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7 trainable soft skills for outstanding agents

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SATURDAY MORNING SUPPORT

It's Saturday morning, and your customer has an issue. They pick up the remote—er, phone—and dial the number to your support line, expecting instant gratification.

There's only one problem: Your customer might not get connected with the agent they expect. Will they be a knowledgeable one? Will they be understanding and empathetic? Or will they seem disconnected or uncaring? Either way, the customer-agent interaction has the power to be memorable—for better or worse.

Cartoons from your childhood are memorable, too. After all, they were your gold standard of entertainment. Your workforce should be the same, only the gold standard of customer service. And much like your workforce, cartoon characters sometimes embody the skills you want your contact center agents to have—or, at least, develop—to achieve gold-standard service.

Read on to learn seven agent soft skills you need and how to actively develop them across your workforce. Doing so will boost CX, increase agent engagement, and make your brand as memorable as the cartoon shows your customers grew up with.

Active Listening

Problem: Lack of focus

Byron Baxter is the day dreamer on your floor. He's constantly dazing off into thoughts of what his world could—or should—be. He dreams about his secret crush Molly, traveling the globe with his best friend Arthur, and thinking more about his lunch than the task at hand.

When he's on the phone with a customer, Byron has a difficult time focusing on the interaction, because he's caught up with living in a fantasy world. This leads to frustrated customers who have to repeat information and feel like their needs aren't being given the attention they deserve.
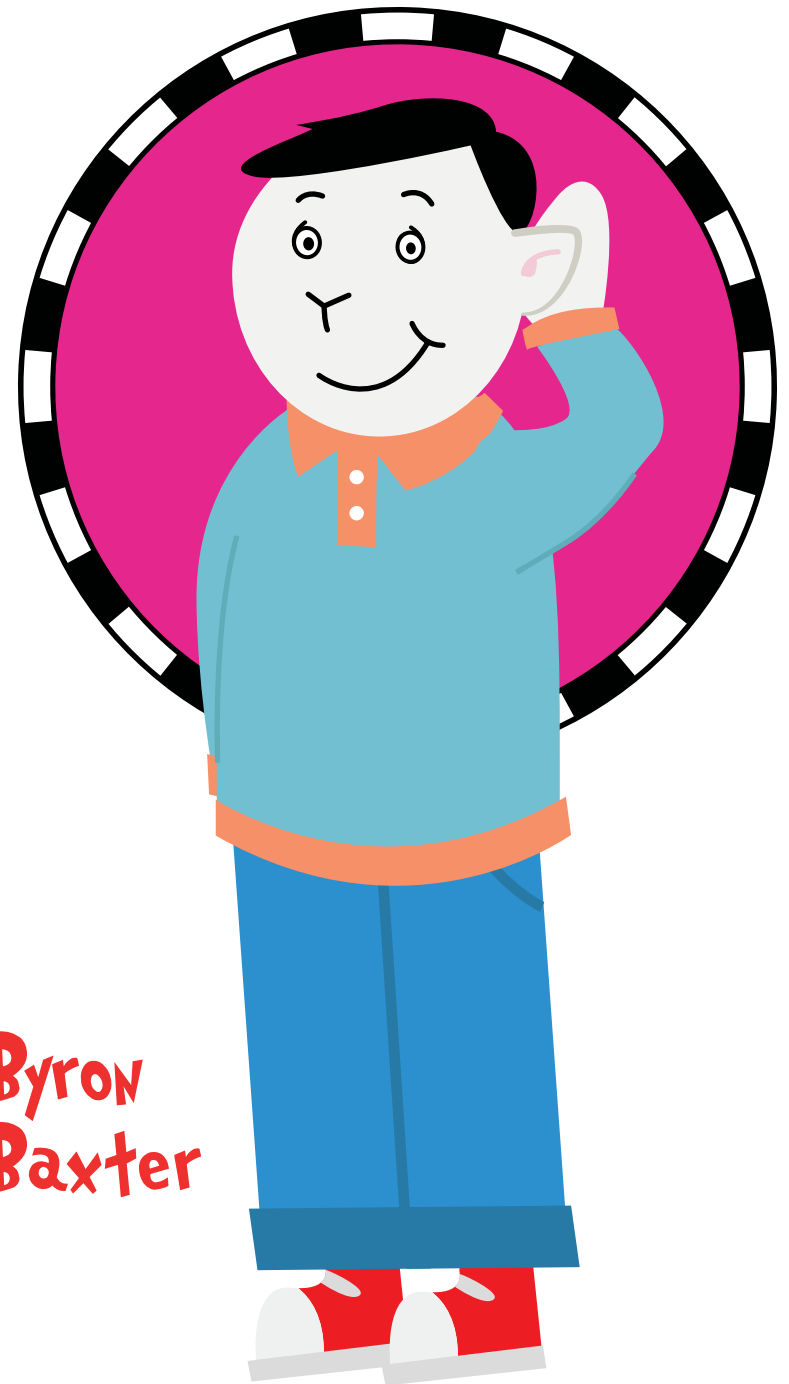
Solution: Gamify and incentivize performance

