5thTALENT

Contact
Center
Industry

Work
at Home
Study

June 2020

Insight for developing
a work at home model
that is the best fit for
your company and
your employees

The contact center industry has never experienced anything like the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. It has led to a rapid and global shift of moving contact center agents and supervisors to a work at home model. We launched this research to help industry leaders determine what to do when agents are permitted to return to the center. We asked three important questions during this study.

? How are people currently performing at home?

? Where do agents and supervisors want to work and why?

? Are there key challenges with the work at home model that could impact its sustainability?

Method

5th Talent designed and delivered an online questionnaire to agents and supervisors in May 2020, to understand their perspective of the recent at-home shift and what their preferences are going forward.
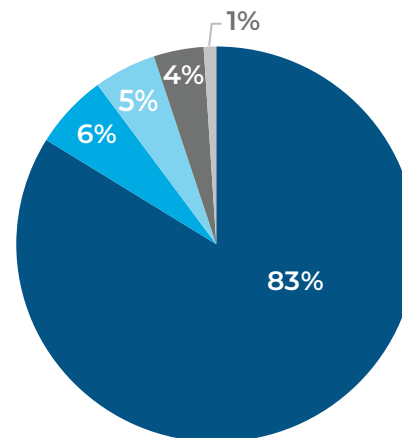
4,133 Participants

Participants: 4,133
- Agents: 92%
- Supervisors: 8%

25 Cities

Locations: 25 cities, 7 Countries (includes onshore, nearshore and offshore locations)

Work Arrangements

1%
4%
5%
6%
83%

- I work at home, but previously worked in an office setting.
- I work in an office setting, but previously worked at home.
- I work at home and have always worked at home.
- I work in an office setting and have always worked in an office setting.
- I am splitting my time between working at home and working in an office setting.

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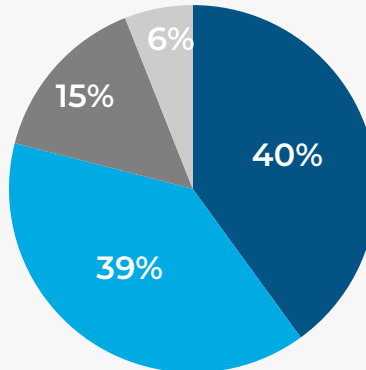# Background | Who Participated in the Study?

Ages

2%
12%
29%
57%
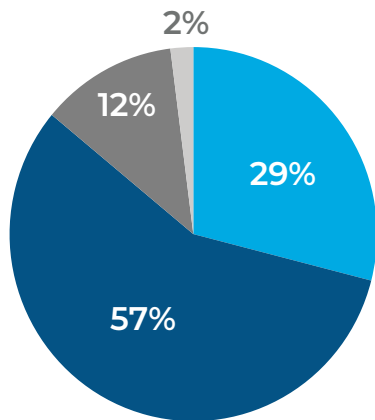
- Less than 25 years old
- 25 - 38 years old
- 39 - 54 years old
- more than 54 years old

Job Roles

- Customer Care or Billing
- Technical Support
- Product Support
- Sales

6%
15%
40%
39%

Types of Work

13%
8%
21%
58%

- Phone
- Chat
- Back Office (offline)
- Combination of the above
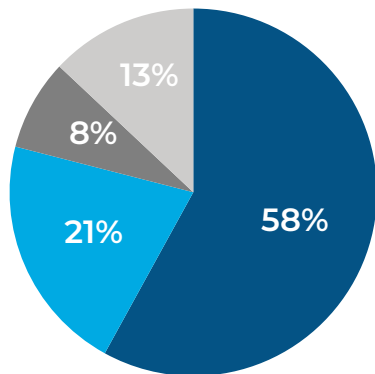
Content | Contact Center Industry Work at Home Study 2020

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In March 2020, contact center employees from around the world began working at home due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In May 2020, over 4,000 employees responded to a survey about their experience moving from the contact center to home.

01 More Employees Reported that Performance is Better at Home Rather Than Worse

If most agents are performing the same or better at home, it provides evidence that success can transfer from the contact center to the home. If customer satisfaction and resolution have increased, is there something we can learn from their experience to improve those KPIs while working in the center?

02 The Top Choice of Employees is a Mix of Working Between Home and the Contact Center

Almost no employees want to return to working entirely in the center. However, less than half of the employees want to work entirely at home. The largest number of employees favor the flexibility of a mixed work arrangement. According to comment analysis, it appears that COVID-19 had little influence on their preference.

03 The Work at Home Model Has Challenges that Can Impact Its Sustainability

Employees expressed communication challenges as well as increased feelings of loneliness and technology issues while working at home. They also indicated that it requires more effort to work with each other and customers. If these challenges are not addressed, it can impact long-term sustainability.

Contact center leaders are faced with the option to replace agents with those who fit their work at home model or adapt their model to fit their existing agents. Agents who are successful in the center should be successful at home.

01 Enable Supervisors to Overcome Work at Home Challenges for Themselves and Their Agents

Supervisors need to be trained at how to adapt their communication style, reduce the effort it takes to work with their team, and to develop each agent to become more self-managing. Also, reducing the size of their teams will increase the probability of their success.

02 Implement a Mixed Model to Improve Sustainability and Reduce Costs

A model that allows employees to work between home and center provides most of the benefits and reduces most of the negative factors of both work arrangements. This model is also the top choice of employees because it accommodates individual preferences and optimizes employee satisfaction. Since most employees want to spend most of their time at home, companies can significantly reduce their contact center capacity, and potentially replace a single center with multiple microsites.

Use Our Survey

For a limited time, you can use an online link to the 5th Talent Work at Home Questionnaire to survey your own agents and supervisors. There is no cost to use of the questionnaire. Pease visit the link below.

