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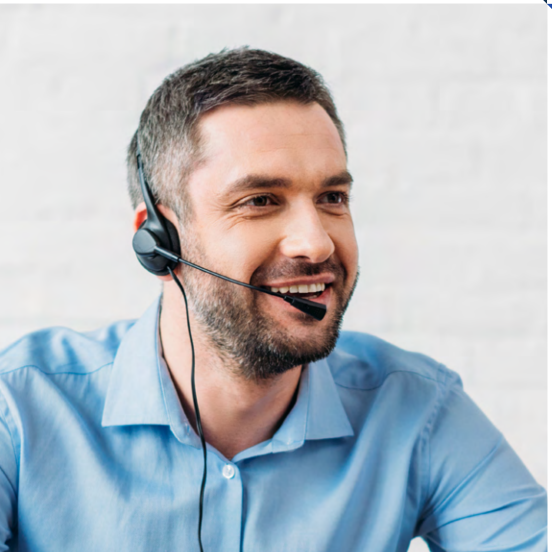
THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO

Reducing Agent Ramp Time



Stop us if you've heard this one before: a contact center hires a new agent and guides them through onboarding only for the agent to quit within a few months. *Pretty common, right?*

Agent turnover is an unfortunate reality with contact centers. The trouble is, you're not just losing the agent—you're also losing the investment you made into training them. You're probably aware of how this "brain drain" impacts your bottom line on a practical level, but have you thought about how it affects your customer experience and your brand?

In today's world, with the Great Resignation at our doorstep, you can no longer ignore the issue. Agents expect different things from their employers today and they are willing to go elsewhere if they don't get them. They are looking for better work/life balance, less stress, newer technology and, perhaps most importantly, they want to feel valued.

Giving agents a clear path to success is a compelling way to show you care about their career and their wellbeing. When an agent doesn't receive adequate onboarding, it creates a confidence gap that's difficult to bridge later on. **Agent turnover is directly linked to ramp time.** The longer it takes an agent to ramp up, the less confident they feel about their ability to do the job. A lack of confidence leads to a lack of motivation and then a lack of productivity. Finally, that demotivated and frustrated agent will quit.

If you want to keep your agents and create a remarkable customer experience, you need to close that confidence gap by improving agent ramp time. So, how do you effectively do that? Follow the tips below to create an onboarding program and company culture that reduces agent ramp time.

Start with the right agents.

Think about your ideal agent. What is their current skill set? What would make them successful both in their role and within your organization as a whole? Build a profile of your ideal prospective agent based on work experience, personality traits, skill set, and anything else that is important to you in the role. If you already have rock star agents on your team and want more of them, you can base your profile on these current employees.

Really take the time to think about who would fit into your culture and delight your customers. If you can clearly define who this person is, you'll have a better chance of recruiting them. Better recruitment can mean improved ramp times.

Communicate.

Good communication is critical to an agent's success. This isn't limited to how well an agent communicates with customers—it's also crucial within your organization. You must enable good communication between departments, teams, and agents in order to foster a culture of teamwork. There are practical business reasons for this, but it can also impact agent ramp time. A culture that prioritizes communication is one in which agents feel more confident in their roles and are comfortable enough to speak up if they need help.

Get real.

It’s a tale as old as time. An agent goes through a lengthy onboarding process only to sit down at their desk on day one and have a coworker say, “Forget what they told you. Here’s how we actually do things…”

Agent training needs to be rooted in the reality of your business. What tools does your team use every day and how do they use them? What systems do they use? What procedures do they follow… and which ones do they ignore or have workarounds for? Evaluate how your current agents do things and decide if it makes sense for the business. Try not to make knee-jerk judgments about how or why your agents are circumventing certain processes or procedures. Truly examine if the “real” way they do things is better. If it is, it might be time to change your procedures and design your training around this reality. If in the end you find that the reality of how your agents work doesn’t match your vision and values, it may be time to re-examine your processes and your training program might need an update. (If that’s the case, make sure everyone gets a training refresher.)

Set learning objectives.

How do you know when a new agent has been successfully trained? Without setting measurable goals and milestones, it can be difficult to determine how well a new hire is progressing. One of the best things you can do for any new agent is to set clear, actionable goals and have a regular check-in to discuss their growth. An ideal structure for goals is to set several small targets that build up to a larger learning objective. This gives agents the opportunity for quick wins, which helps to build confidence.

Show new agents around.

