

The logo consists of the letters 'CX' in a large, white, outlined font, followed by a colon and two stacked circles, also in white outline. The background is dark with a pattern of small, light-colored arrows pointing in various directions, some of which are highlighted in yellow and pink.

# The Human Factor

**A Research Report from ASAPP**

In partnership with the University of San Francisco, School of Management  
Master of Science in Marketing Intelligence program.

# CX leaders often deal with 40% agent churn —and sometimes 100% or more—every year.

Large companies offering consumer goods or services spend millions (and sometimes billions) of dollars each year on the contact centers that serve their customers. The labor cost for agents represents the largest investment here, often 80-90% of total costs.

Somewhere in the neighborhood of 3 million customer service agents work in America representing 2% of the US workforce. Contact center agents have one of the worst employment retention rates. Roughly 1.2 million people in this role leave their jobs each year.

Recruiting, hiring, and training agents is expensive for the large consumer companies who employ them. In addition to direct costs, there are indirect costs.

It is difficult to adequately serve customer needs and provide great experiences with an ever-changing staff. That can cause customer churn, reduce customer lifetime value (CLV), and especially in this age of social media, make it harder to attract new customers.

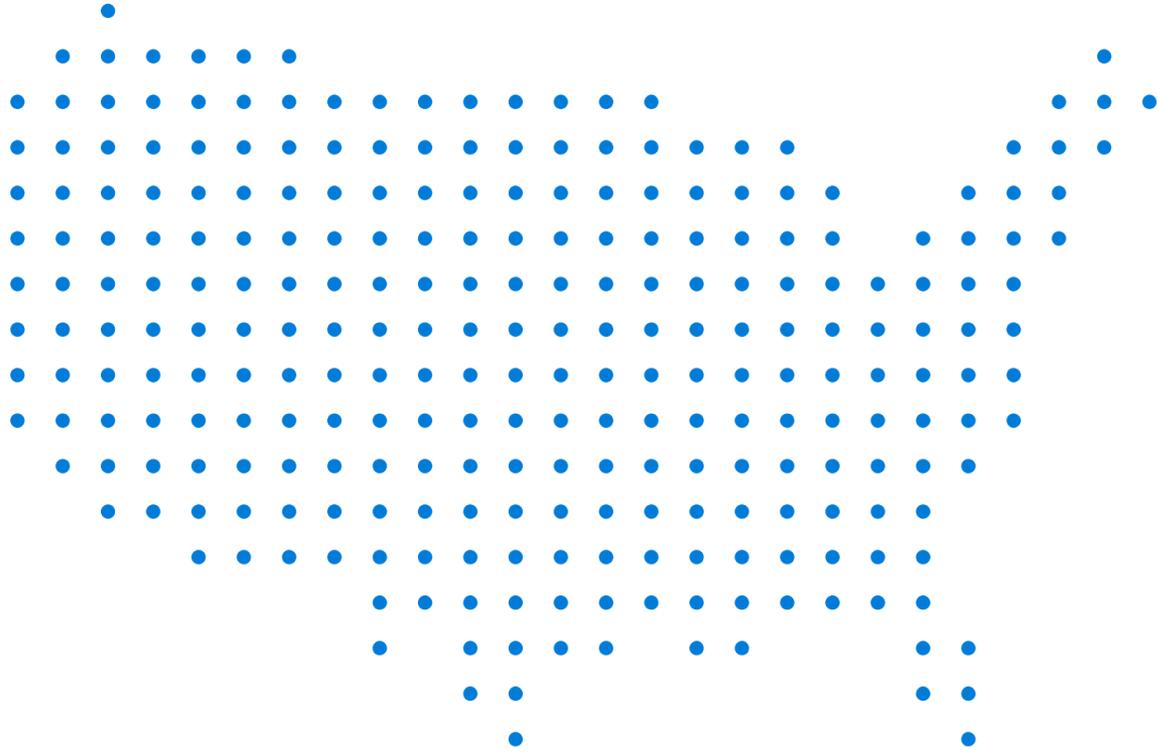
What can companies do to reduce agent attrition – and in doing so, reduce these costs? Who could provide better insight than the agents themselves?

That was the genesis for this study.

