USING
EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE
IN CALL CENTER AGENT INTERACTIONS CAN SIGNIFICANTLY IMPROVE CX

Learn Best Practices to Improve Agent Emotional Intelligence Skills

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

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Using Emotional Intelligence in Call Center Agent Interactions Can Significantly Improve CX

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In recent years, there has been a pivot towards emphasizing Emotional Intelligence (EI) in call center interactions. This whitepaper explores how integrating emotional intelligence in the call center does not merely address issues but builds lasting relationships with customers, ensuring a tangible impact on overall service quality.

Recognizing the immense value of emotional intelligence is not just a trend; it's a strategic maneuver to improve customer satisfaction. Call centers that invest in emotional intelligence stand to revolutionize how they connect with customers, ensuring efficient, empathetic, and personalized interactions.

SQM research shows that **88% of people have stopped doing business with a company due to poor call center customer service.** This statistic alone should motivate companies to train their agents on emotional intelligence skills, which have been proven to be correlated with high-quality customer service.

What Is Emotional Intelligence?

Emotional intelligence (also known as emotional quotient or EQ) is the ability to understand your and other people's emotions and to manage your emotions positively to communicate effectively and maintain good relations. In 1990, researchers John Mayer and Peter Salovey coined the term EI, but psychologist Daniel Goleman later popularized it.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE
AS INITIALLY PROPOSED BY DANIEL GOLEMAN

01 SELF AWARENESS:

This attribute involves recognizing and understanding your emotions, including their triggers, strengths, and limitations. It also encompasses accurately perceiving how your emotions affect your thoughts, behavior, and interactions with others.

02 SELF-MANAGEMENT:

Refers to the ability to regulate and control your emotions and behaviors effectively. It involves handling stress, adapting to changing circumstances, and staying composed and focused even in challenging situations. Self-management also includes the capacity to delay gratification, manage impulses, and maintain a positive outlook.

03 SOCIAL AWARENESS:

Social awareness entails being attentive and empathetic towards the emotions and needs of others. It involves understanding different perspectives, reading nonverbal cues, and being sensitive to the dynamics of social interactions. Socially aware individuals are skilled at listening actively and demonstrating genuine concern for others' well-being.

04 RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT:

Relationship management refers to the ability to build and nurture healthy and productive relationships with others. It involves effective communication, conflict resolution, teamwork, and collaboration. Individuals with strong relationship management skills are adept at inspiring and influencing others, fostering positive connections, and managing conflicts constructively.

These four attributes collectively contribute to emotional intelligence, enabling individuals to navigate their emotions and relationships successfully.

	SELF	SOCIAL
RECOGNITION	**SELF-AWARENESS** — Emotional Self-Awareness, Accurate Self-Assessment, Self-Confidence	**SOCIAL AWARENESS** — Empathy, Organizational Awareness, Service Orientation
REGULATION	**SELF-MANAGEMENT** — Self-Control, Transparency, Adaptability, Achievement Drive, Initiative	**RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT** — Influence, Developing Others, Change Catalyst, Inspirational Leadership, Conflict Management, Building Bonds, Teamwork and Collaboration

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

How can Emotional Intelligence Improve Customer Service in the Call Center?

Emotional intelligence (EI) is crucial in managing interactions within a call center environment. It involves recognizing, understanding, managing, and using emotions positively to communicate effectively, empathize with others, overcome challenges, and defuse conflict.

EI can differentiate between a successful interaction and a dissatisfied customer in a call center, where agents often deal with a high volume of calls and a range of customer emotions.

Here's an excellent example that demonstrates how EI improves customer service and Csat in the call center:

An agent named Sarah works for a telecommunications company. One day, Sarah receives a call from a customer who is extremely frustrated because their internet service has been down for several hours, affecting their ability to work from home. The customer is agitated and demands immediate resolution.

With high emotional intelligence, Sarah recognizes the customer's frustration and listens attentively without becoming defensive. She acknowledges the inconvenience the customer is facing and expresses empathy for their situation. Instead of simply following a scripted response, Sarah uses her EI skills to connect with the customer on a personal level.

