

A thinkJar Thought Leadership Series

Creating Highly Engaged Customer Service Employees

How technology and processes in digital transformation help organizations create engaged employees and reap the rewards

Published March 2017

A U.S.-based utility company routinely solicits input from its employees on how to improve operations. After thoroughly analyzing and ranking ideas, the company implements around 30 percent of the recommendations. On average, a recommendation can save \$4,000 a year – except when the proposal comes from the most engaged employees. Those recommendations end up saving between \$11,000 and \$15,000 a year.

Why the difference?

Engaged employees commit more time and effort to making sure the company runs as well as it can, often resulting in triple or quadruple the savings from all ideas submitted. But contributions from engaged workers who know what's expected of them also result in thousands more satisfied customers and productivity gains between five and ten percent, per a study by Gallup.¹

The concept of engaged employees has come to the forefront. Research proves that engaged employees perform better, deliver more successes, and affect the core metrics and key performance indicators for a company right way. This applies to customer service, where engaged customer service agents have been shown to churn less, be more productive, and deliver higher levels of customer satisfaction. Yet, less than 26 percent of employees are highly engaged.²

How can an organization create highly engaged customer service agents? There are three aspects to doing so - people, process, and technology.

Cultural changes, such as hiring of most appropriate employees and managers, are long-term, transformational initiatives that often are beyond the reach of technology and beyond the reach of a white paper recommendation. Books have been written and classes have been taught about such long-term initiatives. While transformational initiatives will always be goals in most organizations, there are faster and easier ways to create change and obtain results.

This paper will focus on the most effective and quickest ways to produce change: implement the right tools and optimize the customer service processes.

Implementing the Right Tools

ThinkJar's research over the past few years shows that the biggest complaint from customer service agents was the lack of quality software tools to do their jobs: they were either too scant in number, too disconnected or simply not good enough. Due to vendors' focus on making customer service agents – and their employers - happier and more empowered, changes in the solutions we see in the market became better aligned with agent's expectations.

The agent's tools used in contact centers fall into two categories - problem resolution or agent support.

¹ <http://www.gallup.com/businessjournal/26281/First-Element-Great-Managing.aspx>

² <https://experiencematters.blog/2016/12/02/only-26-of-u-s-employees-are-highly-engaged-how-engaged-are-your-employees>

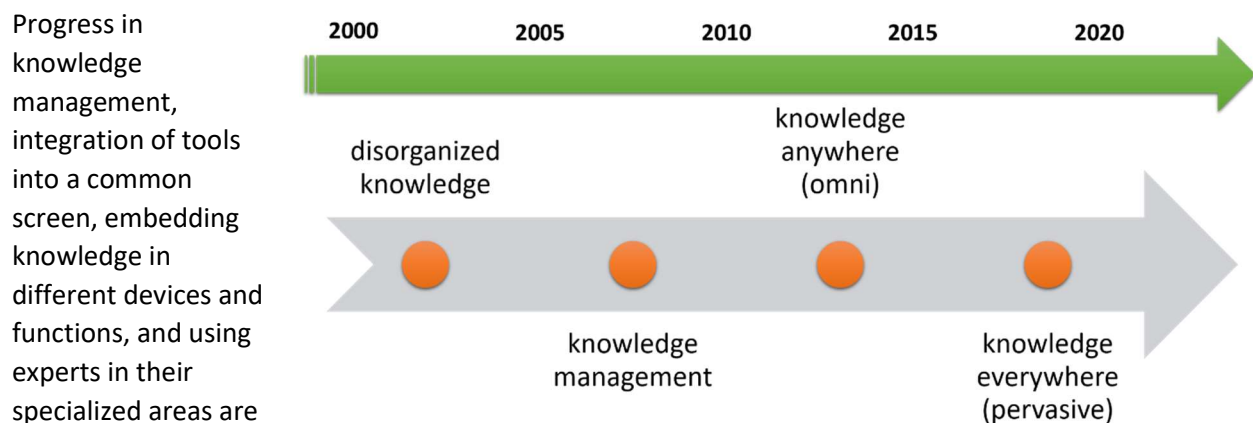
Problem Resolution Tools

Problem resolution tools have seen the largest innovation in the past five years. The rise of self-service via the Web³, the expansion of self-service into other channels, and the emergence of communities and social channels to complement the tools associated with the agents' jobs have all led to a marked evolution in how service issues get resolved. Whether it's customers themselves using self-service tools in myriad channels, agents using social tools to engage more deeply with and more quickly help customers, or customers finding that many of their questions and problems can be solved without involving a customer service agent, today's market allows customers themselves to solve their issues faster and easier than before.