# About This Research

For this study, ASAPP partnered with the University of San Francisco, School of Management Master of Science in Marketing Intelligence program. We surveyed 506 customer support agents based in the US, working across a broad range of industries.

We also conducted in-depth interviews with ten customer support agents for their perspective on the human factors that impact the \$600 billion customer experience industry.



## Research Summary

We wanted to understand the world of the agent better.  
Why so much churn – and what might be done to change that?

We heard from agents across dozens of industries.

We found four key reasons for attrition:

1. Not being well trained to serve customers needs
2. Being managed to the wrong metrics
3. Technology is substandard
4. Aggressive customers and little or no support to address it

We'll share much more detail in the pages ahead.

Training Metrics Aggression Tech



Training Metrics Aggression Tech



Training is crucial to agents' success in contact centers. It enables agents to act with confidence in addressing customers' needs – where to find information, what to say, and specific actions to take to solve the problem. It's also a major cost for CX teams that see high levels of turnover. There is a constant tension over the length of training required for new agents to achieve proficiency. Plus, there's a need to keep agents current as new products and programs are introduced.

While companies often look at ways to reduce the time it takes to train agents, our research suggests that reduced training lowers the confidence and competence of agents. In our in-depth interviews, agents expressed their frustration with lack of training and identified it as a key cause for poor performance, unhappy customers, burnout, and attrition.

“I just feel like the companies that take the extra time to actually train you how to do your job, the people are typically happier. If you gave just a little bit more time teaching them how to do their job, you wouldn't have to have them bothering you for help every five seconds.

*James, Agent with experience in several industries*

# The impact of good training is significant

Training

Metrics

Aggression

Tech

Of agents who strongly agree that the training they received set them up for success:



92%

Are satisfied with their ability to help customers



88%

Are satisfied with their knowledge of systems



77%

Are satisfied with their support from management

Agents who feel they received sufficient training report a more positive experience all around.

**Notable:** Better trained agents are more engaged. They become strong company brand ambassadors as they solve customer problems and upsell products and services.



74%

Agree that they feel like brand ambassadors



**More training is good. But, there's also real value in ensuring agents get the right level of training at the right time.**

“They gave us I think, eight weeks of paid training. It was very long. But I felt like it didn't necessarily prepare me the way that I would have wanted it to. Because at that point, I didn't really know what I was getting into. I hadn't worked at a call center. We would practice, role play call scenarios and things like that. They would show us the systems and how to look at things. But the first day of taking calls was just crazy. And then I just continued taking calls with no additional break for training.

Now, I think they're doing it back and forth, where you take calls for a little bit and then have more training. I'm glad that they're changing that. I had so many more questions after I started taking calls than before, like when someone's explaining something to you it all sounds good. But you actually go to do it and you're like, wait, what's going on again? Blank.

*Brooke, Agent in her first role*

**77% of agents say hands-on training and shadowing is more effective than reading a manual.**



63%

Feedback is helpful and encouraging



37%

It's been difficult to get feedback during the pandemic



27%

Feedback doesn't reflect overall work

**I think it was like four or five calls, they would listen in every month to ensure that you're meeting the quality assurance metrics and also meeting the other metrics regarding the phone call time...there's definitely a lot of pressure, because at that point you're not treated like a human anymore you're more so, like a machine.**

*Len, Agent with 5 years of experience.*

In many call centers the approach to feedback is antiquated. Typically managers review a small sampling of an agent's calls to evaluate performance and identify behaviors for coaching. The feedback is always retrospective and not an overall picture of the agent's performance.

Poor quality feedback is also a frustration point.



Training **Metrics** Aggression Tech



Contact center operations are extremely metrics driven, intended to measure the performance of the business, the team, and the individual agents. Average handle time (AHT) and customer satisfaction (CSAT) are two common ways to measure agent performance. One in 5 agents don't consider AHT a good measure for today's businesses. And nearly that many say the same about CSAT.

Is it time for change?



20%

Average handle time (AHT) does not accurately measure success



15%

Customer Satisfaction (CSAT) does not accurately measure success

“Every call center has their own metrics. And everyone wants to be best in class, it's what a lot of companies say...it doesn't really mean anything. If you have to force those metrics, you can't really fully help a customer because you have to be within those metrics.

*Sarah, Agent with 7 years experience*

How would you rate your overall satisfaction with the service you received today?