Through active listening and effective communication, Sarah de-escalates the customer's anger. She assures them she will follow up on the issue to ensure a swift resolution. Despite the customer's initial hostility, she keeps her tone calm and professional throughout the conversation.

After resolving the technical issue and ensuring the customer's internet is back up and running, Sarah follows up with a courtesy call to check if everything is working smoothly. The customer is impressed by Sarah's genuine concern and proactive approach, leading to a positive experience despite the initial frustration.

In this example, Sarah's emotional intelligence was pivotal in managing the interaction effectively. By recognizing, understanding, and managing emotions—both her own and the customer's—Sarah was able to turn a potentially negative situation into a positive one, enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty to the company.

If Sarah had not acted emotionally intelligent, this situation could have easily escalated and resulted in a <u>very angry or upset</u> customer. Proper training can ensure that agents understand how to remain calm in tense situations and communicate effectively to help manage customer interactions.

Emotional Intelligence allows agents to connect with customers emotionally, fostering a better understanding and responsiveness to the customer's needs and concerns. This connection is vital, as **customers are more likely to remember how they were made to feel rather than the details of the conversation itself.**

SQM research shows that **87% of customers view tone of voice as the most important aspect of the customer communication experience**. This statistic alone demonstrates that call centers must ensure their agents have strong interpersonal skills to deliver high Csat.

Agents skilled in EI are adept at managing their own emotions and influencing the emotions of others, which can lead to higher customer satisfaction and loyalty.

How to Incorporate Emotional Intelligence in the Call Center

Emotional intelligence plays a crucial role in the success of call center agents in delivering great customer satisfaction. EI helps them effectively understand and manage their own emotions and the emotions of customers, leading to improved customer satisfaction and positive interactions.

Recent SQM Group research shows that 47% of managers feel their biggest problem operating a call center effectively and efficiently is high agent turnover, job burnout, and absenteeism. The main cause of these problems is stress. However, when agents learn skills related to emotional intelligence, such as emotional regulation and self-awareness, to manage stress, they are much more effective at coping with stress, thereby reducing burnout and agent turnover.

TIPS ON HOW CALL CENTER AGENTS CAN USE EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

01 SELF AWARENESS

02 EMPATHY

03 ACTIVE LISTENING

04 EMOTIONAL REGULATION

05 ADAPTABILITY

06 CONFLICT RESOLUTION

07 CONTINUOUS LEARNING

1 Self-Awareness

Agents should develop self-awareness by recognizing their emotions and understanding how they affect their performance. They should regularly assess their emotional state and take steps to manage any negative emotions before interacting with customers.

- For instance, a call center agent, Maria, takes a few minutes to reflect on her emotions before starting her shift. She realizes she's feeling a bit stressed due to a personal issue. Recognizing that this could affect customer interactions, she practices mindfulness techniques to calm herself and focus on her role.

2 Empathy

Agents should strive to understand and empathize with the emotions and concerns of customers. This involves actively listening to their needs, acknowledging their feelings, and demonstrating understanding. Showing empathy can help build rapport and trust with customers.

- For example, when a customer calls in frustrated about a billing error, David, a call center agent, listens attentively to the customer's concerns. He acknowledges the customer's frustration and assures them he understands the inconvenience. David shows empathy by putting himself in the customer's shoes and apologizing for the error.

3 Active Listening
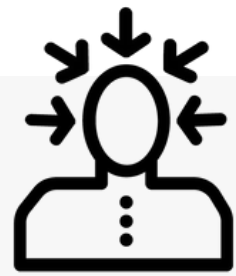
Call center agents should practice active listening, which involves giving full attention to the customer's words, tone, and emotions. They should avoid interrupting, provide verbal cues to show they are engaged (e.g., using phrases like "I understand" or "I hear you"), and summarize or paraphrase the customer's concerns to ensure accurate understanding.

- For example, during a call with a customer reporting technical issues, Sarah practices active listening. She refrains from interrupting the customer, says "mhm" and "okay" to show she's following along, and repeats key points to the customer to ensure she understands the problem fully before offering assistance.

4 Emotional Regulation

Agents must manage their emotions effectively, especially in challenging situations. They should learn techniques to stay calm and composed, such as deep breathing exercises or taking short breaks if needed. This helps agents respond to customers professionally and positively.

