or more back office employees as they do contact center agents, few organizations share work between the two groups.

Demographics in Brief

For full demographics information, see Appendix.

The two surveys, Workforce Management Trends for Contact Center Leadership and Workforce Management Trends for Contact Center Agents each received more than 400 responses. Respondents were equally split between workers in North America and EMEA.

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The proliferation of multichannel and hybrid work

When we asked the question last year, a majority of organizations (63%) were already working in a hybrid work environment. More organizations than ever have hybrid work models, and the number of respondents working hybrid has increased 6% to 69%. This is a move away from fully remote work, not an abandonment of the office. Between 2022 and 2023, the number of respondents working in a fully remote environment dropped from 17% to 3% (Figure 1).

Contact center workforce model

- 28% Fully in-person
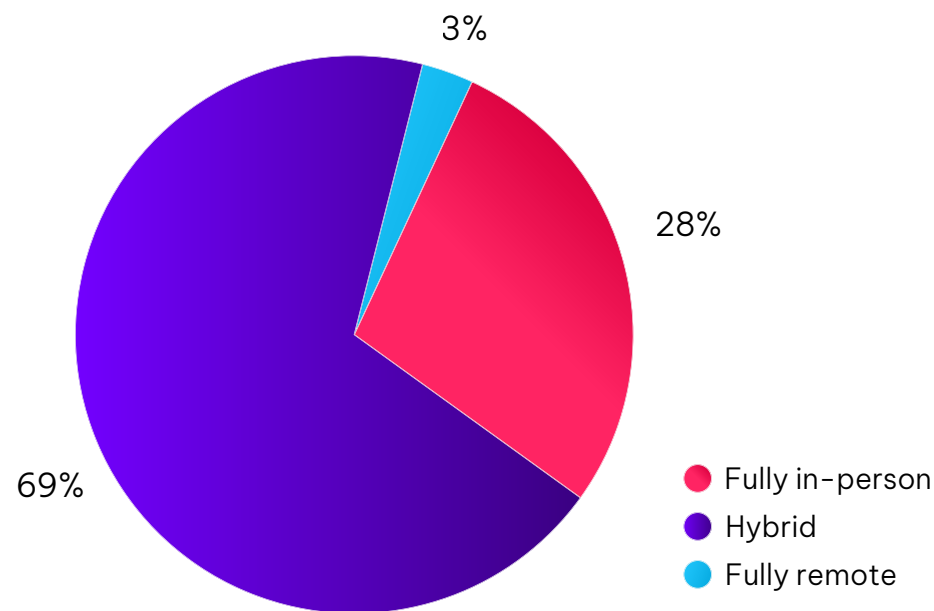- 69% Hybrid
- 3% Fully remote

Figure 1

Along with hybrid work environments, the number of channels agents work in concurrently continues to climb year over year. In 2022, only 46% of leaders said that the number of channels agents work in had increased since the previous year. In 2023, 56% of leaders said the number of channels agents handle has increased over the past two years. Multichannel work is here to stay.

What, exactly, does multichannel work look like? According to leaders, agents work on multiple channels either always (25%) or most of the time (50%). Many organizations have agents working in a number of different channels, including the most ubiquitous ones like voice or chat. In the coming years, organizations plan to include additional channels, such as co-browsing, communities/forums and in-app messaging.

Channels offered for customer interactions

- Email
- Voice
- Live Chat
- In-app Messaging
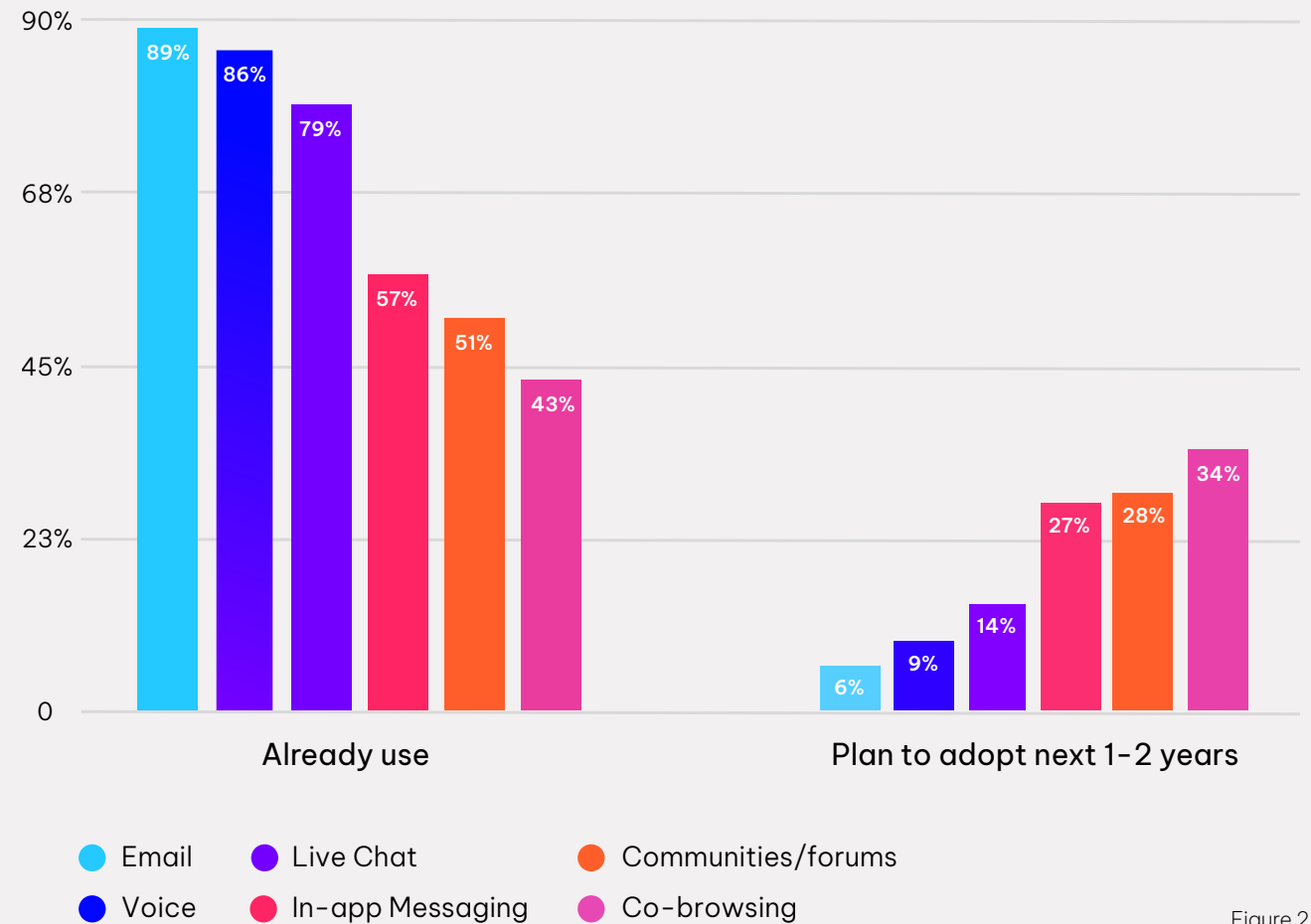- Communities/forums
- Co-browsing