1. Very Unsatisfied



2. Unsatisfied



3. Neutral



4. Satisfied



5. Very Satisfied

Oftentimes agents are assigned full responsibility for the CSAT score provided by the customer in a post-contact survey. But the agents don't have full control over the customer's experience. For example, while customers typically have an expectation of wait time and a threshold for waiting, agents can't influence wait times, or the overall brand experience.

In a separate research project, ASAPP reviewed CSAT scores against more than 17,000 messaging interactions. The correlation of wait time to negative CSAT is higher than any other variable, including an agent satisfactorily resolving an issue.

While negative CSAT rates occur about 20% of the time, when a customer is timed out and must reinitiate contact the negative CSAT rate jumps up to 80%.

Additionally, anytime an agent has to transfer a customer because of routing issues, wrong customer selection, or transfer to a supervisor, that also increases the risk of a lower CSAT score by nearly 1.5x.

AHT is a long-standing metric for call centers. But, as the approach to CX evolves, companies may need to consider new options for measuring success. There are several reasons for this.

**1. Conversations may be omni-channel, concurrent, and asynchronous.** As companies now serve customers in digital channels as well as on the phone they need metrics that work across channels. AHT doesn't serve well for messaging, where agents may handle multiple contacts concurrently. Nor does it serve for asynchronous communications, where customers may come and go.

**2. Complex issues take more time.** As IVRs and bots have become prevalent, automation is addressing the simplest of customer needs – so agents are addressing the more complex issues. Rising AHT is not necessarily indicative of lagging performance.

**3. You can't rush great experiences.** Companies increasingly need to differentiate themselves by providing great customer experience. If this is a primary goal, companies may not want to penalize agents who take extra time to ensure customer needs are met.

“If there's a busy day and there's a little old lady on your line that doesn't understand that you have metrics and you can't talk about her granddaughter, you know, there's no polite way to say, please hang up.

*Shana, Agent with many years experience*



# Widespread metric manipulation?

How often do you believe agents manipulate calls to improve their performance metrics

Frequently



38%

Occasionally



40%

Rarely



15%

Never



7%

If current KPIs do not accurately reflect the business outcome the company wishes to achieve, then the problem is only exacerbated when agents engage in intentional manipulation. Seventy-eight percent of agents believe manipulating metrics to improve performance results is common practice.

Data is crucial for successfully running contact center operations. But metric manipulation makes it difficult for management to accurately evaluate performance and achieve business objectives. That makes it critical to understand the reasons why agents take these actions.

Armed with this knowledge companies can consider:

- How incentives are designed
- Ways to clearly define business objectives
- What new metrics to measure