Byron is a day dreamer, but his lack of focus could be channeled quickly toward performance by means of incentives and hands-on, rewards-driven training. This approach allows Byron to express his own creativity and personality, while individual and team-based goals will help incentivize him to stay on task.

The Contact Center Leader's Guide to Gamification
Your tool for long-term employee engagement and behavioral change

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Want to learn more about gamification?

Get your copy

Byron Baxter

This method, tailored to Byron's unique personality, can also help improve his critical-thinking and problem-solving skills by incorporating competition, collaboration, and role-playing.[1] When interacting with his customers, Byron can now channel his newfound skills into active support, thus improving his customers' experiences and his own performance.

Of course, incentives and hands-on learning aren't just for the day-dreamer agent like Byron. They can quickly lead to better performance for all types of agents, as well as instant gratification for customers waiting to get back to their lives. Hands-on learning can help you:

- *Decrease supervisor workload and quickly improve team performance*

- *Onboard faster with customized training to inbound, outbound, in-office, remote, and blended workforces*

- *Coach agents to lower average handle time (AHT) by incorporating timed self, peer, and teamwide competitions*

- *Incentivize performance by offering rewards and recognitions that work, including big-ticket prizes such as gaming consoles or low-cost prizes such as flexible schedules or extra breaks*

> " **CXone's gamification is amazing; we use the challenges to engage our agents. For instance, agents get virtual coins whenever they earn a solid 100 on a quality score. We have large monitors stationed throughout the contact center so everyone can see the winners' names and their avatars. The agents love it**.
>
> — Luke Wilson, Workforce Manager, Appriss

Read case study

[1] *Herro, Danielle and Clark, Rebecca: An academic home for play: games as unifying influences in higher education (2016)*

Butternut

Being a Team Player

Problem: Unreceptive to feedback

Jo, AKA Butternut, is known for her fireball attitude. If something doesn't sit well, she has no problem saying how she feels. She is the spiciest of all the agents, and is often unreceptive to feedback. Because she is set off easily, she doesn't listen to what people have to say about her attitude—or anything else that would make her a better agent. And when she finally does come around, her coaches have already exerted valuable time and energy trying to get through to her.

Solution: Performance management

Training Butternut to be a team player is a soft skill that can be taught quickly. With the right approach, she'll become more receptive to feedback and align her own goals with your contact center's. With the social element performance management offers, you can harness even Butternut's hard-headedness into teamwork.

