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Gartner for Customer Service & Support

Untap the Hidden Potential of the Customer Service Supervisor Role



Customer service and support supervisors face unique challenges that, if left unaddressed, can contribute to loss of productivity, feelings of burnout and increased attrition. Use this research to learn about these challenges and how to take action against them.

Overview

Key Findings

- Sixty percent of customer service and support supervisors report spending significant time on invisible work, which is work not accounted for in their formal performance evaluations or captured by their role responsibilities.
- Remote supervisors are able to dedicate more time to coaching than their nonremote peers, likely because they are interrupted less frequently.
- Supervisors are at risk of moderate to high change fatigue, increasing the likelihood of them having negative feelings toward their work or looking for a new job.

Recommendations

- Conduct a role audit to gain a clear understanding of how supervisors spend their time, and how the work they do promotes (or detracts from) organizational objectives.
- Create a culture that respects and protects time for prioritized tasks such as coaching preparation and coaching delivery.
- Take action against the three root causes of change fatigue by providing proactive rest, building psychological safety within teams and encouraging team-owned implementation planning.

The State of the Customer Service and Support Supervisor

The supervisor role is challenging; they must coach and develop frontline workers, guide their agents through change and handle the in-and-out of every day operations of the function. And they must do this while meeting the needs and expectations of those both above and below them in the organizational structure. Despite the importance of supervisors, addressing the pain points of the role is less important than addressing the needs of others, such as frontline agents. But ignoring the challenges supervisors face comes at the expense of their performance and overall well-being, with potential for trickle-down effects on their direct reports and the success of the organization.

To better understand the challenges customer service and support supervisors face, and to help leaders proactively address these challenges, we conducted a series of interviews and surveys. Through this research we find that:

- Supervisors are doing invisible work
- Supervisor's coaching time isn't protected from interruption
- Supervisors are burned out on change

Supervisors Do Invisible Work

Interviews with leaders across a range of industries, organization sizes and business models revealed that the responsibilities supervisors hold are diverse. However, one thing was the same across the board: Supervisors are being asked to do a lot. ¹ And with so many diverse responsibilities, it is easy for some work to go unnoticed.

Sixty percent of supervisors report spending a significant amount of time on work not captured by their formal performance evaluations or role responsibilities. Essentially, they're spending time on work that is invisible to their leaders, and it may be getting in the way of things that are more important.

2023 Gartner Customer Service and Support Coach, Supervisor and Manager Survey

Some invisible work is not valuable to the organization. Supervisors may be spending time on tasks, such as preparing reports that will go unread, that could be better spent on priorities like coaching and developing reps. Or, supervisors may be unknowingly duplicating the efforts of another employee. In both cases, this is work that could be eliminated, freeing up resources for more important things. But it can only be eliminated when leaders know it is happening.

Other invisible work may actually add value, but is perhaps better suited to someone other than the supervisor. For example, supervisors may be spending time helping reps troubleshoot technological issues. While this is work that definitely needs to be done, it may be done more effectively and efficiently by an IT specialist rather than a customer service and support supervisor.

Invisible work can also be of high value and well-suited to the supervisor role. For example, an experienced supervisor may spend significant time mentoring peers who are newer to the role, helping them develop the necessary skills and abilities for success. But if peer-to-peer mentorship is not included as part of their performance evaluation, this work goes unsupported and unrewarded.

Invisible work should be addressed to prevent undesirable outcomes, such as poor productivity, lowered morale, burnout or increased attrition risk. Conducting a role audit to gain a full understanding of the varied tasks that their supervisors do, the amount of time they take, and how these tasks contribute to (or detract from) organizational goals and priorities is the first step.

Once the audit is complete, service leaders can ensure that valuable invisible work is assigned to the appropriate role, and that adequate resources are provided to achieve the work in the most efficient way possible. Invisible work that does not add value can be eliminated, and supervisors who are engaging in this type of invisible work can be coached on how to better prioritize tasks and manage their time.

Supervisors' Priorities Are Not Protected

Sixty percent of leaders report that coaching is one of the top 3 primary responsibilities for supervisors.³ But the reality is that supervisors are only spending an average of 30% of their time on coaching and coaching-related activities.² Instead of being prioritized, coaching often gets pushed aside to make room for urgent issues. Interviews with leaders reveal that many are frustrated and dissatisfied with how their supervisors are spending their time.¹

“We want our supervisors to be really focused on development, spending at least 70% of their time on coaching and development. But the reality is that it’s flipped — they’re stuck triaging problems and putting out fires. So their coaching time is spent just delivering data, or being reactive. It’s not proactively developing talent.”