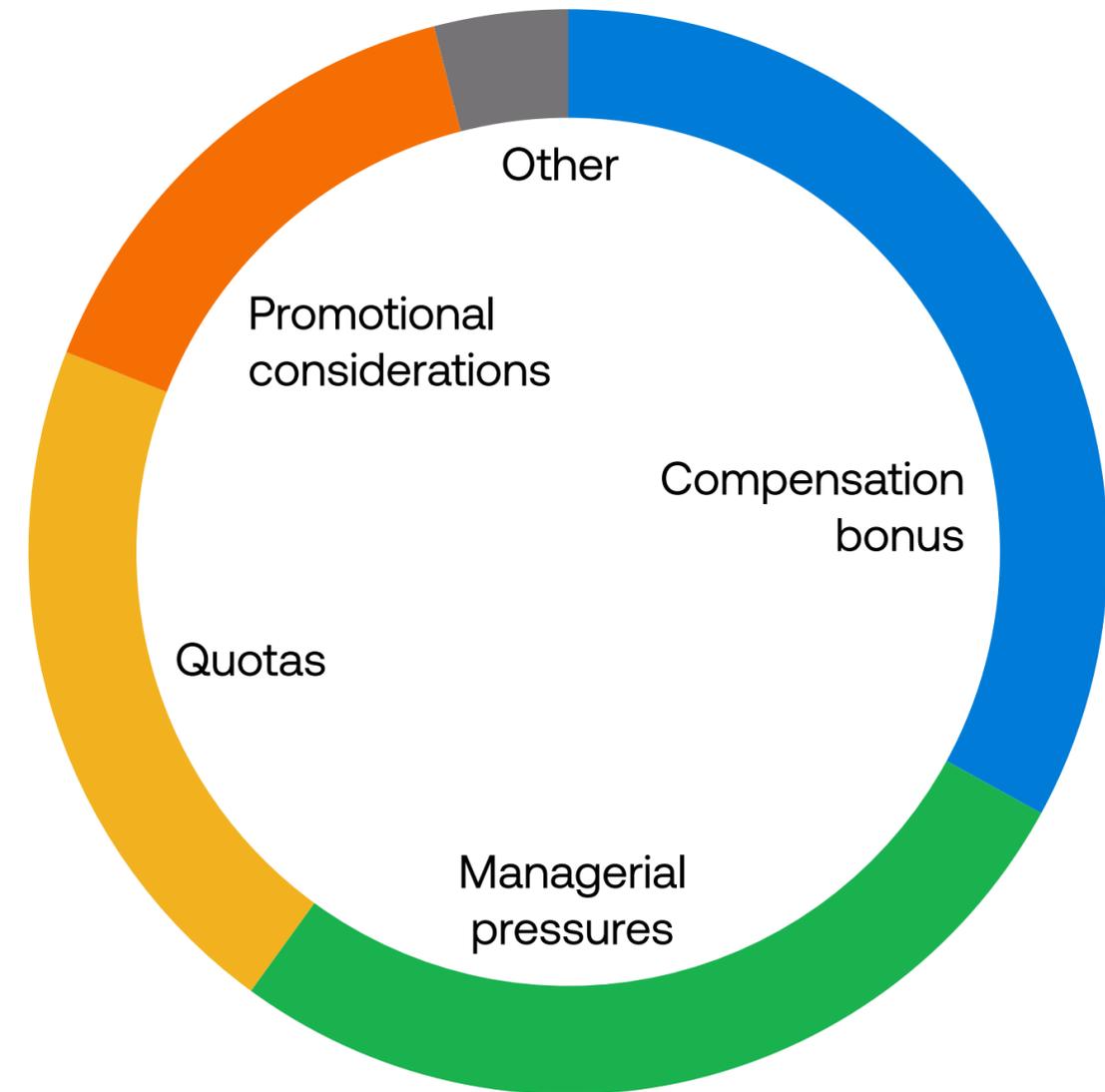


# The reasons behind manipulation

While metrics serve continuous improvement, these measurements also create anxiety in the industry for agents, as it impacts bonuses, managerial pressures, and quotas. These are the most common reasons agents cite as cause for metric manipulation:

- 33%** Compensation bonus
- 27%** Managerial pressures
- 21%** Quotas
- 15%** Promotional considerations
- 4%** Other

As mentioned in our discussion of feedback, the current system of rating agents at many companies relies on quality management programs that sample a tiny fraction of an agent's monthly interactions to score.



Current trend:

Make survey results known to agents in near real-time.

Unintended consequence:

Exacerbation of the anxiety agents experience.

“One negative survey has the potential to derail me for the whole day.”

