

3

**Strategies to
improve customer
service flexibility**

liveops

How (and why) to boost flexibility in your contact center strategy

What does it cost you when your agents are sitting idle? Or worse, how does customer experience suffer when too many calls come in and wait times increase?

Enterprise contact centers constantly fight a tug-of-war: the need to build capacity while avoiding overstaffing. They add extra capacity so they're prepared for potential spikes and can service customers quickly. On the flip-side, they will waste resources when agents are idle. However, if they don't build this extra capacity, customers get frustrated due to long hold times and can abandon the brand.

It's impossible to predict the exact level of activity you'll experience in your contact center. Very few businesses have a consistent flow of customer service demand. Across a variety of industries, all businesses experience spikes in activity, whether they are seasonal or event-based.

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The retail industry is a great example. Think of insurance companies after a natural disaster, or airlines managing bookings after a major weather delay. Seasonal spikes in customer demand, unexpected service needs, or a wildly successful product launch all put additional pressure on organizations to respond rapidly.



This white paper explores three strategies modern, flexible contact center solutions offer to handle call spikes. Each offers greater flexibility and business agility while preserving service quality.

Sometimes the causes are understood—even anticipated. In many cases, these peak periods overburden call center resources and ultimately diminish the customer experience. No company is immune to spikes and lulls, but more flexible contact center models—powered by the gig economy—are better able to adapt than more traditional models.

Companies that use contingent workforces find breakthroughs in cost, quality and flexibility. In fact, the total number of gig-workers in the U.S. is now 53–68 million, or 35% of the total civilian labor force and growing to 50% by 2020¹.



TRADITIONAL CONTACT CENTER



FLEXIBLE WORK-AT-HOME

Ramp-up time	Typically require weeks to prepare for increased call volume.	On-demand agents can ramp up in a matter of hours.
Scalability	Resources can't scale quickly to cover unexpected emergency shifts or a late-night rush.	Supports a 24x7 schedule, meets non-standard schedule demands, accommodates last-minute schedule changes, and can scale for call volume spikes and unexpected activity.
Hold times	Often get overloaded and customers are stuck on hold. Service quality drops and call abandon rates go up.	Agents are proven to deliver faster call resolution and measurable improvement in CSAT and NPS scores.

Identify bursting trends—the answers lie in your data.

Spikes are inevitable. You can't always predict customer behavior, market conditions, weather, and even trends-based forecasting is imprecise. Forecasting demand is like forecasting the weather—it's hard and ultimately imprecise because there are too many influencing factors to always predict accurately.

Instead, plan as much as you can and deploy an approach that provides flexibility for unanticipated bursts or reductions. Leverage history to see your way forward. If it's happened before, it's likely to happen again.

The great thing about working in the contact center industry is that data is everywhere. The bad thing is that data is everywhere. How do you put that data into action?

Source: 1. McKinsey, <http://www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/employment-and-growth/independent-work-choice-necessity-and-the-gig-economy>

1. Predictive analytics is an invaluable tool.

Software from vendors such as IBM, SAP, Oracle and Microsoft use data mining, machine learning and statistical techniques to extract information from data sets to uncover patterns, trends, and predict outcomes.

2. Review past performance in call volume, service level, handle time and customer satisfaction.

Apply past solutions to upcoming problems. For example: How many agents will be needed on Christmas? How will a new product launch affect call volume?

Look at the previous two months and label the spikes as planned or unplanned. Note any patterns that are present. For instance, many businesses tend to have spikes on Mondays after being closed during the weekend. This data can help you optimize staffing with more agents available on Monday, or any day when you anticipate spikes will occur.

3. Research historical trends and demand forecast.

Use this to estimate call volume and staffing requirements during future busy periods. If your company experiences multiple busy periods, be sure to compare each period individually. Here are two things we recommend you start with on this journey.

For instance, at Liveops we work with a global floral provider to examine the volume of calls they historically handled around Valentine's day, Mother's Day, and Christmas, comparing the same holidays, year over year. Doing the proper analysis up front and on an ongoing basis, while also providing buffer staffing, enabled them to effectively manage these seasonal fluctuations outside of the normal "run rate" call volume, giving them a competitive advantage in an increasingly competitive market.