- For instance, when dealing with an angry customer dissatisfied with a product, James uses emotional regulation techniques. He takes a deep breath before responding, maintains a calm tone, and focuses on finding a solution rather than becoming defensive or escalating the situation.

5 Adaptability

Call center agents should be adaptable and flexible in their approach. Different customers may have varying emotional states, so agents should be prepared to adjust their communication style accordingly. This might involve being more patient with upset customers or using a more upbeat tone for enthusiastic customers.

- For example, Lisa encountered a customer who was grieving a loved one. Instead of sticking to her usual script, she speaks more slowly and patiently guides the customer through troubleshooting steps, keeping in mind that the customer may have trouble focusing on the conversation.

6 Conflict Resolution
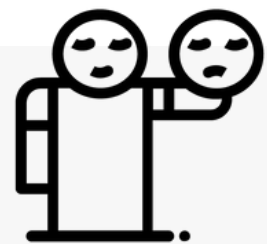
Agents should have conflict resolution skills to handle difficult situations. This involves staying calm, actively listening to the customer's concerns, and offering appropriate solutions or compromises. Agents should focus on de-escalating conflicts and finding mutually beneficial resolutions.

- For example, when a customer expresses dissatisfaction with a service delay, John remains composed and listens actively to the customer's concerns. He apologizes for the inconvenience and offers a discount as a goodwill gesture, resolving the conflict and leaving the customer satisfied.

7 Continuous Learning

Agents should actively seek feedback and learn from their experiences. They can review past interactions, identify areas for improvement, and seek guidance or training to enhance their emotional intelligence skills. This ongoing learning process helps agents refine their emotional intelligence and deliver better customer service.

- For instance, after a particularly challenging call, Emily requested feedback from her supervisor on how she handled the situation. She takes note of areas where she can improve her emotional intelligence skills, such as maintaining patience during longer calls, and attends a workshop on effective communication to enhance her abilities further.

By incorporating these practices into their daily interactions, call center agents can leverage emotional intelligence to create positive customer experiences, enhance customer satisfaction, and build long-term relationships.
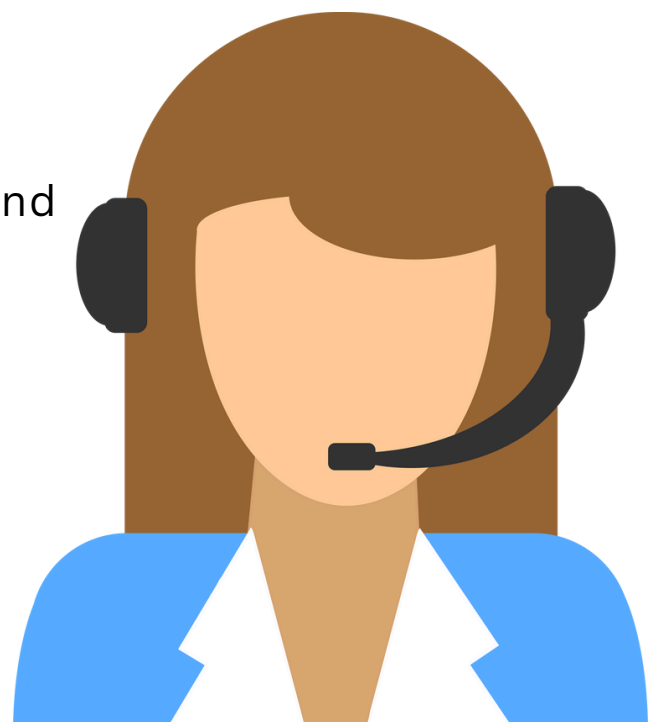
How Emotionally Intelligent Are You?

Most call center agents and managers feel they have a sense of their emotional intelligence. However, according to research by organizational psychologist Tasha Eurich, 95 percent of people think they're self-aware, but only 10 to 15 percent are, and that can pose problems for your employees.

It's helpful to assess your emotional intelligence to bring out the best in yourself. One easy way to understand your EI is to complete Mindtool's free emotional intelligence questionnaire. To get the most out of the EI questionnaire, you must complete 360-degree feedback, in which you evaluate your EI and can compare it to others' (e.g., peers, supervisor) opinions.