Training Metrics Aggression Tech



# The happy unhappy agent

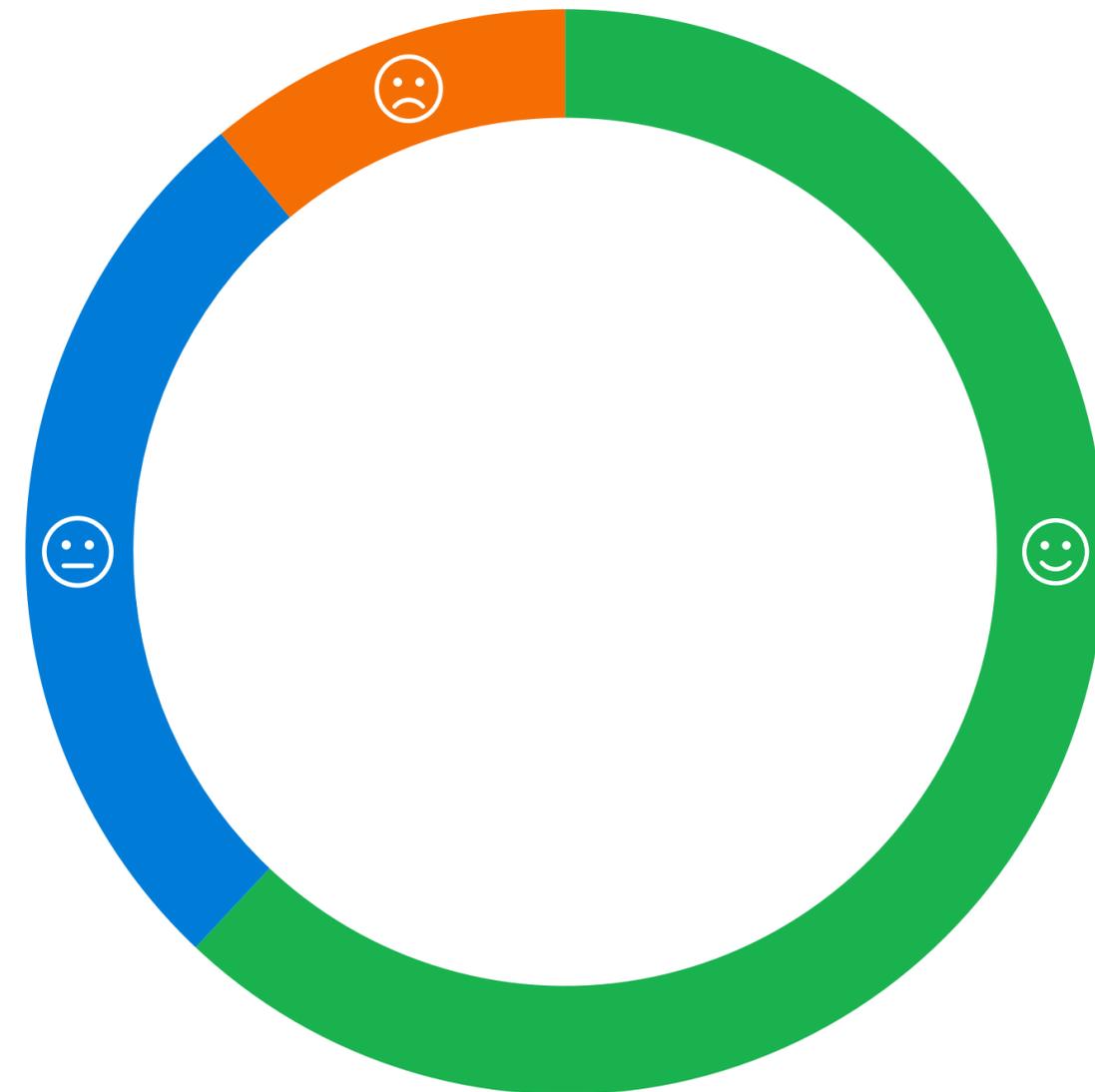
Ninety percent of agents reported that calls with customers made their day, and the majority say they are happy with their jobs.

**63%** Enjoy working as an agent

**27%** Neutral about job as an agent

**10%** Unhappy about job as an agent

However, the high attrition rate in this industry is indicative of the pressures facing these agents. A search on social media about the agent experience provides some visibility into “a day in the life.” Many agents report being treated poorly by some customers and so it’s no surprise that our survey results illustrate this point. But, the extent was unexpected.



# 4 out of 5 agents report being berated by customers



**Agents' jobs are mentally challenging and often thankless. When aggressive customer behavior is thrown on top, it creates an intolerable level of anxiety and stress.**

**Agents often feel helpless.**



When you get personally attacked, it impacts your mood greatly like you're stupid or you don't know what you're doing. It impacts you a lot, you don't want to take any more calls. You want to take a break. You don't want to deliver great customer service to the next call. You want to remove yourself from the situation.

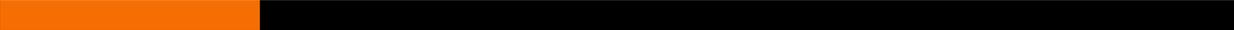
*Len, Agent with 5 years of experience.*

Talking with agents and industry executives, it's clear that while aggressive behavior by customers has been an epidemic for a long time, it's been a fairly taboo subject for any real conversation.

