

# The State of Workforce Management

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An ICMI Executive Summary

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# INTRODUCTION

ICMI last studied contact center workforce management (WFM) trends and benchmarks in 2017. Since then, the workplace as we know it has evolved in ways we could never have predicted three years ago. In early 2020, many contact centers worldwide were forced to take their operations remote with little notice. And as contact volumes spiked amid global uncertainty, WFM professionals had to quickly adapt their plans, staffing models, and forecasts. Now, as offices are preparing to re-open or move to hybrid work models, what will this mean for contact center WFM?

As the authority on contact center excellence, ICMI sought to understand better the WFM techniques, technologies, and best practices that guide today's contact center environments. A new study, conducted in March and April 2021, allowed us to take a fresh look at the evolution of WFM and the current state of agent experience (including work from home), technology (including digital channels and automation), long-term planning and forecasting, scheduling, and intraday adjustments.

In the contact center, change is a given. It is a WFM professional's responsibility to expect the unexpected. After all, they must ensure they have the correct number of suitably skilled and equipped agents available to serve customers as efficiently and effectively as possible. Workforce management is critical to any service organization's success, and now more than ever, organizations have taken note.

When ICMI last captured a snapshot of the state of WFM in 2017, we found that just half of the contact centers surveyed had a dedicated workforce manager or team tasked with scheduling. Only 25% were collaborating with the frontline to create schedules. One-fifth weren't measuring forecast accuracy; nearly three-quarters weren't using a WFM solution for scheduling back-office activities, and 70% were still executing intraday forecasting manually. Our new research revealed that positive changes are afoot. More organizations are devoting the budget and resources to improve workforce management processes that impact employee and customer experience. Yet, there is still room for automation to free up some of the burdens workforce managers face.

**“THE PESSIMIST SEES DIFFICULTY IN EVERY OPPORTUNITY.  
THE OPTIMIST SEES OPPORTUNITY IN EVERY DIFFICULTY.”**

**— WINSTON CHURCHILL**

## HIGHLIGHTS

- **73% of contact centers plan to adopt a** blended or hybrid work-environment post-pandemic
- **87% say their organization has a formal** employee engagement program, up from 74% in 2017
- **52% of contact centers enable agents to** engage in schedule/shift bidding, up from 38% in 2017
- **28% of contact centers say agent turnover** is increasing, down from 36% in 2017
- **30% of contact centers now use cloud-based** WFM software or a hybrid of on-premises and cloud-based solution to develop long-term plans, up from 23% in 2017
- **Only 32% of contact centers specifically** employ for back-office functions, down from 55% in 2017

# THE CURRENT STATE OF WORKFORCE MANAGEMENT

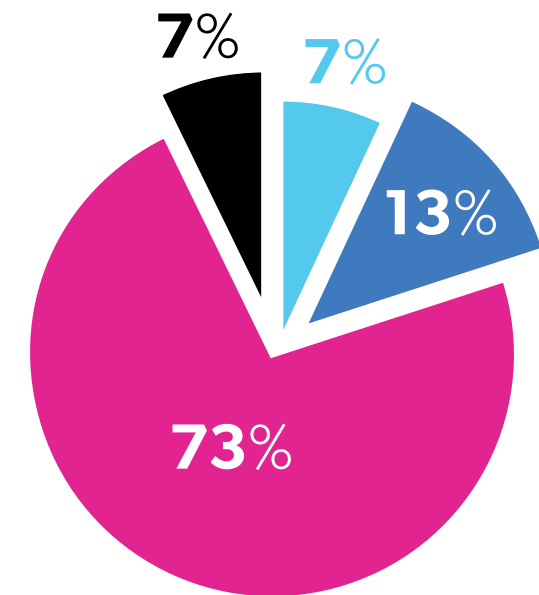
According to survey respondents, dedicated WFM resources have never been more critical to the contact center. In 2010, our research indicated that roughly 60% of contact centers had a workforce manager/team whose primary responsibility was scheduling. That number held steady in 2017, but today, 78% of the contact centers surveyed have a dedicated team or manager responsible for scheduling. Given the uptick, it's undeniable that organizations realize the critical role of workforce managers. But have contact centers managed to improve the effectiveness of their WFM efforts?

In reality, having a team of employees who oversee workforce management is just one piece of the equation. What, when, where, and how are important questions to explore, too. What types of technology are contact centers using to meet their workforce needs? And if they currently use software to assist their efforts, when and how are they using those tools?

In 2017, when we asked survey respondents which solutions they were using to develop long-term plans, 28% said they relied on Excel spreadsheets, and 39% used on-premises software. In 2021, nearly half of all respondents (46%) reported using a spreadsheets-only approach for long-term planning. While those numbers are staggering, cloud adoption on the rise, too. In 2017, our research revealed that 23% of contact centers used either a hybrid of on-premises and cloud-based WFM software or 100% cloud-based software. Today, that number sits at 30%. Of the total respondents, only 3% indicated they don't use any WFM solution, which is down from 10% in 2017.

**IN 2021, DEDICATED WORKFORCE MANAGEMENT RESOURCES HAVE NEVER BEEN MORE CRITICAL TO THE CONTACT CENTER.**

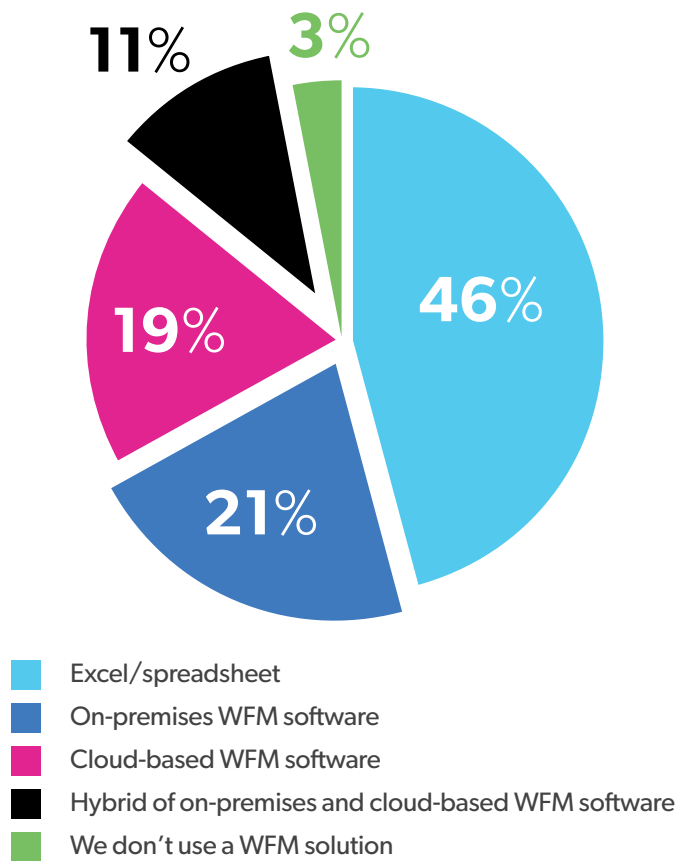
Which of the following best describes your strategy for work-from-home post-pandemic?