A good performance management platform accomplishes this in several ways:

Inspire agent improvement: Performance transparency reveals where positive behavioral changes are needed and embedded gamification makes those changes fun and interactive

Reach goals together: Inspire hard-headed agents to work toward collective business key performance indicators (KPIs) while cultivating a social working environment

Create one view of truth: Aggregate data from disparate sources into a consolidated view, placing confidence and trust with your in-office and remote agents to provide the correct answers and support to their customers

> **With CXone, we can coach our agents on behaviors that need improvement as well as reward them for positive performance.**
>
> — Sandra Jacobs, Contact Center Support Manager, Check Into Cash

Read case study

Empathy

Problem: Lack of customer rapport

Winnie Pobare always puts others first. He listens to his customers and cares about their feelings. By doing this, Winnie's customers feel welcome and cared for. But his fellow agents often struggle to relate to their customers in the same way, and envy how easily Winnie does.

Solution: Real-time coaching

The good news for agents without Winnie's natural ability to connect with their customers is that empathy is a skill that can be taught and reinforced in real time, instantly turning negative interactions around.

83% **of customers are more likely to do business with a brand that they have an emotional connection with.[2]**

Using AI-powered coaching technology, you can train your agents to know the next best action and response to take in the heat of the moment. Using statistical analysis, the AI recognizes negative behaviors, such as whether the conversation seems merely transactional, or if the customer's tone is upset. Then, real-time popups guide the agent to be more empathetic or conversational, and otherwise adjust to the behaviors most likely to lead to a positive outcome.

Winnie Pobare

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[2] *Iterable : 2020 E-Commerce Holiday Shopping Trends*

This is training in the moments that matter most. It instantly gratifies everyone involved, from the customer to the agent to the supervisor. So, even if the agent doesn't embody Winnie's natural empathy, they can build rapport and cultivate a better customer experience.

Develop soft skills in the heat of the moment:

- *Real-time sentiment scoring and pop-up alerts reminds agents of critical behaviors that influence CSAT*

- *"Learn by doing" agent enablement encourages good engagement habits and personal ownership*

- *Continuously improve agents via visual "in-the-moment" guidance on crucial soft skills*

- *Assist remote agents as effectively as in-office ones on crucial soft skills*

See what your agents can do with the power of AI

Watch video now

RESOURCEFULNESS
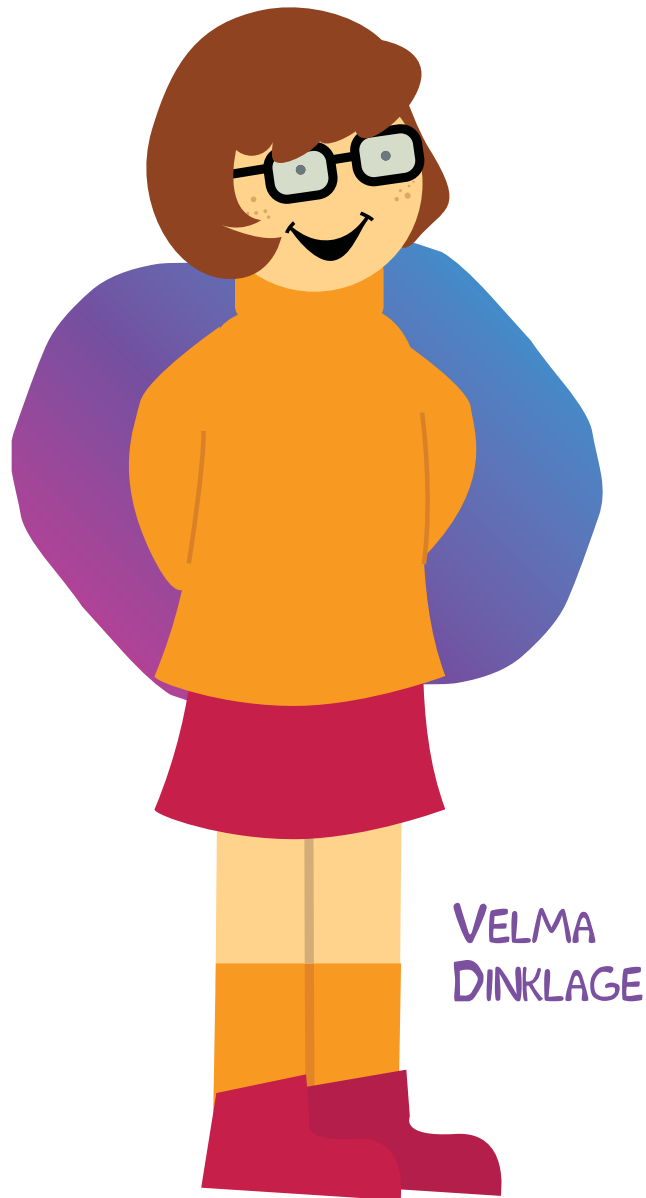
Problem: Trouble conveying the right message