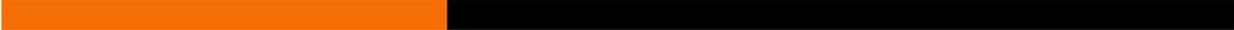
But when you look at the numbers and understand the costly impact on business – and on the agents' well being – it's clearly time to bring this into the light.



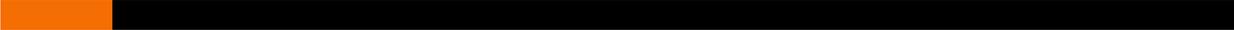
**81%**  
have experienced verbal abuse by customers



**21%**  
of female agents have been sexually harassed by customers



**36%**  
have been threatened with violence by customers



**9%**  
of male agents have been sexually harassed by customers



“I have a lot of anxiety. So I don't like when people are yelling at me. Customers are definitely so toxic because they know that they can get away with it. There's no repercussions at all. One of their policies is you can't hang up on people because they want the customer to say a lot of stuff so they can record. But they don't follow up on it. I don't find that employers are very supportive because they want to bend over backwards for the customer.

*Sarah, Agent with 7 years experience*

“There are people who leave crying every day. And no one seems to care whether the employees are happy.

*Mimi, Agent with 4 years experience*

**Especially in this era of heightened consciousness, agents want to feel supported in dealing with aggression.**

“It just all happens so fast when you’re on the phone. Someone can be fine. And the next minute, they’re yelling at you or cussing you out. Really specific training on how to handle difficult situations would be helpful...things you can say to help ease the tension and things like that

*Brooke, Agent in her first role*

**78% think companies should have a company policy that allows agents to terminate a call with overly aggressive customers.**

“I’m lucky enough to be in a company where we don’t have to stay on...we can disconnect calls. We can work on a customer, if we’re uncomfortable, we actually can hang up on them. That makes you feel a lot safer or just more comfortable at work.”

*Shana, Agent with many years experience*

Training Metrics Aggression Tech



There is a seemingly never-ending parade of technology being introduced for the contact center. But, what is the impact on businesses? Is it empowering agents and improving results?

We heard optimism for the future, but frustration with the status quo. Agents shared:

**1. They're working with an incohesive “frankenstack” of solutions.** This impedes them more than helps them.

**2. Much of their time is spent on repetitive tasks.** These tasks could potentially be automated.

**3. They're aware of AI, but unsure how it will impact their jobs.** Contrary to industry narrative about AI solving simple issues, many agents express eagerness for AI to tackle complex tasks.

“And, because there’s just so much information that you have to filter it would be great if there was some kind of software or robot there with you, helping you find the answers, suggestions of what to say.

*Janet, Agent with 4 years experience*



# “Frankenstack” systems paralyze agent performance

Training

Metrics

Aggression

Tech

As contact centers have grown and evolved companies have continuously invested in technology. These include incremental add-ons to decades old systems as well as individual products that may not be well integrated. As a result 45% of agents state that the rate of technological advancement is behind the times.

**Agents desire a unified experience that makes complex customer resolution simpler.**



43%

It crashes and freezes on me.



37%

Technology doesn't help me complete tasks faster or do what I want it to do.



11%

It's not suitable for remote work.

“I have to open 15 tabs to do my job. It would be really nice if it was all integrated in one.”

*Mimi, Agent with 4 years experience*



## Agents tell us they spend a lot of time on things that don't directly solve customers' problems, citing these common tasks:

- 71%** Asking for a customer's information
- 60%** Searching through a knowledge base
- 38%** Writing disposition/summary notes for records
- 15%** Requesting authorization from a manager

An assortment of technology is available to automate these tasks to varying degrees, with the expectation that more of an agent's time will be spent addressing complex customer needs. As mentioned in our discussion on metrics, shifting simple tasks away from agents will impact AHT. And as they're dealing with only the more challenging issues it's worthwhile to note that agents' cognitive stress is likely to increase.



Live reporting and monitoring mechanisms with the intention of improving agent performance add to the cognitive burden agents face. Already dealing with customer aggression, sometimes unrealistic performance metrics, “frankenstack” systems, and complex customer issue resolution, they’re annoyed by technology that increases anxiety rather than helps. We’ve already mentioned their frustration with real-time survey results.

Here’s another example: Earlier this year, [reports](#) emerged of one company that mandated that all call center employees be monitored by web cameras.

