

Workplace Research

# Dialing Up

Planning Strategies to Support Agents  
in the New Contact Center

**Knoll**



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## Planning Strategies to Support Agents in the New Contact Center

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Formerly considered a back-office operation for taking customer complaints, with equally overlooked office décor, today's contact centers command attention from the C-suite down.

As organizations recognize the value of customer loyalty, they acknowledge the significance of those connections made between employees and their customers.

No longer named simply “call centers,” “contact center” and “customer care” refer to the central workspaces of customer service agents whose jobs have been elevated as companies appreciate their contribution to image and success.

Using telephones, email and live chat, today's agents interact with customers 24/7, providing technical support, handling inbound or outbound sales, monitoring and responding to social media, and more. Staffers range from entry level customer service representatives to engineers who troubleshoot software and bankers who advise on retirement accounts. As the first line of contact with current and future customers, agents play a crucial role in achieving customer satisfaction as well as growing new business.

With the cost of new customer acquisition estimated at 5 to 25 times the cost of retaining a current customer<sup>1</sup>, companies have a lot at stake in how they treat their existing customers. While yesterday's disgruntled customer might have told 10 people about their experience, today, thanks to social media, a dissatisfied user might reach 1,000 others with a single click.

Knoll spoke with designers, clients and real estate specialists to identify emerging trends that affect the design and planning of contact centers and learn the requirements of their occupants. This paper compiles feedback and shares solutions and best practices for designing winning contact centers.

### The Evolution of Contact Centers

Early call center operations focused primarily on cost containment. The 2001 recession escalated cost reduction

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

No longer a back-office afterthought, today's contact center commands a comfortable, engaging environment for agents who are a critical link in a company's customer-focused, omni-channel strategy. As firms place increasingly greater weight on customer loyalty, the value of front-facing customer service agents rises as well. Our research shows that successful contact center environments include:

- 1 Ergonomic furniture and layouts that share daylight to foster wellness
- 2 A broad variety of shared spaces that allow agents to de-stress and take a break
- 3 Suitable acoustic treatments to maintain a comfortable sound level
- 4 Adaptable layouts that support informal coaching and simplified reconfigurations
- 5 Efficient designs that optimize space and keep amenities within close reach
- 6 Engaging environments that express company culture to recruit and retain agents

### Contact Center vs. Call Center

Many use these two terms interchangeably, but they are not identical. The main difference between a call center and contact center lies in the methods of communications and overall experience. A contact center accommodates the growing importance of providing omnichannel customer support—phone, email, live chat, texting and other digital options—across an integrated system.

Consumers are increasingly expecting the businesses they patron to be present on several service channels, and to offer consistent, qualified support on all of them.

efforts, and ultimately led many firms to outsource their call center functions overseas.

By about 2010, a backlash ensued as many U.S. customers expressed a preference for dealing with agents who were native English speakers. Large data breaches, beginning around 2005 and continuing today, have forced companies to re-examine the costs, benefits and risk management of an offshore strategy.

At the same time, the rise of online shopping, chat options and continuing daily integration of technology have elevated the functions of a customer center, calling for a more highly trained representative. Greater attention to customer service and data security has inspired development of new models for contact centers and a reversal of the outsourced, offshore contact center.

***An employee who can deliver superior customer service and build relationships is of great value to a company.***

Many centers were moved internally, and programs were instituted to support employee development, engagement and retention in an industry plagued by high turnover rates.

Major organizations, comprised of multiple business units across a range of industries, can now offer a promise of career growth in what, barely a generation ago, was often considered a dead-end job.

Today, the occupational stigma has changed. The long-neglected, under-appreciated contact center associate is now an integral part of the customer experience.

A greater focus on customer satisfaction, combined with evolving channels and increasingly complex products and services, continues to drive the need for a greater skilled labor pool. With steep competition in many markets, the stakes have never been greater for attracting and retaining top talent. To maintain market leadership, companies deem investing in a well-designed workplace a top strategy to appeal to and support staff.