Yet, agent engagement also has increased because customers are finding the answers or solutions to simple problems by themselves – or within online communities. This gives agents the time to focus on more complex issues and more advanced questions that will make them feel gratified by helping customers and bring meaning to their jobs. Finding a rewarding career with challenges where they can make an impact is what makes customer service employees more engaged these days. Leaving the “easy questions” out of their jobs accomplishes this.

Research conducted by thinkJar in 2016 shows that more than 60 percent of customer service agents are looking for better careers that enable them to engage further in their jobs, be more satisfied with their jobs, and succeed with more complex assignments. In addition, less than 30 percent indicated that heavy customer load was a problem and just 15 percent indicated that the software tools were to blame for their lack of engagement, less than the numbers from just three years prior.

In addition to the auto-resolved nature of communities and self-service, there has been significant innovation in knowledge management. In years past, agents' complaints centered on a lack of the right information in the right format. A search on a knowledgebase usually returned many potential answers, not necessarily the one needed. This increased stress on agents and was the most often cited reason to quit their jobs.



³ http://blogs.forrester.com/kate_leggett/16-01-28-online_self_service_dominates_yet_again_why_its_an_effortless_way_to_get_to_your_answers

all contributing to shortening the process of finding the answer and reducing the stress on customer service agents.

These advances also created more dynamic and more complete tools than ever before. The simplification and improvement in the technology for customer service agents has meant that the problem resolution tools are finally at the level expected for agents to do a good job.

Agent Support Tools

The three advances that have created the most impact on supporting agents have been the expansive use of performance management tools, the use of analytics to deliver better outcomes, and integration between all components in the enterprise to allow customer service agents to become better at their jobs. This has created a baseline by which agents judge their software tools: can I find the right information, make sure I am doing it right, and discover how to become better at my job?

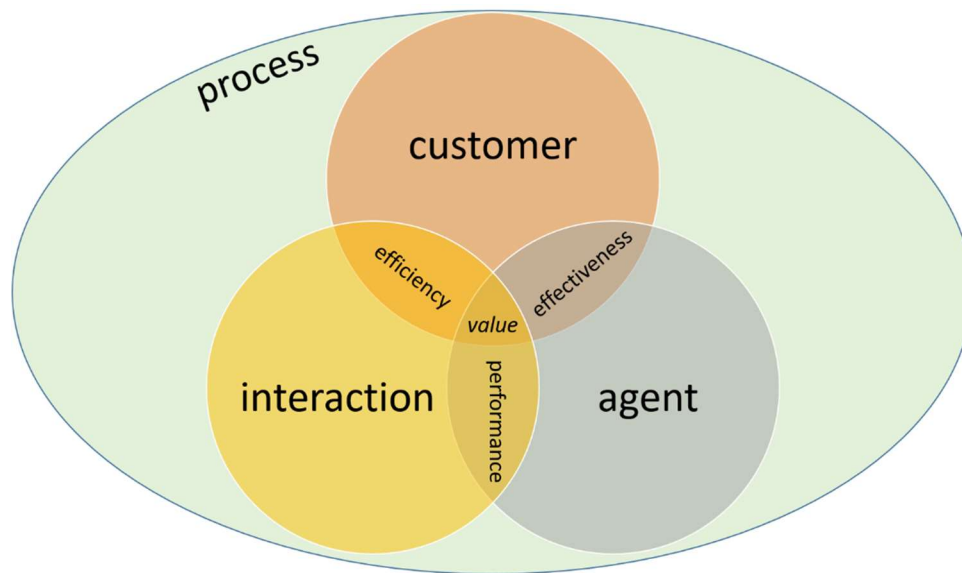
Performance management used to be tied to efficiency-driven metrics like number of calls answered or duration of each call. This created a requirement for agents to meet artificial quotas that were not related to delivering value to clients or fulfilling the purpose of their jobs. As the “Age of the Customer”⁴ developed, organizations found they needed a more effective - not more efficient - method to measure customer service success – one tied to customers’ needs and expectations.

Managers and agents began to understand the demands and needs of the customer, adapted metrics to support them, and correlated feedback from customers to the right agent and the right action. The tools implemented helped identify, optimize, and reward the right actions from the customers’ perspective and used the outcomes to further optimize the processes.