The public response to the news was met with uproar and negative media reports resulted in the company reverting its decision to make video monitoring voluntary.

Interested to understand what is common practice we asked the agents who participated in this study about it. Surprisingly 21% of agents said they are required to have their video camera on, even though the industry largely serves customers either by phone or chat.

“It monitors and tracks real-time employee behavior and detects any violations to pre-set business rules, and sends real-time alerts to managers to take corrective actions immediately.

*According to a company guide to the remote webcam monitoring system*

# What is the cost of cognitive stress?

Training

Metrics

Aggression

Tech



Does ensuring that an employee is at their computer for a set period of time deliver the business outcomes a company needs to achieve?

David Heinemeier Hansson, the creator of Ruby on Rails and co-founder of Basecamp, described the employee monitoring issue bluntly: *“There is a depressing amount of [employee surveillance] demand and it’s mostly coming from dinosaur companies who have been forced through Covid to go remote. They think that they have to replicate—or even increase—what they do in the office.”*

Tipping points in cognitive anxiety such as these can create a cascading effect across the contact center. For example, as one agent opts to take a sick-day to recuperate from a challenging customer issue, another agent faces increased risk of burnout due to handling a larger load of complex issues for customers who have had to wait longer to hear from an agent. As the next agent opts to skip work or leave, the contact center as a whole suffers—which leads to increased wait times for customers, and more frustration on all sides, and the circle continues.



# Hope and fear about AI

The implementation of simple AI capabilities within the contact center likely informs how agents view the technology.

When asked what agents think of when they hear the term “AI,” the top four responses were:

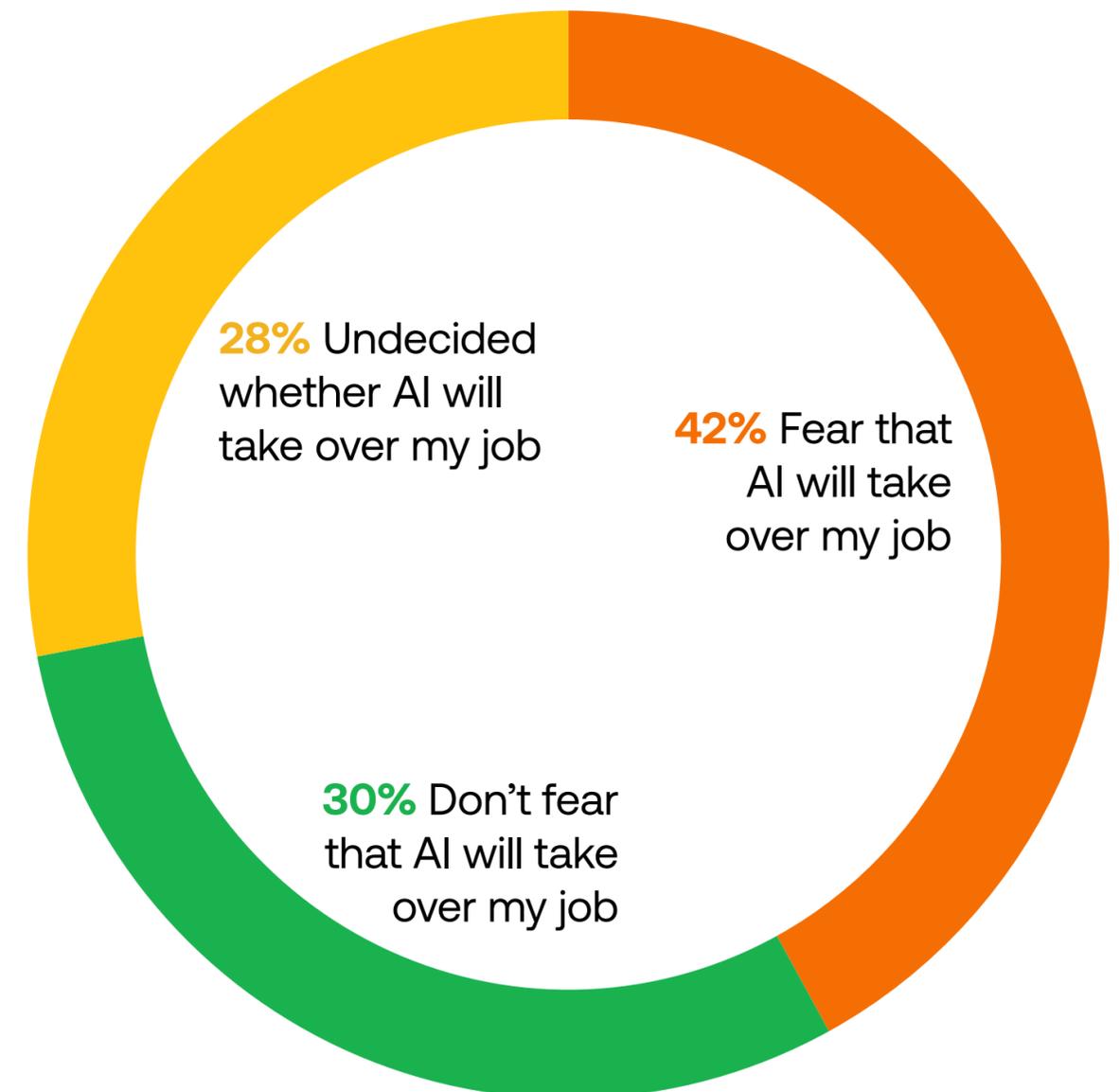
Automation (36%)

