



Employee Engagement:

The Missing Link to Sustaining a Highly Productive Contact Center

Talent is the one company asset that can grow exponentially, which is why 88% of enterprises plan to improve employee engagement this year.¹ However, employee engagement has proven to be elusive for most. According to Gallup's State of the American Workplace Report, only one-third of the workforce is engaged today,² and even fewer (16%) say they feel "connected and engaged" by employers.³

Battling High Turnover

Call centers and contact centers have historically experienced high agent turnover, averaging anywhere from 30% to 50% annually. At these attrition rates, a typical U.S.-based 500-person contact center loses \$1 – 2 million in operational costs and lost revenue over a 12-month period, according to Everest Group research, which is why RemX focuses on improving employee engagement.

"In our experience, employee engagement has proven to be the missing link to improving contact center attrition and sustaining high levels of productivity," said Joanie Courtney, President, RemX Professional Division.

RemX's employee engagement program is credited with improving retention among contact center associates hired for seasonal ramps by as much as 65%. National research by Gallup reinforces the link between employee engagement and retention, indicating that 73% of actively disengaged employees are looking for a new job or career opportunity, as compared to only 37% of engaged employees.⁴

Boosting Bottom Line Performance

The financial implications of engagement levels go well beyond the high cost of turnover, loss of intellectual capital, and negative impact on employee morale. National research indicates:

- Highly engaged business units result in 21% greater profitability, realize a 41% reduction in absenteeism, and a 17% increase in productivity.⁵
- Highly engaged business units also achieve a 10% increase in customer ratings and a 20% increase in sales.⁶
- Companies with engaged workforces outperform non-engaged companies by 167%, and have higher earnings-per-share.⁷

Within contact centers, RemX has observed the positive ripple effect of employee engagement. After instituting an employee engagement program for one customer, retention improved 53% during training and 51% for the overall project. During its annual peak season, the operations center achieved record-setting productivity levels. It administered more performance-based bonuses than in any peak season in history. In addition, no overtime or weekend hours were required to meet seasonal goals, which represented another performance first and measurable savings to the bottom line.

The Cost of Disengaged Workers

While an engaged workforce has the potential to boost business performance, should the employee engagement pendulum swing in the opposite direction, the cost of disengagement is severe.

- Disengaged workers cause massive losses in productivity – between \$450 and \$500 billion a year.⁸
- For a 500-employee company, disengagement is estimated to cost \$4.35 million per year on salaries for under-performing workers.⁹

Forging the Missing Links that Create Employee Engagement

According to RemX experts, a successful employee engagement program is based on this simple principle: People begin a new job wanting to be successful in their role.

“Assuming you’ve hired someone who is a good fit for the role and cultural environment, the goal is to give them the proper resources, provide personalized attention and clearly outline a pathway for success that is reinforced, with appropriate recognition,” said Courtney.

Hire for Cultural Fit, as well as Skills Fit

In order to make great hires that fit well within a culture and job function, the organization must first define both. How will you know when you’ve found a great-fit candidate, if you don’t have a clear idea of what you’re looking for?

For instance, depending upon the function being performed, what are the required skills of the job? Is it phone skills, online communications, attention to detail, organization skills, tenacity, empathy, etc.? Depending on the culture, what are the behaviors that best align with the environment? Is it competitiveness, desire to help people, open to learning new ways of doing things, speed, patience, etc.?

Research shows that employees who fit well within their organization, showed superior job performance.¹⁰ On the other hand nearly two-in-ten executives surveyed by Korn Ferry said new hires, especially millennials, leave because they don’t like their organization’s culture.¹¹

With an organization’s culture and values defined, it’s important to find ways to expose job candidates to your specific culture, work environment, and job requirements, so they have a clear picture of what they may (or may not) want to sign up for.



Create a Lasting First Impression

After investing time and resources to make the right hire, the onboarding and orientation process is no time to drop the ball. Remember first impressions count. In fact, more than one-quarter (28%) of new hires are willing to quit a job if they don't find it satisfactory in the first 90 days,¹² and that doesn't account for those who remain but are disengaged.