On Mindtool's EI questionnaire, evaluate each statement as you are rather than as you think you should be. When finished, click "Calculate My Total" to determine your Emotional Intelligence rating.

Another way to measure Agents' emotional intelligence is to perform behavioral assessments such as Situational Judgement Tests (SJTs) and role-playing exercises.
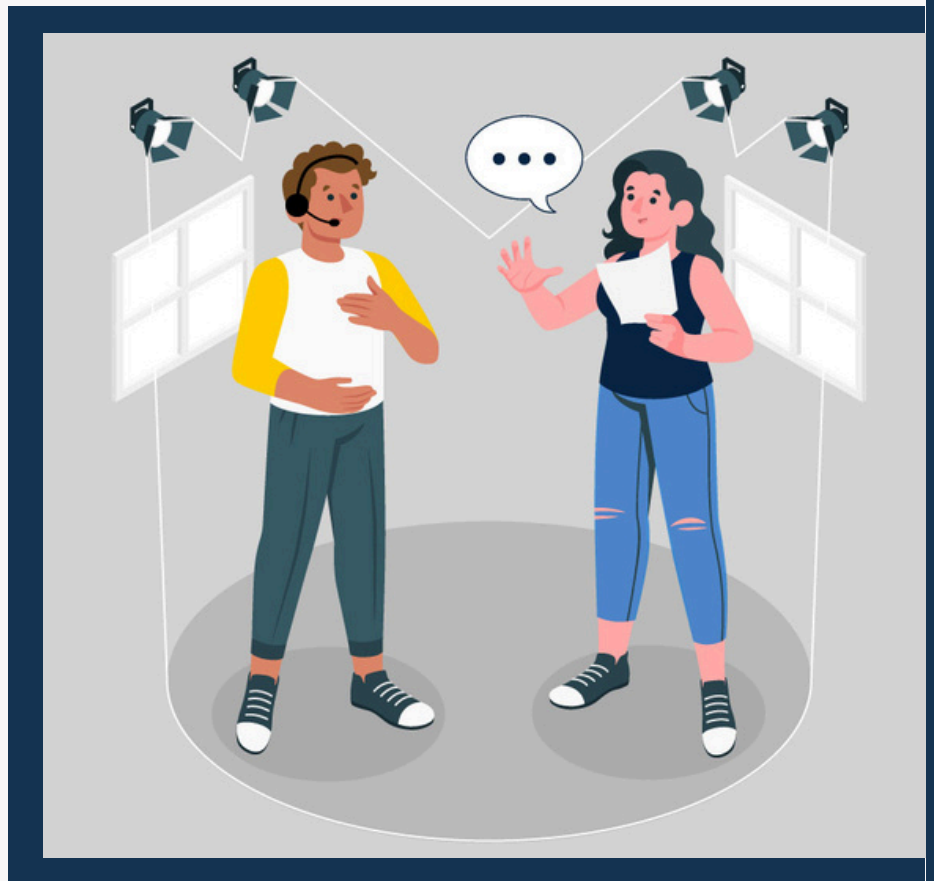
Situational Judgement Tests

Situational Judgment Tests (SJTs) are valuable tools for assessing how agents handle various emotionally charged scenarios. These tests present hypothetical situations that agents might encounter in their role and ask them to choose or rank the best responses. SJTs help evaluate the practical application of emotional intelligence (EI) in real-world settings.

Here are some example scenarios for SJTs:

1. **Dealing with an Angry Customer**
Situation: A customer calls in, furious about being overcharged on their bill. They are shouting and threatening to cancel their service. What should the agent do?

2. **Handling a Sensitive Request**
Situation: A long-time customer calls to request a temporary suspension of their service due to financial difficulties. What should the agent do?

Supervisors can use these SJTs to assess and evaluate the agent's empathy, problem-solving skills, and willingness to go the extra mile for the customer.

Role-Playing Exercises

Role-playing exercises simulate challenging customer interactions in a controlled environment, allowing managers to observe and assess an agent's emotional responses, communication skills, and coping strategies. These exercises are typically conducted with a manager or a peer acting as the customer.

