

THE HIRING GAME HAS CHANGED

Strategies for solving staffing issues.

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STRATEGIES FOR SOLVING STAFFING ISSUES.

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While many jobs come with a fair amount of stress, few positions are as taxing as that of an associate in a busy contact center who must regularly handle difficult customer service issues.

According to a study by [Cornell University](#), 87% of call center employees report high job stress levels. As the first line of defense against angry customers, many customer service associates report they have been blamed for things that are out of their control.

It is little wonder that a recent Mercer [survey](#) found that, when compared to all job functions in the business world, the contact center associate position has one of the highest average voluntary turnover rates.

At the same time, [Forbes](#) reports that 56% of workers would quit their jobs if they couldn't continue working remotely. This makes it incumbent on contact center employers to figure out how to effectively staff customer service positions to minimize job stresses and keep their associates happily engaged.

I advise my clients that to retain high-performing associates, they must provide training, keep them motivated, and work to reduce the key drivers of their job stress. By proactively addressing associate burnout, contact centers can empower their associates to improve the customer experience.

THE NEW NORMAL

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, almost all contact center associates worked strictly in contact center offices. When the pandemic hit, most associates were sent home to work remotely out of sheer necessity. There was simply no other option. Surprisingly, this arrangement worked out much better than anyone expected. In many ways, it was a win-win for both the associates and their employers.

In some respects, transitioning to remote work gave associates the equivalent of a raise. Those who had long commutes found that working from home (WFH) allowed them to save significantly on gas and other expenses.

When associates were later asked to return to the office, they found that gas prices and other expenses had skyrocketed, but they were not being appropriately compensated. They effectively lost not only that “raise” but the work-life balance they had enjoyed while working remotely.

As a result, many associates who went back to the office stayed only a short time until they found better situations, such as jobs in hybrid environments that offered a better work-life balance. Others decided they were not willing to go into the office at all and held out for fully remote positions.

Not surprisingly, high performers had an easier time finding more desirable job options than others, and companies that insisted workers come back full-time lost their high performers first.

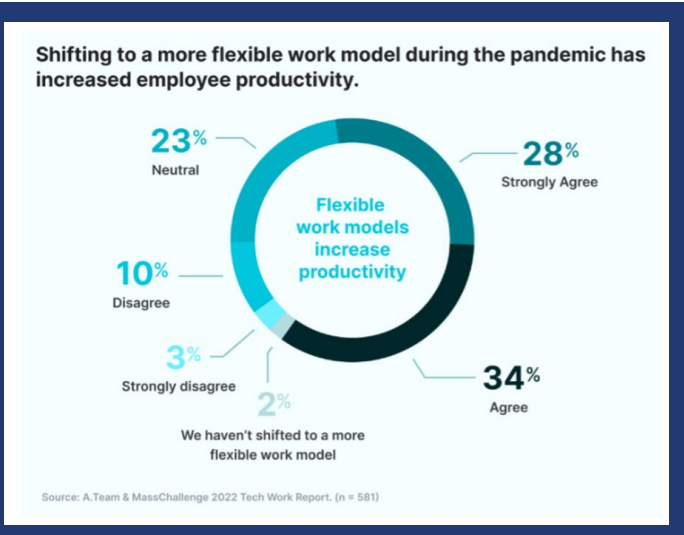
“The spike in remote & hybrid work is eliminating ~ 200 million weekly commuting hours in the U.S. alone”, says organizational psychologist and New York Times best-selling author, @AdamMGrant in an August 31, 2022 tweet. “Time is our scarcest resource. Saving time is our most valued benefit.”

POST-PANDEMIC CONTACT CENTER STAFFING STRATEGIES:

1 CHOOSE A FLEXIBLE STAFFING MODEL TO MAXIMIZE ENGAGEMENT, PRODUCTIVITY, AND RETENTION.

Among contact center employers, what to do about this new staffing dilemma is a hot topic. The Northridge Group has observed a trend among clients:

- Those that shifted to more flexible work models during the pandemic and maintained them afterward report increased productivity among associates.



