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DIGITAL CHANNELS IN THE CONTACT CENTER

A PARADIGM SHIFT FOR PERFORMANCE AND QUALITY

Make experiences *flow*

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.

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INTRODUCTION AND KEY FINDINGS

Introduction & Methodology

Today's contact centers are becoming increasingly digital and omnichannel, and have incorporated many new digital channels that transform the way agents are working and being managed.

At NICE, we wanted to understand the impact of this digital transformation on contact centers, recognizing that the path to digitization doesn't happen overnight. Many contact centers are in the process of shifting their infrastructure to support better self-serve tools, and onboarding digital channels that give customers greater choice over their service and support interactions.

However, more channels means more complexity, and adds new barriers in terms of measuring the quality and performance of each interaction. We've seen in previous research how the effect of digital transformation has left many agents feeling less engaged, with a greater amount of cognitive load to contend with, and higher instances of burn out.

This report aims to ask key questions around the true state of digital transformation in contact centers today. How far is the infrastructure already in place to support digitization initiatives? How often are agents handling concurrent interactions, and on which channels are these interactions scheduled? With new skills essential for thriving in a digital contact center, are digital and hybrid agents harder to hire, and harder to retain? **Most crucial of all – are agents getting the right coaching, performance metrics, and support to keep them engaged and committed to your newly-digitized company?**

METHODOLOGY

To get these answers and more, we commissioned a survey of 300 contact center employees, 50% managers or supervisors, and 50% agents. We split the respondents into three equal groups, with a third who work in voice-only support, a third who work in digital-only support, and the final third working hybrid. All respondents come from North America and work in companies with between 20-10k+ employees.

This report was administered online by Global Surveyz Research, a global research firm. The respondents were recruited through a global B2B research panel, invited via email to complete the survey, with all responses collected during August 2022. The average amount of time spent on the survey was 6 minutes and 46 seconds. The answers to the majority of the non-numerical questions were randomized, in order to prevent order bias in the answers.

Key Findings

1 Let There Be No Doubt: Contact Centers Understand the World is Moving to Digital

80% of agents say that they are scheduled to handle both voice and digital channels, and almost all agents (95%) say that they handle both digital and voice concurrently at least some of the time. On average, agents are allowed to handle 3.2 channels at the same time. Digital transformation has arrived in contact centers, creating a fast-paced, busy environment where agents are expected to juggle a high amount of cognitive load.

2 However, the Ability to Measure Performance and Satisfaction is Not Yet Up to Speed

While 73% of agents believe their performance is being measured by specific KPIs for each channel, only 31% of managers agree. It appears that agents don't recognize that they aren't being measured accurately. This disconnect shows a gap between agents and managers, both in terms of measuring for this new digital reality, and also in the importance it holds. While managers recognize the need, they are struggling to make it happen. Just 25% of agents and 29% of managers believe they can access one holistic performance score that includes all KPIs and provides a clear picture of agent performance and customer satisfaction.

3 Plus — Coaching and Agent Engagement Need a New Focus in this Digitally Driven World

Despite the digital focus, 64% of clients say that voice is the first channel they would choose to start their customer journey with the contact center. This proves the importance of agents who can manage both digital and voice. However, 62% of managers recognize that hiring hybrid agents is more difficult and expensive, while 71% experience the same problems with retention. To make things worse, just 14% of current agents call themselves highly engaged at work. Coaching could support better engagement and retention, but it will need to be targeted by agent need, as, for example, voice-only agents say language skills are their top priority, while context switching is more beneficial for those who work hybrid.

SURVEY REPORT FINDINGS

Are Agents Handling Both Digital and Voice Channels?

Contact centers are equipping themselves with personnel to handle the digital transformation. While traditional customer service agents might have worked on voice-only, today 54% of managers said that most of their agents are scheduled to handle both digital and voice channels.

Many contact centers are equipped to handle digital, but it's important to consider which are qualified to handle both digital and voice, essential in today's hybrid contact center reality.

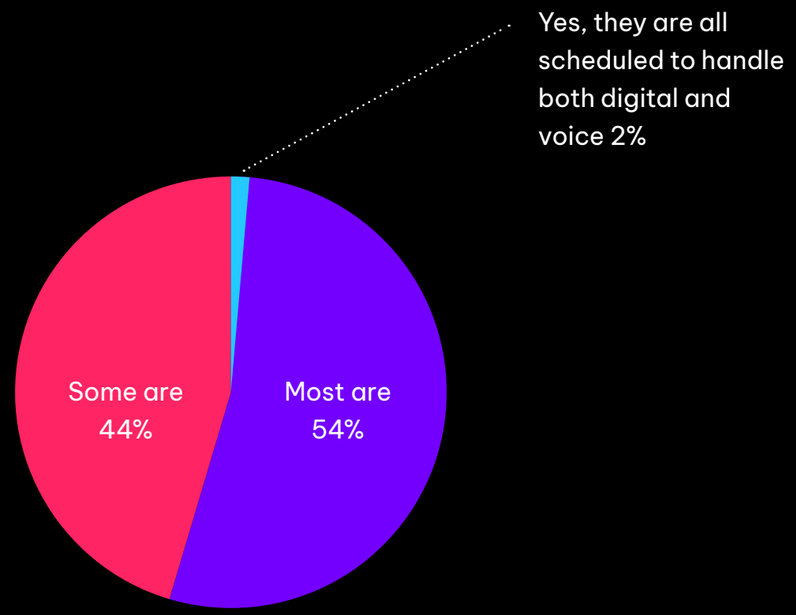

Figure 1 - Are Agents Handling Both Digital and Voice Channels?

Frequency of Handling Both Digital and Voice Channels Concurrently

95% of hybrid agents and 100% of managers handle their digital and voice channels at the same time. While this isn't happening all the time, it's either most of the time or sometimes, showing it's a skill that contact center employees need to have, part of the contact center culture.