Many of your agents may be like Velma Dinklage, who is the "brains" on your floor. She's always looking through the facts and data and sorting through information to uncover the exact answer the customer needs. Velma has a clear vision into what works, and because she knows how to access the right information at the right time, she's very successful at her job. But not all agents are as resourceful as Velma, which leads to sub-par feelings for both the agent and customer.

Solution: Knowledge management

The best way to foster good communication skills in your agents is to give them confidence in talking about your products, services, and troubleshooting. The way you do that is by cultivating a *knowledge management* (KM) framework that provides instant access to the information your agents need in order to communicate clearly to their customers.

VELMA DINKLAGE
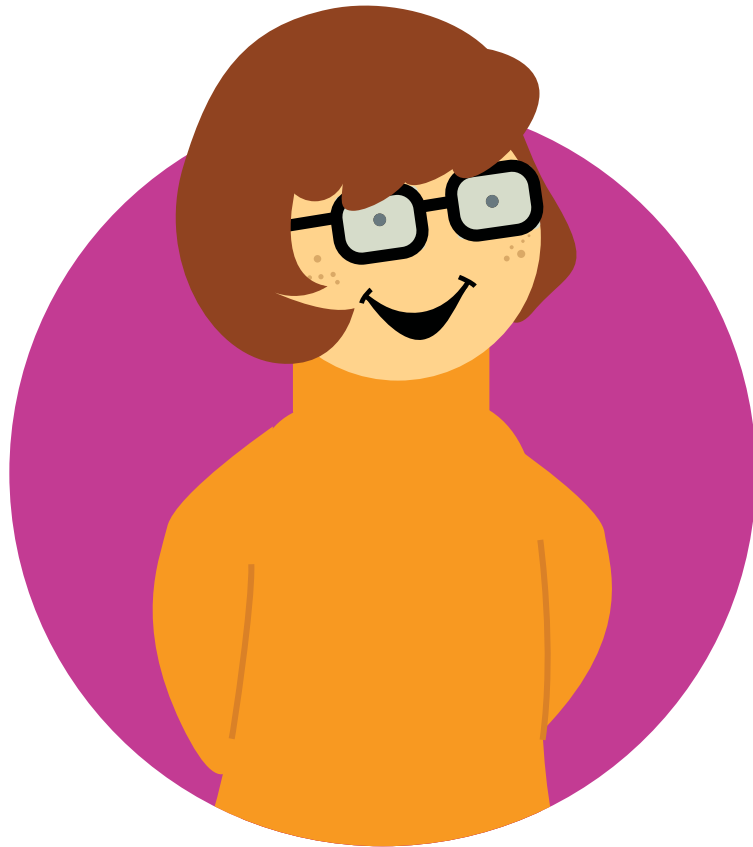
Rather than spinning their wheels to find answers while their customers wait on hold, agents can provide fast and effortless support in many ways, including:

- *Your KM depository will have product or service information and troubleshooting tutorials in one easy-to-find and continuously optimized location*

- *Screen pops show agents what customers have searched for and viewed prior to the escalation, as well as solutions based on case subject line*