You will be asked to provide some information so that we can customize your survey if required. Once your survey is closed, we will send you the results (including the raw data for your own analysis) which will also allow you to benchmark your company against this report.
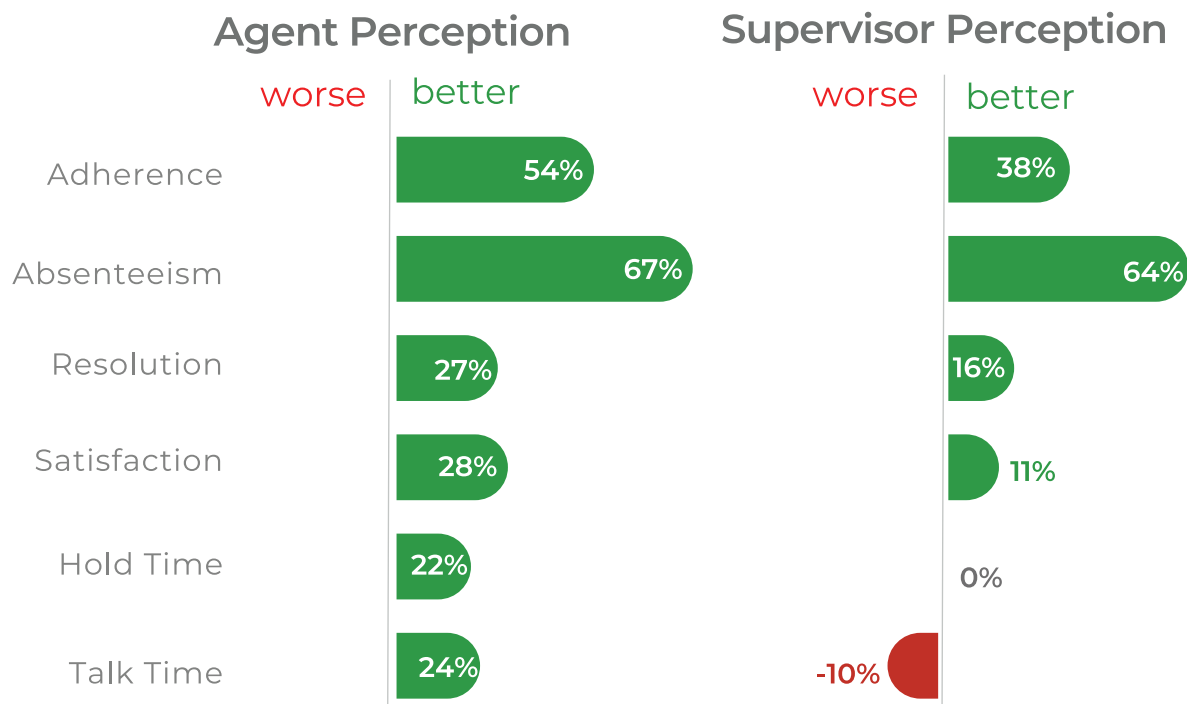
Use Our Survey

Work at Home Performance

Do employees perform better or worse at home?

Work at Home Performance | Can Agent Success in the Center Transfer to Home?

Most agents responded that they were performing at least the same or better since they moved to working at home. Fewer supervisors agreed there was an improvement in performance, but they still far out numbered those who felt it got worse.

Perceptions of how performance changed from working in an office setting to working at home.

Agent Perception

	worse	better
Adherence		54%
Absenteeism		67%
Resolution		27%
Satisfaction		28%
Hold Time		22%
Talk Time		24%

Supervisor Perception

	worse	better
Adherence		38%
Absenteeism		64%
Resolution		16%
Satisfaction		11%
Hold Time		0%
Talk Time	-10%	

Results based on calculation of the net difference between the number who said performance got better and the number who said it got worse.

Insight

If customer satisfaction and resolution increased for these agents, is there something we can learn from their experience to improve those KPIs while working in the center?
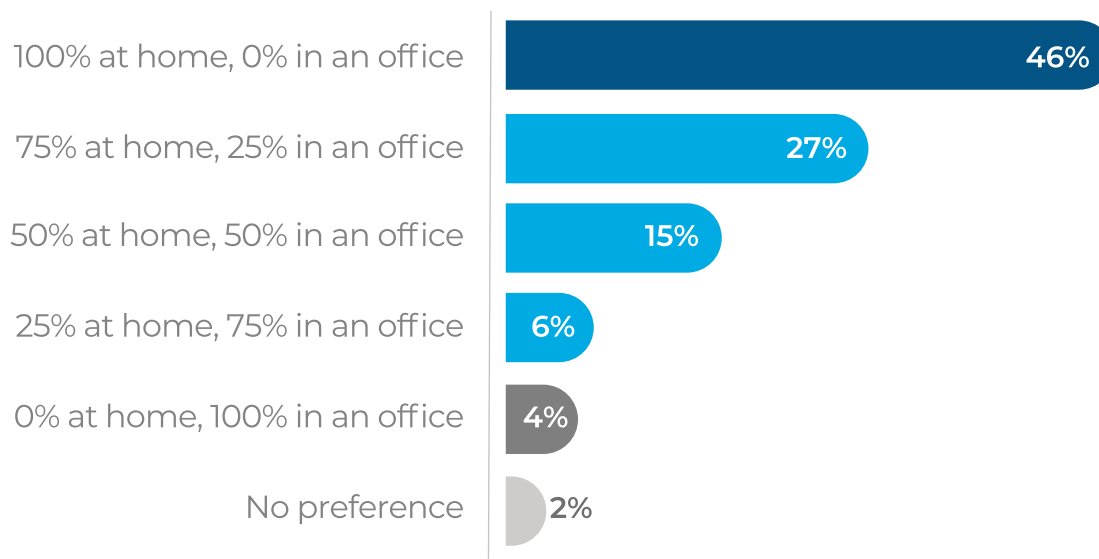
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Where Employees Want to Work

Do people want to work full-time in the contact center, full-time at home, or split their time among both?

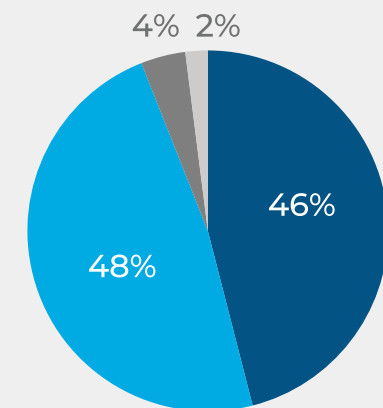# Where Employees Want to Work | What are the Preferred Work Arrangements?

Most prefer a work arrangement that is a mix of the office and home, followed closely by working entirely at home, with very few wanting to work entirely in the office.

Approximately how much time would you choose to work at home versus in an office setting on a monthly basis?

100% at home, 0% in an office	46%
75% at home, 25% in an office	27%
50% at home, 50% in an office	15%
25% at home, 75% in an office	6%
0% at home, 100% in an office	4%
No preference	2%

Top Choice is a Mix of Home and Office

4% 2%

46%

48%

Work Arrangement Preference

- 100% at home
- Mix of home & office
- 100% at an office
- No preference

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Top 10 Things Agents Like

1 I don't have the hassles/frustrations of commuting.

2 I save money.

3 I feel I have more time/connection with my family.

4 I feel less stress overall.

5 I feel healthier.

6 It is physically more comfortable.

7 I find it easier to focus/concentrate on work.

8 I can be more myself when working with customers.

9 I am further away from office politics/challenging co-workers/drama.

10 I can control my own surroundings (pets, plants, décor, etc.).

Insight
If people are required to go back to the office, the loss of these top work at home benefits may have a significant impact on their overall satisfaction.