Figure 2

Agents were already working within a multitude of different channels concurrently last year, and this trend has only continued. Now, it's important to recognize the effect multichannel work has on agent well-being. With multichannel becoming the norm, organizations need better planning on how they schedule to avoid agent burnout and voluntary attrition.

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Attrition isn't inevitable

Conventional wisdom suggests that contact center agents don't stick around for very long. When asked to describe a contact center agent, many people might depict a person who stays at the job for only a few months before moving on to other things. This is at a time when many employees in all industries are suffering from high levels of burnout. Recent research shows that when asked to self-assess, 36% of employees called their burnout levels "moderate," with an additional 21% calling their level of burnout either "high" or "very high."

And yet, while it's clear that employees are stressed, this isn't translating to overly high attrition levels. On the contrary, a majority of agents expect to be with their current employer for more than 2 years (Figure 3).

How long agents expect to stay at their current jobs

- 3%
- 18%
- 58%
- 21%

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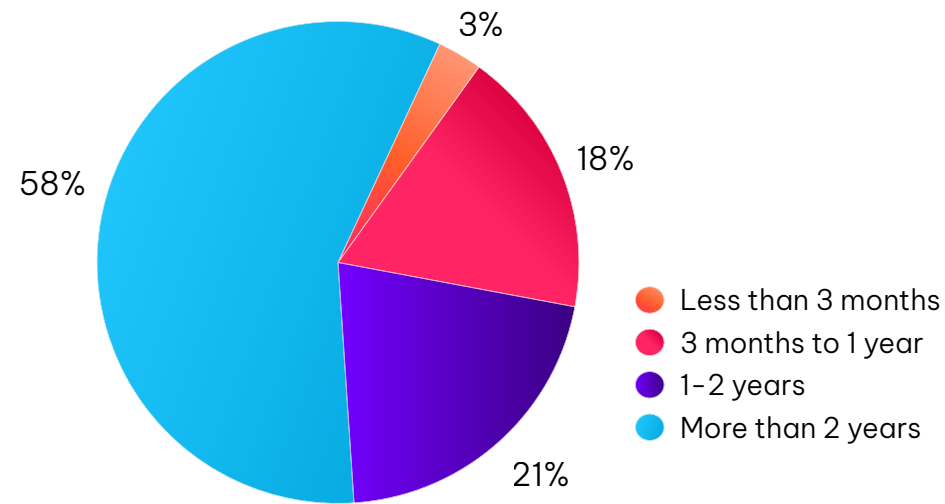● 1-2 years
● More than 2 years

Figure 3

Further, actual attrition rates might not be as high as one would expect. Last year, the average attrition rate among our respondents was 49% for contact center agents and 47% for back office employees.

It's important to note that while these are the averages, there are a few outliers that skew the results and these outliers are greater this year. In 2022, only 2% of respondents reported attrition rates greater than 100%. By contrast, in 2023, 10% of respondents reported more than 100% agent attrition, while 9% reported more than 100% back office attrition. So although the overall average might be less than expected, more companies in 2023 had outsized attrition rates compared to 2022 (Figure 4).

Company attrition rates

2023 Contact center agents
- 10%
- 33%
- 21%
- 19%
- 18%

2023 Back office employees
- 9%
- 1%
- 34%
- 19%
- 20%
- 17%

2022 Overall
- 8%
- 2%
- 1%
- 26%
- 35%
- 28%

● 0
● 1-20
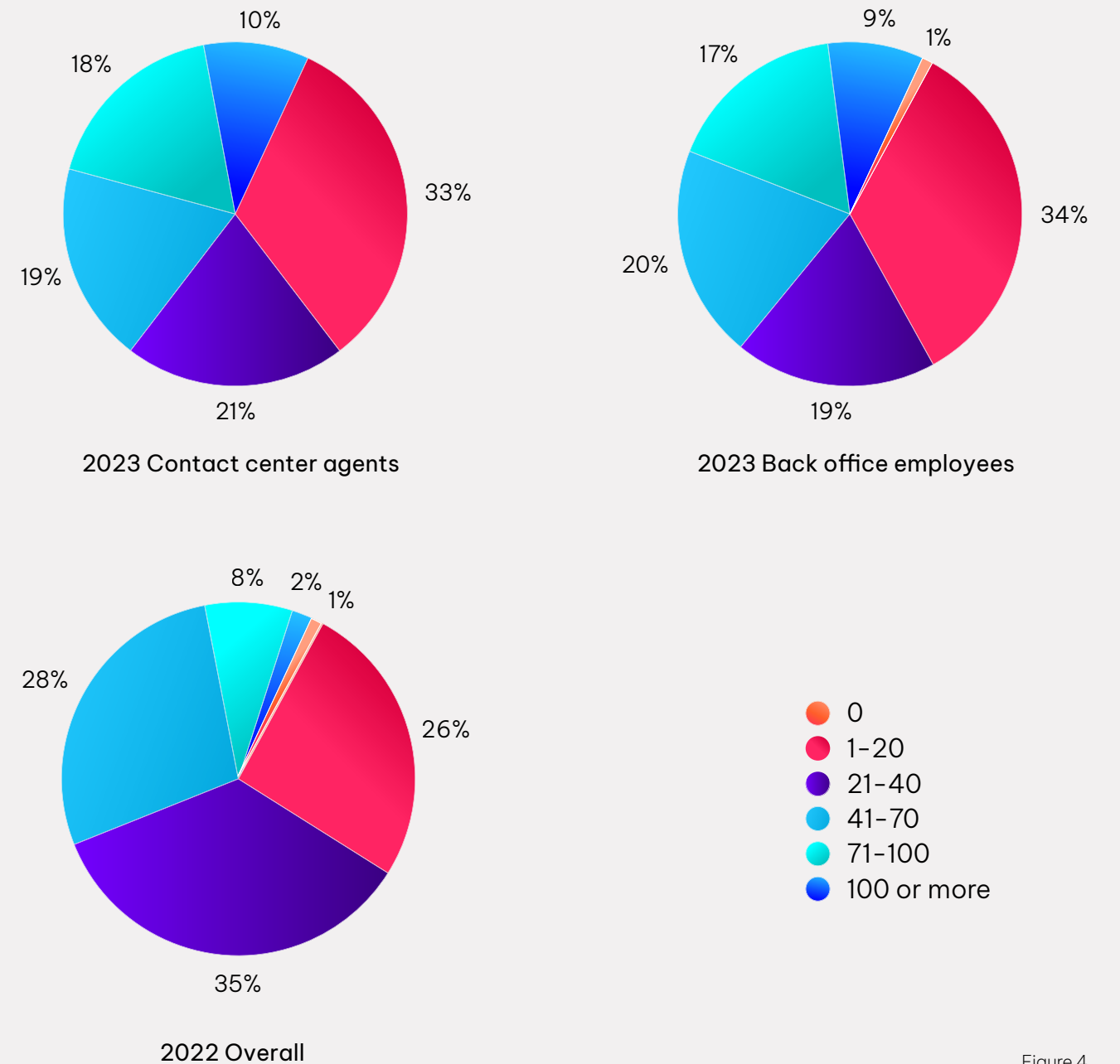● 21-40
● 41-70
● 71-100
● 100 or more

