



**A homage to
contact centre agents:**
the unsung heroes of your brand

When we think about the hierarchy in a business, contact centre agents often get the short end of the stick. They're seen as the bottom rung, the entry-level folks – it's the job you do before you get a 'real job'. But that perception couldn't be more wrong – and it's one that I will never stop talking about until it changes. Believe me, spend a day in an agent's shoes and you would join me in that, in a heartbeat.

Being an agent isn't just about answering calls or responding to emails. It's a role that requires a massively diverse set of skills – from empathy and problem-solving to communication and resilience. And it's certainly not for everyone. Do it well and, in my view, you can do pretty much anything – your CV will be overflowing.

I must add here too, that working as a customer contact agent is also incredibly rewarding. You have the opportunity to make a real difference in people's lives, offering support and solutions, sometimes during their most challenging times. You can't overestimate the satisfaction of resolving issues and making customers feel valued and heard.

Changing the myths around contact centre work – and truly valuing agents – is the responsibility of businesses, employers, the contact centre industry and customers. I want contact centre roles to be celebrated, to be seen as a fulfilling career in itself with a path ahead, not just a temporary stop gap. It equips you with so many skills, and so much experience, that you can grow your role as far as you want to.



The many (many) skills required by a customer service agent

I try and spend as much time as I can on the contact centre floor, chatting and listening to our contact centre agents. Only last week I was at our [Cape Town operation](#), and it really hammered my point home about the incredible job our agents do.

For example, we have a number of financial services clients who we provide with customer services, debt services and complaints management. Here's just a glimpse of what a contract like this involves for our contact centre agents.

First, there's all the finance industry regulations to be followed. The FCA and PRA has oversight of the client and, by proxy, us and our behaviours. The client also has its own governance teams that monitor our calls. Then, there's productivity targets, scoring and feedback on performance.

Our agents also need to be prepared to support the most vulnerable of people, struggling with debt, often faced with a literal 'heat or eat' situation. They need to understand the benefits system, to suggest support options available, plus free money advice services and charities. They need to be able to pick up on triggers: is this customer in health, financial or mental distress? Is it an emergency?

It's all very sobering. This is not bottom of the rung stuff. This is tough, top-rung stuff. And yet the customer service industry often expects it to come from 'entry level' people, who in many cases are young, with little life experience under their belts to deal with this, unless underpinned with extensive training and a lot of support.

Customer agents need

(and this is by no means an exhaustive list):

- incredible communication and listening skills – and to know the process but also know when to deviate from it
- expertise in industry and client regulations and governance
- problem-solving skills, quick thinking, analytical thinking and creativity in finding solutions
- confidence, emotional intelligence, empathy, patience – and a cool head, particularly when dealing with angry and frustrated customers
- tech skills to navigate CRM systems and other software tools
- inside out knowledge of the brand and product / service
- time management, prioritisation and efficiency skills to meet productivity targets
- adaptability and an 'always learning' approach.



Dealing with complex calls

Digital channels such as chat bots have totally transformed contact centres by taking over routine tasks and the simpler transactional calls. But this leaves human agents to handle a higher concentration of more complex and sensitive issues. So, while chatbots make things more efficient, they highlight the need for skilled agents who can build trust through tough conversations.

When it comes to angry customers, some are just plain furious, and it can feel like nothing you do or say is going to make a difference. Good agents find a way to connect, adopting a 'let's solve this together' attitude. They take ownership of the problem and won't end the call until there's a solution. The worst approach is hitting angry customers with scripted responses. Agents need to disarm them without seeming patronising, which is a real skill. It takes a thick skin too of course, to do all this while staying calm.

Handling calls from vulnerable customers is, as you would imagine, emotionally taxing. Agents often listen to distressing stories about financial struggles, health issues, and personal crises. Without going into detail, I'm talking about the toughest calls you can get, ones where our agents must make a decision as to whether to get emergency services involved. That's not once a year, or even once a month these days. I would say our business takes a call like that at least once a day. Imagine trying to stay composed while hearing such upsetting things, then having to move to the next call?

And that's why I get so cross when people talk about entry level, or that it's just a job, not a career. I think, tell me what you can't do after you've dealt with all of that.



We all know how important good customer service is...

Customer service in the UK is certainly in a rough patch and customer satisfaction seems to show a year-on-year decline. The latest [UKCSI report](#) shows satisfaction levels at their lowest since 2015. Despite all the talk about ‘putting customers first’, it would seem that many businesses are not putting their money, time and investment where their mouth is. So, it’s no wonder customers are frustrated and switching to companies that actually deliver. Even in a cost-of-living crisis, the report shows people are willing to pay more for better service, proving that good customer care is more important than ever.

To quote Joanna Causon, Chief Executive of the Institute of Customer Service: “This is therefore a pivotal time to restate and redefine the value of customer service. Our latest evidence reconfirms that customer satisfaction is a business asset: over the past 5 years organisations that

have consistently earned higher satisfaction than their sector average have delivered stronger EBITDA (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization) and revenue growth than others. This should give pause for thought to organisations that consider cutting their service capabilities”.