## **Business Drivers and Impact on Design**

With agent happiness and retention ranking in the top four measures of success for a contact center<sup>2</sup>, designing a supportive, engaging environment for agents is a high priority. Additionally, in a stressful environment, a calm and uplifting atmosphere can be as important as efficiency. Knoll identified several key contact center drivers that have considerable impact on workplace design.

## **Characteristics of Contact Center Environments**

The nature and nuances of contact center work and culture create a unique set of considerations for planning environments:

### **Stress-filled**

- + Constant oversight for quality and accuracy
- + Loud, noisy environment
- + High accountability and visibility
- + Frequent performance targets
- + Real-time customer service
- + High-call volume
- + Potentially emotional customers

### **High Churn Rates**

- + Traditionally entry-level job with limited career path
- + Populated with younger staff
- + Historically low wages
- + Pressure to perform
- + High burnout and turnover

### **Continuing Education**

- + Continued investment in technology and interpersonal skills
- + Weekly or monthly trainings, often supplemented with feedback or refreshers on a single topic
- + New products and promotions need regular introduction and overviews
- + One-on-one training happens casually and formally

### **Competitive, Contest-driven Culture**

- + Frequent contests and incentives
- + Competition standings and statistics broadcast internally
- + Prizes range from basic company merchandise (water bottles, hats), to donations to charity, to a car!

### **Metrics-driven**

- + Key performance indicators regularly tracked via technology
- + Customer feedback can affect compensation

### **24/7 Operations**

- + Multiple, around-the-clock shifts
- + Furniture and tools shared by a wide range of people of varying sizes
- + Furnishings get heavy wear and tear

### **Security & Risk Management**

- + High premium placed on maintaining data integrity and protecting from natural disasters
- + Constant scrutiny, policies to minimize exposure to internal or external data breaches

## **Recruitment and Retention**

An employee who can deliver superior customer service and build relationships rather than process transactions is of great value to a company.

With high turnover rates, and recruitment and training costs averaging \$6,440<sup>3</sup>, 43% of organizations see improving company culture and atmosphere at their contact centers as a wise investment, ranking it above all other hiring criteria<sup>4</sup>.

Many companies have discovered that finding the right cultural fit is a better retention tool than salary. By using their physical environment as a showcase to define and



A quiet, secluded space for employees to collaborate provides focus, reduces fatigue and creates a more productive environment.

express their mission, companies stand to attract and retain talent best-suited for their unique culture.

### Active Environment

A flexible setting accommodates team changes, rapid growth and added staff for short-term campaigns and/or promotions. Since many centers operate around the clock, shutting down a space to reconfigure the floor is not typically an option. Furnishings that can be assembled, dismantled and/or moved, preferably within a compact footprint to minimize disruption, are preferred.

Easily replaceable and cleanable fabric panels, carpet squares, etc. help streamline and simplify maintenance efforts, particularly when facilities operate 24/7.

### Training and Mentoring

Training is a constant in most contact centers, and is on the rise as companies build internal teams with employees and provide growth opportunities.

Encompassing peer support, one-on-one coaching, informal small groups and large classroom trainings with up to 50 agents, training needs are broad and highly varied.

In most contact centers, supervisors sit in close proximity and in easy viewing range of agents to be accessible for questions or help on a call. In many cases, open workstations are an ideal solution, providing agility, easy support and access for colleagues or supervisors. In other cases, more private meeting areas are required. These private spaces can be carved out of workstations with portable screens or components; a private office can be provided when needed.

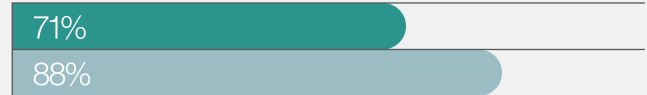
## Customer Experience Rises to the Top

Once considered a "nice-to-have" feature, customer experience/expectations is the top priority for 88% of contact centers, followed by improvement of service for 73%. Growing the business was third at 43%. The shifting priorities are a sharp contrast to just two years ago when growing the business ranked first with 78% of firms.

