

A small icon of a glowing yellow lightbulb with a white mouse cursor pointing at it, positioned above the word "new" in the main title.

The new call center

**Why soft skills are more
critical than ever**

The **impact of Covid-19 on call centers** and employees has extended beyond the disruptions caused in the workplace itself. Not only have call centers been impacted by additional Covid-required duties, but there has been an increase in call volume with less staff available. It is now more critical than ever for call centers to establish a workforce that has strong soft skills, including communication skills, so they can handle the additional stress and volume that has resulted from these uncertain times.

This paper will take a look at the problems impacting call centers in the wake of the pandemic and what potential solutions may exist to support managers in running more effective operations.

▶ Call Center Landscape Post Covid

The impact of Covid-19 has been monumental, leaving no industry unchanged. Call centers have not been spared. Managers have had to deal with higher call volumes as well as more calls of a sensitive nature due to the problems associated with the pandemic. These have ranged from needing to contact a health insurance company to rebooking an airline ticket.

The soft skills that are required to effectively manage these calls are more important now than ever before. This includes the ability to handle difficult customer conversations swiftly and respectfully, especially when there is a need to divert from a call script and offer compassion and understanding. In a March 2020 article in Persado¹ titled 'Call Centers Brace for COVID-19 Volume: How Language Can Help,' the organization stated 'Call centers should expect not only call volume to grow, but also call complexity to increase. Consumers will be calling in for more varied, involved and complex issues.' The article also

suggested that the average call time would rise above the average 3-5-minute range to closer to 10+ minutes. The longer the conversation with each customer, the fewer calls a center will be able to address, thus contributing to dissatisfied customers. This is only one issue that has emerged in the post Covid world for call centers, but it is one that is already having a large impact on the industry.

When call center volumes increase, customers naturally become frustrated and inclined to seek other options for their business transactions. Details of the frustrations that customers encountered while on hold with their credit card companies, for instance, were documented in an article in Wharton Magazine titled 'Covid-19's Impact on Call Centers.' Of being placed on hold, one customer, American actor Josh Young, said, 'I did want to cry. Two calls, no humans.' Why was it so important for him to reach someone at his bank? His credit card details were stolen and fraudulently used online. Another customer said of her long wait time on hold, 'I was on hold for so long, I fell asleep... when I woke up, I was still on hold.'

¹ Persado; Call centers brace for Covid-19 volume: How language can help; <https://www.persado.com/articles/call-centers-what-happening-whats-next-and-how-language-can-help/>



▶ How can English language skills solve these problems?

As customers ourselves, we all know how important it is to speak with someone who not only understands our problem but who also empathizes with us, especially if we are calling a company about an urgent issue, like credit card fraud and cancelled flights. The role that strong English language skills play in aiding this cannot be underscored. Magellan Services reported that 97% of global consumers say customer service greatly impacts their buying decision ('Does Accent Matter in Today's Inbound Call Center?'²). If customers are not satisfied with the service they receive when contacting Customer Service, they will take their business to a competitor.

Being able to listen to a customer's problem goes hand-in-hand with having strong English skills. When a customer needs to frequently repeat oneself on the phone, frustrations rise and the length of the call is extended. Contact Centre World recommends 'Through proper training, agents can avoid situations in which they inadvertently affect customer satisfaction. A proper English assessment tool – combined with an excellent training tool – can mitigate the problem,' (Ethel Kay Merioles, 'Importance of English Assessment for Call Center Agents'³, ContactCenterWorld.com Blog).

The most important soft skills that center around English language proficiency include communication and questioning techniques, which, as evidenced in the long wait times that callers have experienced, have a tantamount impact on the quality of the call. Other soft skills which can contribute to the improvement of calls, supported by strong English usage, are empathy and self-awareness. These attributes have been increasingly important in the post-Covid landscape.

² Magellan Solutions; Does accent matter in today's inbound call center?; <https://www.magellan-solutions.com/blog/does-accent-matter-in-todays-inbound-call-center/>

³ Ethel Kay Merioles, 'Importance of English Assessment for Call Center Agents', ContactCenterWorld.com Blog).



Key metrics

impacted as a result of heightened stress on **call centers.**

(according to Persado)



Average Handle Time (AHT)

First Call Resolution (FCT)

Hold Times

Customer Experience (UX)

Abandonment Rate (AR)



Better English skills, better KPIs for your call center

In addition to improving the customer experience, strong English language skills amongst all center agents can increase performance for managers. The better the ability to cope with uncertainty and deploy strategic and adaptable questioning strategies, combined with empathetic tones and language, the more calls a center can address. In the post-Covid world, it's more vital than ever to have high call volumes combined with customer satisfaction.

The key metrics that will be impacted as a result of the heightened stress on call centers, according to Persado, include:

- Average Handle Time (AHT)
- First Call Resolution (FCT)
- Hold Times
- Customer Experience (UX)
- Abandonment Rate (AR)

If customers are going to sleep and waking up with no resolution in sight, we can only imagine how severe the impact on abandonment rate, customer satisfaction and overall experience have been during the pandemic.

