

How to Battle Contact Center Agent Burnout



Research Report



Toister Performance Solutions, Inc.

Table of Contents

Overview	3
Executive Summary	4
<i>Key Findings</i>	4
<i>Surprises</i>	4
Study Design	5
<i>Burnout Survey</i>	5
<i>Responses</i>	6
<i>Survey Analysis</i>	6
Study Results	7
Conclusions	23
<i>Profile: Agent at Risk of Burnout</i>	23
<i>Profile: Agent with Low Burnout Risk</i>	23
Recommendations	24

Written by: Jeff Toister

Toister Performance Solutions, Inc.
5694 Mission Center Rd #264
San Diego, CA 92108

619-955-7946
jeff@toistersolutions.com



About the author

Jeff Toister is an author, consultant, and trainer who helps customer service teams unlock their hidden potential. He wrote *Service Failure: The Real Reasons Employees Struggle with Customer Service and What You Can Do About It*. He's also appeared in several customer service training videos on Lynda.com.

Overview

Agent burnout is a huge problem for contact centers.

Incredibly, 74 percent of contact center agents are at risk of burnout. A whopping 30 percent of agents face a **severe burnout risk**.

What is burnout?

Here's a definition from the [U.S. National Library of Medicine](#):

Burnout is a psychological term that refers to long-term exhaustion and diminished interest in work.

Key symptoms include:

- Emotional exhaustion
- Alienation from job-related activities
- Reduced performance

One survey from ICMI ranked agent burnout as the **second biggest** contact center agent issue. That's because there are many operational problems that can be linked to burnout:

- Low agent engagement
- Poor customer service
- High attrition and absenteeism

That's why Toister Performance Solutions launched a contact center agent burnout study in May of 2016. This report contains the results along with suggestions to help your agents avoid burnout risk.



Executive Summary



Contact center agents fundamentally want to deliver good service. Their burnout risk increases substantially when they believe their contact center is making it hard for them to do this.

The risk of burnout declines when agents feel their contact center is customer-focused, they feel empowered to provide great service, and they trust their co-workers to do the same.

Key Findings

Here are a few statistics from the study.

Customer-Focus

- 52% of agents who are at severe risk of burnout said their company **is not customer-focused**.
- 95% of agents who faced little to no risk of burnout said their company **is customer-focused**.

Empowerment

- 41% of agents who are at severe risk of burnout said they **don't feel empowered**.
- 92% of agents not at risk of burnout felt they **are empowered**.

Trust

- 36% of agents with a severe burnout risk think their co-workers **don't provide** outstanding service.
- 92% of agents not at risk of burnout felt their co-workers **do provide** outstanding service.

This data suggests that the number one thing a contact center can do to avoid agent burnout is create a strong customer service culture.

Surprises

The results contained a few surprises. For example, there's a lower risk of burnout among agents in contact centers that have a display board showing real-time metrics like calls in queue. These boards are often linked to agent stress, so it was an unexpected finding.

Study Design

The study consisted of a two-part anonymous survey given to contact center agents.

Burnout Survey

The first part of the survey was a 15 question burnout self-assessment from the [MindTools website](#). Participants received a burnout score that ranged from 15 to 75.

Scores were classified using the following table recommended by the self-assessment's authors:

Score	Comment
15 - 32	Little to no risk of burnout
33 - 49	At risk of burnout
50 - 75	Severe risk of burnout

The second part of the survey consisted of 15 questions about the participants' workplace and lifestyle:

1. How many agents work in your contact center?
2. Does your contact center have a display board that shows real-time data such as number of calls in queue, average wait time, service level, etc.?
3. Are you held to at least one productivity standard such as average handle time, number of tickets closed, etc.?
4. Do you have a schedule adherence standard you must meet?
5. Do you receive regular feedback from your boss?
6. Does your contact center use gamification to help motivate agents?
7. Do you believe your company is customer focused?
8. Do you feel your co-workers generally deliver outstanding customer service?
9. On average, how many different software programs do you use to serve your customers?
10. How many computer monitors do you have at your workstation?
11. How long does it usually take you to get to work?
12. How much sleep do you usually get per night?
13. Approximately how much caffeine do you typically consume per day?
14. Do you feel empowered to help customers with most of their needs?
15. Are you given a numerical score when your contacts are monitored?

The questions were selected based on research suggesting each one might have a relationship with agent burnout.

Participants were able to enter a random prize drawing as an enticement to complete the survey. The prizes awarded were:

- **1st prize:** \$100 Amazon gift card
- **2nd prize:** \$50 Amazon gift card
- **3rd prize:** \$25 Starbucks gift card

Responses

A total of 637 responses were received.

The anonymous nature of the survey made it difficult to track participant demographics, but here are some general statistics:

- More than 10 contact centers from the U.S. and Canada are represented.
- Industries include retail, software, and banking.
- Contact center sizes ranged from less than 25 to more than 300.

It's worth noting that 74% of participants reported burnout self-assessment scores of 33 or higher, indicating they are at risk of burnout.

Survey Analysis

The survey was analyzed by comparing the responses from two groups:

- **Not At Risk** (32 or lower on the burnout self-assessment)
- **At Risk** (33 or higher on the burnout self-assessment)

A question with a difference of 10 percentage points or more between responses from the Not At Risk and At Risk groups indicates a strong relationship between that question and burnout.

The results are reviewed in greater detail on the following pages.

Study Results

The average burnout risk score was 42. A total of 74% of participants scored at least a 33 on the burnout self-assessment, indicating they are at risk of burnout.