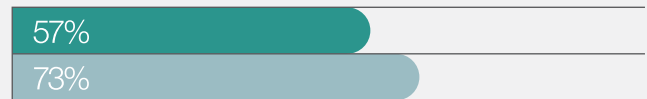
### Main Drivers of Growth Within Global Contact Centers

● 2015 ● Today

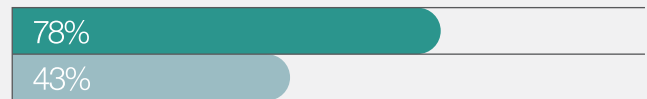
#### Customer Experience/Expectations



#### Improvement of Service



#### Growth of Business



Source: Deloitte, Global Contact Center Survey<sup>5</sup>

## Contact Centers Have High Burnout and One of the Highest Turnover Jobs in the World

### Contact Center Mean Annual Attrition Rate



### U.S. Industry Average Annual Attrition Rate



Source: ContactBabel and CompData Survey<sup>6,7</sup>

While many contact centers are structured for agents to work independently, some companies seek a more team-based environment that lets coworkers or supervisors support each other on challenging calls.

Shared spaces play a key role for both formal and informal learning and development. They complement more

## Large Telecommunications Company

North America

150,000 sq. ft. / 2,000 workstations / 2,000 people

To improve data security and customer service, a large telecommunications company consolidated its outsourced contact centers from varied business units across the globe, hired its own team, and located its operation closer to home. It sought to create an engaging, comfortable environment that made employees feel respected and valued and offered the possibility of career growth.

### Drivers

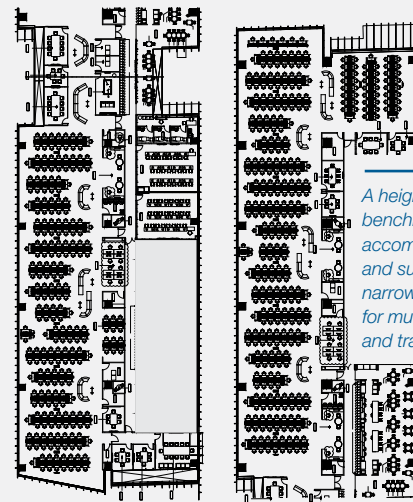
- + Improve data quality control, security and customer service
- + Reimagine how contact center operations work
- + Develop employee engagement so agents feel valued, respected, part of the team
- + Offer training and future growth options to decrease turnover

### Tactics

- + Benching design, with sit-to-stand tables; rows of 10 per side, with a manager at the end
- + Change of mindset and philosophy from C-suite down, with planners empowered to implement some experimental methods
- + Engage employees into the larger parent company so they feel like they have a stake in the game and a possible career path into another of the firm's numerous business units
- + Show employees they are valued by investing in high-performance workstations, sit-to-stand desks, dual monitors, ergonomic chairs and sound masking solutions
- + Well-equipped training rooms house technology for "virtual professor" training
- + Training rooms reflect same high level of design
- + High quality noise-cancelling headsets that mute area noise
- + Separate production floor from extensive amenities

### Outcomes

- + Benching design and dynamic settings provide connection between teams and managers who are rarely seated at their own desk; more often they roam around to plug in and listen to calls
- + Location considered a "center of excellence" representing new contact center design and philosophy planned throughout the company
- + Sense of engagement, community and commitment
- + Initial pilot for 500 seats expanded into 2,000 in one location and will be rolling out into 5,000-7,000 additional seats in other areas



*A height-adjustable benching system efficiently accommodates agents and supervisors in a long, narrow space while allowing for multiple flexible huddle and training areas.*

traditional individual workspaces by putting people in charge of their work experiences, offering them areas for collaborative seclusion and assembly spaces for larger group education.

### Acoustics and Privacy

A high density of people, large open rooms and poor design present acoustic challenges in most contact centers. Since sound has a powerful effect on psychological state, cognitive ability and social behavior, the price for a poor acoustic environment can be very high.

Maintaining a comfortable sound level helps agents focus, reduces fatigue and stress and creates a more productive

environment<sup>4</sup>. Good acoustics contribute to a more pleasing customer experience since representatives can provide efficient, accurate and professional attention.

The delicate job of meeting acoustical requirements in a contact center is achieved through a combination of three tactics:

- + **Manage Noise.** Avoiding sound by separating noise generating activities from quieter activities.
- + **Minimize Noise.** Using sound-absorbing materials to attenuate sound levels.
- + **Mask Noise.** Utilizing sound-generating equipment to conceal sounds.