Practical Tips for Applying Emotional Intelligence in Call Centers

1 **Developing Empathy and Understanding Customer Needs**

To excel in customer service, call center agents must develop a strong <u>sense of empathy</u>. Understanding customer needs goes beyond merely addressing their immediate concerns; it involves recognizing their emotional state and responding appropriately.

Agents should practice putting themselves in the customers' shoes, imagining the stress or frustration that might accompany a customer's issue. To facilitate this, call centers can:

- Encourage agents to **ask <u>open-ended questions</u>** that prompt more than yes or no answers.
  - Instead of asking, "Did the product arrive on time?" encourage agents to ask, "Can you tell me about your experience with the delivery process?"
  - Rather than asking, "Are you satisfied with our service?" agents can ask, "What aspects of our service do you appreciate the most?"
  - Instead of asking, "Did you find everything you were looking for?" encourage agents to ask, "What can we do to make your experience even better next time?"
- Train agents to recognize **verbal cues** that may indicate a customer's mood or level of frustration.
  - A customer saying, "I've been waiting for ages!" indicates impatience or frustration with wait times.
  - Phrases like "I'm disappointed" or "I expected better" signal dissatisfaction with the product or service.
  - A customer saying, "I'm not sure I understand," might indicate confusion or a need for clarification.

- Use **role-playing exercises** in training to help agents experience both sides of customer interactions.
  - Agents can role-play scenarios where the customer is experiencing a technical issue and then switch roles to play the agent providing support.
  - Create role-playing scenarios where agents encounter upset customers due to billing errors or delayed deliveries to practice handling difficult situations.
  - Role-play scenarios where agents must navigate language barriers or cultural differences to enhance their communication skills and empathy.

Empathy leads to better service experiences because customers feel heard and understood, which can defuse potential conflicts and lead to more satisfying resolutions.

2 Active Listening Techniques for Improved Communication

Effective communication in call centers is rooted in active listening. This skill ensures the customer feels valued and understood, not just heard. To practice active listening, agents should:

- Focus entirely on the customer, avoiding distractions.
- Paraphrase or summarize what the customer has said to ensure understanding.
- Acknowledge the customer's feelings by saying, "That sounds frustrating," or "I can see why you'd feel upset."
- Allow customers to complete their thoughts without interruption.
- Use words to acknowledge listening (e.g., yes, okay, I see, I understand, and uh-huh).

Active listening improves the accuracy of the information exchanged and enhances the emotional connection, making the interaction more personal and effective.
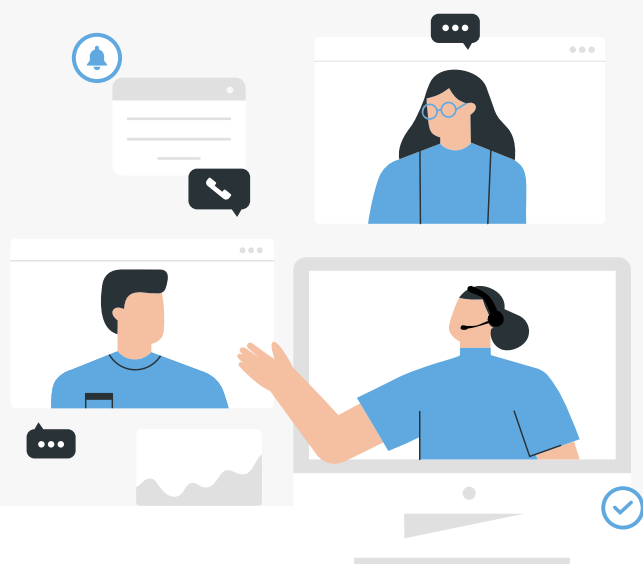
3 | Adapting Communication Styles to Different Customer Personalities

A one-size-fits-all approach does not work in personalized customer service. Agents must adapt their communication style to suit the individual personalities of customers. This adaptation could mean being more straightforward and concise with some while providing more detailed explanations and reassurances to others. Key strategies include:

- Identifying the customer's communication style early in the conversation.
  - I.e., is the customer an analyzer, supporter, driver, or influencer?