- All agents will return to the office immediately
- All agents will remain at home indefinitely
- Adopt a blended WFH and office-based model
- Other

Percentage of respondents

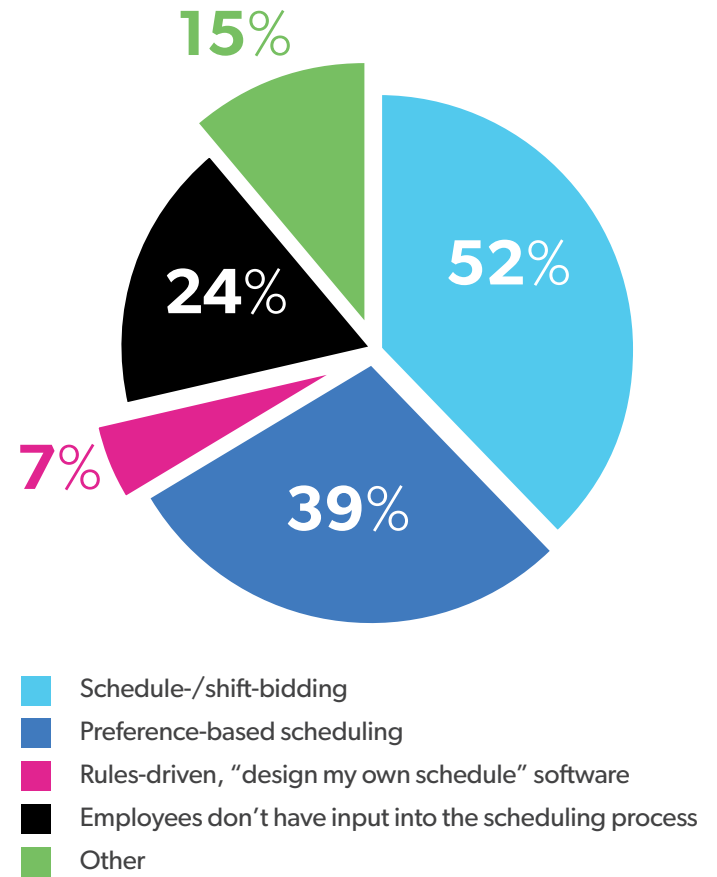
Which of the following best describes the solution you use to develop long-term plans?



Percentage of respondents

Regardless of the types of tools used, scheduling is critical to the success of any workforce management operation. In terms of offering agents input in the process, quite a bit has changed since 2017. More than half (52%) of contact centers enable agent schedule-/shift-bidding, up from 38%. And while 31% of survey respondents in 2017 indicated that their agents had no say in the scheduling process, only 24% of this year's respondents said that was the case.

In what ways do you enable employees to engage with the scheduling process?



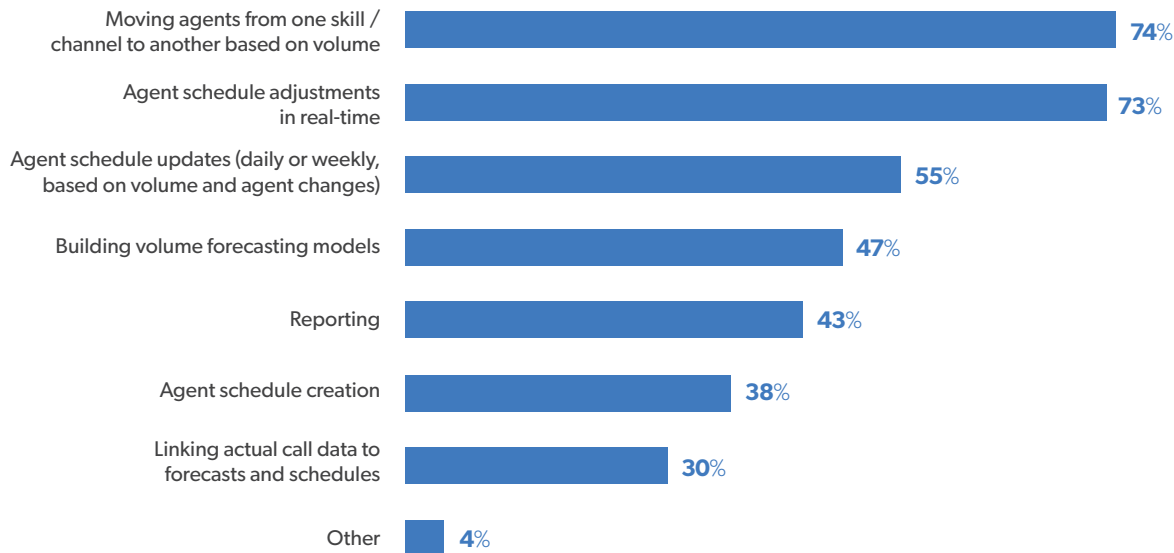
Percentage of respondents

In general, agent empowerment seems to be on the rise as well. According to survey respondents, 93% of agents are able to view their schedules, 59% are permitted to submit any number of schedule-change requests, and nearly half (47%) can view schedule change opportunities.



Despite the empowerment at the agent level, survey respondents indicated that workforce managers now face more manual tasks. Three-quarters of respondents report manually moving agents from one skill or channel to another based on volume, and 73% report making manual adjustments to agent schedules in real-time. Those numbers are up from 57% and 64% in 2017. Meanwhile, the number of contact centers making manual agent schedule updates (daily or weekly, based on volume and agent changes) and building volume forecasting models manually has dropped since 2017. And fewer contact centers reported using manual methods to create agent schedules or link actual call data to forecasts and schedules.

### Which components of your forecasting and scheduling process are manual?



Percentage of respondents

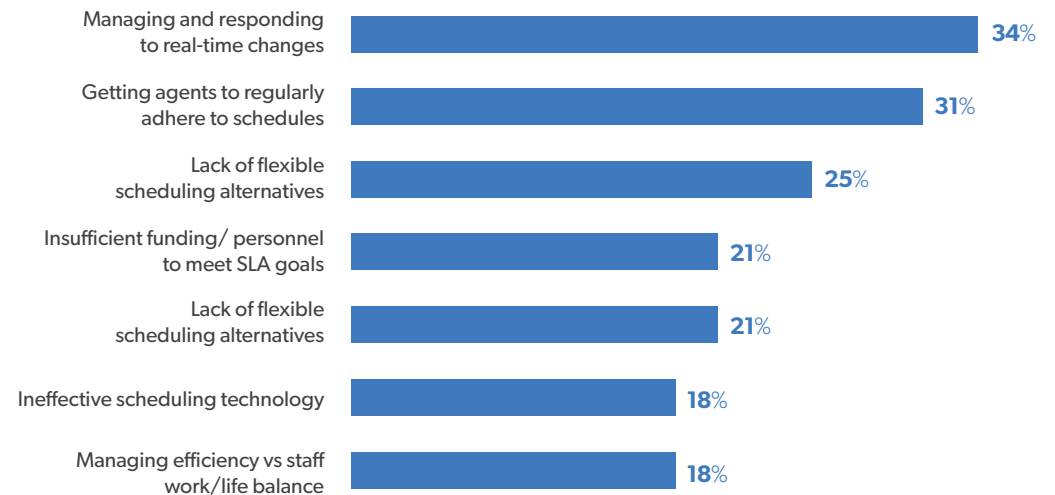


## CHALLENGES WITH WFM: INCREASED WORKLOADS AND LACK OF AUTOMATION LEAD TO BURNOUT

When it comes to our findings on WFM challenges, that statement holds true. When asked to share their top three challenges, respondents report grappling with the same issues as they did in 2017. Managing and responding to real-time changes in workload/staff availability remains the top challenge. Getting agents to adhere to schedules regularly is a close second, followed by a lack of flexible scheduling alternatives to manage workload effectively.