- *Desktop integration extends contextual search data, customer context data, and articles that have helped similar cases in the past*

> **One of the top three drivers of customer service success is agent knowledge.[3]**
>
> — Forrester

[3] *Forrester : Knowledge Management Solutions Are Powerful, But Choosing The Right One Is Hard (2020)*

# Friendliness

Problem: Off-putting attitude

Sterling Tentacles comes to work every day with a chip on his shoulder. Although he is highly intelligent and creative, his behavior has been known to be off-putting to some of his customers. He answers the phone with a smug welcome knowing he'll be able to help, but right away the interaction has taken a turn for the negative.

Solution: Real-time screen and digital voice recording

While AI-powered tools can help flip a negative interaction in the midst of it, there's still a benefit to meeting one-on-one with a supervisor— particularly for tough, performance-based conversations.

Sterling may be smug as he sits down with his coach, but therein lies the opportunity for training. Using his own recorded interactions—both audio and visual—Sterling will objectively recognize what he does positively, and, well, otherwise.

With embedded call and screen *recordings*, agents are able to revisit their past conversations and find room for improvement in their interactions with customers. This is perfect for Sterling, who is more than capable of recognizing his own need for growth, but could still benefit from the accountability of formal training.
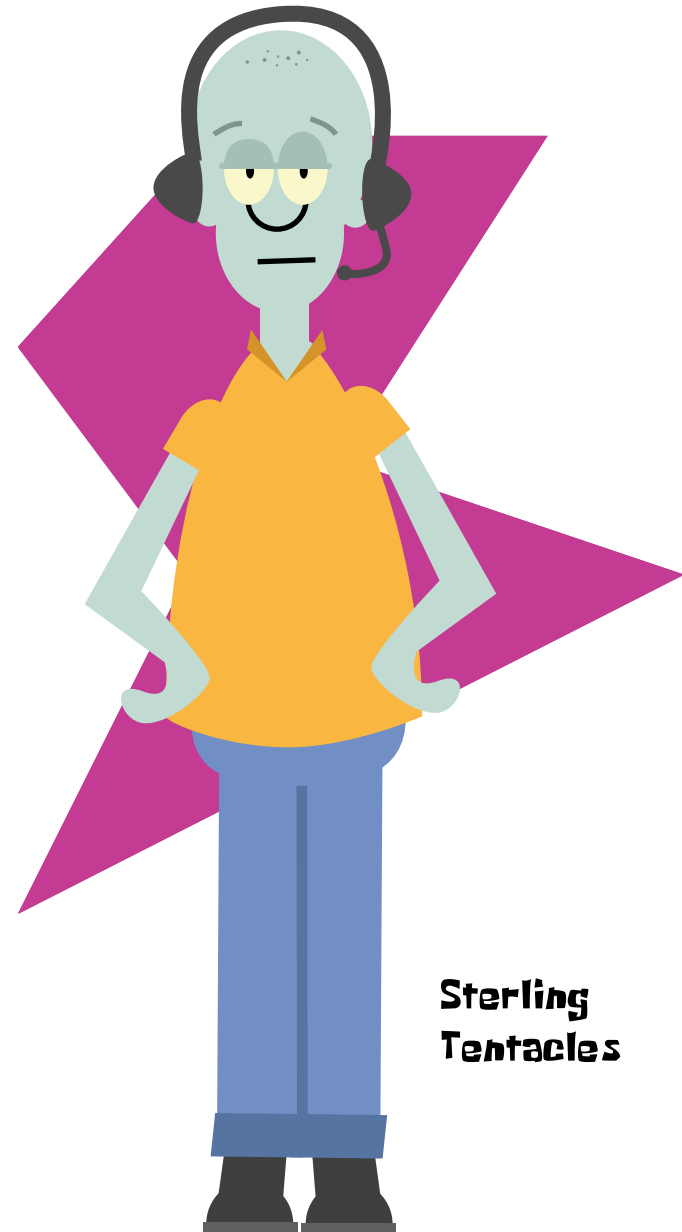
Sterling Tentacles