Figure 4

Why the huge difference between expectation and reality? One reason could be that agents believe their organization is putting forth a high amount of effort into retention. Organizations are responding to employee stress and attrition with better pay, more benefits, and the flexibility many seek. For the most part, what organizations are offering aligns with the factors agents consider to stay with their current employer. In some instances; however, organizations are over-relying on some tactics, particularly benefits and hybrid/remote work (Figure 5).

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What organizations offer vs. what convinces agents to stay

Figure 5

Legend:
- Better or premium pay
- Increased benefits
- Ability to work remotely or hybrid
- Clear career growth path
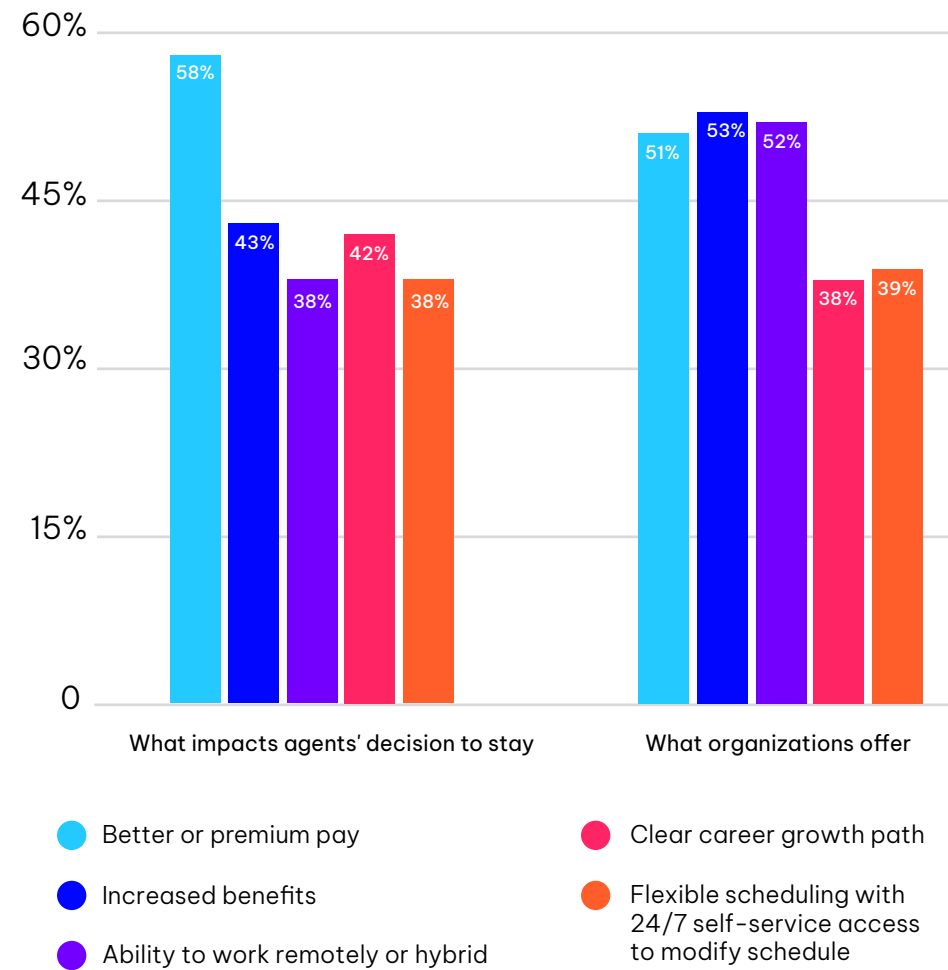- Flexible scheduling with 24/7 self-service access to modify schedule

For leaders, there are areas of opportunity around cross-training and upskilling. Among survey respondents, 42% of agents said that cross-training opportunities would entice them to stay. Related, 37% of agents were interested in upskilling and reskilling opportunities. Organizations that develop and nurture agents' careers will be better positioned to retain their best talent.

Aligning organizational programs with the things that would entice agents to stay should go a long way toward reducing attrition. At the same time, it's important to recognize the underlying causes of attrition. What drives agents to leave in the first place?

Among contact center leadership, the top variables impacting attrition include high workload and stress levels and various dissatisfaction with pay, scheduling or career growth (Figure 6).