This meant a shift in performance management tools - focusing on rewarding agents for efforts in delivering value to the customer, not just performing better for the organization. By turning the model around to focus on customers and their needs, the organization ensures engagement with customers by delivering value in each interaction.

⁴ <https://go.forrester.com/age-of-the-customer/>

The picture below shows the different metrics and how value to the customer is an aggregate metric of all actions and functions. The use and tracking of these metrics leads to customer service applications being more focused on analytics (including dashboards and real-time interfaces) to optimize the right moves and quash the wrong ones quickly. If an agent finds a new way to deliver value, the information



can be distributed to other agents far more quickly and easily than ever.

The use of analytics is the preliminary step to using optimization algorithms to find a path to artificial intelligence and machine learning. Eventually, simple interactions can be automated with better performance

and accuracy so that agents can focus on the interactions that matter most - the exceptions and the unique ones that require attention from humans.

Better integration between software tools and better interfaces for service agents create more productive agents. This integration brings together learning systems, field service, knowledge management, and other systems that can be used to deliver better experiences for customers. These better experiences result in engaged customer service agents who like their challenging, rewarding jobs as opposed to unhappy agents who repeatedly apply inflexible rules and regulations over different channels but never resolve customers' issues.

Integrating all these tools together lets the agent work with a more complete picture of both the customers' information as well as the many facets of the organization's information. The result: a better framework to attract and retain the best customer service employees.

Optimizing the Processes

The move to transform organizations through digital transformation has not escaped the realm of customer service.⁵ The challenge, as it is for all other areas of the organization, is to find and use the right data and the right model to mold new processes. Digital transformation is about optimizing processes by using data better.

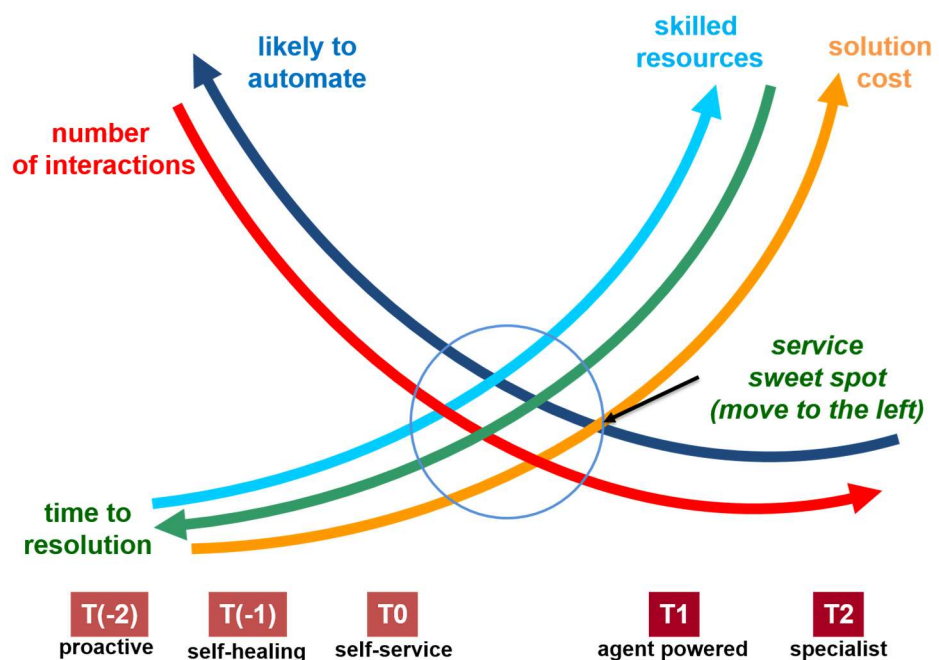
The shift from efficiency to effectiveness for data has changed the focus from operations to customer requirements and perceptions. While this is good, it does not truly fit within the mission of customer

⁵ <http://estebankolsky.com/2015/02/stop-talking-about-digital-transformation/>

service. The goal of customer service is finding the right balance between delivering answers and reducing costs. As our research over the years has shown: more than half (closer to 90 percent in certain situations) of the interactions between customers and the company happen via customer service. Customer service organizations are keen on finding a balanced model between costs and solutions.