Where Employees Want to Work | What Do Agents Dislike Most About Working at Home?

Top 10 Things Agents Dislike

1   I experience internet/power issues.

2   It is more difficult to get IT assistance with computer/system issues.

3   It is more difficult to get quick support when I need help with a customer.

4   The tools/equipment.

5   I miss meeting others through work who become part of my social life.

6   It is more difficult to collaborate with co-workers.

7   The access to HR isn't as easy.

8   There is not as much face-to-face communication with those around me.

9   Physically it is less comfortable (chair, desk, etc.).

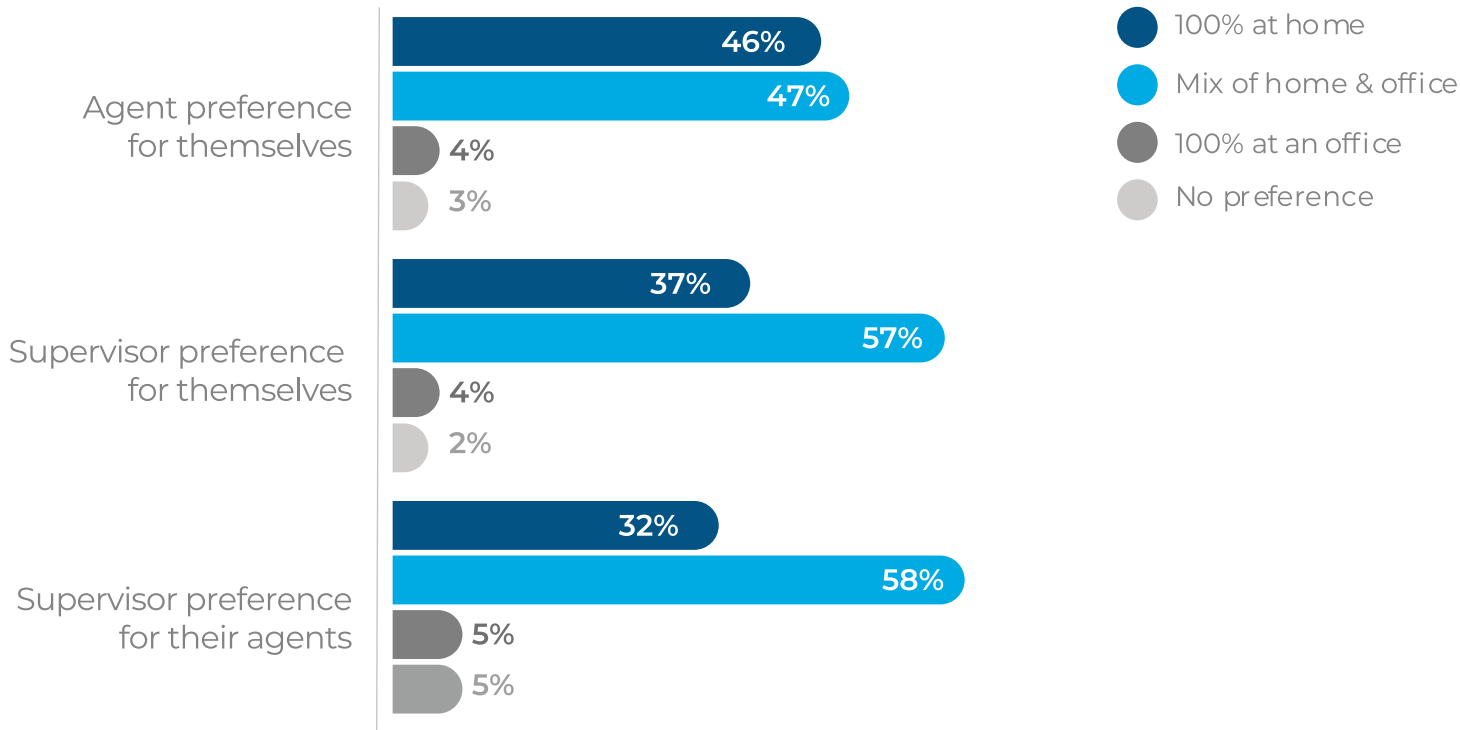**10**   I receive less information about the company direction.

Insight

The top three out of four things employees like least are related to technology, which is the foundation required for a successful work at home model. If technology issues persist, the model will fail.

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Where Employees Want to Work | Comparing Agents and Supervisors

Supervisors want a mix of home and office more than their agents.

Work Arrangement Preference by Agents and Supervisors

Agent preference for themselves
- 46%
- 47%
- 4%
- 3%

Supervisor preference for themselves
- 37%
- 57%
- 4%
- 2%

Supervisor preference for their agents
- 32%
- 58%
- 5%
- 5%

Legend:
- 100% at home
- Mix of home & office
- 100% at an office
- No preference

Insight

Supervisors are more in favor of a mix of home and office for their agents due to the level of effort required to coach and communicate with their team while they are at home.

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|	**Agents**	**Supervisor**	
100% at Home	"I can spend more time with my family, and I feel comfortable in working at home. I am glad to avoid the hassle of a commute, and I have fewer expenses."	"I find that it is much easier to get my daily task done and work with my agents in real time. I avoid the chaos of the office and it has been much easier to identify where my agents struggle. I put together action plans to work with them and reach out for coaching on a consistent basis."	
Mix of Home & Office	"I never thought I would thrive at home working 5 days a week, but I have become comfortable doing so. I would like to still visit the office."	"I would say one day per week at home (20%), with the rest in office. The reasoning for this is that as supervisors we have auditing work and need big chunks of uninterrupted time to complete this work."	
100% at the Office	"I would choose working in an office because I can focus and there are no internet issues. I enjoy getting away from my home and working at another location. I also enjoy being around other coworkers."	"I am really challenged in assisting 4 new agents on my team because they are not familiar with the terms. When I instruct them, it's more like jargon to them. They only had virtual training and it's not really working for them."	

Many employees who indicated they have always worked at home appear to want a mix of home and office.