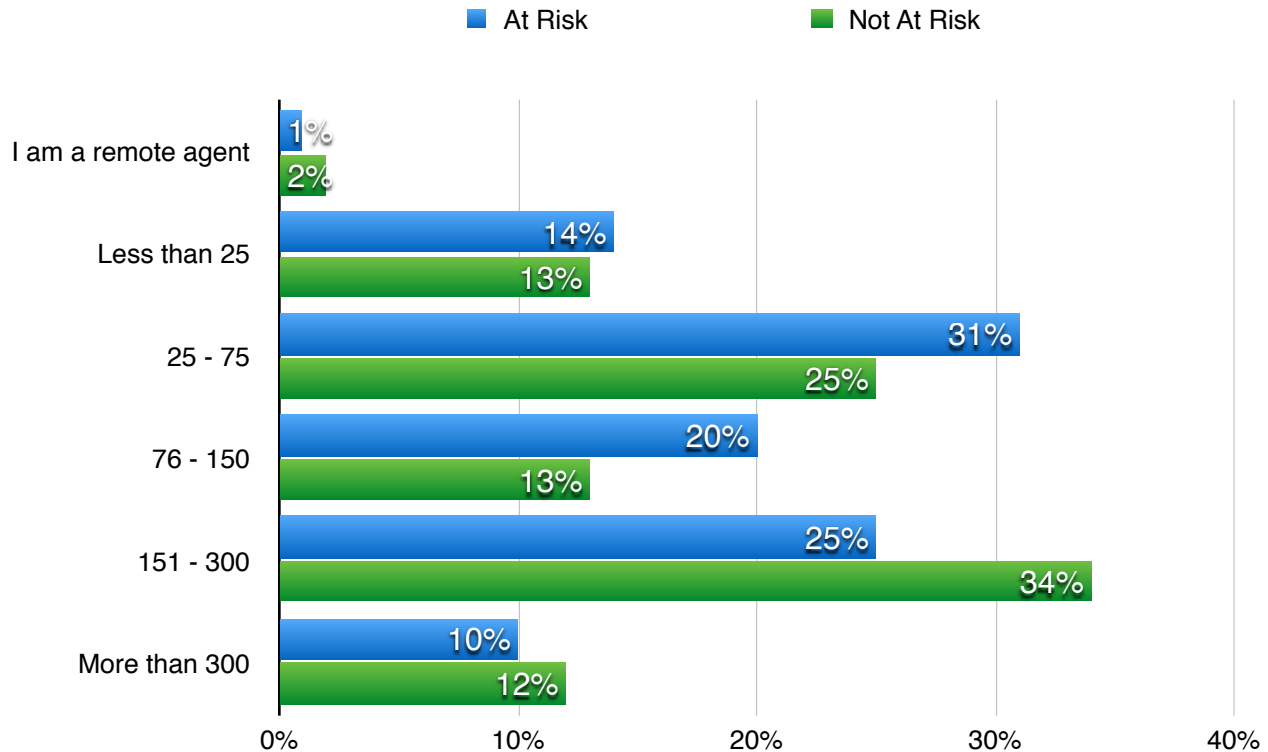
The data revealed 8 of 15 items on the survey are related to burnout risk:

Finding	Item #
Related to Burnout	2. A lack of a display board with real-time metrics. 5. Not receiving regular feedback from the boss. 6. Not using gamification. 7. A belief that the company is not customer-focused. 8. Feeling co-workers don't deliver outstanding service. 10. Having two or more computer monitors. 12. Getting less than 7 hours of sleep per night. 14. Not feeling empowered to serve customers.
Inconclusive	1. The number of agents working in the contact center. 11. The agents' average commute time.
Not Related to Burnout	3. Being held to a productivity standard. 4. Having a schedule adherence standard. 9. The number of software programs typically used. 13. Average daily caffeine intake. 15. A numerical score for contacts that are monitored.

The following pages contain the results and analysis for each individual question.

Question #1:

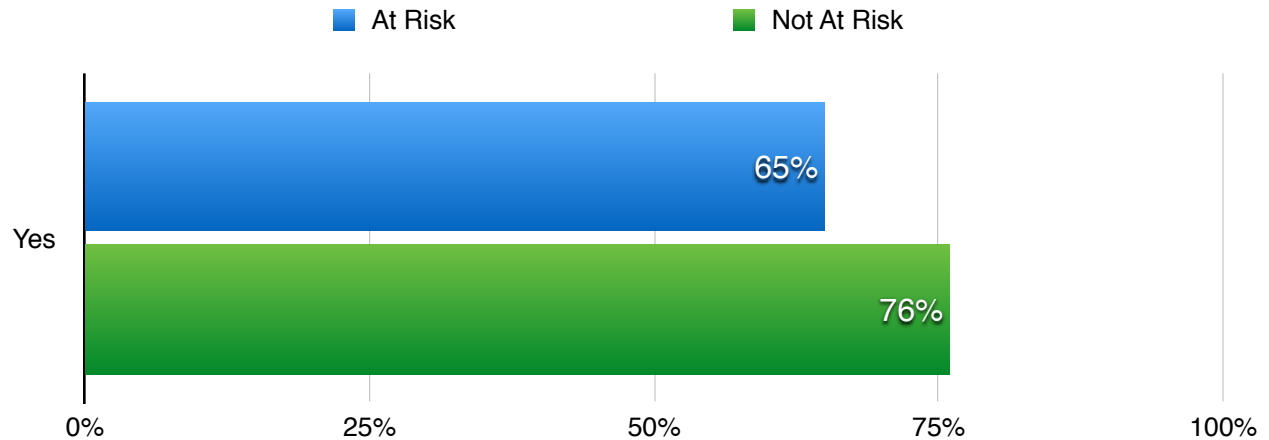
How many agents work in your contact center?



<p>Hypothesis</p>	<p>Agents in larger contact centers are more likely to be at risk of burnout.</p> <p>Why? Bigger companies tend to provide worse service and have less engaged employees. The findings are summarized in this blog post.</p>
<p>Result</p>	<p>Inconclusive</p>
<p>Discussion</p>	<p>The results were the opposite of the hypothesis, but the differences weren't huge.</p> <p>Agents in contact centers with 76 - 150 agents had the highest average burnout risk score of 46. The next highest average was 43 for contact centers with 25 - 75 agents. There weren't enough remote agents in the study to draw any conclusions about them.</p>

Question #2:

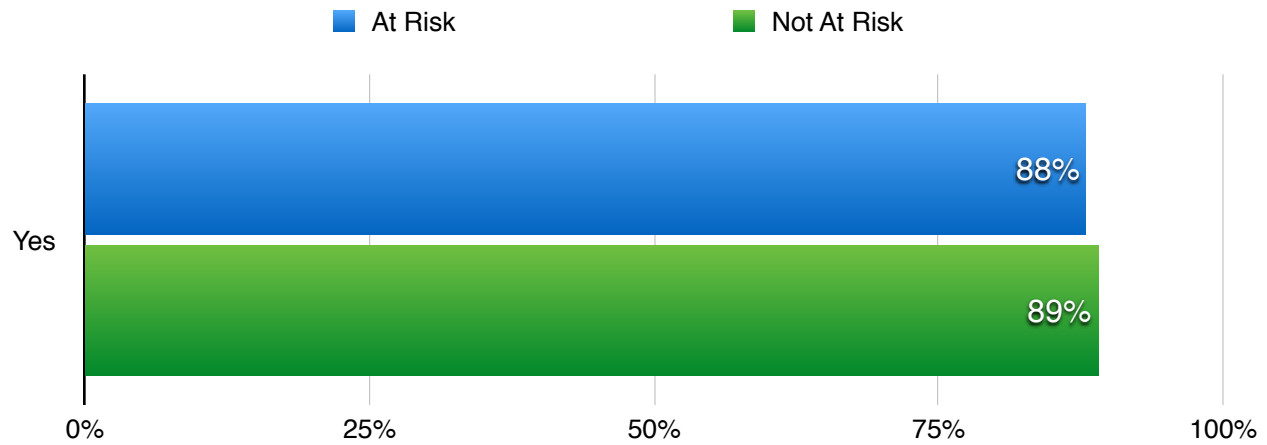
Does your contact center have a display board that shows real-time data such as number of calls in queue, average wait time, service level, etc.?