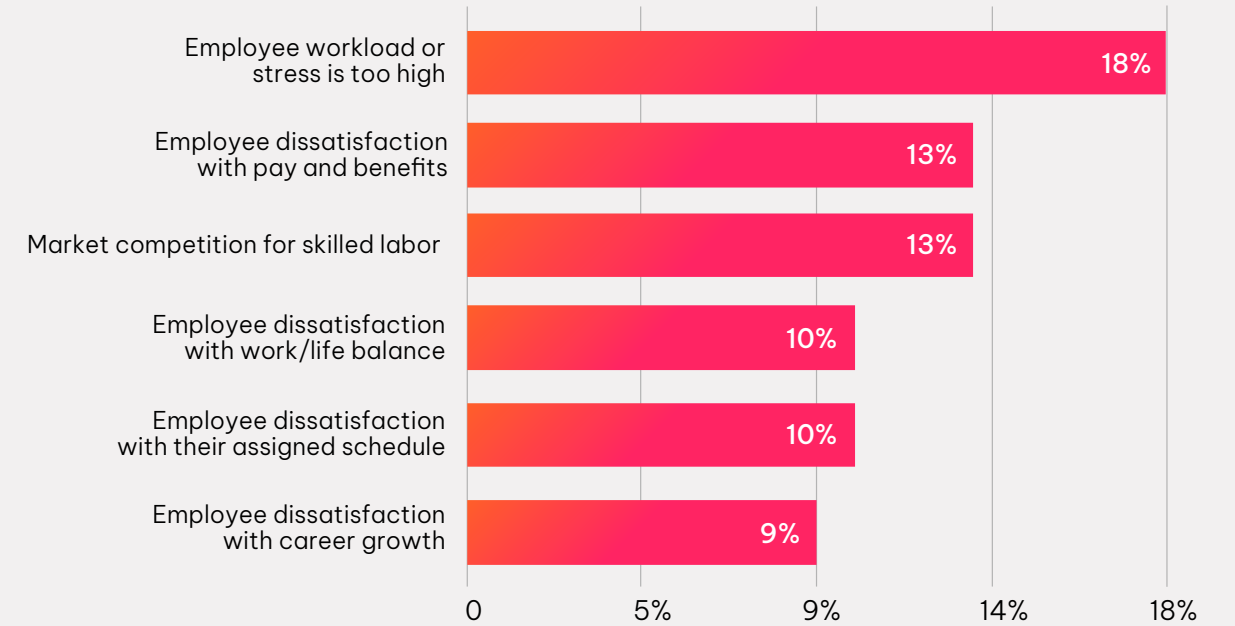## The variables impacting attrition

Figure 6

As leaders look for ways to mitigate agent attrition, it's important to understand the challenges agents face around remote work, and work to address those as well. With stress being the top variable affecting attrition (from a leader's perspective), what's causing that stress? Agents report a number of challenges they've experienced while working remotely, from IT issues to a lack of visibility into either their own performance or that of their peers (Figure 7). If leaders hope to reduce attrition, they should work to improve visibility into agent performance while agents are working remotely.

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Challenges agents have experienced while working remotely

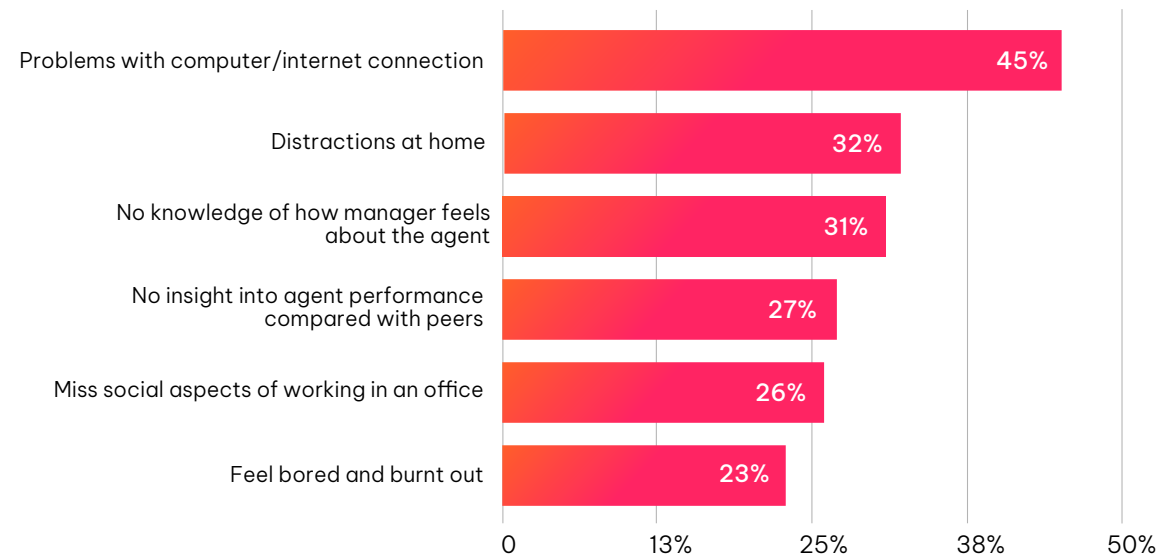| Challenge	Percentage
Problems with computer/internet connection	45%
Distractions at home	32%
No knowledge of how manager feels about the agent	31%
No insight into agent performance compared with peers	27%
Miss social aspects of working in an office	26%
Feel bored and burnt out	23%

Figure 7

It's also possible that the stress agents are experiencing is tied to the increased channels they work in day after day. Working concurrently in multiple channels means agents are always multitasking and switching back and forth, which impacts their workload and can cause stress. For contact center leaders, their daily staffing forecasts aren't as accurate as organizations might like them to be. Only 7% of organizations report having daily staffing forecasts within a 4% accuracy, while 37% of organizations say their staffing forecasts are within 5-8% accuracy. These accuracy numbers might explain why agents need to work in multiple channels as often as they do. At 75% of organizations, agents work in multiple channels either most of the time or always.

Still, there's hope. Organizations are using flexible scheduling options to some success. Implementing flexible scheduling w/self-service access has reduced attrition for 79% of respondent organizations. Further, at a majority of organizations (76%), flexible scheduling is available regardless of channel. Offering flexible scheduling no matter what channel agents are working in should help reduce their stress and in turn, attrition.

Metrics need to refresh

As leaders adopt strategies to lighten agent workloads and reduce their stress levels — ultimately convincing them to stay at the company — they'll need new metrics to better understand the underlying causes of attrition. Data drives good decision-making and leaders continue to see the merit in using metrics for workforce planning. In 2023, 53% of leaders called agent data and KPIs "very helpful" in making workforce management decisions — a 6% increase over 2022.

However, organizations need to take a closer look at the metrics they're currently using to assess agent performance and satisfaction. These new metrics should, in turn, give leaders valuable insights into agent sentiment and engagement. Leaders can then turn around and use these metrics when making workforce management and planning decisions.

One finding that emerged from the survey is that there is no "One True KPI." Leaders are using a number of different metrics to assist their workforce management decisions. Top KPIs include customer satisfaction (CSAT), first response time and average handle time (Figure 8).