- Meanwhile, those that required associates to return to the office have experienced notable attrition, especially among top performers.

Mercer and ICMI report that the average contact center turnover rate is **40%** globally compared to a **22%** average turnover rate across all industries in the U.S.

This high turnover rate is a wake-up call for contact center employers. Job satisfaction levels in contact centers are low and companies need to find ways to make contact center jobs less stressful for their employees.

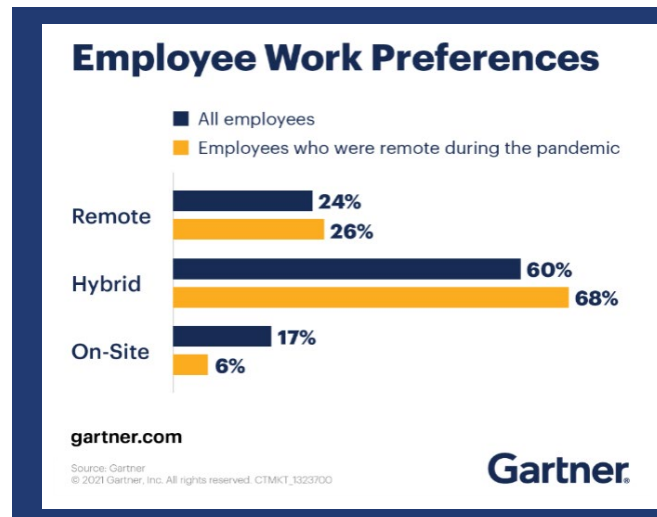
While the use of modern technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI)-powered bots to help facilitate communication with customers helps, remote and hybrid work models that focus on work-life balance are more likely to reduce associate stress and increase engagement.

2 EXPERIMENT WITH REMOTE AND HYBRID WORK MODELS.

Those companies that require associates to be in the office full-time are seeing attrition because companies willing to offer remote work are considered more desirable.

As a result, companies are experimenting with hybrid arrangements. A requirement to be in the office two days per week is becoming increasingly common. Usually, one day is reserved for team meetings and associates are asked to come in on an additional day of their choice.

Most associates looking for new opportunities prioritize jobs that are remote or hybrid. Full-time in-office jobs are less desirable and are difficult to fill.



While some associates like having the option of going into the office on occasion, most want it to be optional. Gartner reports that among employees who were remote during the pandemic, 68% now prefer hybrid work models and only 6% prefer fully on-site models.

Companies looking to add staff will have more access to high-potential associates if they continue to offer remote or hybrid options. Insisting on full-time in-office work in today's work environment makes hiring nearly impossible.

LinkedIn and other job recruiting platforms now allow candidates to search for jobs by filtering for hybrid and remote opportunities. Positions that do not meet these criteria may not turn up in their searches.



3 CONSIDER THE BENEFITS OF WORK-FROM-ANYWHERE (WFA) MODELS.

WFH models have expanded so much that, in many cases, there is no longer a requirement that associates live near their contact centers. They may even be allowed to live in different states.

During the pandemic, many people who could perform their duties from anywhere moved to destinations of their choice and proved they were able to successfully fulfill their job responsibilities. This opened the doors for companies to recruit in different states.

For example, one of our clients that is known as a good employer had exhausted the job market for contact center associates in their community.

With few other options available to them, they took the unusual step of reaching out to former employees who had worked in their branch offices in other states to offer them "work-from-anywhere" (WFA) positions.

This approach proved successful. It opened an untapped market of candidates who they had already vetted and who were already familiar with their product lines.

In the pre-COVID world, associates were hired to work from the office and remote work was exceedingly rare.

Today it is exceedingly difficult to get people to go to an office five days per week because they simply don't have to anymore. WFA staffing models offer associates a better work-life balance, increased flexibility, and savings on expenses such as gas.

However, to WFA associates must meet certain requirements such as having a specified bandwidth, a room to work from, and appropriate childcare if needed.