<p>Hypothesis</p>	<p>Display boards are related to higher burnout risk.</p> <p><i>Why?</i> Anecdotal evidence and interviews with agents suggest that display boards can cause agents stress. They get distracted when queues are large and wait times are long.</p>
<p>Result</p>	<p><i>Related to burnout risk</i></p>
<p>Discussion</p>	<p>The results were the opposite of the hypothesis. This may be because employees like to be informed, and display boards help do that.</p> <p>Agents who face a severe burnout risk (50+ on the burnout self-assessment) were even less likely to have a display board in their contact center (63%).</p> <p>One limitation is the survey didn't explore whether there's an optimum amount of information or specific metrics that should be displayed. Contact centers vary widely in how they use this tool. Some display basic information about queue size and average wait time. Others have real-time performance stats, sorted by agent. Still others focus more on product information or other relevant reminders.</p>

Question #3

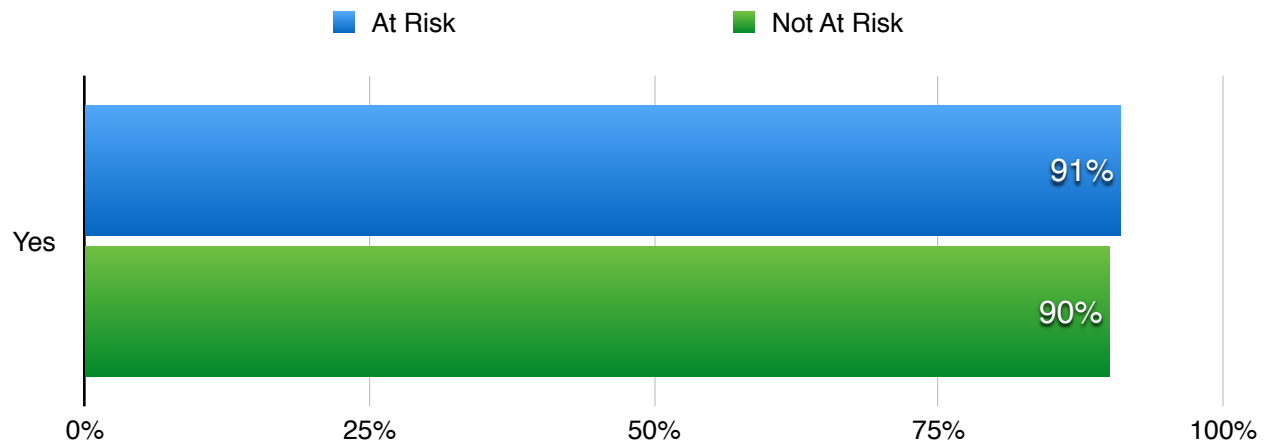
Are you held to at least one productivity standard such as average handle time, number of tickets closed, etc.?



<p>Hypothesis</p>	<p>Productivity standards will be related to higher burnout risk.</p> <p><i>Why?</i> Agents often feel caught between meeting a productivity standard and providing attentive, accurate service.</p>
<p>Result</p>	<p><i>No relationship to burnout risk</i></p>
<p>Discussion</p>	<p>This result was one of the biggest surprises.</p> <p>Contact center agents were just as likely to be held to a productivity standard, regardless of whether they were at risk of burnout or not.</p> <p>Part of this can be explained by the presence of at least some productivity standards in the vast majority of contact centers. In some cases, productivity standards exist but they're de-emphasized compared to other metrics like first contact resolution.</p> <p>The study also did not examine which productivity standards agents are held to, so some standards might be related to burnout risk while others are not.</p> <p>Or, it just may have been a faulty hypothesis.</p>

Question #4

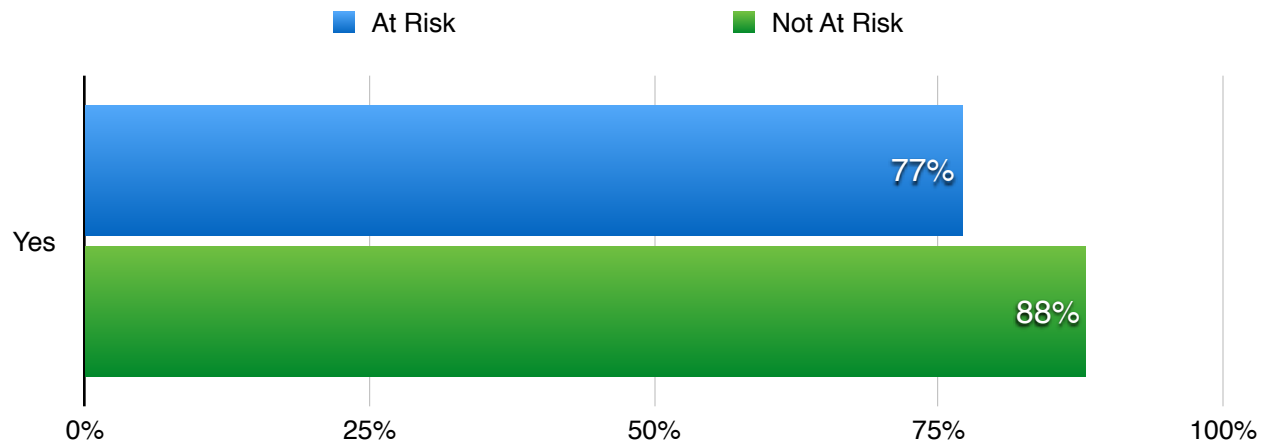
Do you have a schedule adherence standard that you must meet?



<p>Hypothesis</p>	<p>Adherence standards will relate to a higher burnout risk.</p> <p><i>Why?</i> Agents with adherence goals often feel like they don't have enough time to finish notes from a call or investigate a tricky issue. Some agents feel their bathroom breaks are being monitored, like this case from the California Department of Motor Vehicles.</p>
<p>Result</p>	<p><i>No relationship to burnout risk</i></p>
<p>Discussion</p>	<p>Like question three, this result was one of the biggest surprises.</p> <p>Schedule adherence has long been a complaint from contact center agents. However, nearly every agent is held to a schedule adherence standard, so it may just be an accepted part of working in a contact center.</p>

Question #5

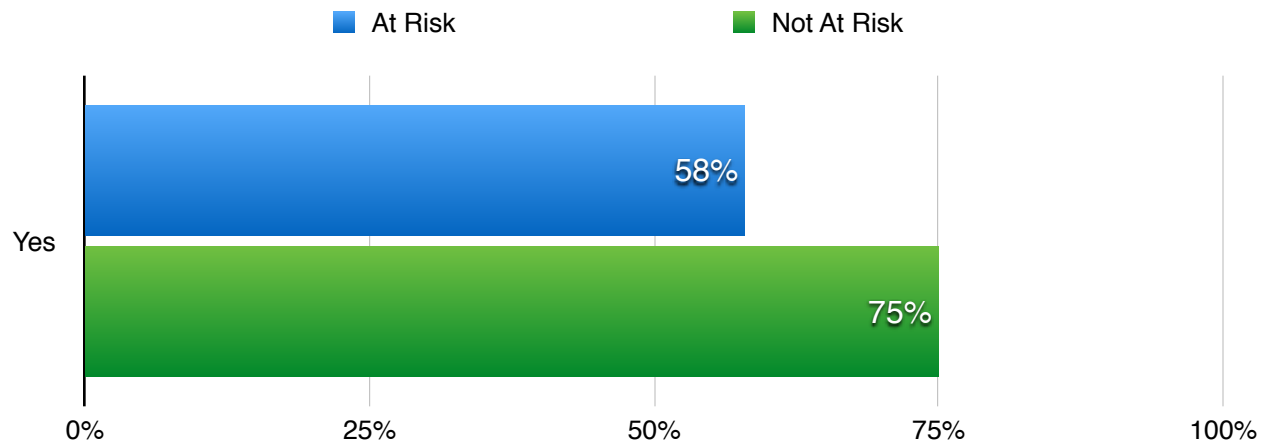
Do you receive regular feedback from your boss?