In addition, 54% of organizations with a standard onboarding process experience 54% greater new hire productivity.¹³ Research also indicates that 77% of new hires who hit their first performance milestone had formal onboarding training. Of those who did not hit initial performance milestones, 49% had no formal onboarding training.¹⁴

According to RemX, an effective onboarding program must do two things well. First, inform employees on the mechanics of the job, including procedures, policies, expectation, rules, logistics, etc. Second, inspire employees to want to contribute to the success of the organization by explaining the role's purpose. This means creating an emotional connection to the job, co-workers, and the organization.

Best Practices for New Hire Onboarding

With this two-fold goal in mind, RemX suggests the following onboarding and orientation best practices:

- **Begin even before the start date.** Many of today's workers, particularly younger generations, are accustomed to instant access to lots of information. Sending information about what to expect on the first day, such as where to park, how to dress or even a welcome video message ahead of time helps to make the right first impression.
- **Have a plan for day one.** Keep in mind the quickest way to bore new hires is to stick them in a classroom for hours without personal interaction. Instead, create a day one itinerary that includes plenty of purpose training and interaction with co-workers. Showing a short video about the mission and values of the company, scheduling time for them to meet with members of leadership, assigning a peer to answer questions, or a welcome lunch are all ways to get off to a great start.
- **Create frequent touch points.** Especially during the first eight weeks, which is historically a high turnover period for contact center associates, frequent touch points are essential. You won't know if there is a misalignment on expectations, if you aren't looking for it. Make a point to ask new hires for their early impressions and provide coaching on how they can successfully assimilate into the work environment. Identify areas that are more difficult for individuals and determine whether additional resources are appropriate to help them hit the ground running.
- **Focus on the "why."** As new hires grow more comfortable with the mechanics of the job, workplace expectations, and cultural environment, the remaining link is helping them understand why their role matters. For a contact center associate who is interacting with senior citizens, this may include elder sensitivity training. For an employee managing a medical file on behalf of a healthcare organization, this may include an orientation on certain diseases and how proper handling of a file will impact a patient's quality of life. For a role that is interdependent with other functions, a "cross-training" session that allows them to understand how their performance impacts other deliverables is valuable.
- **Articulate a pathway for career advancement and put it into action.** Especially during the first 90 days on the job, explaining a clear pathway for success is essential. This may include defining measurable performance milestones within a certain time period. But looking beyond the metrics is important too. Establish weekly one-on-one sessions to review progress, gather feedback, recognize achievements, and provide coaching on improvement areas. This approach allows an employer to quickly identify its high performers, take action to help coach marginal performers to higher performance or even identify broken processes or expectations that need to be fixed on the employer's part. With clear career paths and personalized feedback in place, organizations must be sure to make good on proper rewards and recognition. Even within the first 90 days, progressive pay and advancements in responsibility levels, in addition to general recognition, go a long way in engaging employees beyond the initial time period.



Retaining the Best and Brightest

While an effective onboarding program can set the foundation for new hire engagement, sustaining higher levels of employee engagement and productivity is a continuous effort to be reinforced throughout the employee lifecycle. Feeling connected to one's employer, mission or co-workers; frequent opportunities for feedback and recognition; and clear pathways for career advancement are the primary drivers of employee engagement.

- **Nurture commitment.** To keep employees connected with the purpose of their jobs, consider creating opportunities for interaction and/or recognition from the individual benefiting from the employee's work, such as a thank you note from a patient, an email from a grateful customer, or a video message from a department manager. To help forge stronger bonds between co-workers, create opportunities for collaboration, team recognition, and social activities outside of the office.
- **Provide frequent feedback.** Remember, everyone wants to go home feeling like they did a good job and that they were valued. However, according to Gallup, only one-third of people felt strongly that their efforts were appreciated or had received praise in the last seven days.¹⁵ As the U.S. workforce continues to evolve, the expectation for frequent employer feedback will increase, making annual performance reviews a thing of the past. For instance, 41% of Millennials prefer to be rewarded or recognized for their work at least monthly, if not more frequently.¹⁶
- **Communicate Career Pathways.** One of the challenges unique to contact centers are workflows that often evolve into repetitive tasks. Creating opportunities for both lateral and upward career movement can help engage and retain employees.