One other important factor in the overall performance of a call center is the turnover rate of agents. This can have a huge impact on the above KPIs, especially the customer experience. During the pandemic, call centers saw an increase in agent attrition. Peter Ryan, a senior advisor, commented on this problem, 'Not only are agent attrition levels worryingly high and growing, but the cost associated with finding new agents and developing initiatives to keep them is also climbing. This creates a disturbing situation for contact centers,



considering the vicious cycle of agent churn has on customer experience,' ('How Covid-19 impacted contact center agent attrition,'⁴ Fonolo, The State of the Contact Center in 2020 Report).

▶ **Solutions: Assessment tools that will have the biggest impact in your call center**

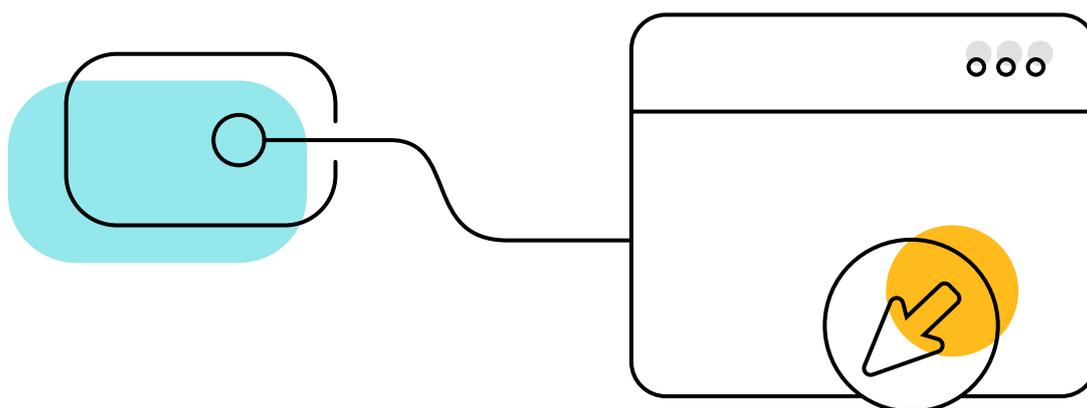
To mitigate all of the problems already addressed, ranging from the need for soft skills in call centers to how strong English skills can support better KPIs in call centers, businesses need a way to evaluate job applicant's and existing employee's skills in a way that is scalable and free from bias. Large businesses that run call center operations will need to screen thousands of candidates in a short amount of time. It's unrealistic to manually test the language skills of each applicant. Testing candidates, as well as upskilling current employees, needs to be done in a way that is free from the bias of race, gender, culture expectations and anything else that could influence an interviewer or manager's decision.

⁴ Ringshall, B; How has Covid-19 affected call center agent turnover?; <https://fonolo.com/blog/2020/10/how-has-covid-19-affected-call-center-agent-turnover/>

Pearson English's Versant tests are an example of a scalable, reliable solution that uses advanced Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology and an integrated skills approach to measure communication. The patented AI scoring technology removes any bias and inconsistency of human judgment from the equation and accommodate scaling for large numbers of tests takers.

Backed by over 25 years of research, Versant English Tests have given corporations competitive advantage to recruit exceptional talent and develop employees' language skills. Versant English Tests provide near instant results to measure candidates' communication skills accurately and reliably, no matter where they are in the world.

Assessing English language proficiency is so important to help businesses improve the quality of their communication, reduce complaints related to language problems and misunderstandings, and improve the quality of their hiring.



To find out more about Versant English tests, go to [**VersantTests.com/contactus**](https://VersantTests.com/contactus)



References

- ▶ Bourke, D; 2018; Developing soft skills in call centre agents; <https://www.callcentrehelper.com/developing-soft-skills-130210.htm>
- ▶ Gardner, P; 2020; The best KPIs to use in your call center; <https://www.callcentrehelper.com/the-best-kpis-to-use-in-your-call-centre-10598.htm>
- ▶ Geraghty, S; 2020; Top call center KPIs and metrics to track for success; <https://www.talkdesk.com/blog/12-call-center-kpis-to-track-for-success/>
- ▶ Hrabi, M; The new normal for call centers unleashed by Covid-19; <https://www.phonexia.com/en/blog/the-new-normal-for-call-centers-unleashed-by-covid-19/>
- ▶ Magellan Solutions; Does accent matter in today's inbound call center?; <https://www.magellan-solutions.com/blog/does-accent-matter-in-todays-inbound-call-center/>
- ▶ Persado; Call centers brace for Covid-19 volume: How language can help; <https://www.persado.com/articles/call-centers-what-happening-whats-next-and-how-language-can-help/>
- ▶ Ringshall, B; How has Covid-19 affected call center agent turnover?; <https://fonolo.com/blog/2020/10/how-has-covid-19-affected-call-center-agent-turnover/>
- ▶ Shekhar, S.; 2021; 21 Skills You Must Test for the Perfect Call Center Assessment; <https://blog.mettl.com/call-center-assessment/>
- ▶ Taussig, E; 2020; Covid-19's impact on call centers; <https://magazine.wharton.upenn.edu/digital/covid-19s-impact-on-call-centers/>