<p>Hypothesis</p>	<p>A lack of regular feedback will relate to a higher burnout risk.</p> <p>Why? Employees crave feedback about their performance. A lack of feedback suggests limited support and perhaps a certain level of detachment from the boss.</p>
<p>Result</p>	<p><i>Related to burnout risk</i></p>
<p>Discussion</p>	<p>The contrast is even starker for agents at high risk of burnout. Only 67% of those agents reported receiving regular feedback from their boss.</p> <p>There are three major causes for this problem in the contact center. The first is some leaders have too many direct reports to provide adequate feedback to individuals. Second, leaders may have a large amount of administrative work that prevents them from spending more time with their agents. Finally, some supervisors are reluctant to spend time giving feedback because they're not comfortable with the process.</p>

Question #6

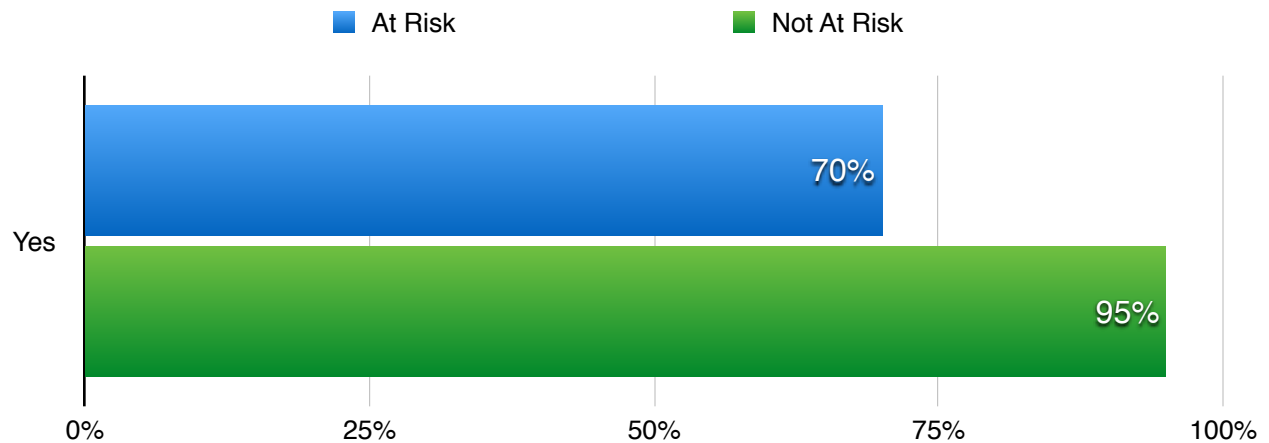
Does your contact center use gamification to help motivate agents?



<p>Hypothesis</p>	<p>Using gamification will relate to higher burnout risk.</p> <p>Why? Gamification can often be a distraction for customer service employees. That's one of the many compelling arguments against the practice laid out in this Wired article.</p>
<p>Result</p>	<p><i>Related to burnout risk</i></p>
<p>Discussion</p>	<p>The twist is gamification is related to less burnout risk.</p> <p>This may be a catch-22. While gamification may distract from outstanding service, agents love it.</p> <p>Nate Brown, Director of Customer Experience for UL EHS Sustainability is a big proponent of gamification for contact center agents. He uses games specifically to improve morale and employee engagement. The trick is that most of the games he uses are outside of the normal workflow.</p> <p>You can read more about his story.</p>

Question #7

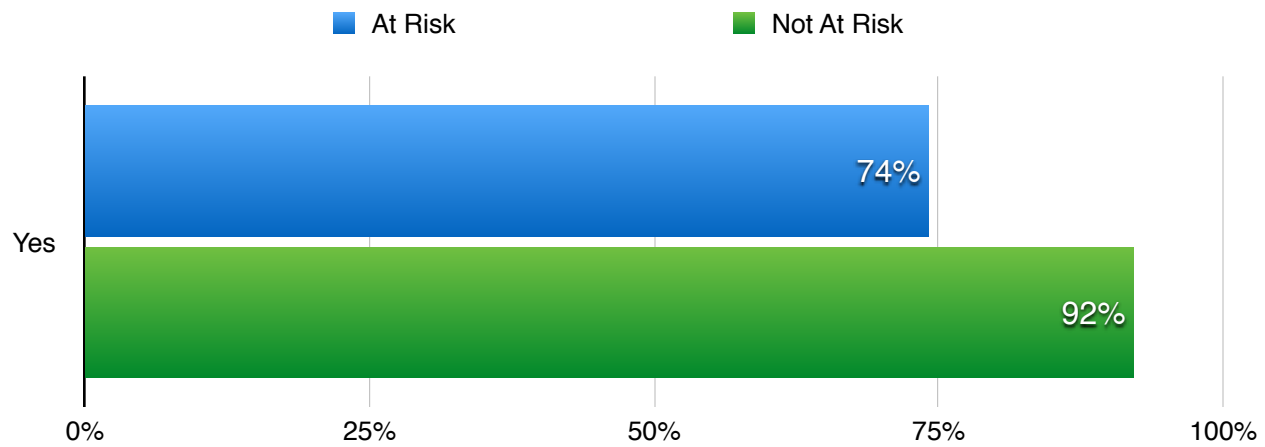
Do you believe your company is customer-focused?



Hypothesis	<p>Agents who feel their company is not customer-focused will be more at risk of burnout.</p> <p>Why? Agents can develop something called <i>learned helplessness</i> when they perceive their company isn't customer-focused. This means that agents accept poor service as a foregone conclusion and stop trying hard to serve their customers. A diminished interest in work is a key component of burnout.</p>
Result	<p><i>Related to burnout risk</i></p>
Discussion	<p>The results were even lower for agents who faced a severe burnout risk, with only 48% responding that they felt their company was customer-focused.</p> <p>A lack of customer focus is one of the chief complaints from contact center agents. Many believe their executives are out of touch or don't provide enough resources. Some even feel their company is intentionally dishonest with customers.</p>