KPIs organizations take into consideration when making workforce planning decisions
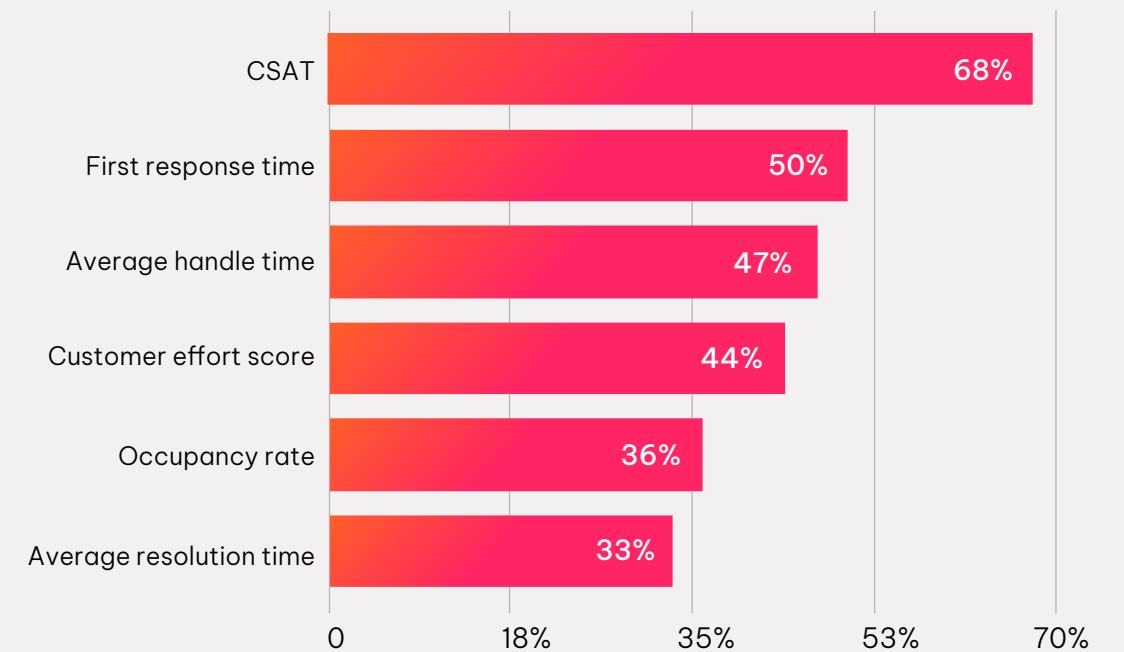
KPI	Percentage
CSAT	68%
First response time	50%
Average handle time	47%
Customer effort score	44%
Occupancy rate	36%
Average resolution time	33%

Figure 8

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Another finding to note is that organizations recognize that a more complicated environment calls for additional metrics to help guide workforce management. A slim majority of leaders (51%) report using additional metrics to guide workforce management decisions as a result of working within a multichannel environment — a 15% increase from 2022. There has also been a sharp decrease in the number of organizations using fewer metrics between 2022 and 2023. In 2022, nearly a quarter of organizations were using fewer metrics thanks to their multichannel environment. By 2023, that number had plummeted to 5% as leaders recognized the crucial need for additional metrics and course corrected (Figure 9)

How a multichannel environment impacted the number of metrics used to guide workforce management

- ● Organizations are using additional metrics
- ● Organizations are using the same number of metrics
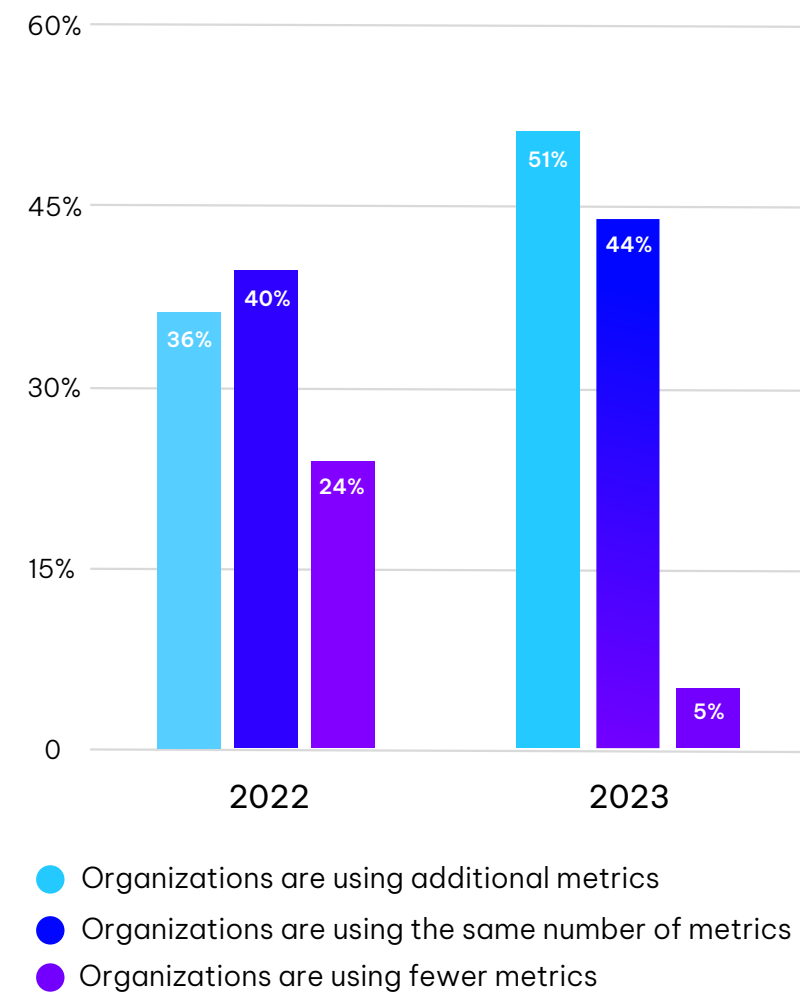- ● Organizations are using fewer metrics

Figure 9

Another piece of good news is that adopting new support channels has a positive effect on a number of employee metrics. From satisfaction to retention, providing additional support channels and cross training can help agents with career pathing; however, these can also inadvertently cause burnout if not forcased and managed correctly.