This was a surprising finding for us at NICE, as after speaking with analysts, we didn't expect to see such a large percentage of contact center agents working concurrently on both voice and digital interactions.

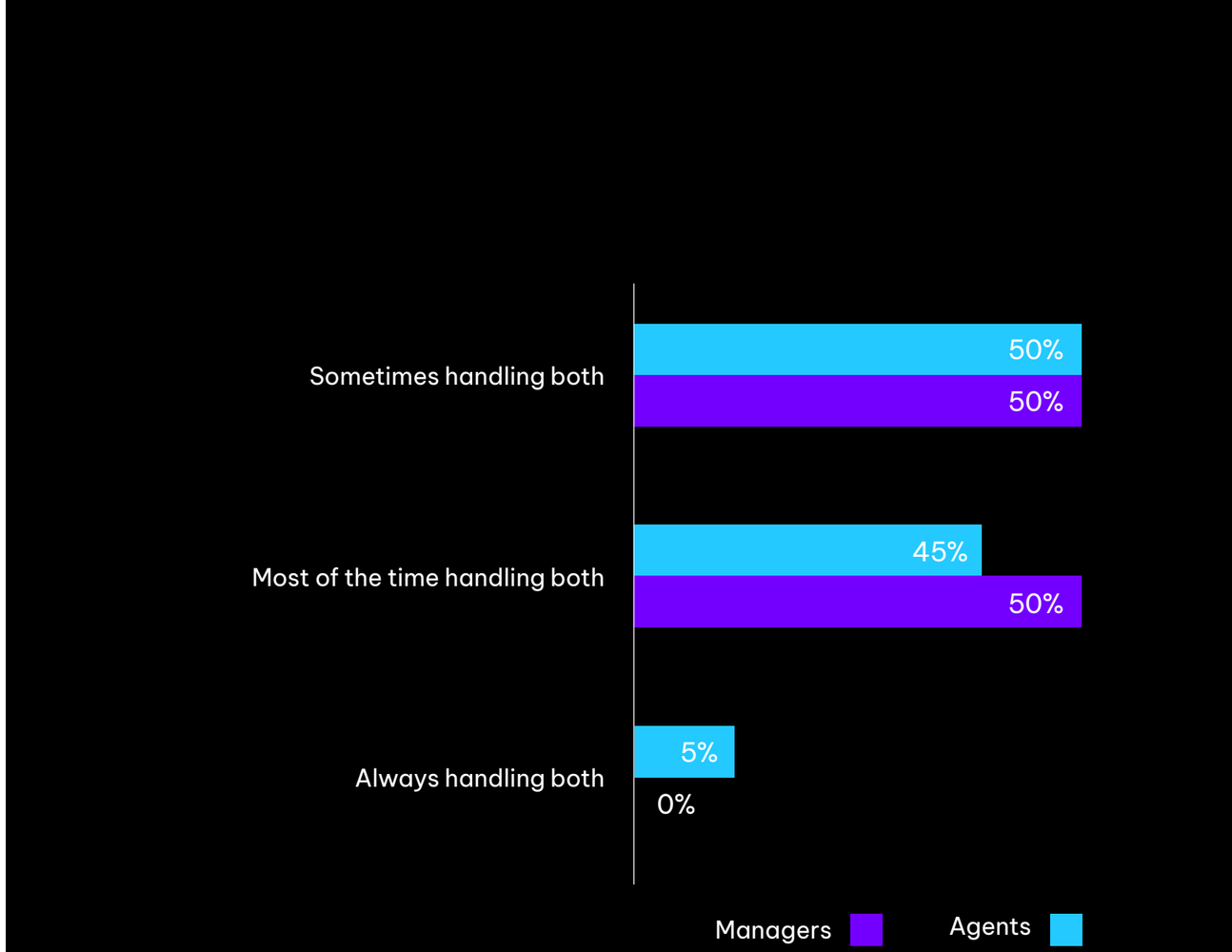

Figure 2 - Handling Digital and Voice Channels Concurrently

How Many Digital Channels Are Agents Allowed to Handle Concurrently?

What does a digitally equipped contact center look like? Not a single agent is handling just one channel, which is consistent with our earlier results, that almost all agents are concurrently handling more than one channel.

On average, agents are allowed to handle 3.2 concurrent channels, painting a picture of a busy environment where agents are expected to master many skill sets and multi-task with a high level of cognitive load.

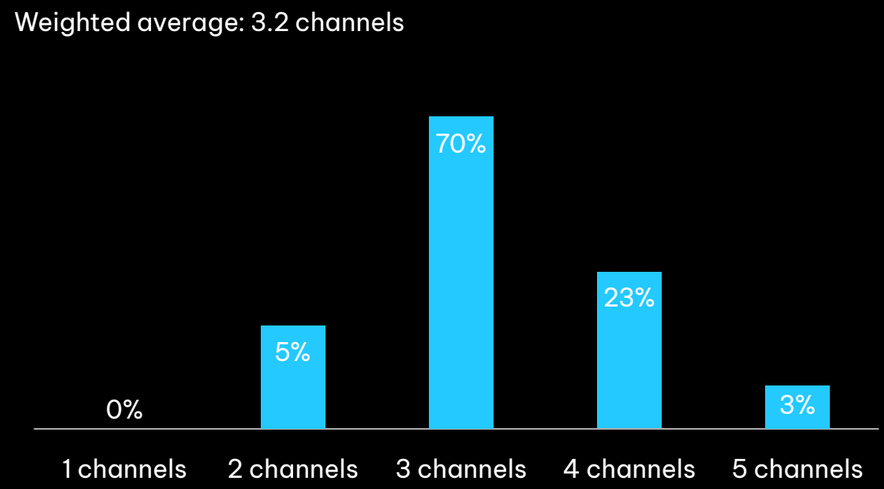

Figure 3 - Handling Digital and Voice Channels Concurrently

Customer Service Channels Offered

Continuing our understanding of the modern contact center, the most common channels through which support is offered are chat (75%), voice (67%), and email (61%).