Question #8

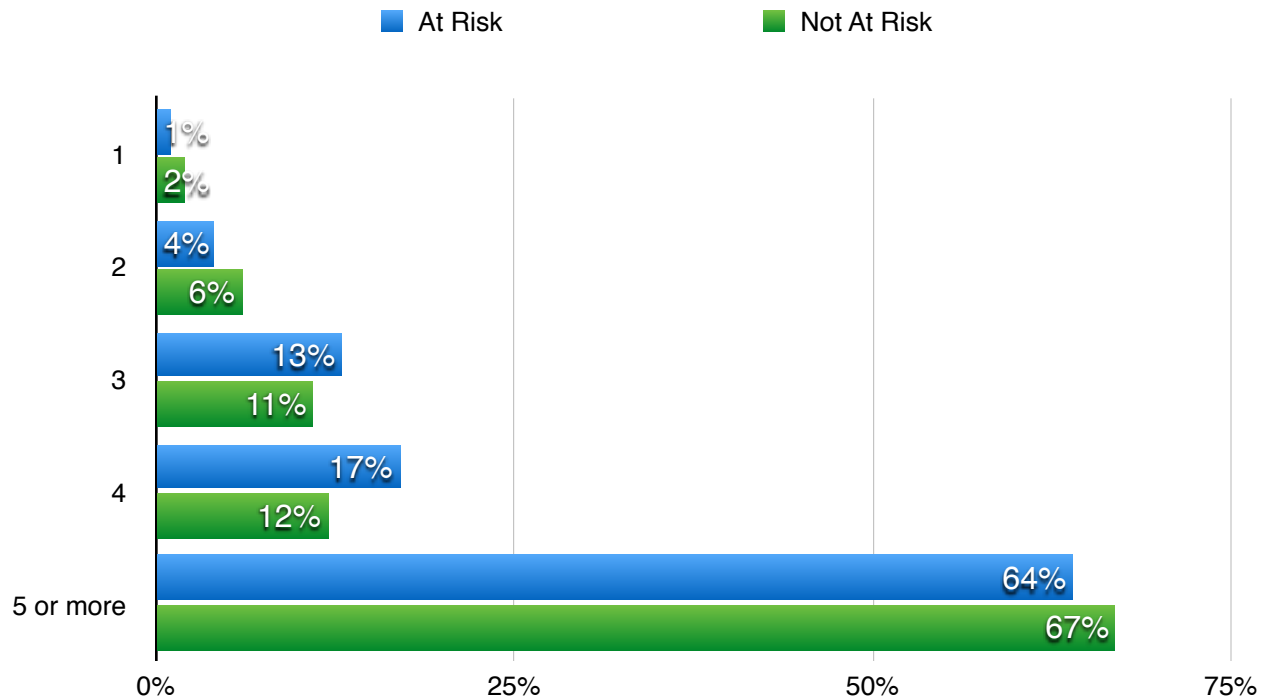
Do you feel your co-workers generally deliver outstanding customer service?



<p>Hypothesis</p>	<p>Agents who feel their co-workers do not deliver outstanding customer service will be more at risk of burnout.</p> <p>Why? Psychologist Abraham Maslow was famous for creating a hierarchy of human needs. Number three on the prioritized list is <i>Love and Belonging</i>. This <u>feeling is essential</u> to consistently providing outstanding service. It's even more important that being great at service (which would probably fit number five on Maslow's list - <i>Self Actualization</i>).</p>
<p>Result</p>	<p><i>Related to burnout risk</i></p>
<p>Discussion</p>	<p>Only 64% of agents facing a severe burnout risk felt their co-workers generally delivered outstanding customer service.</p> <p>This is a problem because customer service is not a lone-wolf endeavor. Agents rely on their co-workers in the contact center and employees in other departments to do a great job.</p>

Question #9

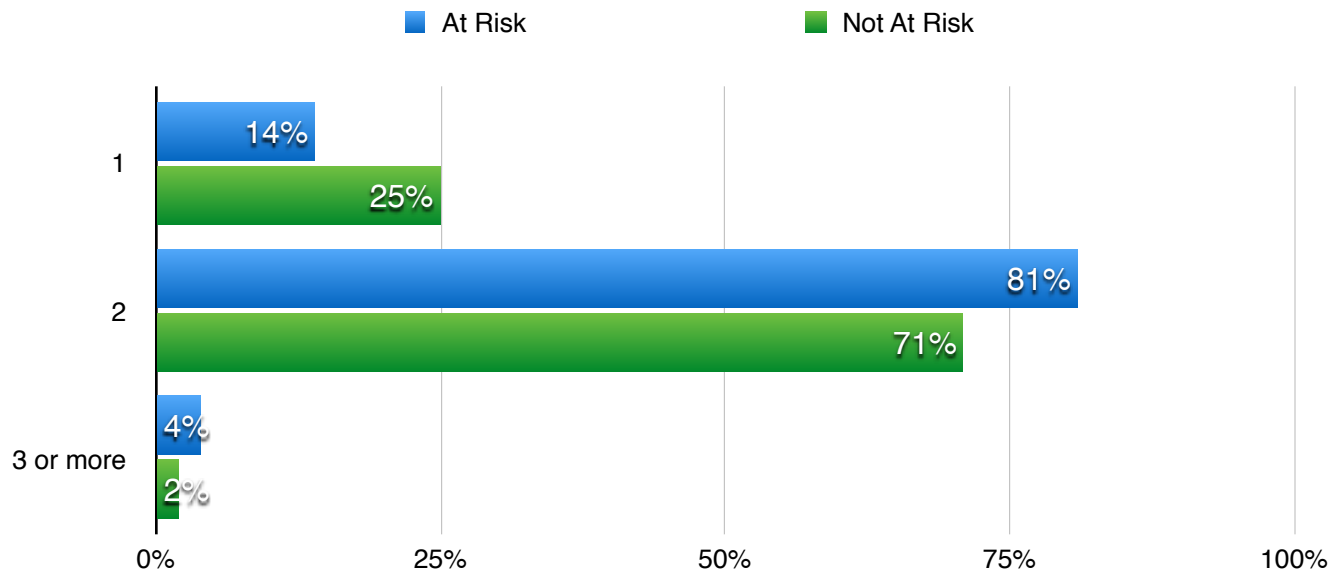
On average, how many different software programs do you use to serve your customers?



<p>Hypothesis</p>	<p>Agents who use more software programs will be more likely to be at risk of burnout.</p> <p>Why? An increased number of software programs is more conducive to multitasking. This can cause a lot of problems for agents, including <u>Directed Attention Fatigue</u>.</p>
<p>Result</p>	<p><i>No relationship to burnout risk</i></p>
<p>Discussion</p>	<p>The numbers on the graph above are a little small, but look at the general shape. The results of at risk and not a risk agents are almost identical.</p> <p>One interesting note is two-thirds of all agents surveyed use five or more software programs. This may ultimately be less efficient, though it doesn't appear to drive burnout.</p>