The following employee metrics have improved as a result of adopting new support channels
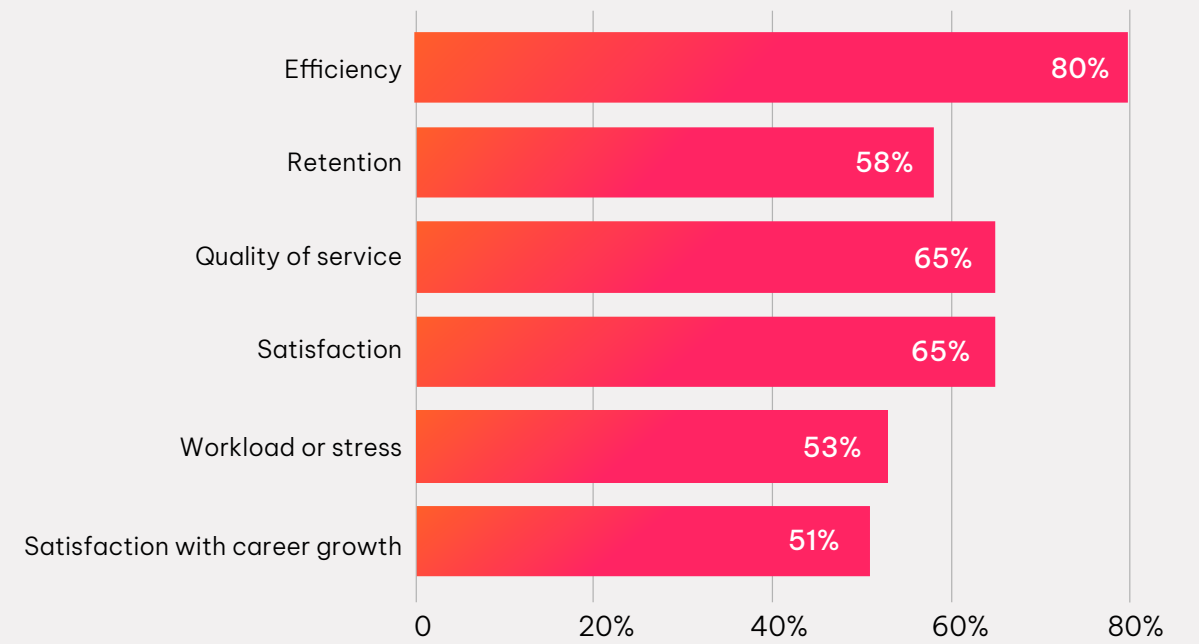

Figure 10

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Back Office employees and work are an untapped resource

As we've seen, although agents are willing and able to work at their current companies for years, they're often stressed and burned out. While agents appreciate better pay and benefits, they're also looking for things like upskilling and better career opportunities.

In this environment, one untapped resource stands out: the back office. The number of contact center agents and back office employees is similar at many organizations. For example, 13% of organizations employ between 1,000 and 1,499 contact center agents, while 15% of organizations employ the same number of back office employees. And yet, even with this parity, few currently distribute work between the two groups (Figure 11).

Total number of contact center agents and back office employees at respondent organizations

Legend:
- Less than 200
- 200-499
- 500-999
- 1,000-1,499
- 1,500-1,999
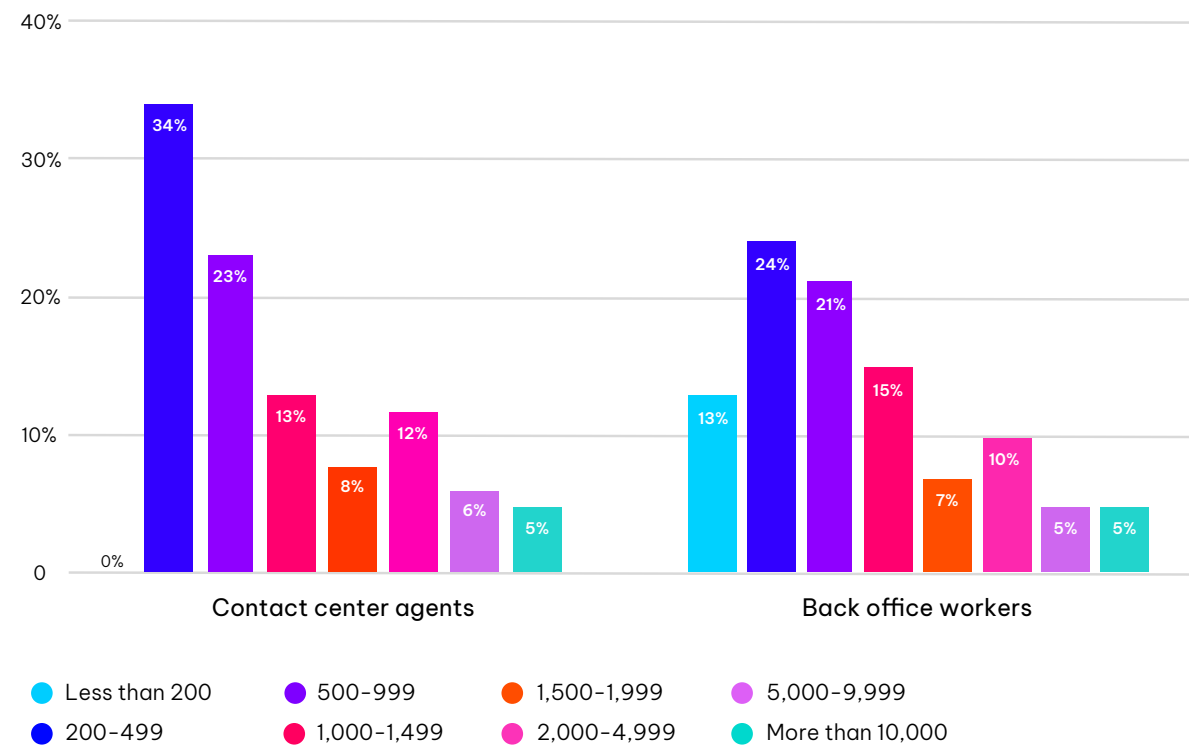- 2,000-4,999
- 5,000-9,999
- More than 10,000

Figure 11

In 2023, only 22% of organizations dynamically shared work between contact center agents and back office workers. In 2022, the percentage of respondent organizations who said that "Front office flexes to assist with back office tasks" was only 33%. In this environment, leaders have an as-yet-untapped opportunity to dynamically share work and cross-train contact center workers on back office work. Such training should also satisfy contact center agents' desire to be upskilled or follow a clear career path.