Why are these issues still troubling contact centers, given the substantial uptick in personnel resources devoted to workforce management? It seems the manual nature involved in performing these tasks might be to blame. More than half (59%) of contact centers are still manually managing agent schedule changes or shift swaps, which holds steady from the 60% who reported the same in 2017. And based on our research, it seems many workforce managers are dissatisfied with that process and overwhelmed with their workload. “I wish I could duplicate myself since I am currently the only one running all of WFM (forecasting, scheduling, and intraday management).”

### What are the top three scheduling challenges your contact center faces?



Percentage of respondents

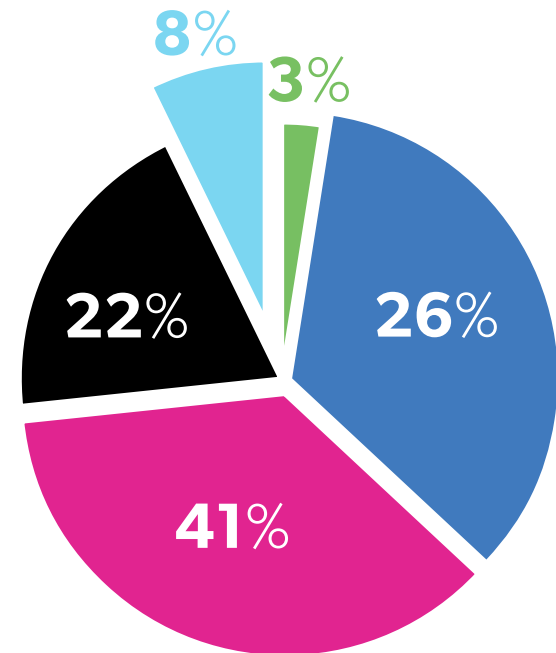
**“THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, THE MORE THINGS STAY THE SAME.”**

Only 29% of survey respondents agree or strongly agree that their current reforecasting process effectively closes the gap between net and goal staffing requirements.

It's also worth noting that while 55% of our survey participants in 2017 said their contact center employs back-office functions, that number has dropped dramatically, to just under one-third (32%) in 2021. However, in a somewhat interesting turn of events, the rate of contact centers using a WFM solution for scheduling back-office activities has risen since 2017. When asked whether or not they had interest in finding a solution that would integrate front- and back-office WFM activities, only 37% of our respondents this year said they were looking for a tool to do so.



Our current reforecasting process is effective at closing the gap between our net and goal staffing requirements.



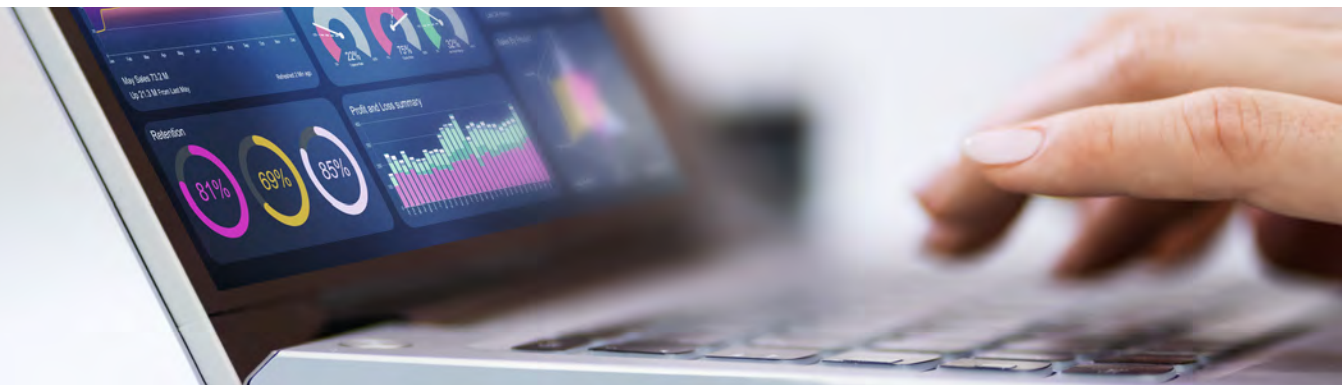
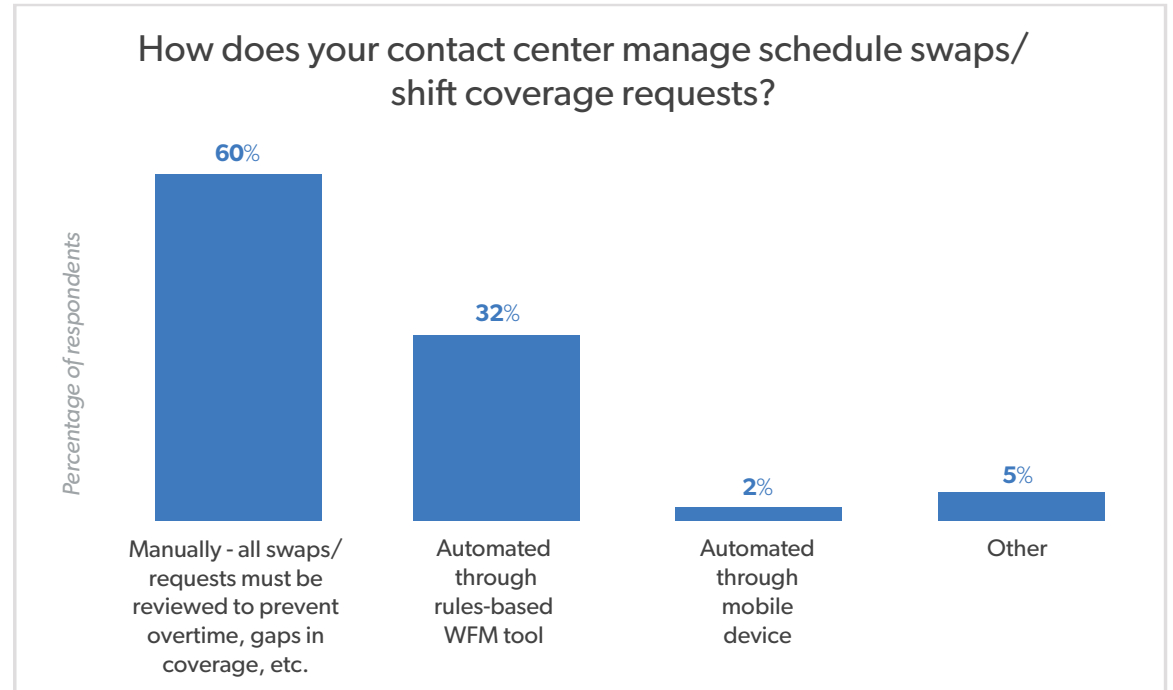
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Percentage of respondents

## HOW DO THE WFM SOLUTIONS THAT CONTACT CENTERS ARE CURRENTLY USING MEASURE UP?

Now that we've touched on "who" and "what" components of contact center WFM, let's consider the "how." In conducting this research, we sought to discover how respondents use their current workforce management tech stack. Given the fact that a majority of our respondents said they're still using manual methods for a variety of their tasks, it should come as no surprise that, by and large, it seems most contact centers either aren't using their WFM tools to their full potential or are on the hunt for new solutions.