Question #10

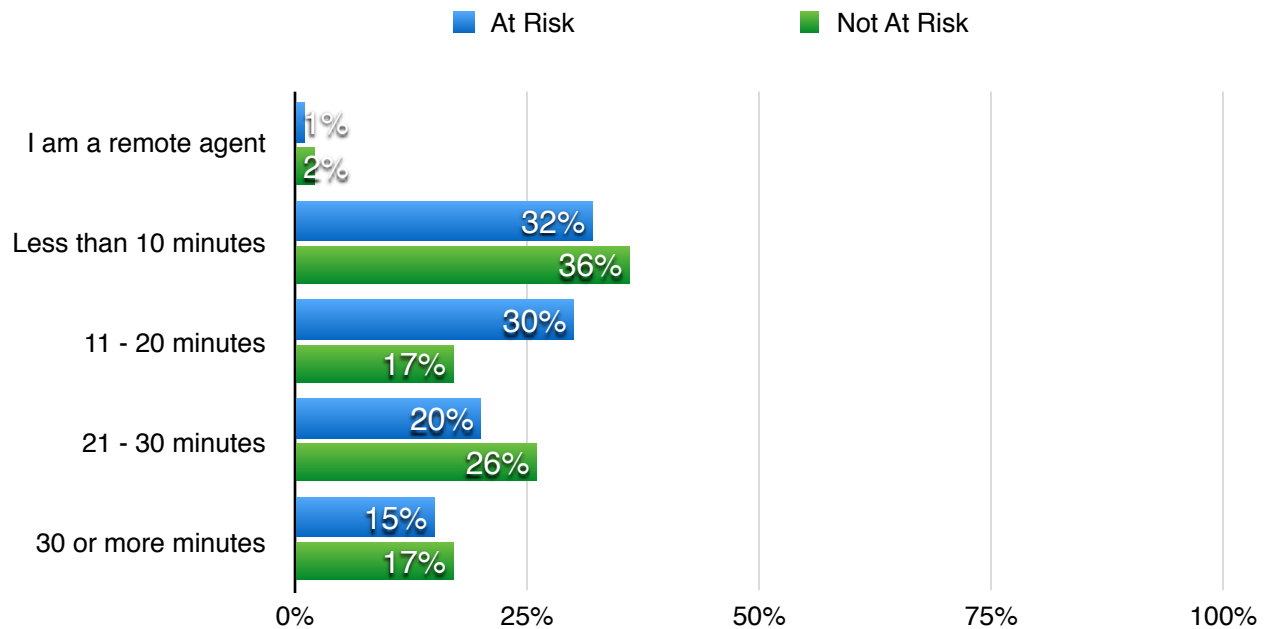
How many computer monitors do you have at your workstation?



<p>Hypothesis</p>	<p>Agents who use two or more computer monitors are more likely to be at risk of burnout.</p> <p>Why? Multiple monitors can encourage harmful multitasking. And, there's <u>some debate</u> over whether a dual monitor set-up is really more productive.</p>
<p>Result</p>	<p><i>Related to burnout risk</i></p>
<p>Discussion</p>	<p>Very few agents use three or more monitors, so it's safe to disregard those results.</p> <p>While most agents surveyed use two monitors, a larger percentage of agents who are not a risk of burnout use just one monitor.</p> <p>There is some evidence that a single, large monitor is more productive than two monitors. And, <u>a study</u> from the Georgia Institute of Technology found that people using single monitors were more productive when they completed a similar task a second time.</p>

Question #11

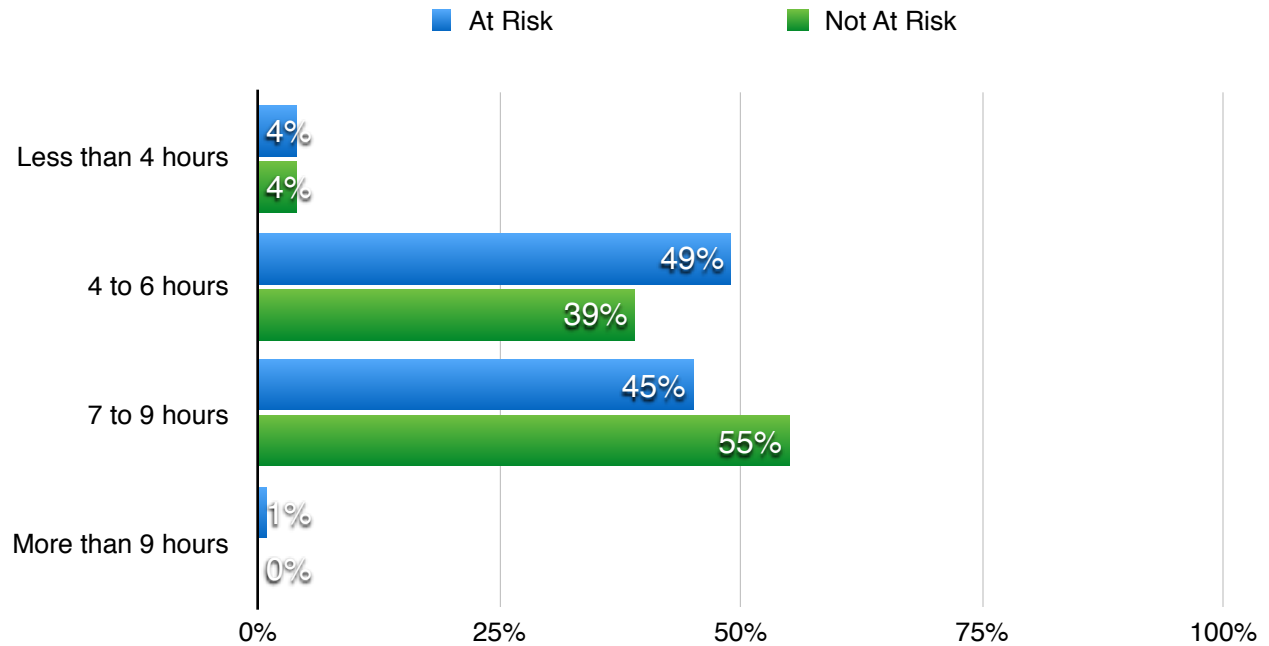
How long does it usually take you to get to work?



<p>Hypothesis</p>	<p>Agents with longer commutes are more at risk of burnout.</p> <p>Why? One analysis suggested that contact center employees with commutes of 10 minutes or less are 20% more likely to stay with their company <u>six months or longer</u>.</p>
<p>Result</p>	<p>Inconclusive</p>
<p>Discussion</p>	<p>The data doesn't show much. One mini-trend was among agents with a severe risk of burnout, 35% had an average commute of 11 - 20 minutes.</p> <p>It's hard to interpret the reason behind the results.</p> <p>One possibility is the not-far-enough theory. Some people look to their commute as a time to get mentally ready for the day or use it to decompress after work. A 11 - 20 minute commute might not afford that.</p> <p>Or, it could be a quirk in the sample.</p>