Despite all the new, innovative digital channels like Slack and social media, traditional channels are still by far the most popular.

It's important to note the combination of asynchronous and synchronous channels, showing that the work of a digital contact center is more complex than ever before, handling interactions that are real-time, as well as those which start and stop. This makes it harder for managers and supervisors to measure impact and customer satisfaction across the board.

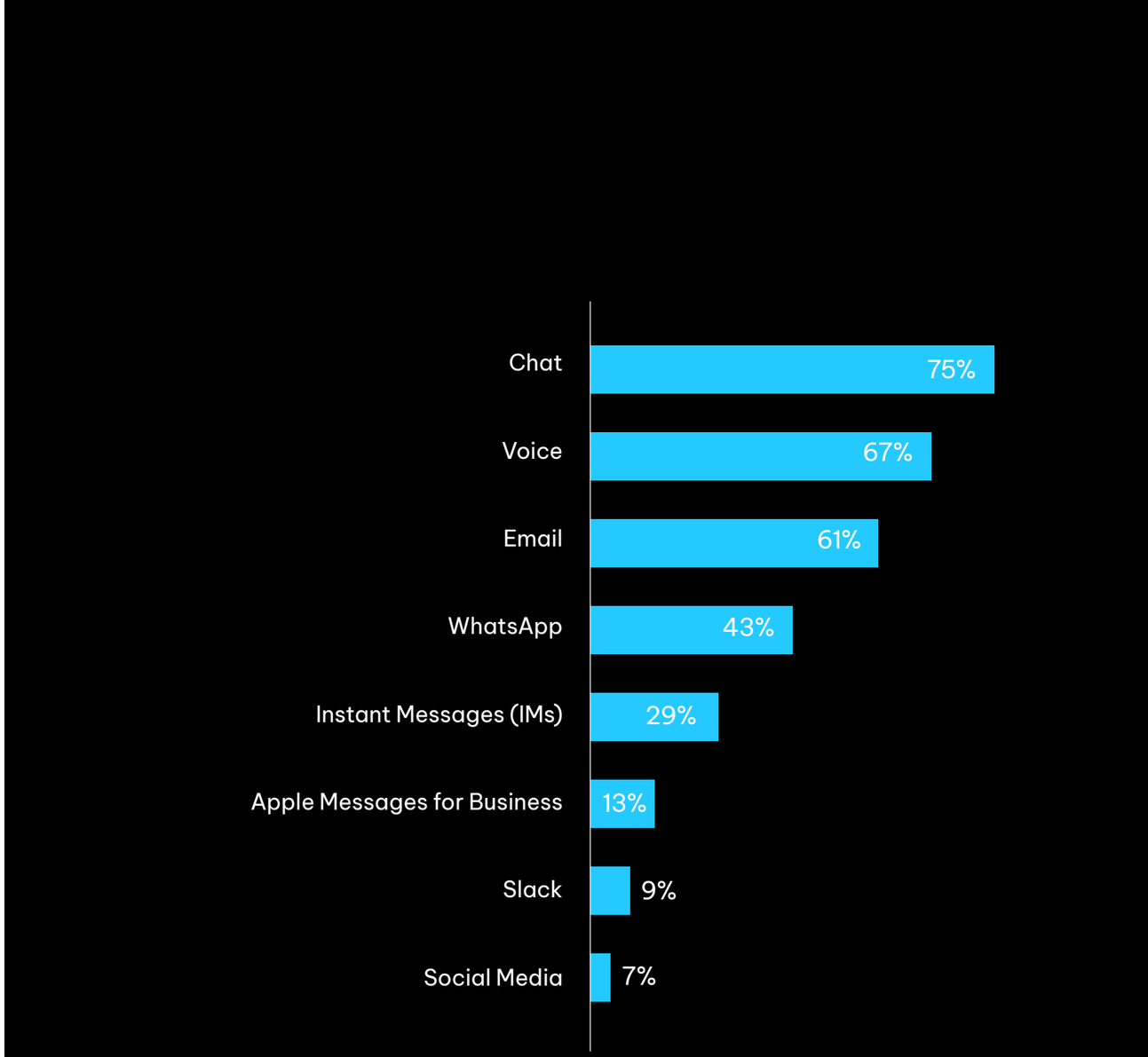

Figure 4 - Customer Service Channels Offered

*Question allowed more than one answer and as a result, percentages will add up to more than 100%

Top Customer Journeys for Clients

We asked clients to describe the most typical customer journeys for the customers they deal with at their contact centers.

Even though the transition to digitization is well on the way, voice is still the first channel customers use to interact with a contact center, at 64%. The second most reported channel of the customer journey is digital, at 29%.

The second-most common customer journey reverses preference with digital at 50% followed by voice, at 31%.

This reality means that, despite the digital direction the world is moving in, we definitely need hybrid agents, who are equipped and trained to handle both channels, and may be increasingly complex to hire and manage as a result.