## Well-being

Healthy, active employees are more productive and inclined to offer friendly customer service. Good ergonomic solutions are critical to the wellbeing of agents who spend an above-average number of hours seated at their desks. Ergonomic, adjustable task seating with a breathable back design enhances comfort and air circulation while adjustable height desks promote movement from sitting to standing throughout the day. Ergonomic accessories such as adjustable keyboard trays, monitor arms and task lighting accommodate different viewing angles and postures while also giving agents control of over lighting levels and glare. Movable screens offer users both an element of visual and audio control.

Training on how to adjust furniture and spaces to properly support individual comfort is also important to worker's wellbeing, since workstations are often shared by individuals on other shifts within contact centers. Well-spaced workstations can help prevent germ transmission and guard against a sense of overcrowding in the open environment.

High levels of stress warrant alternative spaces for employees to decompress in their choice of environment, such as quiet zones for reading, informal areas with views to the outside or group lounge spaces with games and snacks.

## Security and Storage

Natural disasters and other security breaches can have cataclysmic, long-reaching effects on data storage, the heart and soul of most contact centers. Extensive backup procedures and a complex physical infrastructure are typically part of risk management.

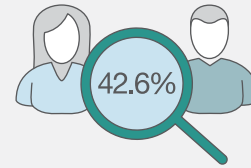
Additionally, in an era where customers' private information can be sold in a matter of minutes, companies are layering in extra precautions to safeguard data. Thus, internal storage is now often addressed in tandem with security measures including passcodes, keyless locks, key cards and other precautions. Printing and copying areas may be located within easy view of supervisors.

***“In an unassigned work environment, locked storage is the only part of the office that is truly theirs.”***

Security mandates often require agents who deal with personal data to lock up all personal electronic devices during work shifts. Storage accommodations are needed when agents are required to check purses, backpacks, phones and other personal items prior to swiping in with badge access to secure areas. Others may be required to lock phones in a desk drawer.

## Workplace Culture and Atmosphere Are Top Priority

How will your organization improve agent recruiting over the next year?



Improve culture/atmosphere

36.5%

Focus on hiring agents with omnichannel/cross functional skillsets

30.4%

Offer remote/work-from-home opportunities

27%

Focus on external hires

23.5%

Focus on hiring specialists

20%

Change how the role is positioned

17.4%

Hire more from within

16.5%

Improve base salaries

11.3%

Improve bonus packages

3.5%

Specifically recruit agents who work for competitors

Source: Call Center Week Digital<sup>2</sup>

While technology has reduced the need for job-related storage at the workstation, personalization and well-being comes into play relative to personal items. In an unassigned, shared work environment, locked storage is “really the only part of the office that’s truly theirs,” remarked one real estate manager, noting that it was another opportunity to build a sense of connection with the company and reinforce retention efforts. “Everything else is wide open, generic and common. If we want them



## CASE STUDY

### GoDaddy

Tempe, AZ

150,000 sq. ft. / 700 workstations / 1,200 people

In a highly competitive region, populated by numerous call centers, GoDaddy sought to differentiate itself by creating an energizing environment for an exceptional employee experience that would translate to equally exceptional customer service. GoDaddy deliberately focused on elevating the agent's experience rather than densifying real estate, opting for larger serpentine-style workstations to provide a greater sense of individual comfort. Colorful privacy partitions help control acoustics and keep germs at bay for improved wellness.