She goes on to say (and I’m paraphrasing here, but only a little) that creating memorable customer experiences is all about personal connections. Technology helps us deliver quick, efficient service and great personalisation, but it has its limits and can be incredibly frustrating. People crave empathy, understanding, and transparency. The real magic happens when we blend technology with the human touch to deliver truly standout service. Which is frankly music to my ears, as that is what we at Sigma Connected are all about.

... so why don’t we value the contact centre agents who deliver it?

Firstly, as I’ve already mentioned, many still hold negative stereotypes about agents’ work, seeing it as monotonous, low-skill work and robotically reciting scripts. And I hope I’ve made my point as to why this is categorically not true.

Then there’s the issue that contact centre work is often dismissed as a temporary or low-level job, leading to a certain stigma around making it a career choice.

And, when they’re hiring for these roles, many businesses don’t seem to get it either. Attracting – and holding onto – the right people, matters.

You have to show your agents just how highly you regard their role. Otherwise, you risk recruiting people that see their job as just a job, lacking the passion and commitment needed for exceptional customer experiences. Or (which is possibly worse) being lucky enough to have people with that passion and commitment, then killing it through a lack of support and recognition. And guess what? Either way that results in poor customer service and high attrition rates.

How can you possibly expect your customers to love your business, if you don’t love the very people that represent your business every day, dealing with the problems, soothing the way.



Elevating the role of contact centre agents

To change the perception of agents from entry-level to indispensable, everyone in the business of customer service needs to:

Recruit carefully

Don't just go for someone with contact centre experience – recognise and seek out potential in new candidates. Look for traits like empathy, problem-solving skills, and a positive attitude, which are crucial for handling complex customer interactions. A fresh perspective can often bring innovative solutions and renewed energy to what you do.

Invest in training

Provide comprehensive training programs to grow and enhance skills and emphasise their importance. Encourage a culture of continuous learning, investing in both hard and soft skills. This not only prepares agents for the challenges they'll face, but also shows them they're hugely valued, and their growth is a top priority.

Offer career paths

Show clear advancement opportunities to motivate agents and acknowledge their contributions. Lay out a roadmap for career growth, with achievable goals and milestones. This helps keep talented employees, with role progression to aspire to and a sense of direction in their careers.

Recognise and reward

Regularly recognise and reward outstanding performance to boost morale and reinforce just how valuable your agents are. Celebrate both small wins and big achievements, whether through formal awards or simple acknowledgments. Positive reinforcement encourages a culture of excellence and motivates agents to keep up their amazing work.

Provide care and support

Have wellbeing support systems in place and ensure agents have downtime during their day. Provide access to mental health resources, counselling, and stress-relief activities. Wrapping enough care and support around each person ensures they feel looked after and can maintain their own health while helping others.

Embrace technology

Equip agents with advanced tools to make their work more efficient and less stressful. Utilise technology for routine tasks, leaving agents to handle more complex issues. Providing the right technological support can streamline processes, reduce errors, and improve overall job satisfaction.

Promote a positive culture

Foster a supportive and inclusive work environment to improve job satisfaction and retention. Encourage teamwork, open communication, and a sense of community. A positive workplace culture not only makes for happier employees but also translates into better customer service.

In short, love your agents. Show them the support you hope they then go on to show your customers.



Investing in agents is investing in growth

Call centre work today is so different from when I first started in the industry. Back then, it was mostly sales and collections, but now it covers the full gamut of tasks. Being a contact centre agent is anything but simple. It demands a huge skill set and plays a crucial role in a company's success.

The requirements are exponentially more diverse, exponentially more challenging, and you're constantly battling preconceived notions about contact centres. However, if you excel in it, it's immensely rewarding. You're

well-positioned for a very fruitful career in customer contact. Or, if you choose, you can take a different career path, armed with a resume packed with an enormous set of valuable skills.

By changing our perception, we're not only investing in agents' growth and job satisfaction, but we're also investing in improving customer experience, brand loyalty, and greater business success.



We're Sigma Connected, we're different

We deliver customer support services with a difference. Being 'human centred' is the most important thing to us and it runs through everything we do. Our whole approach to customer services is about keeping the human touch and treating customers with empathy and understanding. And that starts with how we structure and run our business.

We recruit carefully and are committed to **Impact Sourcing** as a recruitment method. We make sure all our employees feel happy, motivated, supported and rewarded. We're known for it, so we attract – and keep – the best people. People who love their jobs and know how to deliver amazing customer experiences.

Whether we deliver from our UK or Cape Town operations, our dedication to our people translates directly into high-quality service, as our agents feel appreciated and empowered to go above and beyond in every interaction.



We've been named for the second year in a row as one of the UK's top employers in the prestigious [The Sunday Times Best Places to Work list](#).

If you'd like to find out more, please get in touch, we'd love to hear from you.

[Get Connected](#)



Where people



with people



www.sigmaconnected.com