Digital transformation for customer service does not only come from using data to optimize processes but also from using the same data mixed with knowledge and content to move along the service timeline (shown in the picture below) toward more effective customer service. The focus on better data to deliver more effectively via proactive customer service or self-healing applications is what propels the digital transformation of the customer service department.

In addition to the rise of self-service applications over the last decade, there is a renewed effort at using embedded knowledge and proactive customer service to deliver more effective solutions to customers in a more efficient manner. Organizations are constantly seeking better ways to empower their customers and agents



and to use the best knowledge to resolve issues. To accomplish this, a focus on analytics, data-based decisions, and machine learning with automation is fundamental. This is what helps organizations reach the lowest cost functions of proactive, self-healing and self-service. It also liberates customer service employees to tend to the more complex problems which makes them more engaged.

Using machine learning and artificial intelligence is the next logical step to self-service and automation. Once the customers (and the company) trust the value of the automated reply that the system can produce, they will be more inclined to use them – raising the engagement from the customer perspective. However, the biggest value of machine learning is not to automate the simple problems but to take advantage of the knowledge and resolution data that emanates from solving more complex problems and finding ways to proactively handle and automate resolutions to the complex problems.

This knowledge will be used both to further automation and to allow agents to solve customers' issues faster and better. Yet, the myth of machines taking over 100 percent of customer service inquiries is

based on technology that is not feasible in a contact center yet. Agents fill in when technology cannot. All processes should have an escape method from automation to agents as necessary.

The vendors and technologies that are more in tune with customer service needs today are beginning to offer machine learning platforms that can tap into the operational data, resolution knowledge, and other customer and product data to find the best way to generate the right information to solve problems that don't yet exist. Indeed, by analyzing what customers are doing, which products they use, and cross-referencing that information to operational data, the organization can find where potential problems will occur. Organizations can then deploy solutions via embedded and self-healing systems or proactively notify customers (or even technology systems, using IoT and related technologies) and resolve the problems before they occur.

If customer service evolves to where there is no direct interaction between customer and company but rather the company automatically handles problems before they occur, customer service will reach the lowest cost possible for the organization and the highest satisfaction possible for the customer. As it has been said many times before – there is no better customer service than no customer service.⁶

Next Steps

By now, you are convinced that you want to attract and retain highly engaged customer service agents, but you are unsure where to start. The following six steps will help you get the ball rolling:

1. **Ensure Management Buy-In:** The environment in which highly engaged agents excel and remain is very different from a traditional customer service operation. There are changes to people, processes, technology, and metrics that will affect not just the division but the entire company. Without the proper management buy-in, most of these changes cannot happen. This is not a grassroots effort – this is a long-term initiative that changes the way the organization works. It must be endorsed and supported by the proper management to have staying power.
2. **Create a Strategy:** Although it sounds like common sense advice, the number and variety of changes require that a certain sequence be followed to. Hiring the “right people” without having the right tools, for example, would be a mistake. Also, not using appropriate technology would delay the deployment. What are the specific steps your organization must take – and in what order? This is the question that a strategy answers.
3. **Build a Framework:** A framework is essentially a collection of questionnaires and planning tools used to gauge the potential for a specific task to succeed and to align the right resources behind its success. Because each organization achieves success in different ways, different questions and different tools will be used. But the principles highlighted in this report will provide the basis for building your framework to align your new service solution with your customer service strategy.
4. **Align your Partners:** No organization can succeed in digital transformation by working alone. The technology used will be transcendental, so you need to ensure the right vendors and the right technology partners are aligned. If their goals and roadmaps don't follow your strategy, it

⁶ <http://www.destinationcrm.com/Articles/Web-Exclusives/Viewpoints/The-Best-Service-is-No-Service-49244.aspx>

is unlikely you will get to what you want. Align your partners' strategies with yours and make sure they work together.

5. **Seek Help:** Truth be told, someone already either did something like what you are trying to do or is in the process already. Find the people that can help you by relating their lessons learned and sharing their methodologies. Seek the consultants that have experience in this sort of customer service endeavor. Reach out to peers and other practitioners. Ask the questions and then share your experiences. A collaborative approach will yield better results faster.
6. **Implement Slowly and Consistently:** As with any other long-term initiative, things will change along the way and you will need to adapt. Example include the advent of social channels and communities and the rise of artificial intelligence. These trends will change processes and ways to use technology. Slow and consistent implementations, periodic reviews of the strategy, and agile frameworks that allow for changes along the way will be the sure way to succeed with digital transformation.