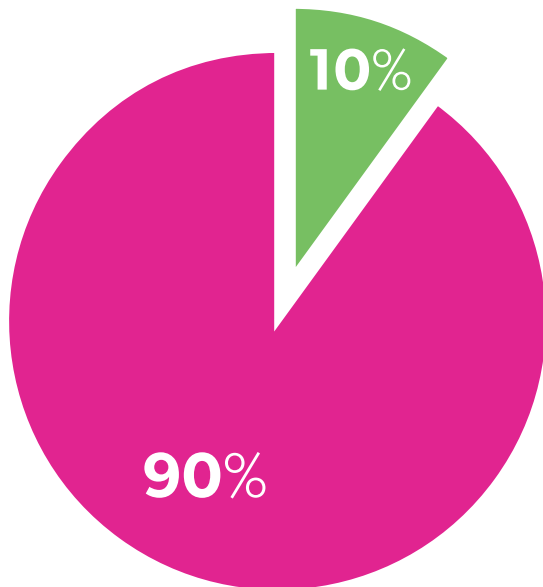
When asked how their contact center handles schedule swaps/ shift coverage requests, 60% said manually, flat from our research in 2017. Nearly one-third said they automated it through a rules-based WFM tool, and 3% said they automated it through a mobile device. And on average, respondents said they spend 8 hours per week managing PTO/shift change requests. For small-to-midsize businesses (SMBs), automation is even more scarce. Three-quarters of our respondents from the SMB segment indicated schedule-swap requests are handled manually.





In terms of intraday management, only 18% of respondents indicated that their WFM tool automates the process. And only 24% of respondents said that their tool automatically alerts them to projected interval staffing variances for contact types and channels. When asked if their WFM solution automatically recommends solutions to remedy staffing variances based on specific business rules and policies, only 10% said yes (a 7% drop from 2017).

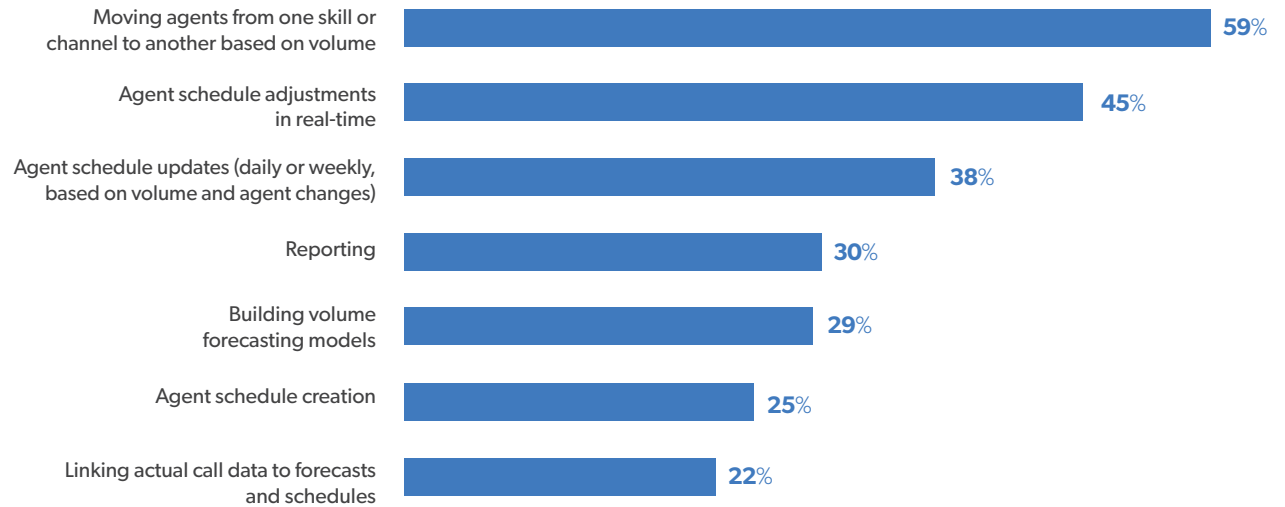
**Does your WFM system automatically recommend solutions to remedy staffing variances based on your contact center's specific business rules and policies?**



■ Yes ■ No

Percentage of respondents

**Of these manual processes, which would you like to automate? (Select all that apply.)**



Percentage of respondents

So, what do contact centers wish their WFM tool could automate? For our survey respondents, moving agents from one channel to another based on a volume is at the top of the wishlist, followed by agent schedule adjustments in real-time. It's worth noting that just 42% of survey respondents in 2017 expressed a need for automated agent channel swaps based on volume. In this year's survey, 57% of respondents said it was a top priority, which indicates the growing challenges workforce managers face in handling volume in the omnichannel contact center.

Rounding out the top three most-wanted automation features, weekly/monthly agent schedule modifications based on volume was something our survey respondents expressed an interest in having. Aside from the top three selections, nearly one-third of our respondents said they'd like access to automated reporting, too.

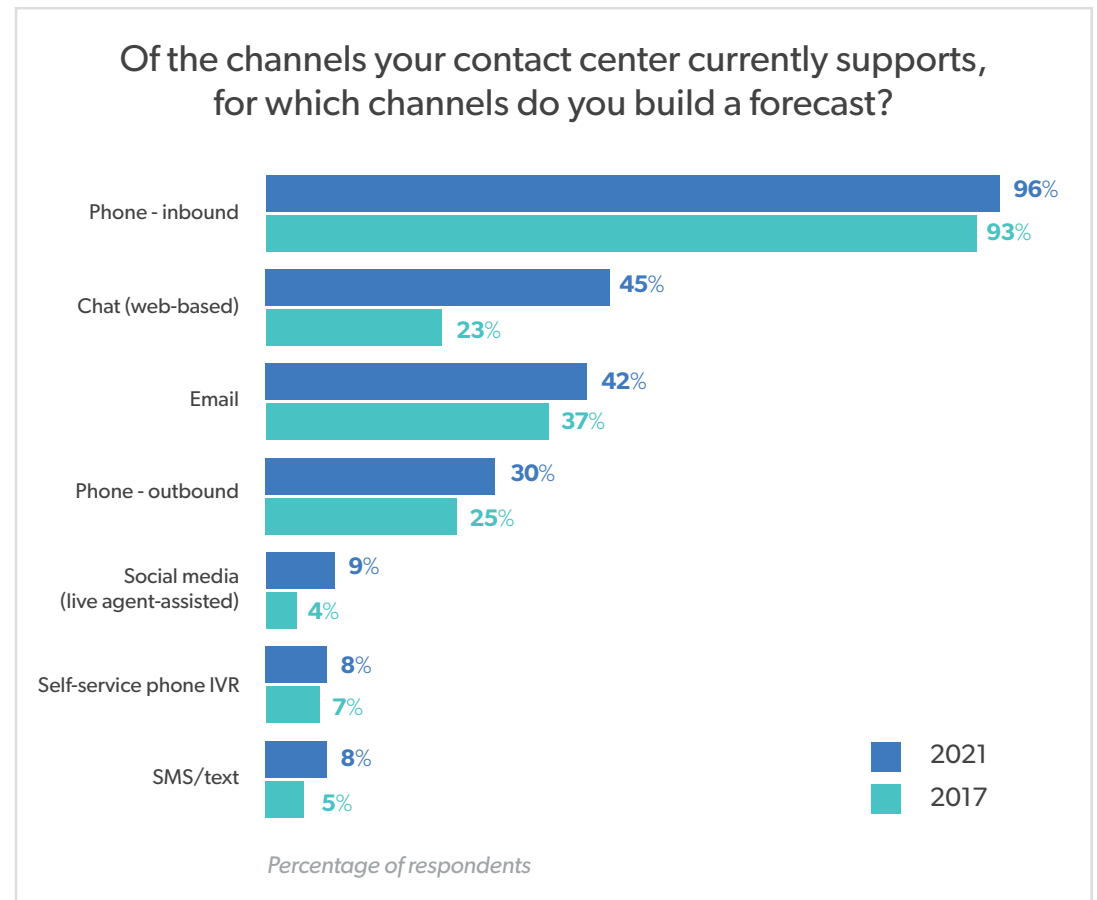
# OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT: DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION, INTRADAY MANAGEMENT, AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