There's evidence that the back office isn't as stressful as front-office work, particularly since there is a difference in attrition rates between the two sections of the workforce. At 50% of organizations, back office attrition has increased over the last year, compared to 62% of contact center agents. Meanwhile, 36%of organizations have seen their back office attrition decrease, compared to just 27% for contact center (Figure 12).
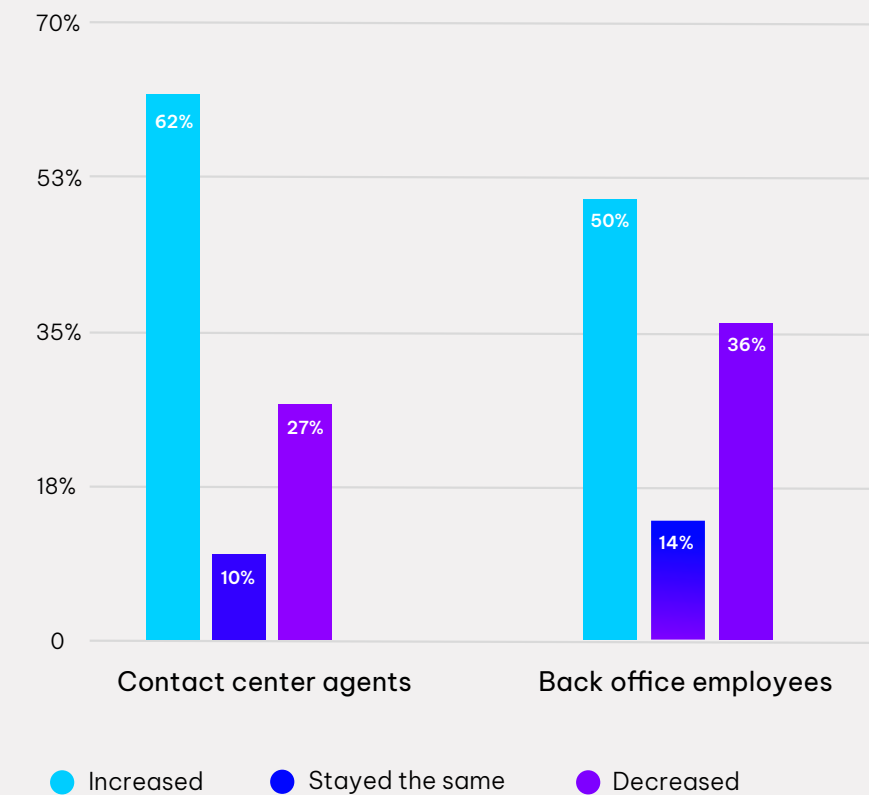
Unmanaged attrition changes over the past year

Legend:
- Increased
- Stayed the same
- Decreased

Figure 12

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There's a variety of workforce management capabilities that aren't being used for back office. Of the capabilities we asked about, only periodic schedule bidding was used equally between contact center agents and back office workers. Other capabilities aren't being used equally. For example, forecasting is used by 63% of organizations for contact center agents, but only by 29% for back office workers (Figure 13). As organizations assess how best to utilize their back office workers, they might examine which capabilities are and aren't being used in the back office and adjust accordingly.
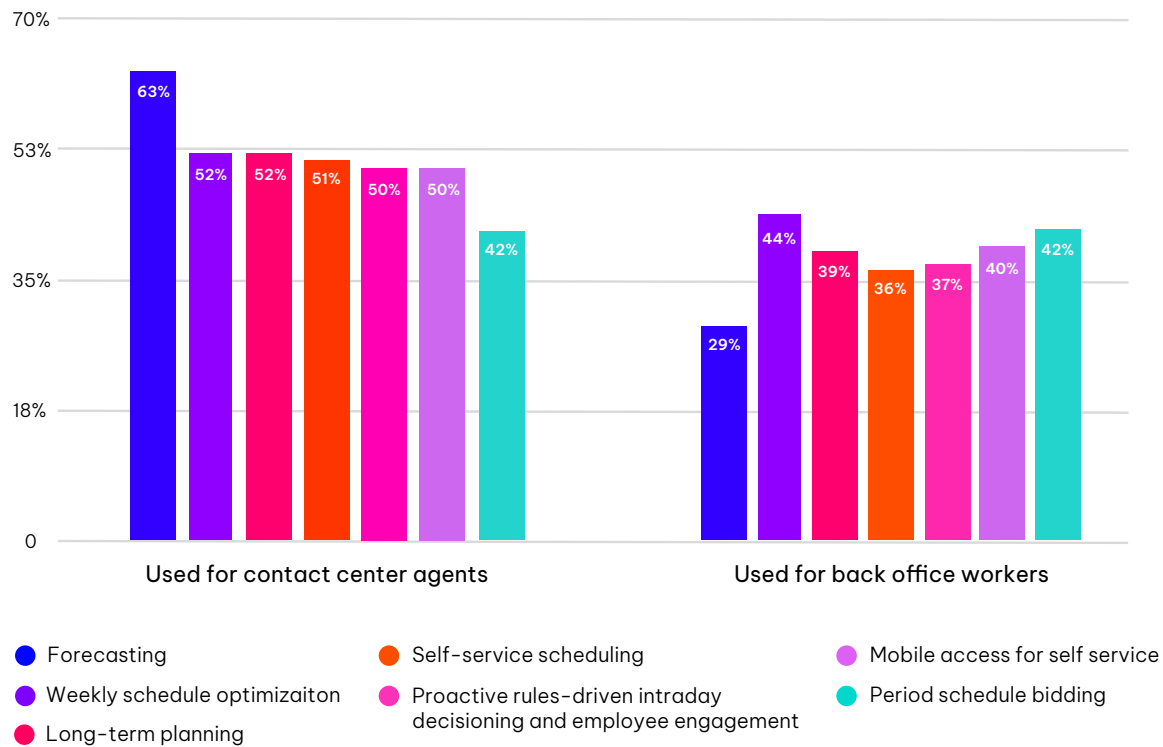
Workforce management capability adoption

Figure 13

Legend:
- Forecasting
- Weekly schedule optimizaiton
- Long-term planning
- Self-service scheduling
- Proactive rules-driven intraday decisioning and employee engagement
- Mobile access for self service
- Period schedule bidding