Recorded interactions allow agents to recognize and remediate their off-putting behaviors, but they also ensure quality operations throughout your contact center. Here's how:

- *Maintain compliance and customer trust by recording 100% of voice and digital interactions*

- *Manage and locate your recordings instantly with intuitive navigation, effortless search interface, and quick permissions and policy configuration*

- *Adapt to remote workforces easily and effectively manage work-from-home agents*

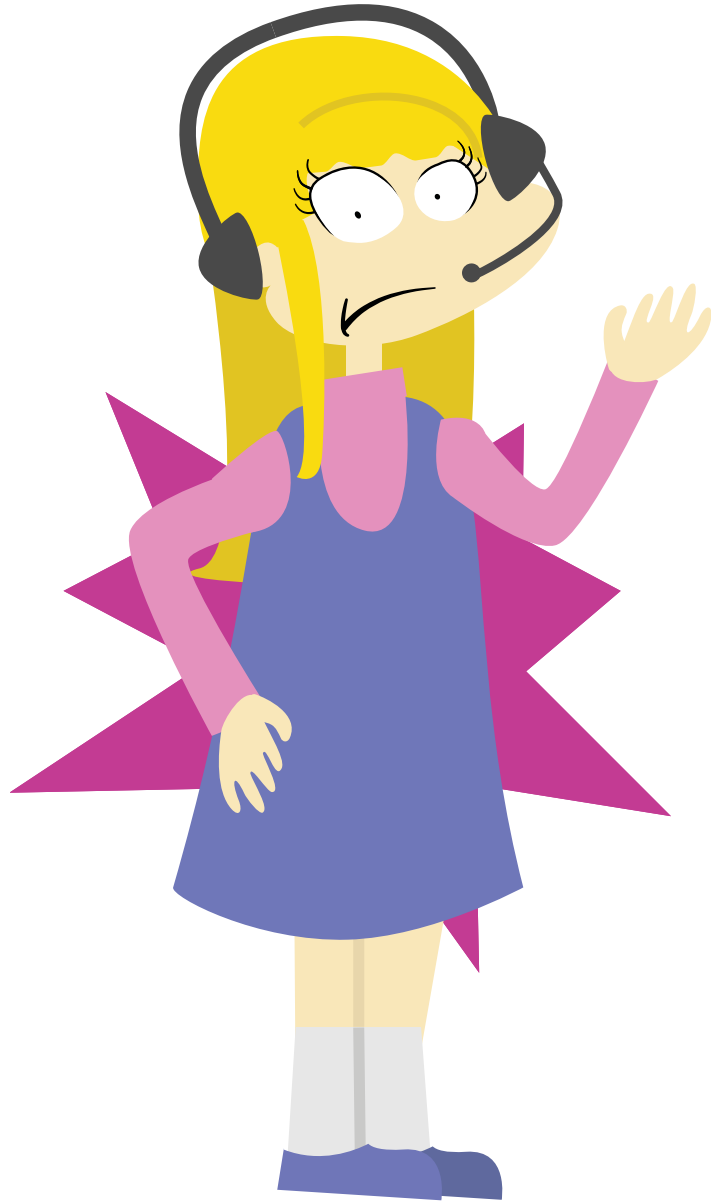- *Support organizational growth with collaboration and localization features*

> **It goes a long way in getting buy-in, because the agents feel like they're a part of their own success.**
>
> — Brandon Wade, Telecommunications Manager, RentPath

Read case study

Patience

Problem: Short tempers

Angela Pickle has the earmarks of a leader, but her short temper and tendency to create conflict often gets the best of her, particularly in team settings and interactions with her customers. When Angela's customers are frustrated, she has a difficult time controlling her own temper, leading to poor customer experiences and longer handle times. Her team members often encourage her to channel her persuasive skills toward upselling and building rapport with her customers, but she ignores this helpful advice.