Future Work Preferences for Employees Who Have Always Worked at Home

- 100% at home **65%**
- Mix of home & office **32%**
- 100% at an office **1%**
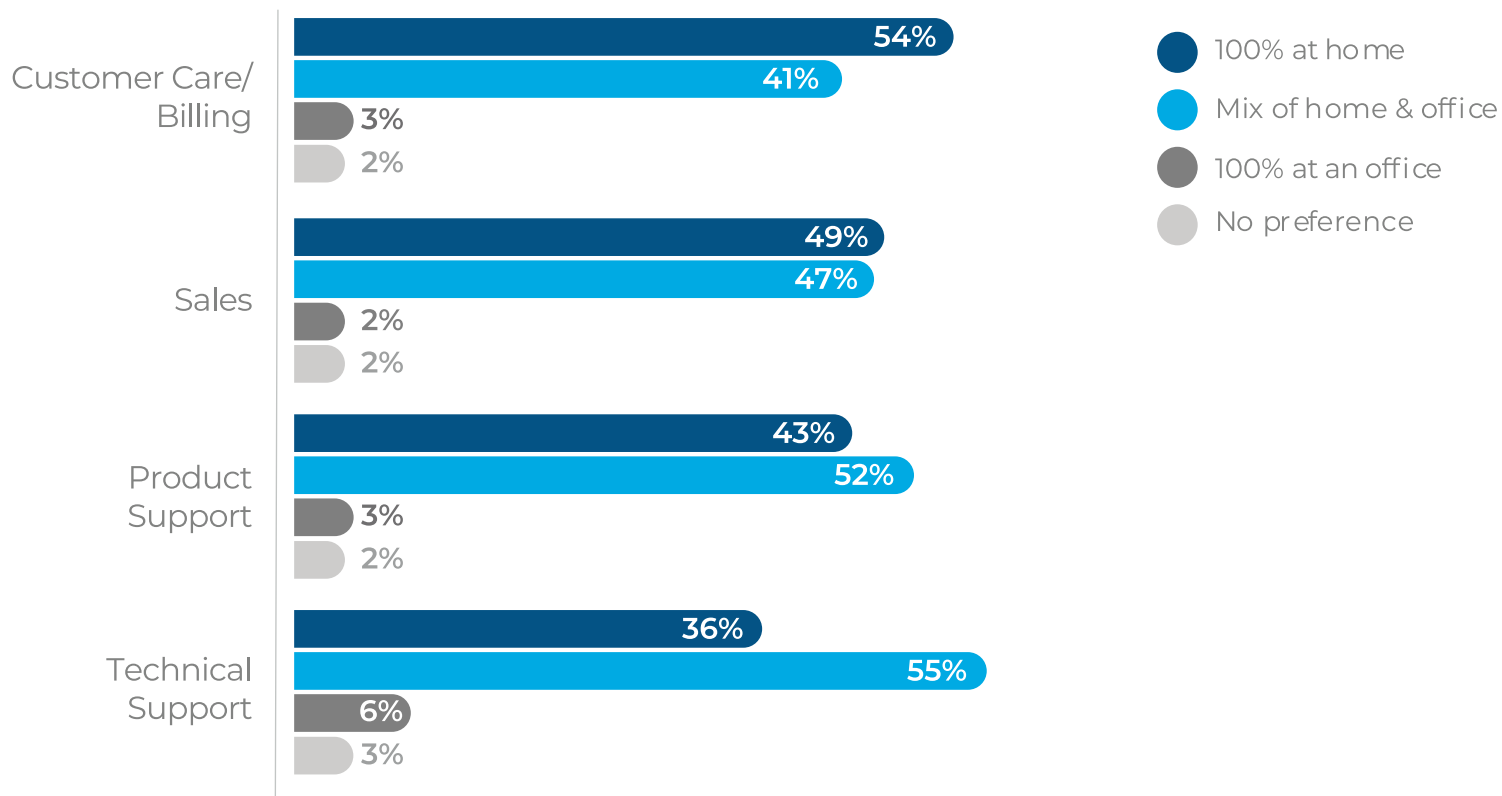- No preference **2%**
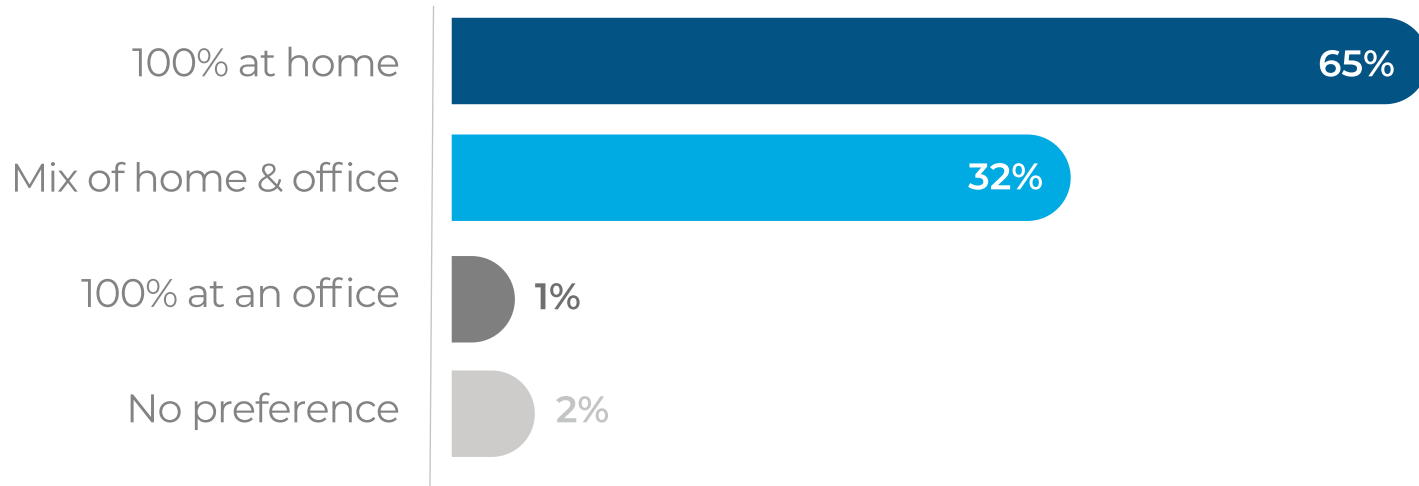
Insight

Employee work arrangement preference could change over time. A well known Ctrip contact center work at home study found that after 9 months, 50% of those who volunteered to work 100% at home decided to come back to the office.

Read the Ctrip Study

Where Employees Want to Work | Does Job Role Influence Work Arrangement Preference?