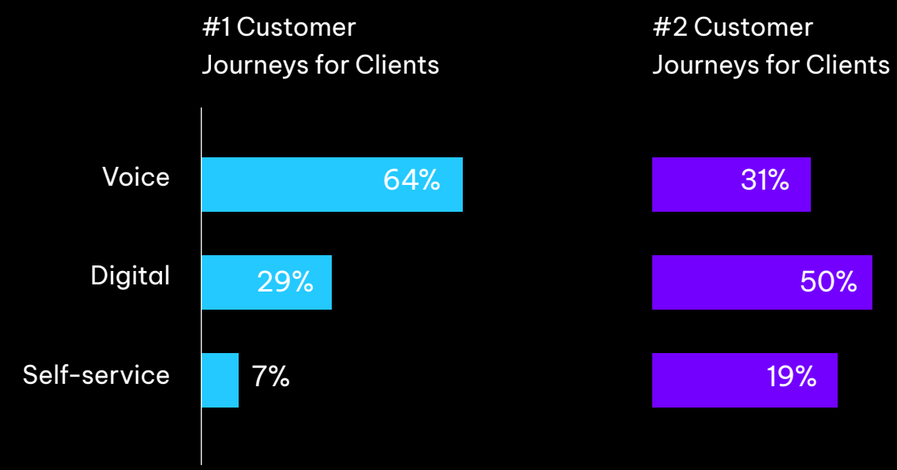

Figure 5 - Top Customer Journeys for Clients

*Question allowed more than one answer and as a result, percentages will add up to more than 100%

Top KPIs for Digital Interactions

We asked survey respondents which KPIs are most commonly measured in their contact centers for digital interactions?

The top KPIs are number of customer responses (67%), number of agent responses (57%), and average handling time (53%).

From the data we can see that contact centers are still heavily reliant on measuring performance by traditional metrics, which are based on time, speed, and legacy measures of performance. These are not up to speed with accurate measurement of digital interactions, and specifically asynchronous interactions which may take place over several days and at the customer's pace, regardless of the agent's efficiency.

These are just a few of many metrics which can measure performance. In contrast, a holistic performance management solution will look at these measures holistically alongside other KPIs. Since we see a high number of digital and hybrid agents, we would expect to see a higher percentage of contact centers measuring more digital-first KPIs.

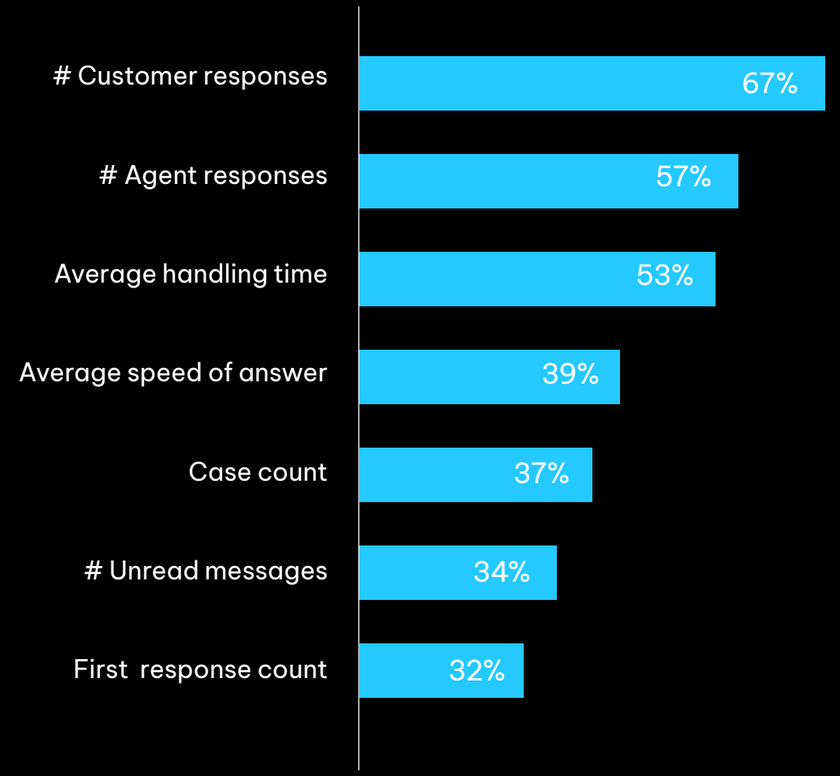

Figure 6 - Top KPIs for Digital Interactions

*Question allowed more than one answer and as a result, percentages will add up to more than 100%

Performance Measurement, Agents vs. Managers

99% of agents said they are measuring KPIs, but there is a gap between what agents and managers believe their measurement processes are.

While 73% of agents believe that they're being measured on KPIs which are based on the channel they're handling, only 31% of managers believe this to be true of agent KPI measurement.

According to managers, the top KPI measured is soft skills (63%), compared to only 38%, according to agents. This suggests that agents don't consider soft skills to be as essential as their managers do.

Taking a closer look at the top KPI (measuring with a KPI based on the handled channel), we broke this down by the data on which channels the agents are handling.

When agents are handling only digital or only voice, the percentage of agents who report being measured on KPIs which are specific to the channel they are handling was higher, at 82%-84%, but this number dropped when agents were handling multiple concurrent channels, (54%). These findings yet again suggest that contact centers for hybrid agents lack the means to properly measure agents according to the channel that their agents are scheduled to manage.

*Question allowed more than one answer and as a result, percentages will add up to more than 100%