Along with adopting more workforce management capabilities for the back office, organizations might also review the metrics they use to assess employee performance. Among the metrics we asked about, only a third of organizations use the same metrics for both contact center agents and back office workers (Figure 14). At a time when increasing the number of metrics they use to assess performance, organizations should review the metrics they use for one employee segment or the other, and see where they can adopt those metrics to both groups.
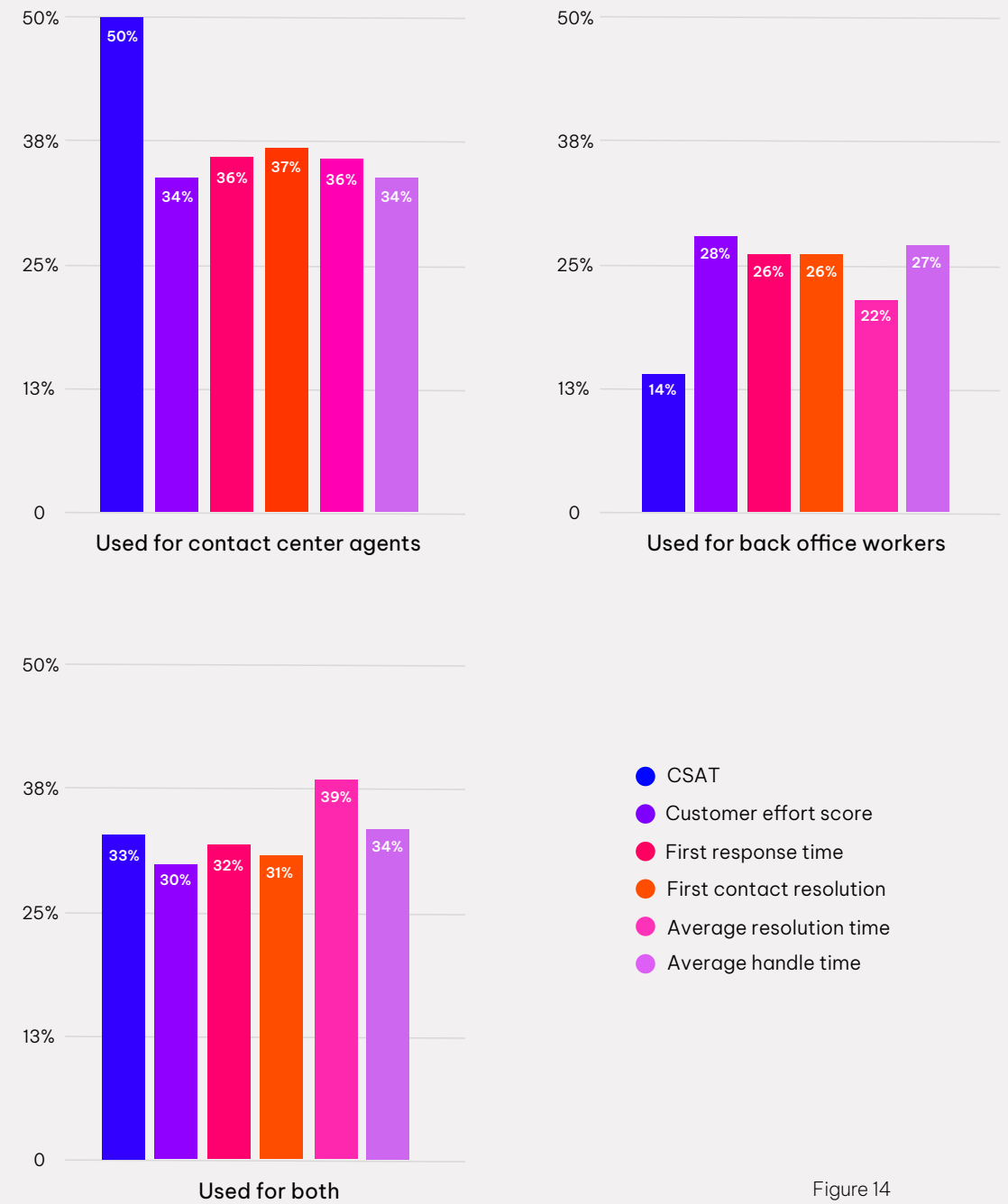
KPIs used to evaluate employee performance

Used for contact center agents

Used for back office workers

Used for both

Figure 14

Legend:
- CSAT
- Customer effort score
- First response time
- First contact resolution
- Average resolution time
- Average handle time

As organizations look for ways to reduce agent stress, they might explore the possibility of sharing work between the two groups, or cross-training contact center agents on back office work. Development and career pathing are important to contact center agents; organizations should make use of that interest.

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Conclusion

The proliferation of multichannel and continued use of hybrid and remote work environments give organizations the power to address customer concerns and challenges anytime, anywhere from any place customers are. Yet, at the same time, these advantages have also contributed to agent workload and stress. Contact center agents are being asked to work in more channels than ever before, and multichannel work is now the norm.

In this environment, organizations need to carefully review the work they give to employees, the metrics used to assess that work and the rewards for a job well done. Although voluntary attrition isn't as high as it could be at first glance, organizations could lose more workers to stress and burnout if they aren't careful.

Aligning their offerings with what agents are looking for, increasing the variety of metrics used to assess employee performance and distributing back office work among contact center agents are just a few ways organizations can boost employee satisfaction and reduce attrition. Many contact center agents are thirsty for better-defined career paths and upskilling opportunities. The back office remains an untapped resource for organizations willing to cross-train contact center agents on those duties.

By reviewing and revising the tools they already use for workforce management, organizations will be in a better position to reduce attrition and keep happy, productive employees.

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Appendix

Name of survey
Workforce Management Trends
for Contact Center Leadership

Survey dates
December 2023-January 2024

Number of respondents
408

Geographic region
North America: 51%
EMEA: 49%

**Number of contact center agents
at respondent organizations**
200-499: 34%
500-999: 23%
1,000-1,499: 13%
1,500-1,999: 8%
2,000-4,999: 12%
5,000-9,999: 6%
More than 10,000: 5%

Career level of respondents
Manager/supervisor: 50%
Director: 21%
Vice President: 6%
C-Suite/owner: 23%

Name of survey
Workforce Management Trends
for Contact Center Agents

Survey dates
December 2023-January 2024

Number of respondents
408

Geographic region
North America: 50%
EMEA: 50%

**Number of contact center agents
at respondent organizations**
200-499: 24%
500-699: 25%
700-999: 12%
1,000-1,499: 17%
More than 1,500: 22%

Career level of respondents
Entry level: 45%
Individual contributor: 55%

Numbers may not total 100% due to rounding.

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