Question #12

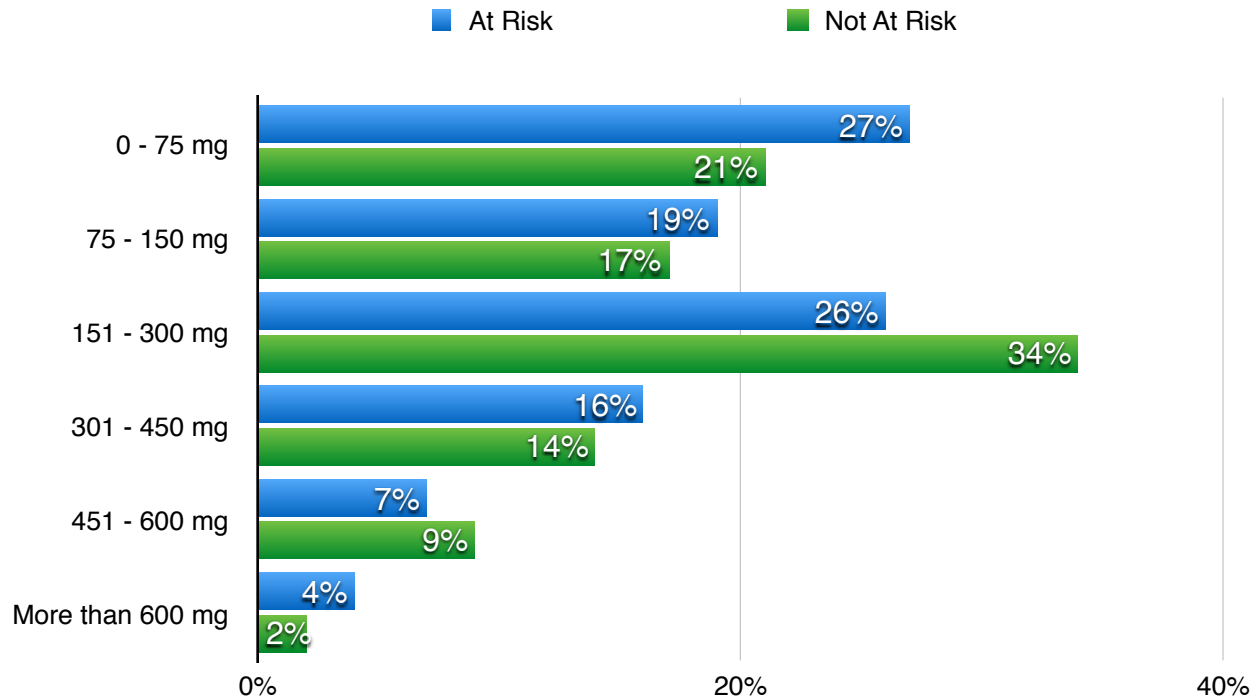
How much sleep do you usually get per night?



Hypothesis	<p>Agents who get less sleep are more at risk of burnout.</p> <p><i>Why?</i> A lack of sleep is linked to all sorts of problems. For example, <u>one study</u> from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that 23.2% of adults have difficulty concentrating due to a lack of sleep.</p>
Result	<p><i>Related to burnout risk</i></p>
Discussion	<p>Agents at risk of burnout are 26% more likely to get just 4 to 6 hours of sleep per night than agents who are not at risk.</p> <p>The opposite holds true. Agents who are not at risk of burnout are 18% more likely to get 7 to 9 hours of sleep per night than agents who are at risk.</p>

Question #13

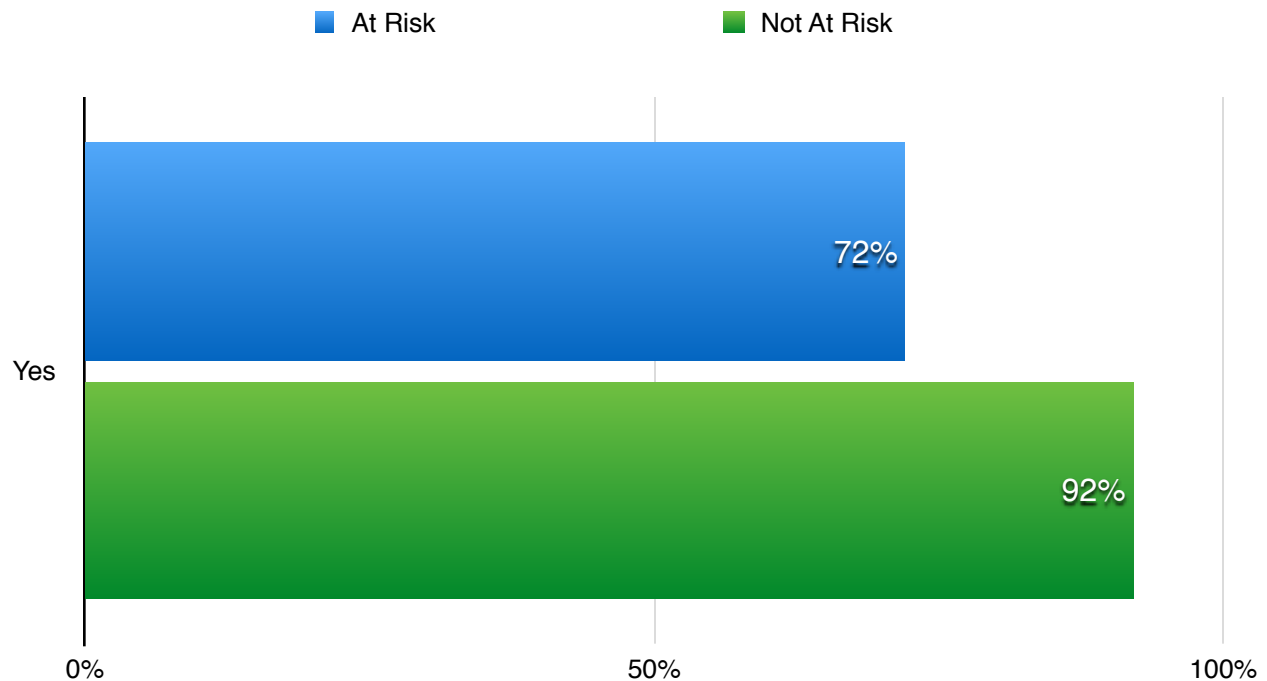
Approximately how much caffeine do you typically consume per day?



Hypothesis	<p>Agents who consume more caffeine are at greater risk of burnout.</p> <p>Why? There's some data that caffeine consumption is linked to poor customer service. Here's a rundown.</p>
Result	<p><i>No relationship to burnout risk</i></p>
Discussion	<p>In retrospect, this was a poorly designed question. The challenge in interpreting the data is granularity.</p> <p>Participants were asked to estimate their daily caffeine intake and a link to a conversion chart was provided to assist them. However, there's a wide variation within the ranges.</p> <p>One 8 ounce cup of coffee contains approximately 75 - 150 mg of caffeine. For reference, a grande sized cup at Starbucks contains 16 ounces. So, a participant who thinks they drink "one cup" of coffee could really be drinking anywhere from 75 to 300 mg of caffeine. That's too wide a spread to draw any conclusions.</p>