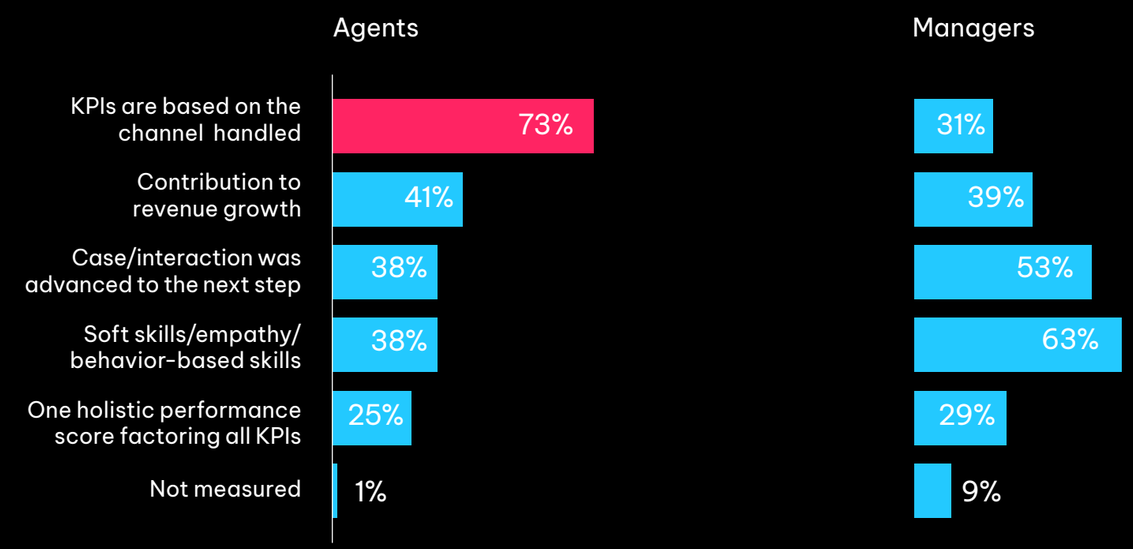

Figure 7 - Customer Support Performance Measurement

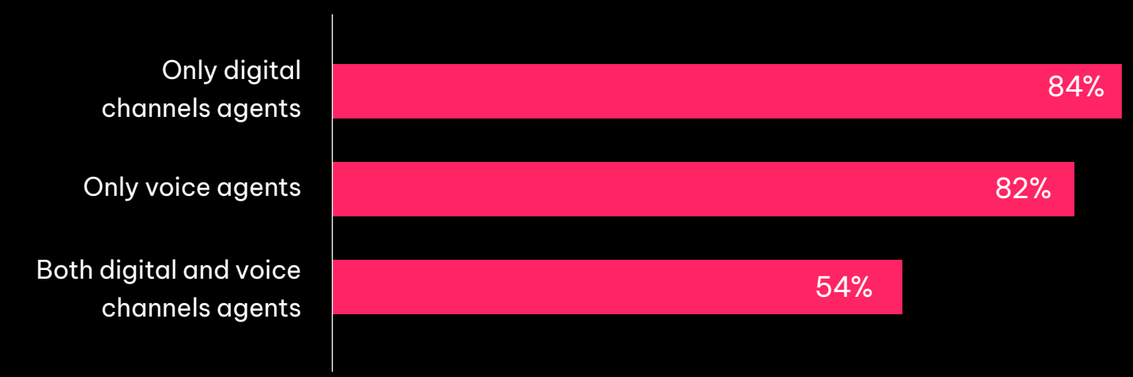

Figure 8 - I am measured for KPI's relevant to the channel I am handling

Most Beneficial Coaching, According to Agents

When asked which coaching skills would be most beneficial for agents, 19% chose language skills, 18% chose conveying emotions digitally, and 17% picked context switching between different channels. There isn't one top coaching topic which stands out more than any others, showing the importance of offering a broad spectrum of coaching opportunities for agents.

However, there are differences when breaking down the data by the types of channels that agents handle for example (figure 10), context switching is seen as almost three times more important as a coaching need for hybrid agents (22%), compared with voice-only agents (8%).

It's clear that each channel requires dramatically different coaching, and contact centers need to be equipped to identify those needs and provide those different types of coaching. If your contact center has hybrid solutions, you need a coaching program that takes into account where agents are struggling, identifying who needs coaching on what areas, and then targets coaching in the right direction for success.

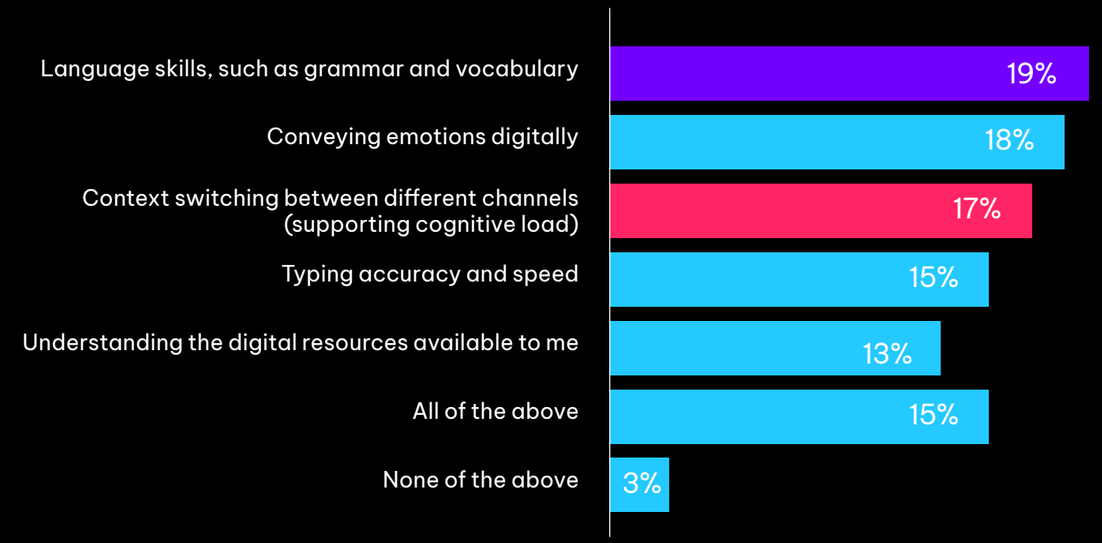

Figure 9 - Most Beneficial Coaching, According to Agents

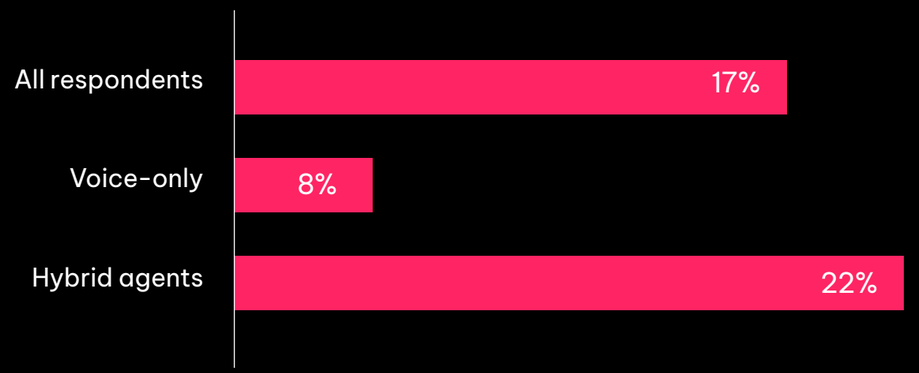

Figure 10 - "Context Switching" – Voice Only vs. Hybrid

Interest in Running a Quality Program to Evaluate the End-to-End Customer Journey