- Adjusting tone, speed, and language complexity based on the customer's responses.
  - Slow down and speak more clearly if the customer has trouble hearing or is not fluent in your language.
  - Speak with more enthusiasm and energy if the customer is excited and eager.

- Being flexible and ready to switch approaches if the current one is not working.

Understanding and adapting to different communication styles can prevent misunderstandings and build a more robust customer rapport.

What are the Different Types of Communication Styles?

The impact of understanding different types of communication styles in a call center cannot be understated. Knowing what kind of customer you are dealing with and how to communicate effectively with them greatly increases FCR and customer satisfaction scores. Furthermore, SQM research shows that for every 1% improvement in FCR, there is a 1% improvement in customer service Csat. Therefore, it pays off to know your customer's communication style.

Despite this fact, many call center agents are not trained to adapt their communication style to the Persona Communication Styles of the customers calling them. Therefore, we will discuss the different communication styles and what they look like from an agent's point of view.

SQM has conducted comprehensive research to determine the different types of persona communication styles and what behaviors and keywords can be used to identify these communication styles.

There are four different types of persona communication styles:

PERSONA PROFILES

ANALYZER

The analyzer persona likes accuracy and uses data when interacting with an agent.

SUPPORTER

Supporters are highly expressive but ask for a solution. The supporter persona likes to be friendly, collaborative and is agreeable.

DRIVER

Drivers are also less expressive but will tell an agent the solution they want. The driver persona wants results and is aggressive.

INFLUENCER

Influencers are also highly expressive but will tell an agent the solution they want. The influencer persona is persuasive and innovative.

The Analyzer prefers accuracy and relies on data. Analyzers like detailed explanations, statistics, and factual information. They appreciate agents who can provide precise answers and data to support their responses.

For example, a customer with an analyzer persona profile might call and say, "Hi, I noticed that my bill this month is $20 higher than usual. Can you provide a detailed breakdown of the charges and explain the difference?"

The Driver is direct, results-oriented, and less expressive. Drivers tell the agent the solution they want and prefer efficiency. Drivers are aggressive and want quick, effective resolutions without unnecessary small talk.

For example, a customer with a driver persona profile might call and say, "Hi, I need my internet speed upgraded to the highest plan you offer. I need it done today because I have an important project deadline."

The Supporter is friendly, collaborative, and highly expressive. Supporters ask for a solution while being agreeable and valuing friendliness. They appreciate empathetic agents, listen carefully, and build rapport through a supportive and cooperative approach.

For example, a customer with a supporter persona profile might call and say, "Hi there, I hope you're doing well. I noticed a problem with my account and was hoping you could help me fix it."

The Influencer is persuasive, innovative, and highly expressive. Influencers tell the agent the solution they want while being enthusiastic and engaging. Influencers appreciate agents who acknowledge their creativity, share enthusiasm, and support their innovative ideas.