Technical support agents are less likely to prefer working entirely at home than care agents

How Job Roles Influence Future Preferences

Customer Care/Billing
- 100% at home: 54%
- Mix of home & office: 41%
- 100% at an office: 3%
- No preference: 2%

Sales
- 100% at home: 49%
- Mix of home & office: 47%
- 100% at an office: 2%
- No preference: 2%

Product Support
- 100% at home: 43%
- Mix of home & office: 52%
- 100% at an office: 3%
- No preference: 2%

Technical Support
- 100% at home: 36%
- Mix of home & office: 55%
- 100% at an office: 6%
- No preference: 3%

Legend:
- 100% at home
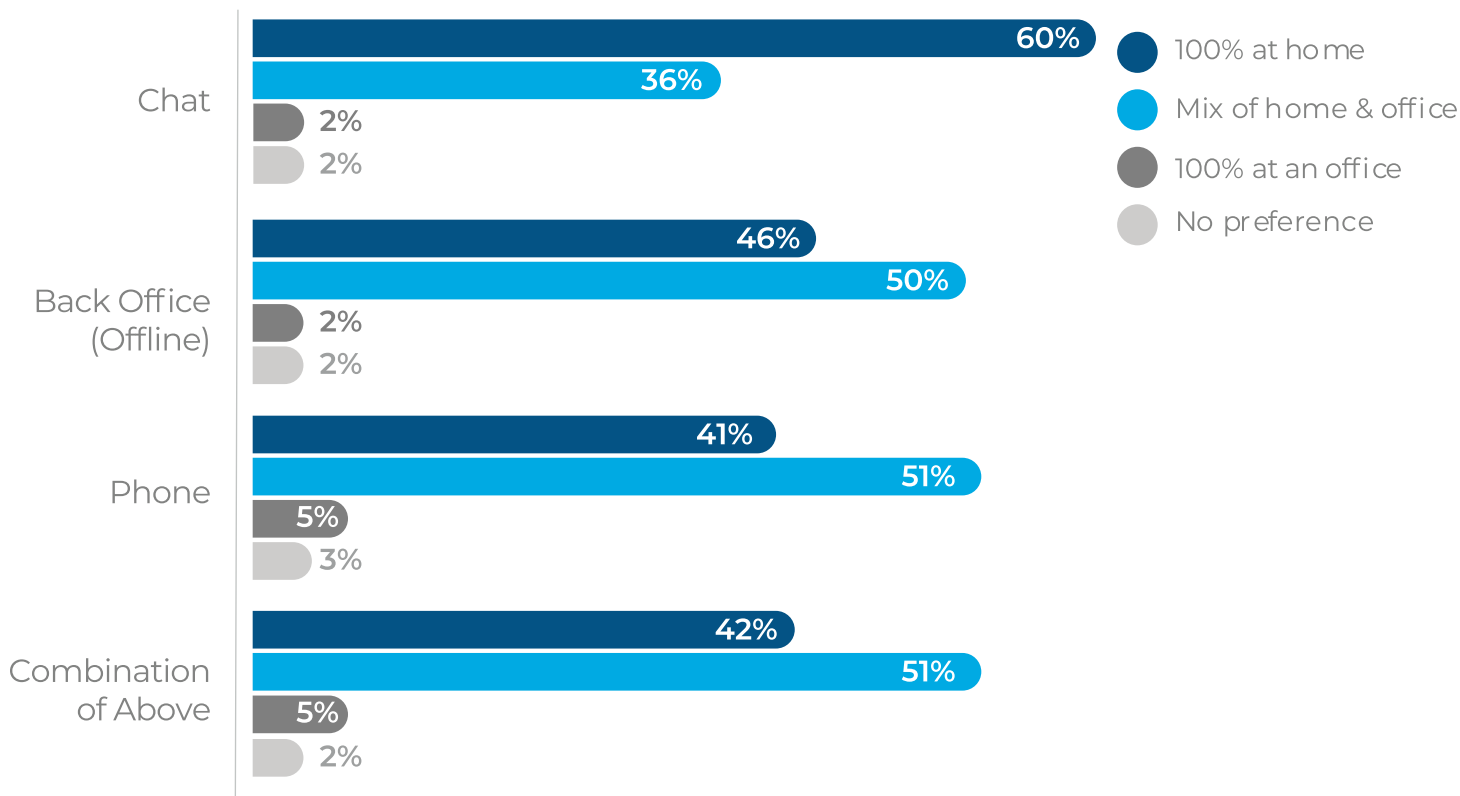- Mix of home & office
- 100% at an office
- No preference

Insight

The degree of difficulty and the importance of knowledge potentially contributed to technical support agents indicating they want more time in the office.

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Phone agents are less likely to prefer working entirely at home compared to chat agents.

## How Types of Work Influence Future Preferences

Insight

Because of a lower dependence on internet bandwidth and less need for a quiet work environment, chat agents preferred more time working at home.

Legend:
- 100% at home
- Mix of home & office
- 100% at an office
- No preference

Chat
- 60%
- 36%
- 2%
- 2%

Back Office (Offline)
- 46%
- 50%
- 2%
- 2%

Phone
- 41%
- 51%
- 5%
- 3%

Combination of Above
- 42%
- 51%
- 5%
- 2%

It appears the COVID-19 pandemic had minimal influence on work arrangement preference.

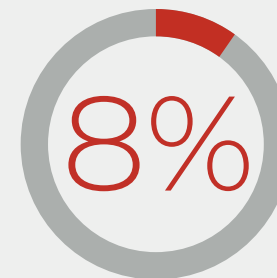## Survey Comments Tied to Pandemic by Work Arrangement Preference

100% at home	11%
Mix of home & office	6%
100% at an office	4%
No preference	13%
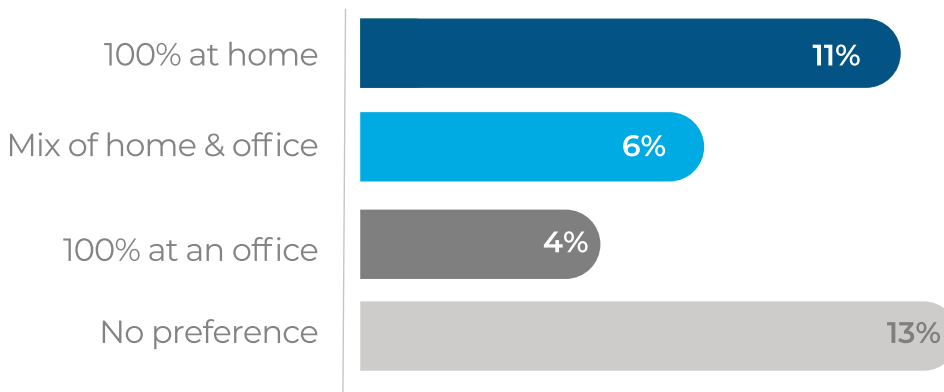
Total comments: 4,257

Text analysis courtesy of

datanautix

"Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I prefer working from home at the moment.

8%

Total percentage of comments referencing the COVID-19 pandemic.

Insight
Due to COVID-19 there may be a small bias toward people selecting to work entirely at home. Once pandemic concerns diminish, those who prefer to work entirely at home may decrease.