Your most successful agent is the one that understands your business inside and out. Agent onboarding and training shouldn't be limited to the contact center. Take new agents on a tour of your business (virtual tours work just as well as being physically onsite). Let them see every department to help them learn what your company does, see the products or services you offer, and how things move from point A to point B within your organization. Show them the manufacturing or engineering department, shipping/receiving, returns, sales, marketing—any department that has an impact on your business should be part of the tour. All of these things fit together to form the customer experience, and your agent is a big part of that. Giving your agent a hands-on look allows them to speak with authority when interacting with customers.

Share your vision.

When a new agent starts at your company, you might be tempted to jump right into the practical elements of training like tools, systems, and processes. Instead, try introducing them to your company's mission and your "customer service vision." When agents are aligned with your company values, they'll care more about making good on your brand promise and offering top-tier customer service. Sharing your customer service vision with each new agent also puts everyone on the same page in terms of what terrific customer service looks like within your organization.

Coach your team.

One of the more common reasons for attrition in the call center space is a lack of support. Don't wait until a new agent is struggling to offer them help. Make coaching available to your agents from day one. The best way to ensure that each agent receives personalized coaching is to monitor performance. Start collecting data from the moment your agents start; this allows you to track performance over time and identify an agent's strengths as well as the areas where they require coaching. This data isn't meant to be used as a "gotcha." It should be used in the context of learning and growth.

It's important to remember that your coaching program should be based on agent performance, not knowledge retention. With knowledge base software, intranets, FAQs, wikis, and agent scripting tools, it's not necessary for your agents to memorize every bit of information related to your organization and product. What is key, however, is how your agent performs in finding relevant information and using it to solve customer problems. Agent ramp times will improve when you build your onboarding program with coaching in mind.

Use scenario-based training.

You want your agents to deliver world-class customer service even in the stickiest of situations. But how do you prepare your team for these moments?

Some contact centers train agents using a "building block" model in which an agent must master a single skill before moving on to the next—but that's inefficient. When was the last time an agent used just one skill to resolve a customer issue? Probably never. In a real customer conversation, your agent will face complexities that require them to use multiple skills all at once to provide excellent customer service. With scenario-based training, you can create practice scenarios based on these real-world customer interactions to put your agents' knowledge to the test.

In scenario-based training, your agents are led through increasingly difficult situations that teach them to think on their feet, draw from a variety of learned skills, and use the knowledge base tools available to them. The scenarios you design should be based on actual customer interactions that your agent will have, such as a product exchange, billing problem, or refund request. Immediate feedback during these scenarios lets your agent see the cause and effect of their actions in a way that single-skill or traditional classroom learning doesn't. Repetition is also key for scenario-based training because working through scenarios multiple times improves knowledge retention and shows your agents how (and when) to use the appropriate skills and tools.

Scenario-based training promotes continual learning and improvement; it is a safe space to practice skills and learn from mistakes before an agent is in front of an actual customer. Call listening can also help to assess your team's communication skills and identify areas for improvement after you've run through scenarios (and it may even help you design new ones).

Share your knowledge.

You've probably got a wealth of internal knowledge, but do your agents know how to access it? Or, do you have a way for them to access it? If you haven't built a knowledge base, FAQ, or another self-serve solution for contact center agents, it's time to get started. Let's face it: a new agent is not going to remember everything from training. But if they know where information lives and understand how to use it during a customer call, they'll deliver a customer experience that does your brand justice.

Having good documentation means that your agent doesn't need the memory of an elephant; they just need to be able to use the tools you give them. Having a robust knowledge management solution allows you to support agents from training to when they perform their first live call. This is the best way to drive consistency and ensure the same level of service can be given at all times, no matter who handles the query.

When you pair a robust knowledge base with scenario-based training, you'll create a powerful army of contact center agents that'll "wow" your customers. Remember to take your agents through multiple real-life scenarios that require them to use the documentation to respond to customer questions and issues. Practice makes perfect!

Make managers part of the team.

Who do the managers on your team spend time with? If they're only spending time with their peers, they are missing out on building relationships and trust with the agents they supervise. Make sure your managers spend time with agents, both as a team and one-on-one. Have your managers run through training scenarios with agents and sit in on calls to provide coaching. A manager should also spend time getting to know agents' future goals and help create career roadmaps. Your agents should feel that managers are invested in their success.

Use the buddy system.