#### Drivers

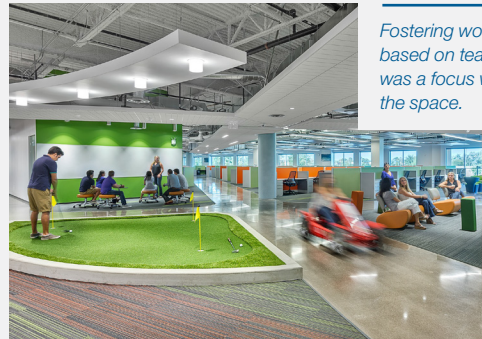
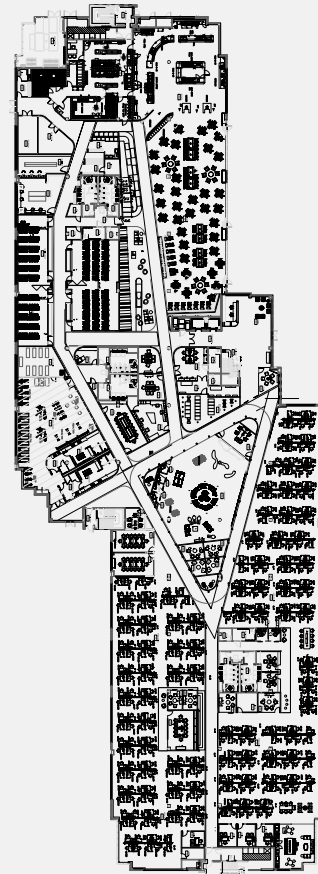
- + Energize and engage employees to attract and retain top talent
- + Optimize space utilization
- + Support ongoing training
- + Provide an environment to deliver superior customer service

#### Tactics

- + 120-degree, 5.5 feet wide workstations with lockable pedestals
- + Nearly 100% open plan, including managing directors (8 offices assigned to HR and Legal)
- + Spaces designed to facilitate collaboration and interaction between agents, as well as coaching from supervisors
- + Hanging acoustical ceiling panels and tackable surfaces to minimize sound
- + Concierge services and ambassador-like approach in which employees are greeted on arrival
- + Extensive amenities to promote relaxation, activity and engagement, including well-appointed kitchen, break room, fitness center, slide and putting green
- + Frequent games and contests between teams, led by "Dr. Fun," a team member whose role is solely devoted to creating incentives

#### Outcomes

- + Honored with virtually every workspace award, from NAIOP, CoreNet Global Innovation finalist, IIDA award
- + Engaged 1,200-person workforce



*Fostering workplace culture based on teamwork and fun was a focus when developing the space.*



*Good ergonomic solutions are critical to the wellbeing of agents who spend an above-average number of hours seated at their desks. Ergonomic, adjustable task seating with a breathable back design enhances comfort and air circulation while adjustable height desks promote movement from sitting to standing throughout the day.*

to feel like they have skin in the game, we at least need to provide better lockers,” he added.

In addition to providing storage, free-standing lockers can also divide workspaces and provide acoustic and/or visual privacy. Open cubbies offer an economical and space-efficient storage solution when privacy and security are not required. When storage needs are minimal, mobile pedestals, dual-locking drawers, digital keypads, and slide out towers deliver lockable options.

*For additional design details and planning examples, please refer to the Design Solutions and Planning Strategies section at the end of this paper.*

## Looking Ahead

The Bureau of Labor Statistics expects customer service contact center employment to grow 39% between 2014 and 2024, and the onshoring trend shows no sign of letting up.

As many industries rid themselves of brick and mortar operations and more companies migrate to digital for routine transactions, opportunities grow along with career advancement at contact centers.

Contact center interactions are expected to grow not only in volume, but also become more complex and multifaceted over the next two years<sup>5</sup>. Phone calls are expected to decline from 64% to 47% of interactions in 2019 with the volume absorbed by chat, text, social media and other yet-to-be-determined options.

Contact agents will continue to sell and support increasingly complex products. For example, banks have shuttered large numbers of branches, shifting much of their customer transactions to digital operations. The process has freed customer service agents to sell and service higher end products such as mortgages and retirement accounts<sup>6</sup>.

With modern software and training, the former back office function can be the hub of an omnichannel customer strategy, enhance revenue, reduce turnover and increase customer loyalty.

At the same time, with technology at the centerpiece of operations, risk management and security will continue to be at the forefront of planning, training and decision-making at contact centers.

As contact center operators strengthen and diversify services and offerings, the need to offer workspace design and amenities to attract highly skilled talent has never been greater. ❏



In addition to space optimization, contact center layouts must also support collaboration, acoustic comfort, attraction and retention, flexibility, privacy and wellbeing.