Solution: Quality management

Agents who cause conflict are often looking for an outlet for their energy, and may turn out to be truly great leaders if that energy is harnessed appropriately. Your *quality management* platform can help create an environment suited for agents like Angela.

Angela Pickle

Not only will it offer data-driven perspectives of organizational goals, it also promotes self-ownership and encourages better performance. Here are a few things it can do:

* *Let your agents see things through their customers', superiors', and team members' eyes with peer- and self-evaluations, as well as dashboard insights that encourage personal ownership*

* *Channel personal and professional growth within conflict-driven agents with bite-sized coaching packages and evaluations accessible via their unified agent interface*

* *Immediately identify negative experiences, including compliance issues and messaging gaps, so that agents can stay on top of potentially frustrating situations*

> **With CXone Quality Management, we can now tell our agents how well they're performing. For agents who are doing a fantastic job, we can recognize them and that's boosted engagement. We can also identify agents who need coaching.**
>
> — Rich Rose, Director of Customer Service, Nine

Read case study

BIG-PICTURE THINKING

Problem: Short-term vision

Georgie has seen his share of challenges, but he always remains optimistic. Whether things are going up, down, or sideways, he's always looking ahead to what comes next, and always with an infectious laugh. But in the contact center world, employee turnover is often higher than other industries, and agents often struggle to share Georgie's optimism and big-picture thinking.

Solution: Workforce management

A strong *workforce management* (WFM) platform allows your call center to accurately forecast and anticipate business demands, while training your agents on their big-picture thinking. Using both real-time and historical trends, WFM improves the agent experience by giving them more say in the scheduling process, optimizing onboarding time, and reducing labor waste. The more agents feel like they're more than just a headcount, the more invested they will be in your contact center's big picture.

GEORGIE

Workforce management does this by:

- *Improving forecast accuracy through AI and machine learning to prevent overstaffing*

- *Reducing idle time and increasing productivity*

- *Eliminating manual calculations and cumbersome tasks, and increasing agility to unexpected spikes in demand*

- *Providing new KPIs that reflect digital interactions*

- *Empowering remote and in-office agents and supervisors through a unified interface and on-the-go tools*

- *Streamlining administration and maintenance efforts*

> **In our first employee survey after implementing CXone, we noted improvements in almost every area of the agents' overall satisfaction. Job satisfaction improved by 15% and agent engagement jumped 80%!**
>
> — Janie Dellinger, Global Quality Supervisor, HireRight

Read case study

What do metaphorical Saturday mornings look like in your contact center?

Chances are, you recognize the characters from this guide. And you don't just recognize them from Saturday morning cartoons, you see them at work every day. As a contact center leader, your job isn't simply to put your agents on the phone and hope for the best. Your job is to foster a growth environment in which every employee can develop the skills needed to not only bring home a paycheck, but to create an exceptional—and memorable—customer experience.

CXone's *Enlighten AI* is built purposefully to identify, score, and provide real-time coaching tips for the agent behaviors outlined throughout this guide—along with a lot more. From personalized, one-on-one coaching to identifying team-wide areas for improvement, Enlighten AI delivers proactive training, scalable to your contact center's needs and goals. Watch the demo below to see all of it in action.

Watch demo

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About NICE

With NICE (Nasdaq: NICE), it's never been easier for organizations of all sizes around the globe to create extraordinary customer experiences while meeting key business metrics. Featuring the world's #1 cloud native customer experience platform, CXone, NICE is a worldwide leader in AI-powered self-service and agent-assisted CX software for the contact center—and beyond. Over 25,000 organizations in more than 150 countries, including over 85 of the Fortune 100 companies, partner with NICE to transform—and elevate—every customer interaction.

www.nice.com