If you want new agents to be successful, don't leave them to figure things out on their own. Create a "buddy system" and pair each new agent with someone they can learn from. There are multiple ways to structure a buddy program, including matching a new agent with another new agent that has a complementary skill set, pairing a new agent with an experienced one, or setting up a cohort of new agents so they can share knowledge together. Research from McKinsey & Company published in 2018 indicated that new agents report higher levels of employee satisfaction when included in a cohort of more than five agents.

If you choose to pair a new agent with a more experienced mentor, it's important to remember that a mentor doesn't have to be a supervisor. Any experienced employee can take on a mentorship role if they are able to effectively counsel a new hire and help them adjust to both the job and the company. Have the new agent shadow their mentor and observe how they handle actual customer interactions. Then, do the reverse. Put the new agent in the "driver's seat" to take a customer call. They'll get much needed live call experience with the security of having a knowledgeable person immediately on hand to help them navigate difficult situations.

A mentorship does not (and should not) end once onboarding is complete. Building a one-on-one relationship is key to continued success. The more comfortable a new agent is with their mentor, the more comfortable they will be to reach out for the advice that will turn them into a skilled employee. You'll know your mentorship program is creating skilled agents when mentees graduate to becoming mentors at a regular pace.

Showcase success.

If you want your agents to replicate the behaviors of your most successful agents, you need to know what those behaviors are in the first place. Identify your most successful agents and have them document their processes and how they communicate with customers. In addition to the documentation, conduct interviews with these agents and ask them questions designed to reveal how they think and make decisions at work, such as what they currently do to plan for success in the future or how they approach gaining knowledge.

Analyze the collected documentation and interviews to develop insights into which behaviors are driving results. When you have the data, you can create an onboarding program that helps your newest agents replicate this success from day one.

Offer incentives.

Working in a customer-facing role can be both stressful and repetitive. Does your culture support your agents? You want to create an environment that keeps your agents motivated. One way to do this is to set goals and incentive agents to meet them. You can poll your agents to find out what the most meaningful perks would be for them, or have each agent fill out a questionnaire so you can reward them on an individual basis.

Use the right tools.

The average turnover rate in a call center is between 30-40%. With numbers like that, you need technology solutions that empower new agents to deliver an exceptional customer experience without adding hours or days of instruction to your onboarding program. Investing in technology will not only improve how your agents give customer service and support, it will also improve ramp time and retention.

Technology has made it easier than ever to modernize contact center operations and improve agent performance. With Zingtree's knowledge base and agent scripting tools, for example, your agents can solve complex conversations in a streamlined way while allowing your organization to reduce onboarding costs and boost call compliance. Our clients have used our interactive, no-code decision tree software to take the guesswork out of customer calls; even an inexperienced agent can delight customers. If you can read and click a button, you can handle complex customer interactions through Zingtree.

Our software also integrates with a wide variety of CRMs, call center software, data sources, and other software tools. Plus, you can use APIs and webhooks to connect even more. There's no need to implement new systems—we connect with the tools you already use.

When you show agents that you're willing to invest in the tools that make their jobs easier, you show them that you're willing to invest in them as well. A motivated agent is a productive agent.

In conclusion…

Agent ramp time can be an afterthought within contact centers, but improving this one aspect of your business can have a lasting impact on customer satisfaction and revenue. Customer interactions will only become more complex as time goes on, and you'll need an onboarding program that prepares agents for the realities of their work. By following these tips, you will have given your agents the competence and confidence they need to provide an amazing customer experience.

The key takeaways to remember are:

- Hire the right agents and keep channels of communication open.
- Train to the realities of your business, not to an ideal you haven't yet reached.
- Set goals and milestones that allow you to assess an agent's progress (and identify areas for improvement early).
- Share your mission, customer service vision, and how the business operates on a practical level.
- Formalize your coaching program and base it on performance, not memorization.
- Create real-world scenarios to use in training that allow agents to practice skills and learn from mistakes in a safe space.
- Make internal knowledge bases readily available and teach agents how to use them.
- Manage your managers—keep them engaged with employees at all levels.
- Assign each agent a mentor and/or add them to a cohort of agents so they can share knowledge.
- Demonstrate how to be successful as an agent, using your top performers as examples.
- Motivate agents with incentives and meaningful perks.
- Use tools that make it easy for agents to do their jobs and for you to measure how well they're performing. You can use Knowledge Usage reporting to compare with your performance data and demonstrate the value of your knowledge solutions.

Have questions about reducing agent ramp time?

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Request a demo by scheduling time with our team to get a full breakdown of everything Zingtree can do.

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