## Digital Transformation in the Contact Center: What's Changed?

While digital transformation is a buzzword that's dominated the last decade, it has mixed meanings for the contact center. In some ways, the contact center has adapted and added new service channels at lightning speed. In other ways, the modern contact center has struggled to adapt. While web-based chat, social media, and SMS/text support have increased since 2017, most contact centers have struggled to find ways to measure and monitor quality in those channels.

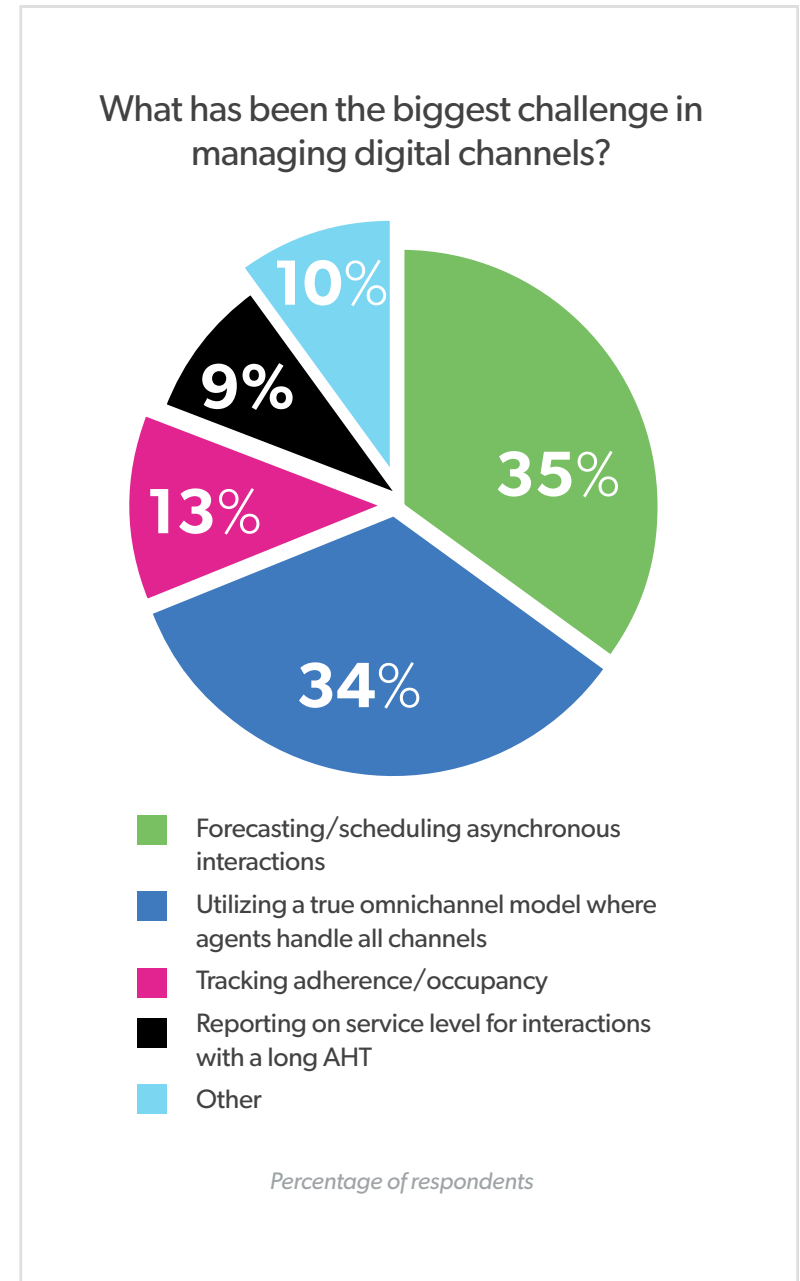
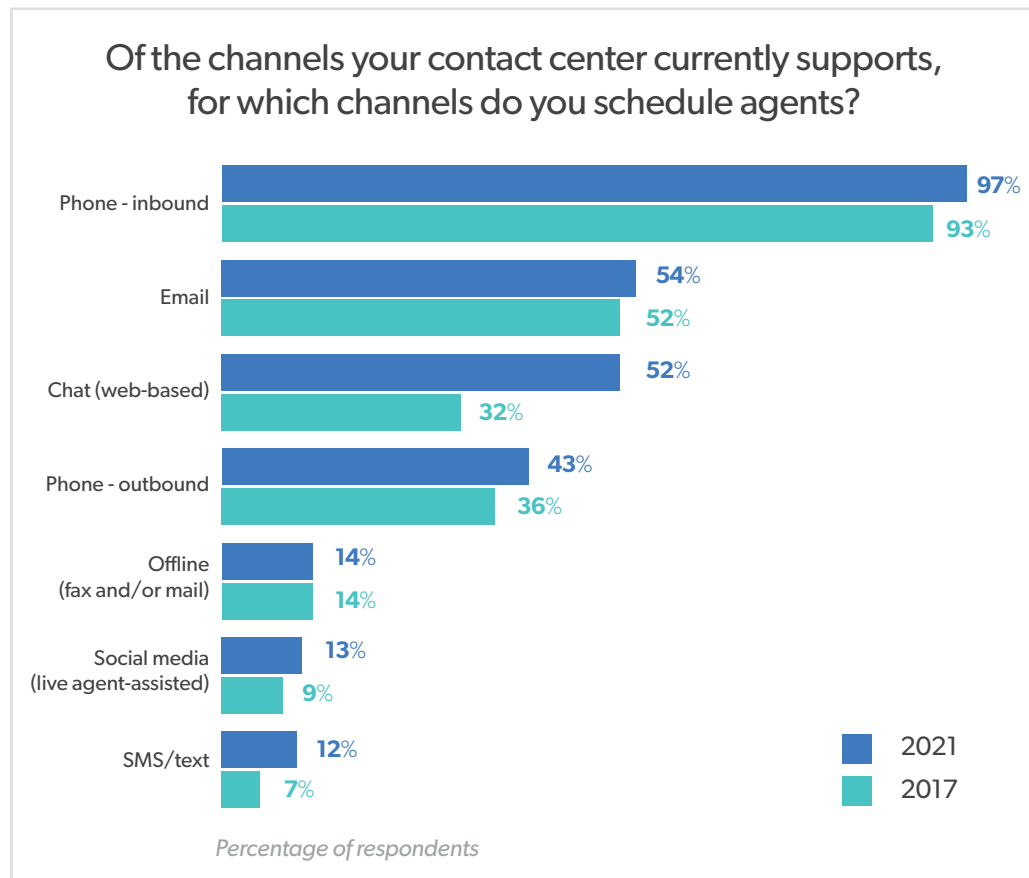
In 2017, for example, we found that only 23% of the contact centers offering live chat support built forecasts for the channel. And for live agent-assisted social media, that number sat at a mere 4%. How much progress have contact centers made in predicting volume in digital channels? The short answer: some.