At Liveops, we average around 70,000 calls per day. During our busiest week, we've handled over 700,000 calls. That's a lot of data across different industries, various seasons, and events. We're able to leverage that data to review historical industry call volume, as well as any call volume forecasts, media spends or promotion information provided by our clients to develop a forecast. That forecast is monitored and adjusted as necessary on a monthly, weekly, or even hourly basis. Changes are made to adjust for trends, weather, and any unexpected events.

4. Tracking and analyzing call volume is an ongoing process.

Changes in the market, or within your own organization, may dictate alterations in the trends. Taking the time to really look at your data will help you plan and strategize for the future.

40%
OF CONTACT
CENTERS HAVE NO
DATA ANALYSIS
TOOLS, DESPITE
ANALYTICS BEING
VOTED THE

#1
FACTOR TO
CHANGE THE
INDUSTRY WITHIN
THE NEXT 5
YEARS.²

Effectively managing seasonal fluctuations outside of the normal "run rate" call volume gave them a competitive advantage.

2. Dimension Data study, <https://www2.dimensiondata.com/>

Plan for the worst; be ready to flex.

Spikes are inevitable so plan as much as you can. After you get the lay of the land during known busy periods, start identifying ways to handle the spikes you know and prepare a contingency plan for the spikes you don't know. Consider all the ways your company can manage an increase in activity while maintaining service quality and customer satisfaction. There are a few things you should consider when planning.

First, ask yourself what resources are available internally. Are you asking everyone, including your customer service leaders, to drop what they're working on to take calls? The all-hands-on-deck approach is fairly common. But, does this strategy really work to deliver good customer service? Is it sustainable over time and cost-effective?

Are there other channels you can offer to customers to help mitigate call volume, such as live chat, SMS, email or consider social approaches, to help ease the pain when customer inquiries increase? These other channels can help with the call surge. A recent study by Harvard Business Review found that the more channels a customer uses, the more valuable they are to your business³. Customers who use four or more channels spend 9% more in the store, on average, when compared to those who use just one channel.

It isn't surprising that contact centers are using multiple channels to reach their customers today. Customers expect to be able to interact with a company via any channel.

91%
OF RETAIL
BRANDS USE TWO
OR MORE SOCIAL
MEDIA CHANNELS⁴

<35%
OF CUSTOMERS
EXPECT TO
BE ABLE TO
CONTACT THE
SAME CUSTOMER
SERVICE REP ON
ANY CHANNEL⁵



*Companies with **strong omnichannel** customer engagement on average **retain 89%** of their customers, vs. **33%** for companies with weak engagement.⁶*

3. Harvard Business Review, <https://hbr.org/2017/01/a-study-of-46000-shoppers-shows-that-omnichannel-retailing-works>

4. Pew Research Center, <http://www.adweek.com/digital/yesmail-retail-brands-social-media-channels/>

5. Zendesk, <http://d16cvnquvjw7pr.cloudfront.net/resources/whitepapers/Omnichannel-Customer-Service-Gap.pdf>

6. Aberdeen Group, <https://www.digitalcommerce360.com/2013/12/31/why-omnichannel-strategy-matters/>

Providing interconnected channels to customers for a seamless experience when contacting your company can be key during times when spikes occur in your contact center. Where customers are concerned, perception is reality. Get it right and customers will perceive:

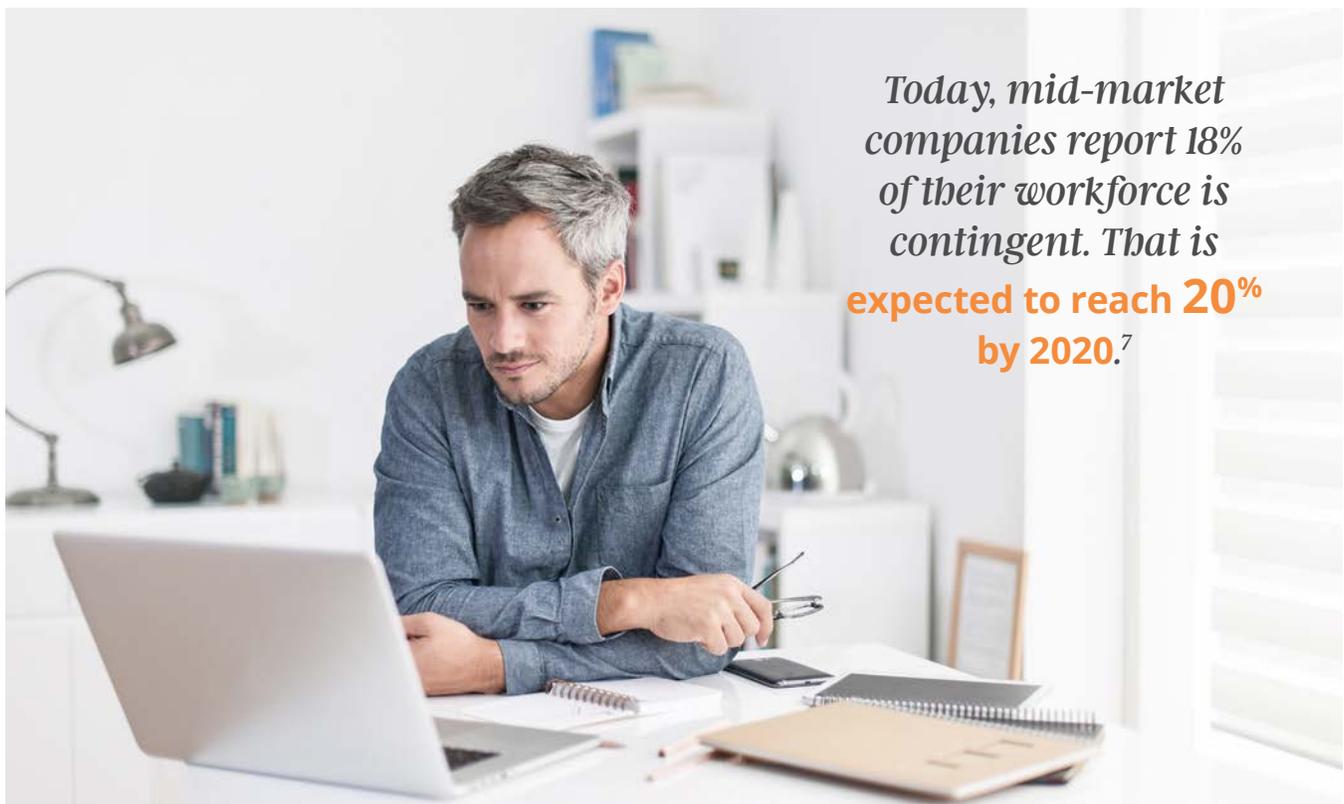
- Immediate access
- A sense of control
- Speed of resolution
- A sense they matter in the process

Finally, are you open to distributing your customer service workload offsite? Be careful how you approach this. For decades, companies hired full-time call center employees supplemented with extra staff during peak seasons, tried to cut costs by moving work offshore, and then smothered it all under “press 5 to be ignored.”

These choices sacrificed quality when workers were unable to live up to customers’ expectations, and when call volumes spiked beyond available capacity.

Once you’ve analyzed your bursts and you’re in planning mode, determine which model best fits your business. Is it:

- One with rigid staffing, where you’re either paying for downtime during slowdowns, or suffering bad CX during bursts?
- Or is it a flexible model that allows for nimble, on-the-fly adjustments?



Today, mid-market companies report 18% of their workforce is contingent. That is expected to reach 20% by 2020.⁷

7. Ernst & Young, <https://betterworkingworld.ey.com/growth/the-gig-economy-a-chance-to-control-your-costs-or-accelerate-your-growth>

Evaluate outsourcing partners.

One way to manage unforeseen spikes in activity is by partnering with a contact center services provider. Before you engage a customer service solution, be it a traditional brick-and-mortar call center, work-at-home employee base, or a flexible workforce delivery model, you must understand the lifecycle of this important partnership.

The surprising solution is more nuanced and agile than just adding staff during peak periods. It's leveraging the gig economy; i.e. a contingent, on-demand, distributed workforce.

Many companies realize that when they solely rely on the traditional brick-and-mortar model, flexibility and quality can suffer. Why put your valuable customers in the hands of brick-and-mortar call center employees? Why deal with rigid staffing practices that either lead to costly idle agents or create a poor customer experience?