Question #14

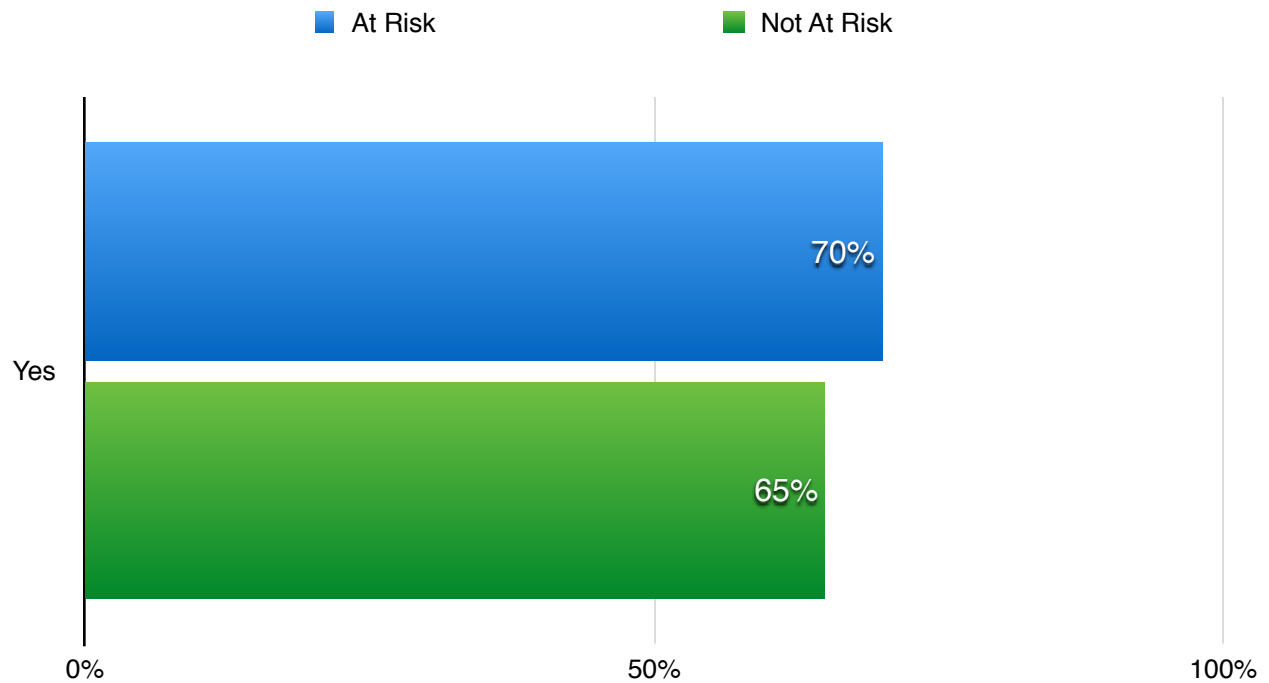
Do you feel empowered to help customers with most of their needs?



<p>Hypothesis</p>	<p>Agents who don't feel empowered are at greater risk of burnout.</p> <p><i>Why?</i> Similar to Question 7, agents can develop something called <i>learned helplessness</i> when they don't believe there's anything they can do to help their customers. This means that agents accept poor service as a foregone conclusion and stop trying. A diminished interest in work is a key component of burnout.</p>
<p>Result</p>	<p><i>Related to burnout risk</i></p>
<p>Discussion</p>	<p>The contrast is even more stark for agents who face a severe risk of burnout. Just 59% of those respondents said they felt empowered.</p> <p>A lack of empowerment is an epidemic in contact centers. A 2015 study from ICMI found that 86% of contact centers admit to not fully empowering their agents.</p> <p>On the other hand, agents can be highly motivated when they feel they're able to take ownership of customer issues and see them through to a resolution.</p>

Question #15

Are you given a numerical score when your contacts are monitored?



<p>Hypothesis</p>	<p>Agents who given numerical scores are at greater risk of burnout.</p> <p><i>Why?</i> Some researchers <u>theorize</u> that giving numerical ratings to employees can trigger an unhealthy fight or flight response. This can cause employees to tune out the feedback and experience some degree of psychological pain.</p>
<p>Result</p>	<p><i>No relationship to burnout risk</i></p>
<p>Discussion</p>	<p>The results for employees at risk and not at risk of burnout were very similar.</p> <p>The survey differentiated between participants whose contacts were monitored but not given a score and those whose contacts were not monitored at all.</p> <p>Even within this group there was no difference. Roughly 11% of at risk and not at risk participants reported that their contacts were not monitored.</p>

Conclusions

There's no single solution to avoiding agent burnout.

For example, a belief that their company was not customer-focused had the strongest relationship to burnout risk among agents. Yet 70 percent of at risk agents feel their company **is customer-focused**.

It may be more helpful to look at a combination of factors. For example, here's the profile of an At Risk vs. Not At Risk agent. You can imagine two very different work environments.

Profile: Agent at Risk of Burnout



- Believes her company is not customer-focused.
- Doesn't feel empowered to serve customers.
- Feels her co-workers aren't great at service.
- Her contact center does not use gamification.
- There's no display board in her contact center.
- Doesn't get regular feedback from her boss.
- Has two computer monitors at her work station.
- Gets less than six hours of sleep per night.

Profile: Agent with Low Burnout Risk



- Believes his company is customer-focused.
- Feels empowered to serve customers.
- Feels his co-workers are great at service.
- His contact center uses gamification.
- There's a display board in his contact center.
- Gets regular feedback from his boss.
- Has one computer monitor at his work station.
- Gets more than seven hours of sleep per night.

People can experience burnout when they don't feel their work has true meaning. Employees at customer-focused companies believe they can go to work each day and make a difference in their customers' lives. Employees who are at risk of burnout often don't feel this way.

So, the key to low burnout risk appears to be a work environment where agents and their leaders are consistently focused on outstanding customer service.

Recommendations

The top recommendation for contact centers is to develop and maintain a customer-focused culture.

This can be exceptionally difficult to achieve. However, research from [The Service Culture Handbook](#) reveals several concrete actions that contact centers can take:

1. Create a [customer service vision statement](#) that gives purpose and meaning to your contact center agents' jobs.
2. Develop [customer-focused goals](#) and provide agents with frequent updates.
3. Conduct a [customer service assessment](#) to make sure your contact center operations are aligned with outstanding service.

Here are six additional recommendations:

1. **Empowerment.** Give agents the tools, resources, and authority to deliver exceptional service. You can use this [empowerment guide](#) to get started.
2. **Teamwork.** There are a number of ways to develop teamwork and build trust among agents and other departments. [Here are a few ideas.](#)
3. **Keep Score.** Agents like knowing how they're doing and how the team is doing. Use a display board or other means to keep agents informed on key metrics. Better yet, [engage agents in discussions](#) to get their ideas on improvements.
4. **Recognition.** Develop a gamification program or other initiative to recognize agents for great performance. Gamification does have some pitfalls, so [read this guide first.](#)
5. **Feedback.** Make sure agents get [regular feedback](#) on their performance from their boss. Go beyond the numbers and focus on behaviors.
6. **Single Monitor.** Re-evaluate the double monitor set-up that's common in many contact centers. There's [some research](#) that suggests some agents are actually more productive and with a single, large monitor.

Bonus Advice:

A lack of sleep puts agents at risk of burnout, but it's hard to control how much sleep agents get. What you can do is educate agents on the ways sleep impacts their lives. And, you can consider [implementing a quiet room](#) in your contact center.