In fact, 83% of employees with opportunities to take on new challenges say they're more likely to stay with the organization.¹⁷ And, 90% of millennials would choose to stay in a job for the next 10 years if they knew they'd get annual raises and upward career mobility.¹⁸ Without clear direction and development paths, employees can become disengaged and begin looking outside the company to fulfill their growth needs.

Path to Sustainable Employee Engagement

The research is clear – organizations pay a high price for failing to achieve employee engagement. It's important to remember that there is a difference between "satisfied" workers and "engaged" employees, as the true outcome of engaged employees is an improved bottom line.

Engaged employees drive innovation and move the company forward because they are invested, engaged and passionate about their job and the organization. They are more likely to go above and beyond, and more likely to stay longer, thus reducing turnover and the costs associated with it. Engaged employees develop an emotional stake in the company's success, and recognize their part in achieving that goal through higher productivity and effectiveness in their job.

Building your path to sustained employee engagement requires more than simply sending out an engagement survey once a year. It is an integrated approach that extends before and well beyond the point of hire. Embedding engagement best practices across the employment lifecycle will deliver impressive dividends for years to come.

1 Virgin Pulse, State of the Industry Survey Report 2017, <https://community.virginpulse.com/state-of-the-industry-2017-es> 2 Gallup, "American Workplace Changing at a Dizzying Pace," 2017, <http://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/203957/american-workplace-changing-dizzying-pace.aspx> 3 EmployeeConnect, "What Every Employee Wants From Their HR Team," <https://www.employeechannelinc.com/insights/what-every-employee-wants-from-their-hr-team> 4 Gallup, "Are Your Star Employees Slipping Away?" Gallup News 2017 <http://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/204248/star-employees-slipping-away.aspx> 5 Gallup, State of the American Workplace Report, "2017" <http://news.gallup.com/reports/199961/7.aspx> 6 Ibid 7 Ibid 8 Ibid 9 Gallup, "High Price of Disengaged Employees" published by Strativity, <https://strativity.com/the-high-price-of-disengaged-employees/> 10 Meta-Analysis Study by Radford University, "Consequences of Individuals' Fit at Work," <http://nreilly.asp.radford.edu/kristof-brown%20et%20al.pdf> 11 Korn Ferry, FutureStep, <https://www.kornferry.com/futurestep/futurestep> 12 Robert Half, "Sink or Swim: The 90-day Trial Period," <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/sink-or-swim-the-90-day-trial-period-300240006.html> 13 Korn Ferry, FutureStep Survey, <https://www.kornferry.com/press/korn-ferry-futurestep-survey-90-percent-of-executives-say-new-hire-retention-an-issue/> 14 Korn Ferry, FutureStep Survey, <https://www.kornferry.com/press/korn-ferry-futurestep-survey-90-percent-of-executives-say-new-hire-retention-an-issue/> 15 Gallup, "Employee Recognition: Low Cost, High Impact," <http://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/193238/employee-recognition-low-cost-high-impact.aspx> 16 PwC NextGen, "A Global Generational Study of Millennials," <http://www.wci360.com/news/article/pwc-nextgen-a-global-generational-study-of-millennials> 17 ReportLinker Insight, "Office Perks: Millennial Expectations Change What Employers Offer," <https://www.reportlinker.com/insight/office-perks.html> 18 CNBC, Accell & Qualtrics, "Millennial Money Myths: The Truth About Homes, Cars and Ownership," <https://www.accel.com/interests/QualtricsAccelSeries>