Forward-thinking business leaders are using "flex" workers as part of their contact center strategy to be more nimble, reduce costs, and quickly respond to wild swings in customer demand. Flex workers perform critical business functions such as customer service, sales, tech support and more.

According to research from Ernst and Young, 18% of the workforce at mid-market companies is contingent, and that's expected to reach 20% by 2020. At large corporations, those numbers are 15% to 19%, respectively.

Even a model with agents working from home on fixed hours creates the same quality and scalability challenges found in the traditional brick-and-mortar model. That's why a flexible workforce is more desirable.

<80%
OF FORTUNE
500 COMPANIES
ARE USING OR
PLANNING TO
USE HOME-BASED
AGENTS.⁸

Major differences based on where agents work:



	BPO EMPLOYEE ⁸	WORK-AT-HOME EMPLOYEE ⁸	FLEXIBLE WORKFORCE ⁹
Average age	23	30	38
College educated	35%	70%	81%
Work experience	5 years	8 years	15 years
Geographically unbound	no	no	yes
Ongoing skill development	unlikely	unlikely	yes
Staffing efficiency	fixed	fixed	flexible

8. Frost & Sullivan, <http://www.frost.com/sublib/display-report> 9. Liveops Agent Survey, 2017

Companies often struggle to find the right workers—a challenge that can be multiplied by a limited pool of local talent and competing employers. In a more flexible model, you're able to focus on finding the best quality people for the job, with relevant experience, who are motivated to invest time in your company. Rather than just settling for the talent available locally, you are able to leverage the gig economy to flex your business with the best talent.

For example, let's say you need a team of experts with insurance backgrounds who are fluent in Spanish. With a flexible model, you can widen the geographical net as far as possible to increase your chances of finding the perfect match.

In a flexible model, you focus on finding the best people for the job, rather than settling for local talent.

In fact, Liveops on-demand agents schedule the services they provide based on our client's needs and call volume. For example, we may open the schedule for 500 certified agents to schedule themselves for one half-hour, 2,000 the next half-hour and then scale back down to 500 in subsequent time periods.

Unscheduled agents are notified when callers are placed in a queue, so they can log on to help eliminate the queue, and then log off when they aren't needed.

Rigid staffing in traditional call centers vs. flexible, on-demand staffing with virtual agents:



Case study: Major medical supplier

Liveops works with a major medical supply company that has grown to serve more than 260,000 patients to distribute mail-order diabetic supplies. As the company attracted new patients through short-form commercials, they would upsell complementary products and services to help patients simplify their medical needs.

Short-form media became a great way to promote the company's brand and grow its patient pool. The commercials, however, aired often and at irregular hours, which led to an influx of calls that traditional contact centers could not service or staff around the clock.

Liveops was able to handle the company's unpredictable call demands and customer service needs, sourcing additional, HIPPA-certified, independent agents to ensure demands would be met.

Today, they are able to quickly meet scale requirements by ramping up agents on an ongoing, as-needed basis. Agents schedule call shifts in 30-minute call blocks, which has dramatically helped meet surges in call demand due to larger short-form media buys, while maintaining a healthy level of agent utilization when volume is lower after airings have ended.

Get started with a flexible approach.

One thing is constant in businesses that rely on customer service—there will always be ups and downs in customer activity. Optimizing your contact center approach for better flexibility ensures you'll be prepared for unpredictable fluctuations so that it isn't such a shock to the system.

Every customer service executive is looking for flexibility without sacrificing quality. If your customer service workforce today isn't as flexible as your business needs demand, or isn't delivering the customer satisfaction your brand demands during those peak times, consider using flexible, on-demand talent to supplement permanent staff.

Visit us at liveops.com, or call 1.800.908.4502 to learn more or request a quote.



Liveops offers an on-demand skilled workforce of onshore agents for customer service and sales. More than 400 organizations across service industries including retail, health care, insurance and telecom trust Liveops to deliver an enterprise-grade workforce, with faster program readiness, increased revenue, and greater customer satisfaction scores than traditional call centers. Visit liveops.com or contact sales@liveops.com to learn more or talk to one of our solutions experts.