When it comes to live chat support, 45% of our survey respondents reported forecasting for volume in the channel, representing a 22% increase since our last research. Workforce managers have made strides with email, social media, and SMS support, too, though the shifts are less significant. Nine percent of this year's survey respondents report forecasting for social media, 42% for email, and 8% for SMS.



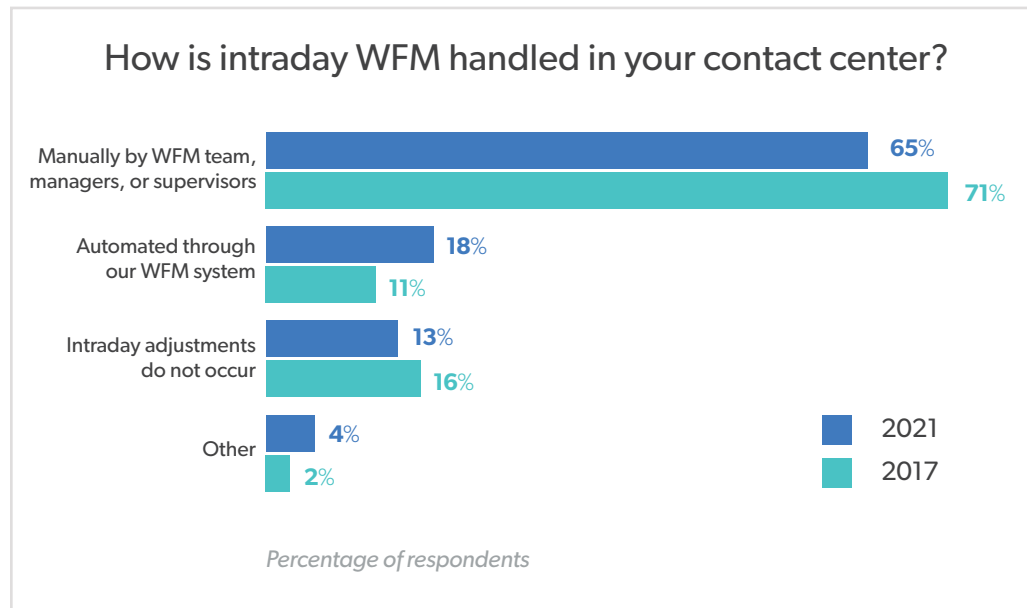
When it comes to scheduling, how do contact centers ensure they have agents available to provide support via digital channels? Only 13% of contact centers schedule agents to support social media, and only 12% for live SMS support. Once again, it appears that contact centers have begun to embrace live chat in the last four years. Of the respondents who said their contact center offers live chat, 52% said they formally schedule agents to support the channel. That represents a 20% increase since 2017.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, our survey respondents report that forecasting and scheduling are significant challenges to providing digital customer service. On a related note, contact centers still struggle to utilize a true omnichannel model where agents handle all channels.



## Intraday Management: A Tale of Then Vs. Now

In our last two research studies on WFM, we identified intraday management as a potential growth/improvement area for contact centers. Is that still the case in 2021?



When we asked survey respondents to share how their contact centers handle intraday WFM in 2017, only 11% said it was automated through their WFM system. When we asked the same question in this year’s survey, 18% of respondents indicated that their WFM system automates intraday management. And yet, 65% of respondents said the process is still managed manually.

The number of contact centers reporting that their system automatically alerts them to projected interval staffing variances for contact types and channels has dropped since 2017. While 33% of 2017 respondents said this process was automated, only 24% reported that was the case this

year. And for SMBs, manual labor is even more prevalent. Only 7% of our respondents from the SMB segment said their system automatically alerts them to variances.

Furthermore, only 10% of this year’s respondents said their WFM system automatically recommends solutions to remedy staffing variances based on their contact center’s specific business rules and policies. And only 4% of SMB respondents said their system does. In 2017, 17% of our respondents indicated their system offered automatic recommendations.