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Challenges with Working at Home

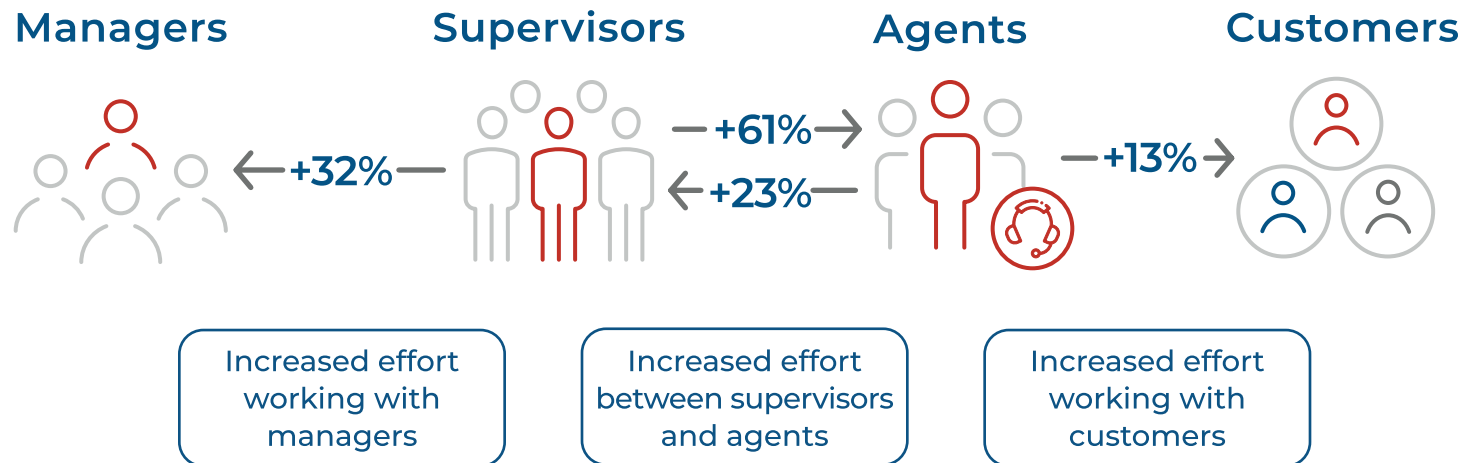Are there issues that can impact the sustainability of the work at home model?

Most employees responded that it takes more effort to work with each other while working at home.

How does your effort to work with others change when you are at home compared to an office setting?

Managers   **Supervisors**   **Agents**   **Customers**

←+32%—   —+61%→   —+13%→
←+23%—

Increased effort working with managers

Increased effort between supervisors and agents

Increased effort working with customers

Results based on calculation of the net difference between the number who said it takes more effort and the number who said it takes less effort.

Insight

The supervisors were the most impacted by the move to work at home. If the significant increase in effort is not reduced, it will have a negative effect on performance and employee attrition. One recommendation is to reduce the size of their teams so they can better focus on each agent and their individual needs.

Many people working at home express feelings of loneliness resulting from communication challenges.
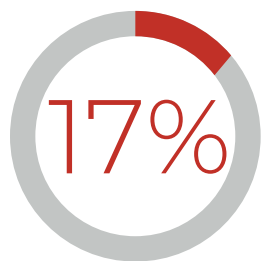
17% Percentage who indicated they feel a sense of loneliness while working at home
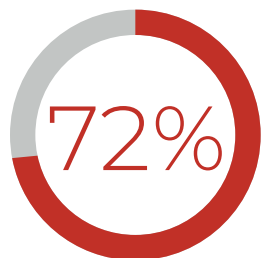
72% Percentage of lonely agents who believe loneliness impacts their happiness at work

2x Generation Z is twice as likely to be lonely compared to other generations

Employees Indicated that Communication Challenges Were the Leading Causes of Loneliness

1 I miss face-to-face contact with co-workers.

2 I miss unplanned/informal interaction with others.

3 I miss the emotional support of co-workers.

Insight
Loss of face-to-face communication can not be easily replaced with technology, especially when informal conversations are monitored. In a research report in 2018 by Flex Strategy Group (FSG), when employees were asked about workplace technologies it found that 40% of them indicated they feel like "big brother is watching them."

Read the Study

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Cigna's 2020 Loneliness Report provides insight into the impact of loneliness on remote workers.

Impact Loneliness Has on Work

2x More likely lonely workers miss a day of work due to **illness**

5x More likely lonely workers miss a day of work due to **stress**

2x More likely lonely workers **leave their job**

3x More likely lonely workers believe their **work quality is lower** than it should be

"Satisfaction with In-person Interactions at Work Correlated with Lower Loneliness Score"

"Remote workers are more likely to say they feel alone, lack companionship, and feel there is no one they can turn to."

"Those who say they telecommute just the right amount for them have a loneliness score [that is] on par with people who rarely or never work remotely."

Read the Cigna Report

Insight
Allowing each employee to chose the amount of time they work at home and the office could significantly reduce the feelings of loneliness and its impact on work.

5 Step Solution Process

How do you select and implement the right work solution for your company?

5 Step Solution Process | How Do You Select and Implement the Right Solution for Your Company?

01 Understand Preferences and Needs
You need to understand what your agents and supervisors want and why. Creating and implementing a plan without understanding what will impact their behavior can be costly in performance and attrition. Just about everyone has an opinion and they differ based upon a variety of factors.
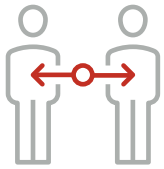
02 Create a Cross-Functional Task Force
Many things need to be considered, including legal, financial, operational, human resource, and technical issues. Create a taskforce that will manage the process for your company's unique situation.

03 Assess Your Opportunities and Challenges
Understand your work arrangement options from entirely in the office to entirely at home, or a mix of both. Assess the related costs, benefits, and challenges. Use objective information in your assessment and be honest about sustainability risks.

04 Design a Plan
Create a plan designed uniquely for your company and its situation. It should address potential challenges and include a road map for long-term sustainability. Obtain buy-in and effectively communicate the plan to your people.

05 Test, Analyze, and Adjust
Your taskforce cannot foresee all opportunities and challenges. Testing your approach is critical in determining its viability. Continue to monitor your situation and remain flexible to adapt your plan as needed.

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Understanding your employees is critical in designing your work at home approach. You need to understand what they want and the issues they are facing in your model. If you can align what drives them and reduce their challenges, your employees will be engaged, high-performing, and loyal. If you don't consider what your employees want, you risk significantly negative results.

Important Questions

- Do you know if your employees want to continue to work at home?
- How many want to work from home 100% of the time and how many employees want to go back to the office 100% of the time?
- How many want a mix of working at home and in the office?
- What do they like about working from home?
- What do they dislike about working from home?
- Do they have significant feelings of loneliness?
- How different are the responses from your supervisors compared to your agents?
- Do answers vary from location?

Use Our Survey

For a limited time, you can use an online link to the 5th Talent Work at Home Questionnaire to survey your own agents and supervisors. There is no cost to use of the questionnaire. Pease visit the link below.