4 EMBRACE TODAY'S NEW STAFFING MODELS AND FOCUS ON THE BENEFITS.

A 2022 Customer Service survey conducted by [The Northridge Group](#), found that 47% of respondents had knowingly spoken to a customer service associate who was at home and 72% of those respondents felt it did not impact the resolution of their issue.

Similarly, Northridge's Quality Monitoring specialists have observed that some customers respond positively to associates WFH and may even engage in personal conversation around it, as long as the associate can resolve their issue.

Some of the obvious benefits of hybrid and remote work models are reduced building expenses and happier employees.

In fact, Forbes reported that the ability to WFH increases employee happiness by as much as **20%** while a Stanford study found that WFH increased productivity by **13%** and decreased attrition rates by **50%**.

Moreover, it has been [reported](#) that remote work is the biggest draw for top talent with **97%** of employees reporting they don't want to return to the office full-time and **61%** preferring to be fully remote.

An additional benefit of remote and hybrid staffing models is reduced absenteeism. Before the pandemic, associates regularly called in sick due to small ailments or the need to take an ill child to a doctor.

Now that they WFH associates are more likely to deal with these matters by reducing their hours as opposed to taking a whole day off. This has led to an industrywide decrease in absenteeism.

Excessive absenteeism leads to long hold times and decreased service levels, which results in poor customer experience. It also causes decreased productivity and poor morale among associates who do show up and must fill in for absent coworkers.

In today's tight labor market, contact centers cannot afford to be short-staffed and reduced absenteeism should be hailed as an unintended benefit of WFH.

IN TODAY'S TIGHT LABOR MARKET, CONTACT CENTERS CANNOT AFFORD TO BE SHORT-STAFFED...

5 SUPPLEMENT CONTACT CENTER RESOURCES WITH GIG WORKERS, BPOS.

Gig workers are independent contractors who work on an on-call or as-needed basis. Often recruited through temporary placement agencies, gig workers can be helpful for contact centers with short-term or seasonal needs for associates.

For instance, insurance companies with greater needs during the open enrollment period may hire gig workers to supply short-term help without long-term commitments. However, the viability and use of gig workers may change should a recently proposed U.S. federal [regulation](#) on classifying employees and independent contractors come into effect.

Our clients report that what is even more popular than outsiders performing gig work are part-time contact center employees agreeing to work more hours when needed. Some part-time workers value the occasional opportunity to work more hours for extra spending money.

By hiring part-time employees with some flexibility, companies can create gig environments within their contact centers, resulting in less need to recruit outside gig workers.

Business process outsourcers (BPOs) can also provide workable solutions for contact center resource needs.

While they can be located either offshore or onshore, those that operate from locations with major time differences from the U.S. offer the advantage of being able to supply workers for the middle of the night shifts, making 24/7 customer service availability possible. They can also provide workers to cover American holidays, allowing U.S. companies to give their employees time off.

In the long run, while gig workers and BPOs do serve important purposes and do help with contact center resource needs, employing productive contact center associates is still essential. Offering permanent hybrid or WFA positions is the best way for employers to attract high-performing associates and offers the greatest defense against attrition.

LOOKING FORWARD

While it is extremely unlikely that things will ever go back to how they were before the pandemic, associate job options could become more limited over the next two years if the economy should plummet.

While some associates may be forced to consider jobs requiring five days in the office, remote and hybrid positions will continue to be more desirable, and employers who offer these options will increase their chances of attracting and retaining high performers.



Looking back, one of the few silver linings of the pandemic is that it changed the way people work for good and this includes contact center associates.

Remote associates are more productive than those who work in contact centers because they have no commute, fewer distractions, and a better overall work-life balance. Employers must learn to embrace remote and hybrid work trends and find the balance that is most efficient for their company. 📍



Vickie Schutze serves as the Director of the Contact Center and Customer Experience Practice at [The Northridge Group](#) and adeptly helps clients improve contact center experiences. The Northridge Group is a leading management consulting firm, specializing in customer experience solutions and operational excellence initiatives, utilizing advanced data analytics and business process redesign to deliver results.

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