Following are some space planning options for both individual and shared spaces along with their associated benefits.

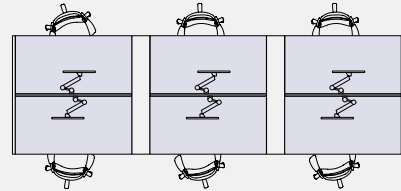
### Individual Spaces

Numerous layout options exist for agent workstations within customer contact centers, with additional variations available to meet specific requirements such as space limitations, team size, desired level of openness and connection with supervisors.

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#### 180 Degree–Benching

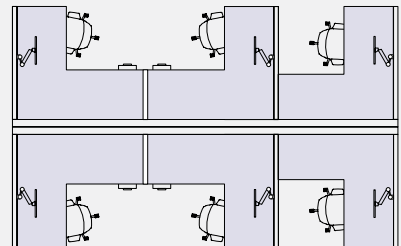
- + **Simplicity.** Straightforward design makes planning easy.
- + **Visibility.** Suitable for times when agents need to be in view of each other and/or manager.
- + **High Density.** Compact workspaces are extremely space efficient.
- + **Adaptive.** Easy to mix sizes, sit-to-stand, add under-the-desk storage.
- + **Collaborative.** Open layout offers an engaging, collaborative environment.
- + **Design Choices.** Sizes range from 48 to 60-inches, with panel and spine-based variations and numerous levels of privacy screens.
- + **Streamlined Inventory.** Minimal parts and pieces provides for efficient inventory.
- + **Supervisor Layout.** Options include embedding a manager in the middle of a row or at the end of the run within easy listening distance. Agents have easy access to drop in for hands-on support, coaching or collaboration with the supervisor.



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#### 90 Degree–Linear Layouts

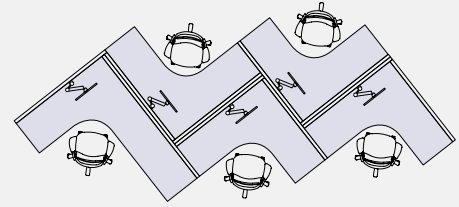
- + **High Density.** Accommodates multiple agents while still providing comfortable space.
- + **Larger Workspace.** The corner design provides a bit more workspace and storage; a 4x4 unit can accommodate dual monitors, display boards and paper organization.
- + **Varied Worksurface Options.** Possibilities include ergonomic cutout, dual height designs.
- + **Privacy and Sightline Choices.** Panel height and material offer various levels of acoustic and visual privacy.
- + **Flexible.** Many configuration options depending on desired length.
- + **Storage.** Accommodates a range of solutions either under the desk and/or atop the worksurface.
- + **Supervisor Layout.** Varying the height of panels and seating, such as low panels or bar-height stool, give managers visibility to easily see if someone raises their hand for assistance.



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### 90 Degree–Sawtooth Layouts

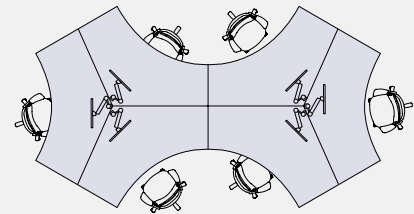
- + **Spacious.** Angled, cockpit-like configuration offers an open, more spacious feeling.
- + **Efficient.** Layouts can accommodate almost as many people as benching systems.
- + **Workspace.** Allows for comfortable workspace, dual monitors, display and paper organization.
- + **Distractions.** Offset orientation with higher panels can separate agents from each other's view and offer sound mitigation.
- + **Supervisor Layout.** Supervisors can be integrated within the pod or a run of stations. If additional privacy is required, touchdown spaces can be carved out with a different height screen or additional components such as storage or a secondary worksurface that can be positioned to provide privacy.