We asked managers how much they agree with the statement: *"I would be interested in running a Quality Program to evaluate the entirety of a customer journey."* We then looked at the differences by those handling digital only vs. voice only.

We see stronger agreement among those running a digital channel (90%) than among those running voice only (65%).

This highlights a gap for managers of digital agents, who seem to indicate a need for a more defined quality program which can indicate quality performance across the entirety of a customer journey (which may span multiple channels).

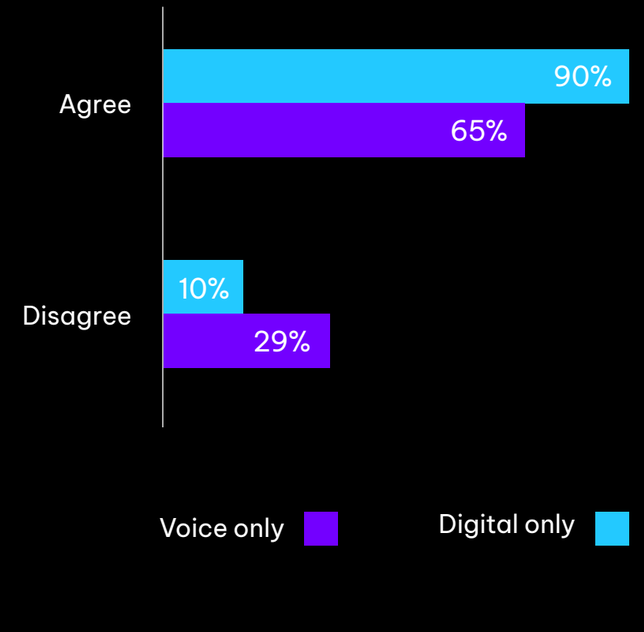

Figure 11 - Interest in Running a Quality Program to Evaluate the End-to-End Customer Journey

Engagement Level at Work

Only 27% of contact center respondents say that they are highly engaged at work (figure 12).

When further investigating those who said they are highly engaged (27%), we see a big difference between managers, where 41% said they are highly engaged, and agents where the number drops to 14% (figure 13). Agent engagement is an important factor to track and measure, as it has a proven correlation with agent productivity and performance. Especially as the world moves increasingly towards a more digital and complex mode of work, the art of tracking engagement gains significance.

Another difference between those who are highly engaged has to do with the types of channels they handle. Those who are handling both voice and digital were the most engaged (32%), compared to only 23% of those handling voice only (figure 14). When you think about training and coaching in your call centers, it's important to consider those who are voice-only, and to bring them up to speed with digital channels so they can feel relevant and future-focused about their careers.