Robots (26%)

Chatbots (17%)

IVRs (7%)

As they consider how AI will affect the future of their work, the agents we surveyed shared mixed views.



Asked about how they feel about work, agents feel more motivated by handling simple tasks.



72%

Solving **simple** customer problems makes me feel motivated



41%

Solving **complex** customer problems makes me feel motivated

What if AI handled simple tasks and allowed you to handle more complex problems?

**I think I would like it the other way around to handle more complex problems because sometimes I am welcoming of the mundane tasks, you know. One day I had just like back-to-back calls, complicated and difficult and requiring research. It was exhausting.**

**I think if the AI could field more complicated calls. That would be better.**

*Janet, Agent with 4 years experience*

Popular belief suggests that AI will automate the routine and mundane processes agents must do to serve customers, leaving the more complex type of interactions for agents.

But agents may not embrace the technology if this is, in fact, how things play out.

While 51% believe AI can solve repetitive issues and 44% expect AI to make them more efficient, many agents reported that they enjoy the quick wins, at least some of the time.



Overall, agents are **optimistic** about the changes AI will bring.



51%

feel that AI will solve repetitive problems



21%

feel that AI will not solve repetitive problems



41%

feel that AI will enable me to solve more complex customer problems



27%

feel that AI will not enable me to solve more complex customer problems



44%

feel that AI technology will improve my efficiency on the job



24%

feel that AI technology won't improve my efficiency on the job



40%

feel that AI technology will improve customer experience



30%

feel that AI technology will not improve the customer experience



Looking ahead



# When shopping for technology think about the human factor

There's plenty of opportunity for CX teams to improve the agent experience and positively impact their business. But, there's also reason to be encouraged. Sixty-three percent of agents report they enjoyed their job, with only 11% reporting they were unhappy.

And, our research participants have provided a clear picture of how their jobs could be improved. They want:

1. Career growth opportunities
2. Training
3. The ability to end calls with difficult customers

Technology can help – but CX leaders need to be thoughtful about their approach here. They need a comprehensive strategy for helping agents and easing stress. A well-considered plan can increase engagement and retention, saving them millions, and can also improve overall CX performance as well as customer satisfaction and loyalty.



We're all consumers, interacting with agents like those we surveyed to help us with consumer goods, technology, banking and finance needs, insurance claims, healthcare, travel plans, internet service, and more. What do agents most want us to know?

**“The biggest thing is to be mindful that it's people answering the calls.”**

*Vanessa, Agent with 1.5 years experience*

## About ASAPP

ASAPP is a research-based artificial intelligence software provider committed to solving how enterprises and their customers engage. Inspired by large, complex and data-rich problems, ASAPP advances the state-of-the-art in automatic speech recognition, natural language processing, and task-oriented dialogue. Leading businesses rely on ASAPP AI Native® technology to make customer experience teams highly productive and effective by augmenting human activity. To learn more about ASAPP innovations, visit [asapp.com](https://asapp.com)

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