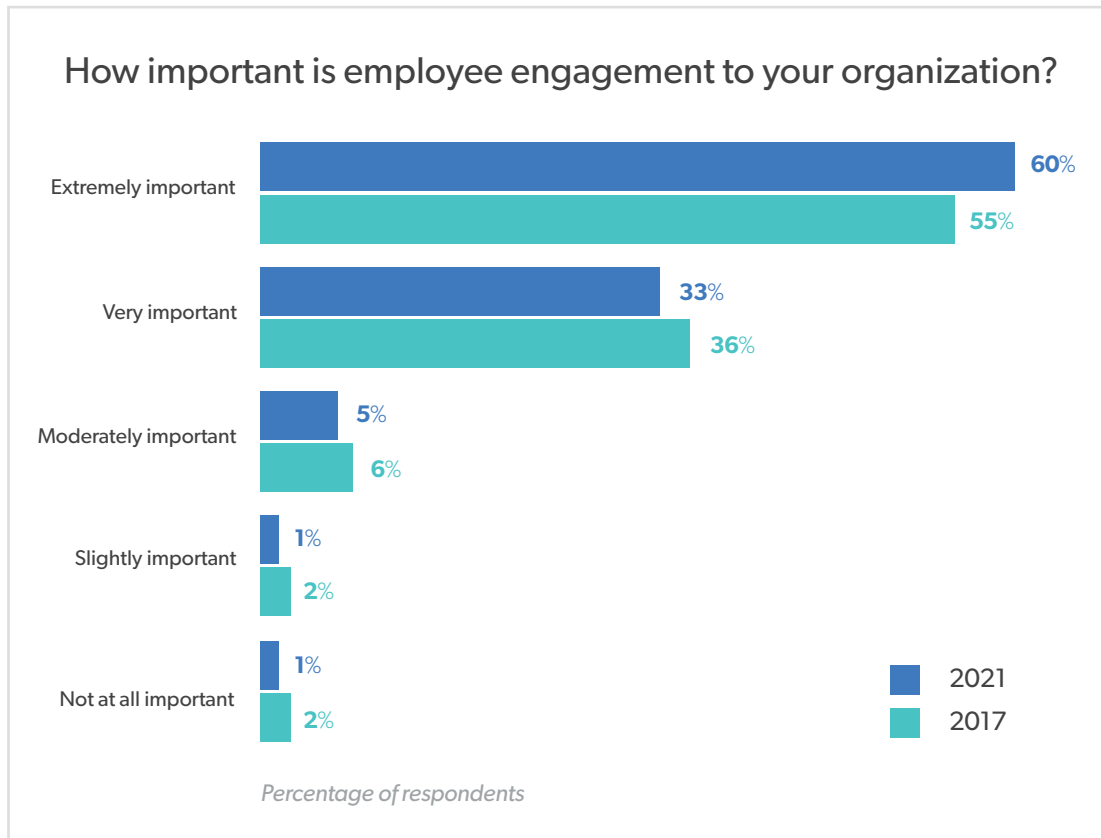




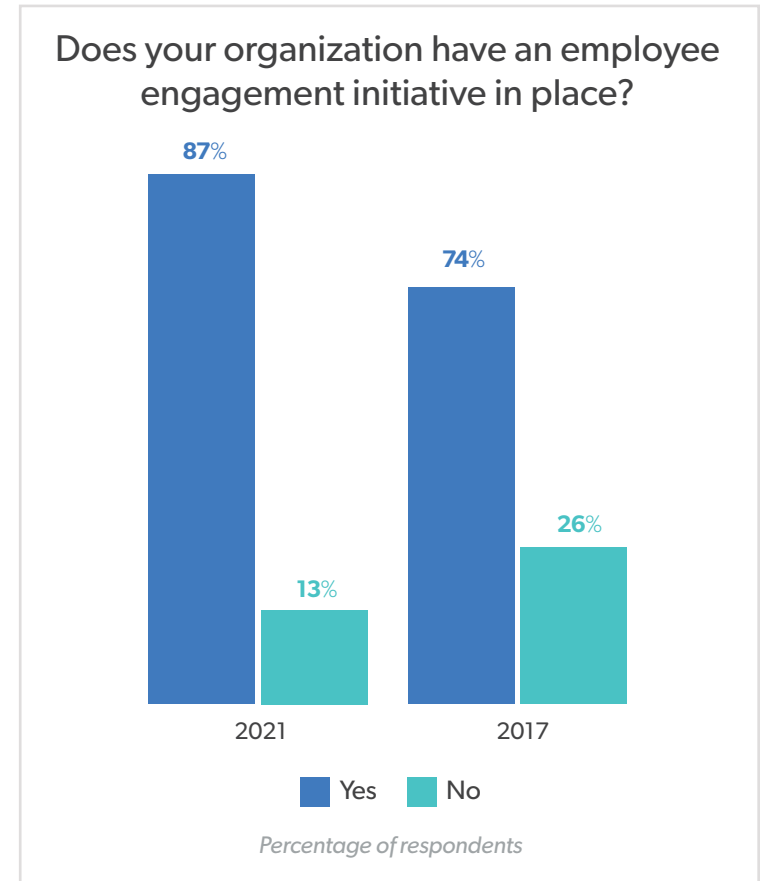
## Employee Engagement in Today's Contact Center

2020 brought unprecedented times for businesses worldwide, and contact centers experienced the impacts of higher contact volumes, staff scarcity, and a sudden shift to remote or distributed work. How did these factors impact employee engagement? While it may not come as a surprise, our survey respondents reported investing more effort into employee engagement over the past year.

When we last surveyed contact center leaders regarding employee engagement at their companies, 55% said that employee engagement was extremely important to their organization. This year, 60% said that was the case.

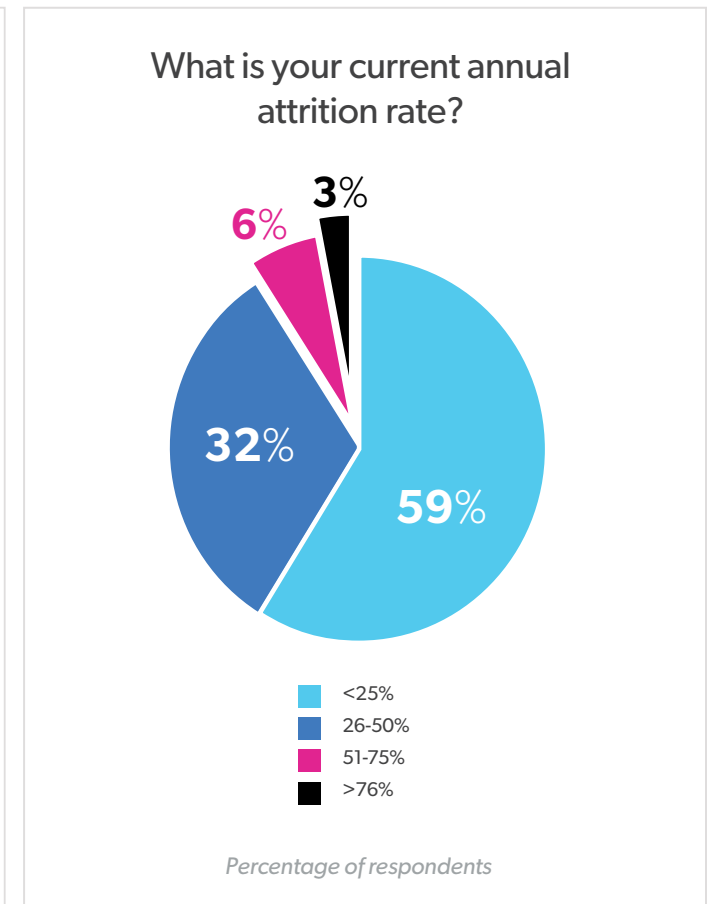
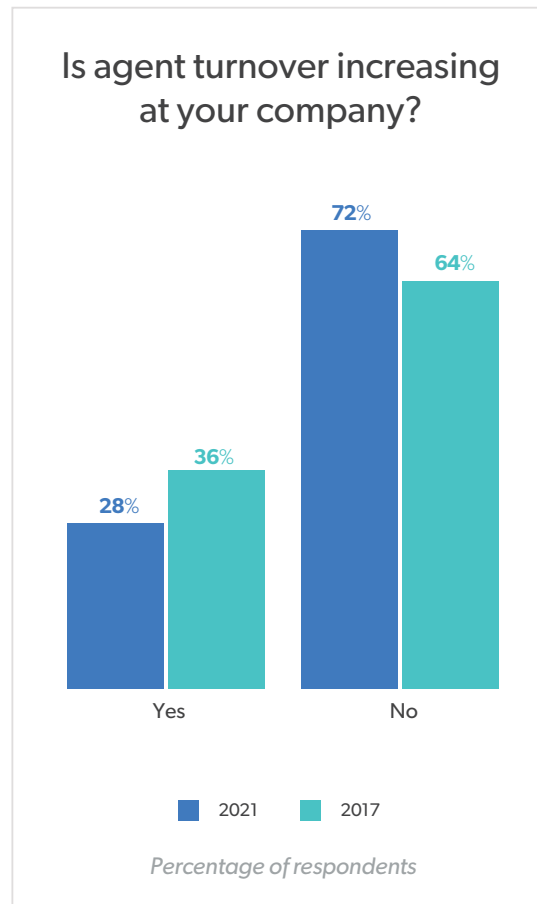
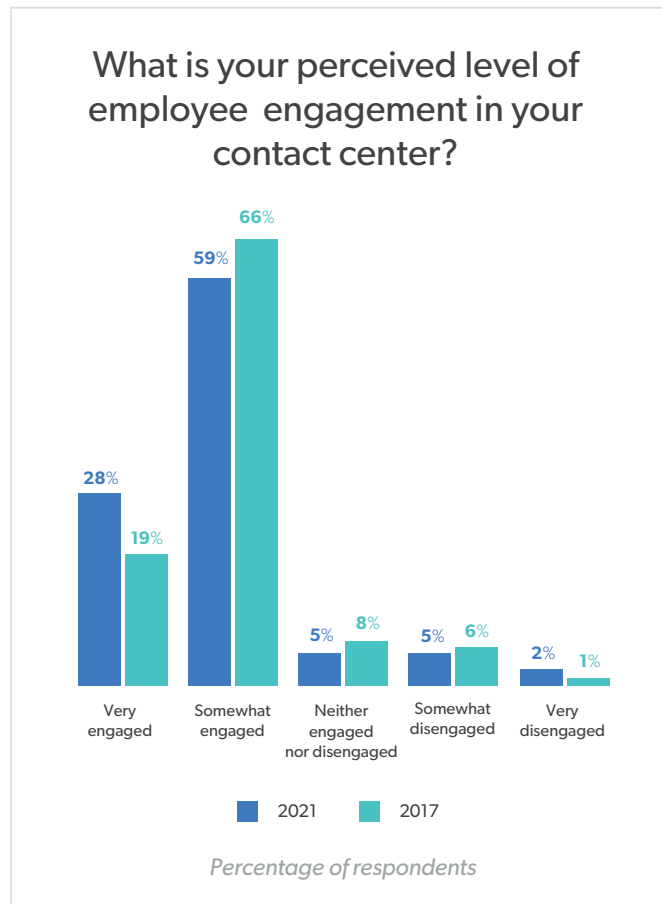