You will be asked to provide some information so that we can customize your survey if required. Once your survey is closed, we will send you the results (including the raw data for your own analysis) which will also allow you to benchmark your company against this report.
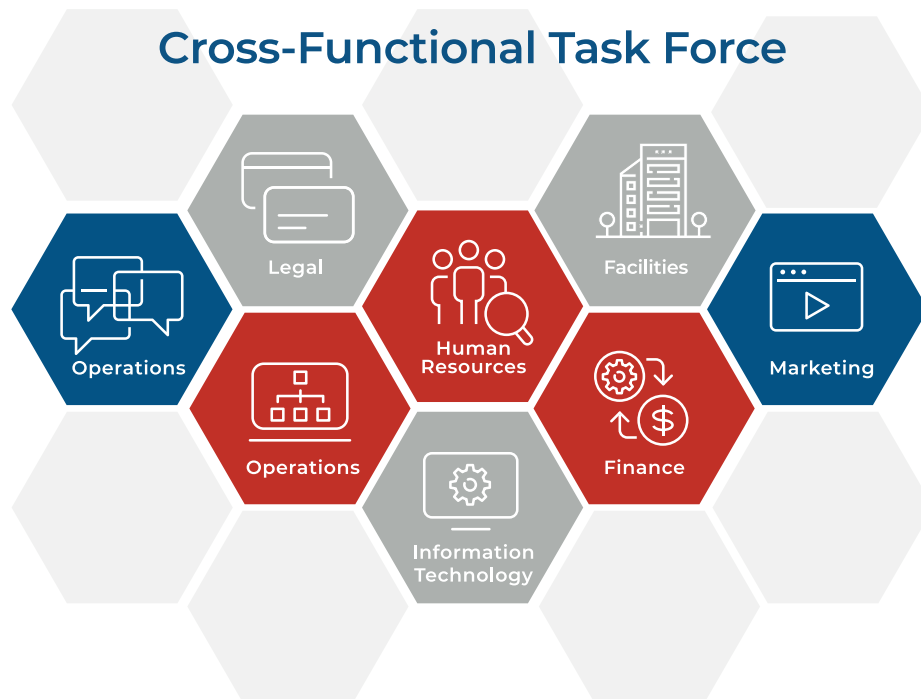
Use Our Survey
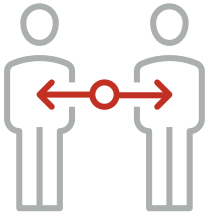
Things are changing almost daily and there are many aspects that need to be considered in creating your work at home approach. That is why many cross-functional areas need to work together to design and implement a plan that is customized for your company.

Issues Companies are Encountering

5th Talent has talked to several companies and they are wrestling with many short-term and long-term issues when considering the right model for them. This is a sample of their issues and why they need a cross-functional team to address them.

Cross-Functional Task Force

Legal

Facilities

Operations

Human Resources

Marketing

Operations

Finance

Information Technology

People Want to Come Back to the Office

- Connectivity issues
- Distractions at home
- Loneliness
- Supervisor difficulties working with Agents
- Lack of Co-Worker Support
- Poor home workspace

People Want to Stay Working at Home

- Fear of COVID-19
- No school or daycare
- Saving money
- Avoiding a commute
- Saving time
- Less stress
- Feeling healthier
- Fewer distractions
- Better performance

Insight

The Adecco Group webinar "Risks & Solutions for Returning to Work, June 2020" cited several legal considerations for bringing the workforce back to the office. In addition to general screening and protection practice concerns, they pointed out that the U.S. Chamber of Commerce considers possibly the largest area of concern to be "the potential for class action suits alleging that unsafe workplaces have caused employees to contract the illness or expose them to heightened risk of contraction."

View the Video

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Understand your work arrangement options from 100% in the office, 100% at home, or a mix of both. Assess the related costs, benefits, and challenges. Use object information in your assessment and be honest about sustainability risks.

Type of Model	Pros	Cons
In the Center Traditional center model in a physical facility with no ability to work at home	· The established working model · Higher security · Regular face-to-face communications · Easier to train and manage · Easier to build a work culture	· Cost of the center · Not the preferred model of most agents and increases risk of attrition · Increases health risks from COVID-19 · Limited capacity
In the Center with Business Continuity Traditional center model in a physical facility with the ability to work at home if required by unique circumstances like a pandemic	· Same as above · Provides an at home option in times of need	· Same as above · Added security risk with at home agents · Added cost to support at home capabilities
In Center Plus Hub and Spoke At Home A physical center supporting both full-time contact center agents and agents who work at home full-time or part of their time **Microsite Option:** A company can eliminate their center and set up small microsite offices to serve nearby agents and supervisors	· Same as above · Provides an at home option which is preferred by most agents · At home agents can be trained on site before going home · Flexibility to bring at home agents to the center as needed · Increases local capacity	· Same as above · More difficult to manage at home agents and keep them engaged, which increases risk of attrition and poor performance over time
Virtual at Home A work at home approach that is not tied to a physical center which allows agents and management to live anywhere with a good internet connection	· No cost of a center · Recruiting is not limited by location	· Not the preferred model of most agents to be 100% virtual · It is the most difficult to train and manage virtual at home agents and keep them engaged, which increases risk of attrition and poor performance over time · Harder to build a work culture · Added security risk with at home agents · Cost to support at home capabilities
Work Where You Want The agent can determine how much they want to work in the center or at home	· The preferred model of most agents · Reduced liability if the employee chooses · Provides the advantages of a center and a hub and spoke model	· Has most of the disadvantages of a center and a hub and spoke model · Cost of a center but can downsize space or remove the center and create micro sites.

Change your people for your work at home model or change your model for your people?

Work at Home ➕ **Challenges**

Replace Agents

Work at Home Model with Sustainability Challenges ➡		Replace Your Existing Agents
If you have communication challenges, loneliness, technology issues, and more effort working with each other…	**then**	…hire new agents who are more experienced, self-managing, self-motivating, and resilient.

Work at Home ➕ **Overcome Challenges**

Keep Agents

Work at Home Model That Overcomes Challenges ➡		Keep Your Existing Agents
Train supervisors to overcome the challenges of a work at home model and mitigate technology issues…	**then**	…your agents who were successful in the center can also be successful working at home.

Insight

If an agent is successful in the center but not at home, is the problem the agent or the work at home model? The best solution is to create a model that overcomes the inherent challenges of working at home so your agents can continue their success.

What are the benefits of a mixed home and center model?
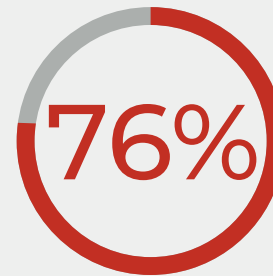
Helps Overcome Work at Home Challenges

Mix
Home/Center

A mixed home and center model provides most of the positive factors and reduces most of the negative factors of both work arrangements.