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### 120 Degree–Organic Layouts

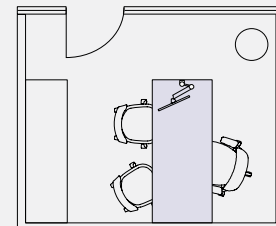
- + **Spacious Feeling.** Boomerang shape wraps around user for greater sense of space.
- + **Design Variety.** Allows for dynamic floor plan; lends itself to numerous designs, shapes and iterations within single floorplan: serpentine, dog bone, pinwheel, honeycomb, etc.
- + **Natural-feeling.** Non-linear planning creates ability to add interesting spaces in between clusters. Flow and flux of undulating curves creates sense of movement.
- + **Team Options.** Departmental pods and/or shared spaces can be easily designed in open pockets.
- + **Privacy.** Agents don't directly face each other. Designs can vary, keeping some open, closing off others.
- + **Density.** Layout helps maximize people within the floor plate with less clutter.
- + **Supervisor Layout.** Movable/customizable screens can partition out areas for managers and/or informal meetings and training. In addition to portable screens, open, exposed sides at end of run in some configurations can be closed with additional components or by positioning station against a wall to carve out manager area.



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### Private Office–Supervisor Layout

- + **Privacy.** Closed-door provides built-in privacy for one-on-one discussions between agents and their supervisor.
- + **Large storage.** Space for a variety of above and below worksurface storage.
- + **Visibility.** Glass walls afford visibility to agent workstations.
- + **Dual-purpose.** Different set-ups, such as a round-table desk layout can function as a small meeting room when manager is vacant.



## Shared Spaces

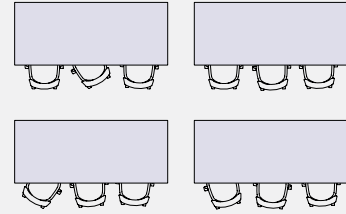
Driven by the competition for talent and desire to support employee engagement, contact centers need to invest in three types of shared spaces: training, social and retreat. Environments are shaped by the programming of the space and equipped with furniture, technology and acoustics appropriate to the activity.

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### Training Spaces

Training is an ongoing and integral part of most contact centers. A variety of spatial sizes are needed to enhance learning, support improved collaboration, and stimulate personal and professional growth.

Types include small meeting rooms with round tables and light-weight task chairs for one-on-one coaching or impromptu meetings, classrooms with flexible seating and training table options. Technology supports in-room or remote instruction, while retractable doors serve to divide up large-capacity rooms.



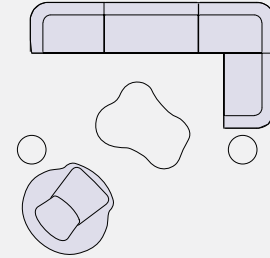
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### Social Spaces

Multiple and varied spaces are required to foster a sense of belonging and provide the opportunity for employees to meet, relax and socialize with peers. Breakout zones help build connectivity and presence within large open plan areas. This might include cafés; lounges with groupings of tables and soft, bar-height and stadium style seating; game rooms and fitness centers.

Pantries and smaller amenity spaces with comfortable furnishings located adjacent to employee work areas allow for quick breaks when agents can't wander far from their station.

Security measures that limit access to personal technology give rise to the need for quiet areas and "chill" lounges with Wi-Fi and soft seating to take care of personal matters during break time.

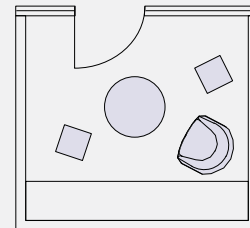


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### Retreat Spaces

Contact centers generate high levels of stress, and agents need alternative spaces to regroup and unwind from the tension of their jobs—from managing large amounts of inbound and outbound calls to dealing with an emotional customer. Ensuring call center employees are given breaks and opportunities to get up from their stations and use other indoor and outdoor spaces can go a long way to reduce the synergistic effect of their overall level of anxiety.

Supportive spaces that promote workers overall wellbeing include private quiet areas within the open plan divided off with moveable screens to communal relaxation spaces such as meditation/wellness room with an area to sit or lay down, lactation room with a sink and chair, group spaces like a library and TV/art room to an outdoor walking path.





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*Through research, Knoll explores the connection between workspace design and human behavior, health and performance, and the quality of the user experience. We share and apply what we learn to inform product development and help our customers shape their work environments.*

*To learn more about this topic or other research resources Knoll can provide, visit [www.knoll.com/research](http://www.knoll.com/research).*