For example, a customer with an influencer persona profile might say, "Hi! I love your service, but I think it could be even better with a feature that allows us to customize our dashboards more. Is that something you can implement?"
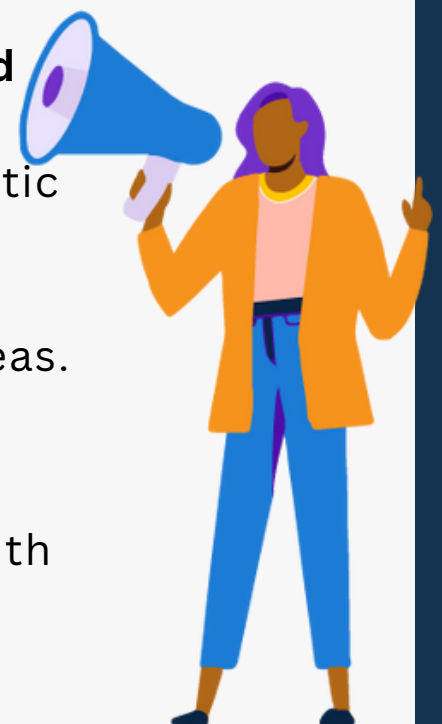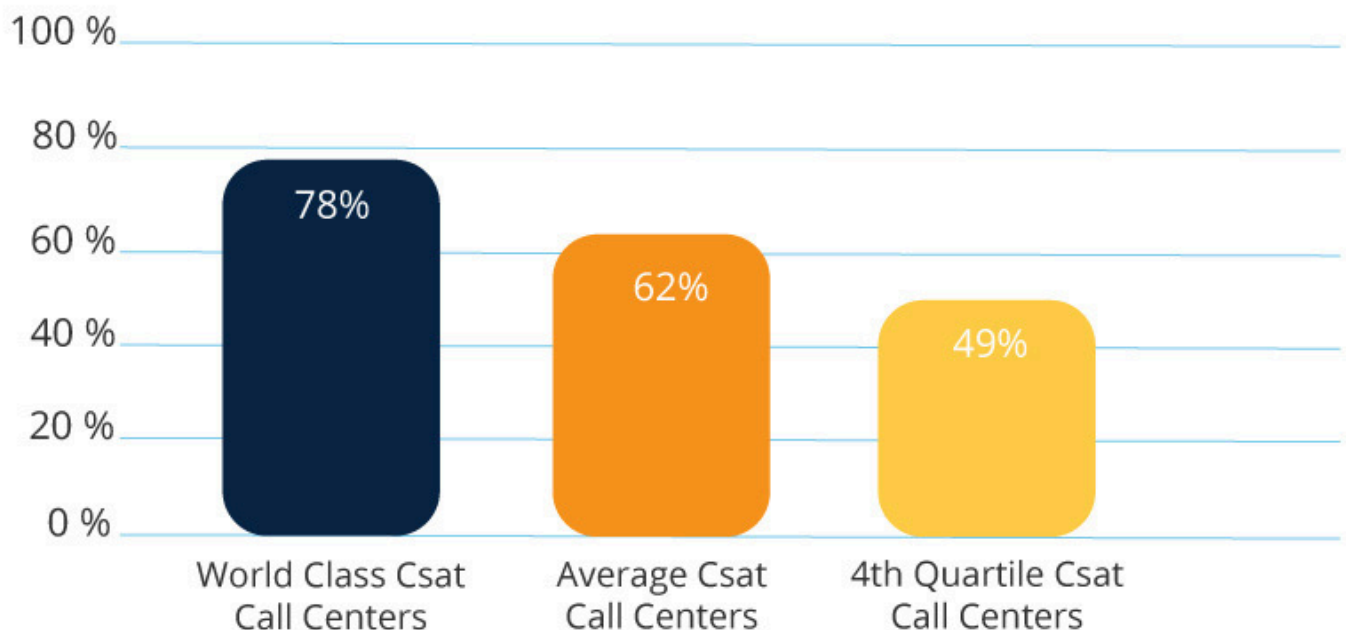
Agent Adaptability Scores

To determine agent adaptability, we asked customers how strongly they agreed that the agent's communication style suited them. SQM uses an Agent Adaptability Score based on the percentage of customers rated the agent's style as a top box response (i.e., Strongly Agree).

Agents with high adaptability scores maintain consistent customer satisfaction across all communication styles. Low scores indicate an opportunity for call centers to train agents on quickly identifying and adapting to a customer's communication style within the first minute of the call.

AGENT ADAPTABILITY SCORE
BY CALL CENTER CSAT PERFORMANCE

World Class Csat Call Centers: 78%
Average Csat Call Centers: 62%
4th Quartile Csat Call Centers: 49%

Improving Agent Adaptability Scores with mySQM™ Customer Service QA Software

While there are many ways that organizations evaluate communication styles, SQM believes the best practice for identifying Persona Communication Styles is to let the customer be the judge.

What makes SQM's Persona Communication Styles approach unique is that it is based on the voice of the customer using mySQM™ Customer Service QA software for identifying personas and our software's Personalized Intelligence™ features for training agents how to adapt their communication style to match the customers they are talking to.

Request a mySQM™ Customer Service QA Demo Video

Learn about SQM's agent… Csat prediction model, which is based on standardized metrics, AI, and regression analysis to predict customer satisfaction derived from a QA evaluation. Our Csat prediction model provides a high statistical correlation, translating to a 95% success rate in predicting agent Csat in most cases.

QA Demo

THANK YOU FOR READING

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