Cost Savings

76% Percentage of time employees collectively want to spend their time at home

Companies can significantly reduce their contact center capacity, and potentially replace a single center with multiple microsites.

Employee Satisfaction

4% Center   **48%** Mix Home/Center   **46%** Home

A mixed model is the top choice of employees. It accommodates individual preference and optimizes employee satisfaction.

Work Where You Want Model

My Scheduling

Agents manage and schedule how often they want to work at home and in the center. This promotes employees to become more self-managing which increases satisfaction, engagement, performance, and retention. In addition, it reduces COVID-19 liability because they choose if (and when) they work in the center.

Address the "Cons" of Your Chosen Model

After you select a model that works best for your company, you need to design a plan to maximize its potential benefits while reducing the negative factors that can impact its short and long-term success.

Develop a Roadmap

Create a roadmap to implement your model which includes how you are going to optimize your model. Your plan should include items like training, technology, operational procedures, budgets, and a communication strategy. It should also provide a timeline with key milestones.

No plan is perfect, so it is important to begin by testing it, analyzing the results, and adjusting your approach accordingly. Unforeseen opportunities or issues may arise, and you will need the flexibility and data to optimize your work at home model.

Monitor Your Model

Create a monitoring report to assess multiple success factors for your model. For each success factor, provide a past, present, and future analysis with relevant contingency plans.

Success Factors

Performance

Employee Attrition

Employee Satisfaction

Communication Effectiveness

Technology Effectiveness

Risks (Safety, Security, Legal, etc.)

Government Policies

Budget

Customer Volume/Staffing

Appendix

"We want to thank everyone who participated in the study and helped make this report possible. Our hope is that during these challenging times, this information can help many companies and their employees transition to a better future."

Ted Nardin and Brian Kearney
Co-Founders of 5th Talent

Training Supervisors to Overcome the Challenges of a Work at Home Model

The work at home model fundamentally changes the supervisor's approach to management. 5th Talent developed an approach utilizing our meaningful work methodology to teach supervisors how to effectively manage their agents when they are no longer in the center.

Excelling at Home - Supervisor Course
How Supervisors Develop Teams to Thrive in a Work at Home Model

The supervisor can enable your agents who were successful in the center, to be even more successful at home.

This course helps supervisors of work at home agents to:

- Adapt their communication style after the loss of face-to-face interaction.
- Develop each team member to become more self-managing and self-learning.
- Reduce the effort it takes to work with their work at home teams.
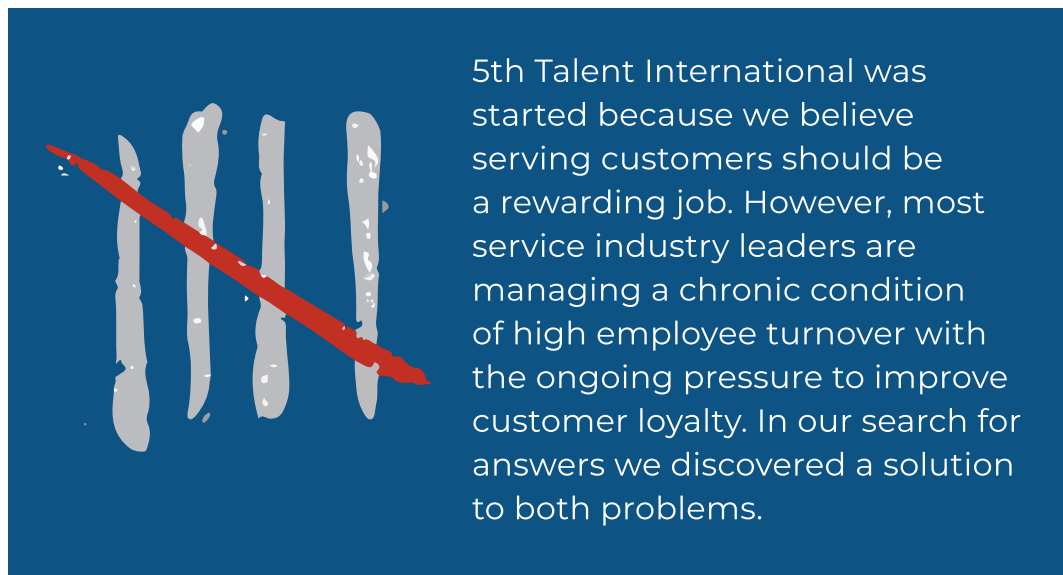- Improve agent support during their customer interactions
- Help agents manage feelings of isolation and loneliness.
- Facilitate increased knowledge sharing among agents.

5thTALENT

5th Talent International was started because we believe serving customers should be a rewarding job. However, most service industry leaders are managing a chronic condition of high employee turnover with the ongoing pressure to improve customer loyalty. In our search for answers we discovered a solution to both problems.

Meaningful Work is the Answer

Our solutions are enabling employees to find meaning in serving others, resulting in lower turnover and higher customer satisfaction. The defining characteristic of meaningful work is that a person's work makes a difference in someone's life. Studies show that 70% of today's employees want more meaning in their work. However, promoting meaningful work is not enough, because there are opposing forces that we call "grind" which is destroying the meaning people find in their job. Our studies show that together meaningful work and grind can predict over 65% of a person's intent to quit.

5th Talent is the only company with a methodology that enables companies to reduce grind and increase the meaning their people find in their actual work. The 5 Talents are the foundation that enables your people to experience more meaningful moments in their work. The 5th Talent is the most important, which is using your unique talent while serving others. It helps your team authentically serve by being themselves, taking ownership, using their strengths, and building confidence, thus enabling them to make a difference in someone else's life.

Our approach is effective because it aligns management, employee, and customer needs. Employees want more meaningful work which leads to authentic and engaging service. Customers want more engaged employees and companies want more loyal customers. Meaningful work helps all three to achieve their desired outcomes.

Resources

Read the Study

Cigna. (2020). *Loneliness and the Workplace: 2020 U.S. Report*. Retrieved from https://cigna.com.

Read the Study

Flex Strategy Group. (2018). 2018 Research Report: *High Performance Flexible Work Culture*. Retrieved from https://flexstrategygroup.com.

Read the Study

Nicholas Bloom & James Liang & John Roberts & Zhichun Jenny Ying, 2015. *Does Working from Home Work? Evidence from a Chinese Experiment*. The Quarterly Journal of Economics, Oxford University Press, vol. 130(1), pages 165-218.

View the Video

The Adecco Group. (2020). *Risks & Solutions for Returning to Work*, June 2020. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZFBoBgvAvc&feature=youtu.be.

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