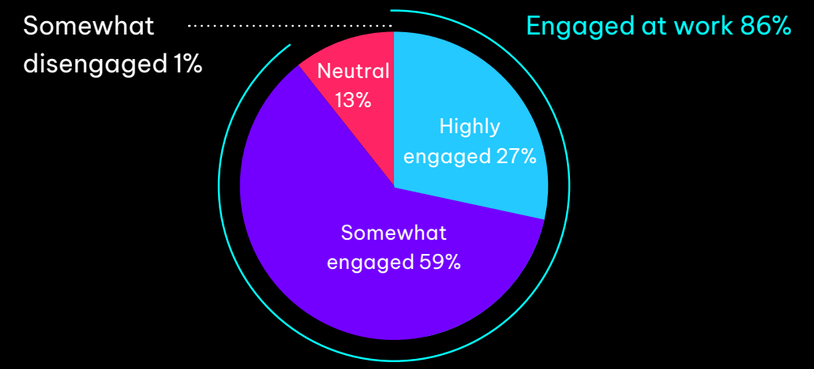

Figure 12 - Level of engagement at work

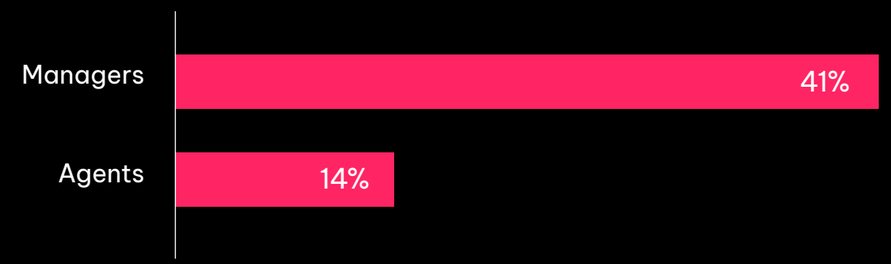

Figure 13 - "Highly Engaged" by Role

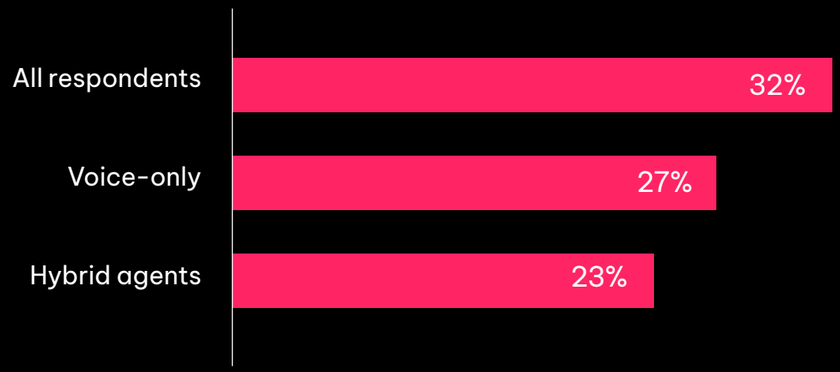

Figure 14 - "Highly Engaged" by Channel Qualified to Handle

Retaining and Hiring Hybrid Agents vs. Voice-Only

62% of managers agree that it's harder and more expensive to hire hybrid agents in comparison with voice-only agents. When asked about retention, 71% agreed it's also harder and more expensive to retain hybrid agents in comparison with voice-only agents.

The findings of this study demonstrate that there is added complexity in the work of both digital and hybrid agents. This means that measuring performance and quality becomes increasingly complicated, but at the same time more important, as hybrid agents are not only harder to hire, but also harder to retain.

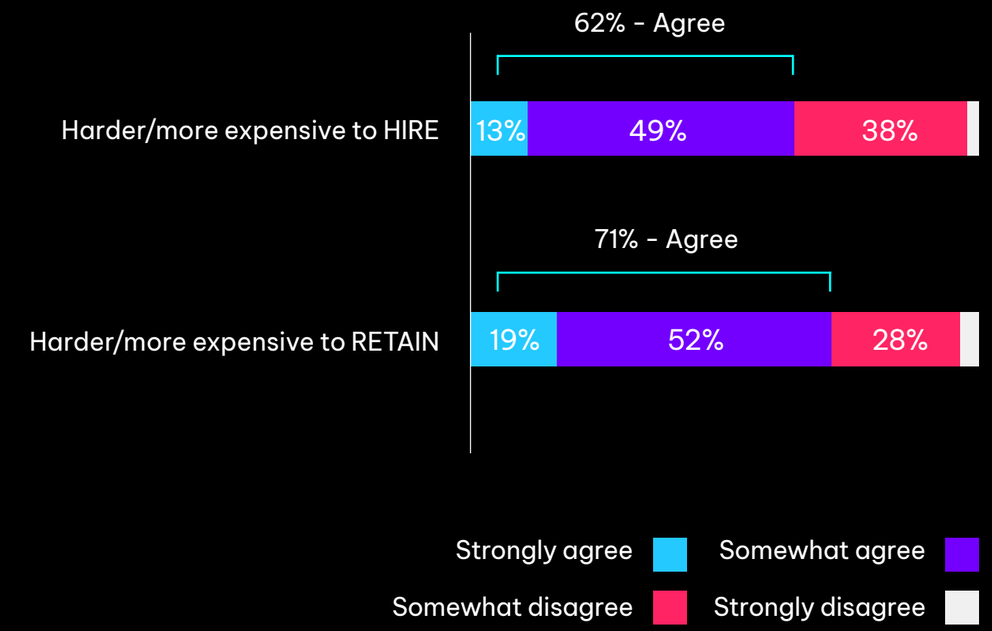

Figure 15 - Is it Harder / More Expensive to Retain and Hire Hybrid Agents vs. Voice-Only