And while 74% of our respondents in 2017 reported that their organization had a formal employee engagement program in place, 87% of this year's respondents said they did.



How are those formal programs helping move the needle towards delivering a better employee experience? Twenty-eight percent of respondents believe their agents are extremely engaged, while 19% said the same in 2017. Only 7% of respondents said they think their agents are either somewhat disengaged or extremely disengaged.

But perhaps the most promising sign of improved employee engagement is the lower rate of agent turnover. Thirty-six percent of respondents in 2017 reported that agent turnover was increasing, while only 28% said the same this year. Whether or not those improvements have more to do with a volatile economy or a stronger focus on employee experience remains to be seen. However, the fact that 59% of respondents reported attrition rates lower than 25% is indicative of positive changes.



## CONCLUSION

With the significant upheaval brought about in the past year, it should come as no surprise that a large majority of contact centers will move toward permanent work-from-home or hybrid work models in the years to come. While forecasting and scheduling remain huge challenges for workforce professionals, it's encouraging to see midsize and larger contact centers invest more heavily in dedicated resources. And though the rate of manual work workforce managers are tasked with is still alarming, our survey respondents' attitudes towards automation point to the fact that broader acceptance for new technology may be on the horizon. As non-phone contacts only continue to grow exponentially, the next big challenge for contact center leaders will be finding ways to accurately forecast volume for digital channels, as well as measure the quality of those contacts. As we look towards the future, especially given the state of the workforce and economy, we expect to see adoption rates of automation, in particular, rise over the coming years.

It is our hope that this research will help to educate and inform contact center leaders, revealing gaps and opportunities for workforce management improvement.



## ABOUT THIS STUDY

The 298 respondents to this survey represent a diverse sampling of contact center industries and sizes. The largest represented sectors were financial services (21%), insurance (16%), healthcare (11%), and retail/sales/e-commerce (10%). Respondents' roles within their contact centers varied; however, the majority were senior management (19%), specialist management (28%), or mid-level management (24%).

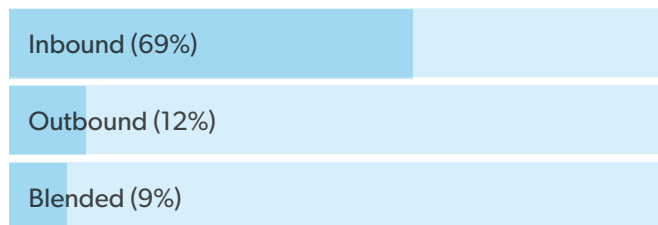
The size of the responding contact centers also varied, with 30% of respondents reporting their contact center have more than 500 seats. One-quarter of respondents reported having 100-499 agents, and another quarter report having more than 1,000 agents. Nearly three out of ten respondents have fewer than 100 agents. The majority of respondents (69%) report handling inbound contacts only, while 12% of respondents came from outbound-only contact centers and 9% from a blended environment.

Of the respondents surveyed, more than three-quarters (78%) reported that a workforce manager or team is primarily in charge of scheduling for their contact centers. Additionally, just under one-third (31%) of respondents indicated that scheduling is the primary responsibility of a contact center manager or supervisor.

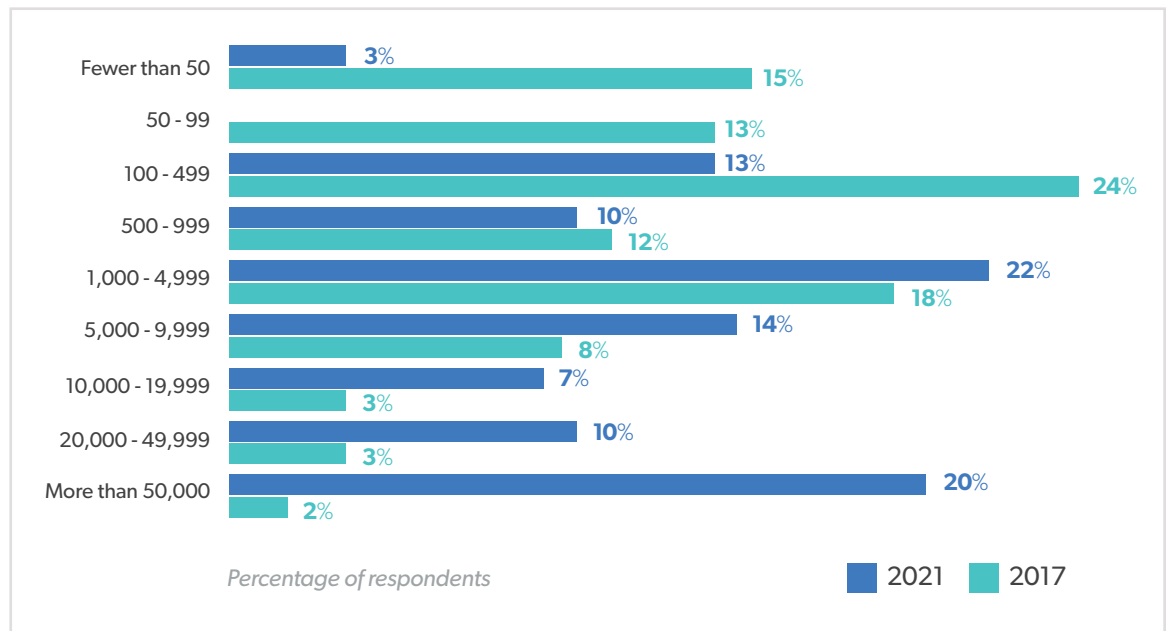
## TOP INDUSTRIES



## SERVICE TYPE



## SIZE OF COMPANY







We are all striving to be better. Whether it's being better people, better leaders, or better organizations, improvement and advancement is at the heart of our daily intentions.

For the contact center, this mission of constant improvement is fundamental to every interaction. We need to meet the expectations of our customers in ways that improve their satisfaction and brand loyalty. We need to improve employee engagement as we build their skills, knowledge, and experience in ways that grow their own loyalty and improve retention. We need to improve our organization's operational efficiencies in ways that drive revenue and improve the bottom line.

No one understands the contact center's focus on improvement like ICMI does. We champion contact centers and their people, and our mission is to make both better every day. Through training, consulting, content and events, we unite the community and empower contact centers to serve their customers better, engage their employees more, and improve the customer experience.

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