DEMOGRAPHICS

Country, Industry, and Number of Customer Service Agents

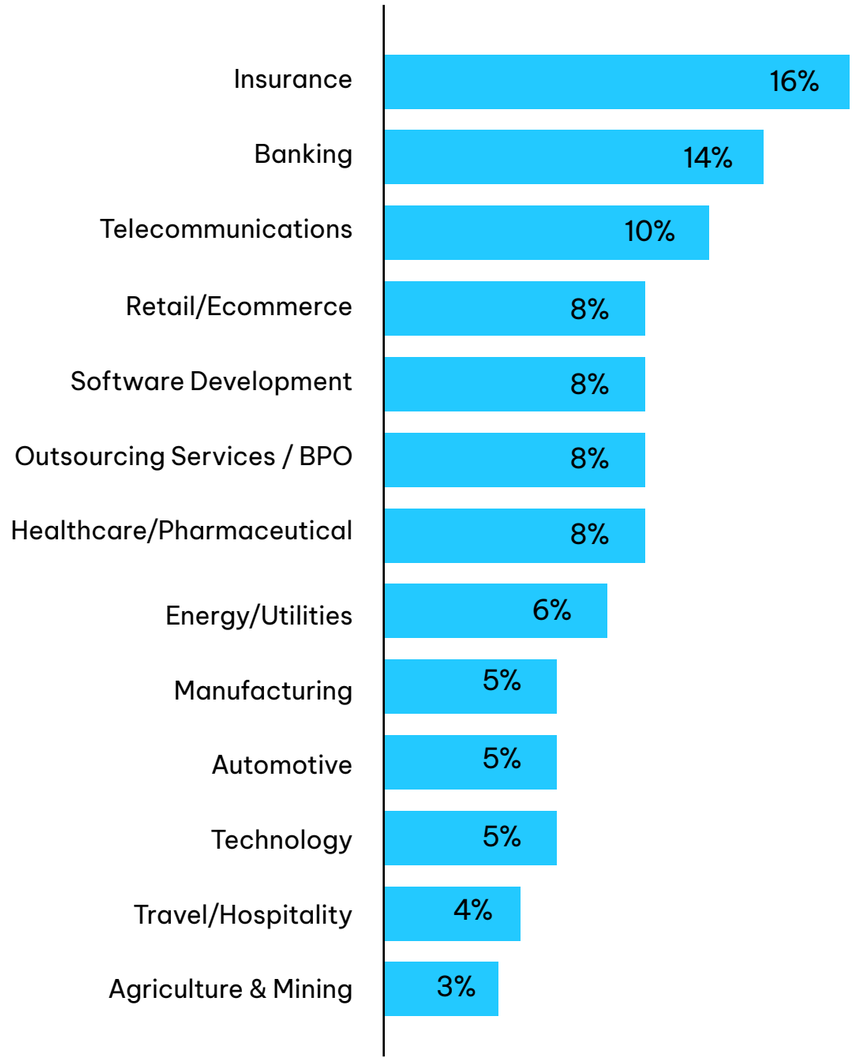

Figure 16 - Industry

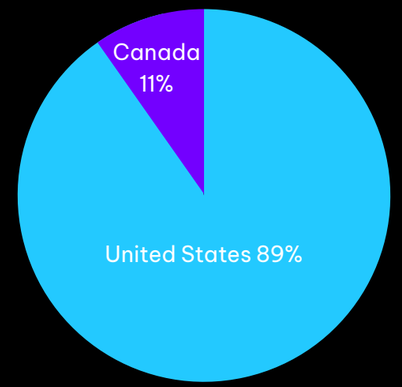

Figure 17 - Country

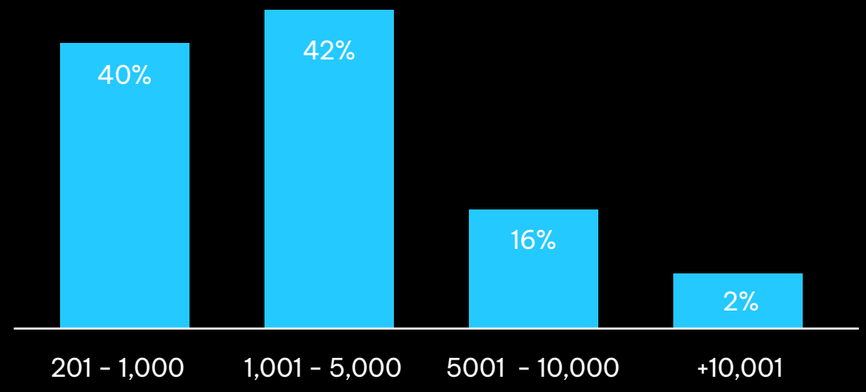

Figure 18 - Number of Customer Service Agents

Employment Status, Job Function, Age Group and More

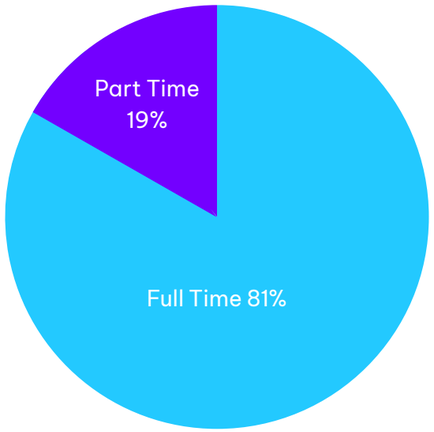

Figure 19 - Employment

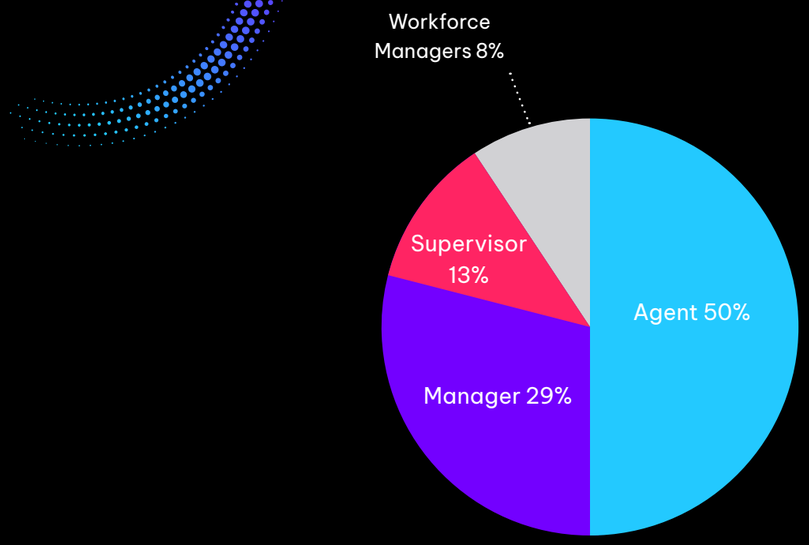

Figure 20 - Job Function

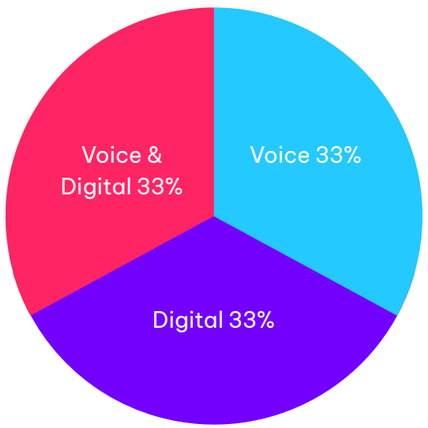

Figure 21 - Qualification to Handle Channels

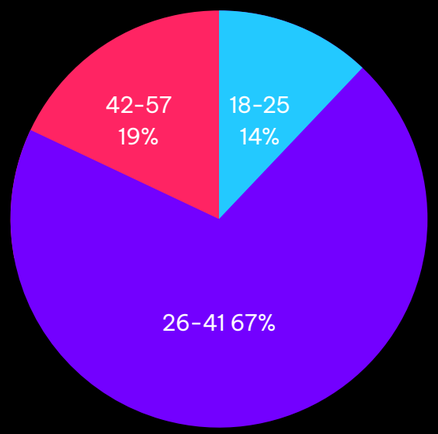

Figure 22 - Age Group