Customer service and support leader

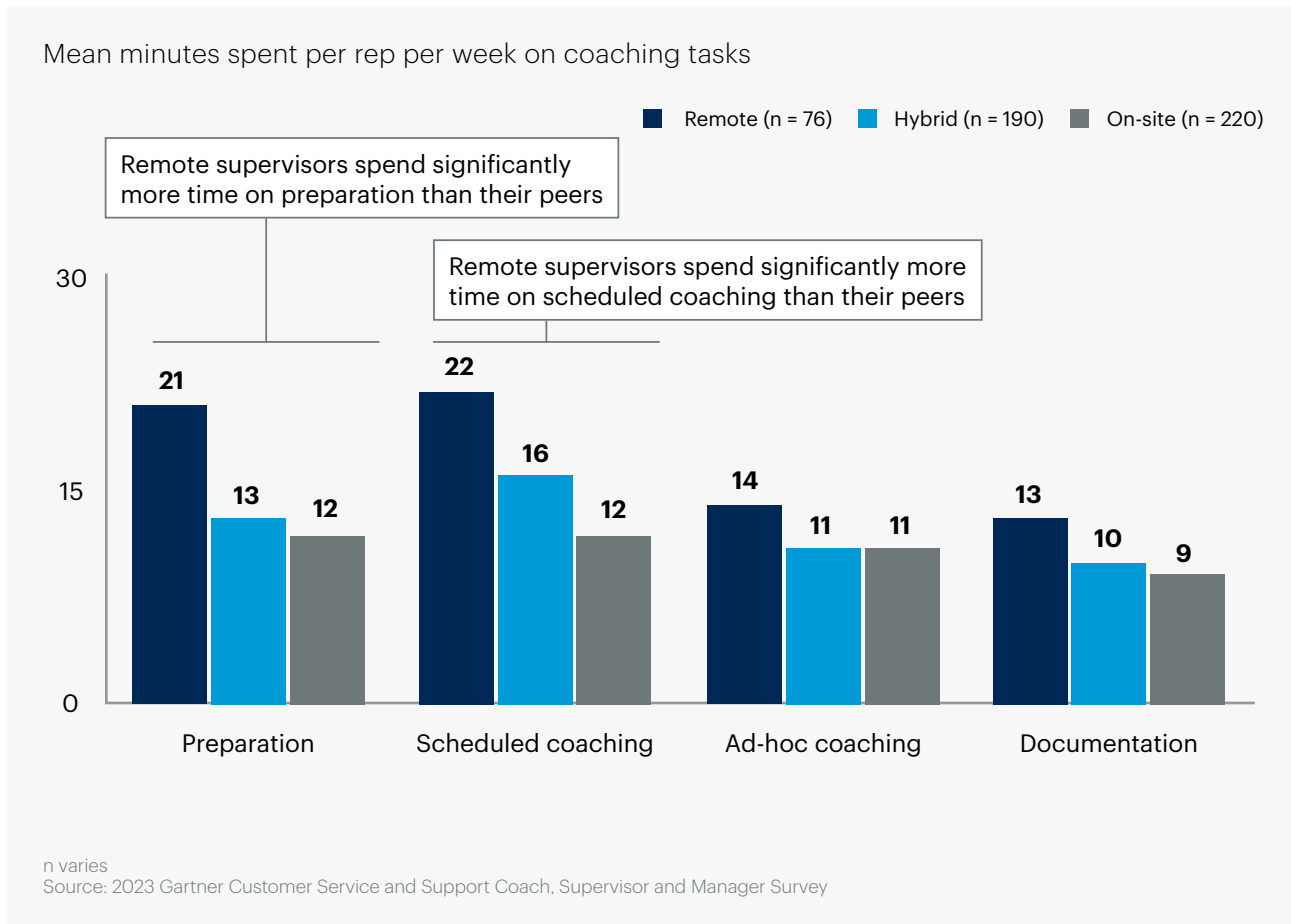
In interviews, customer service and support leaders say that handling customer contacts gets in the way of supervisor’s coaching. At the same time, survey data shows that many leaders want supervisors to prioritize handling customer contacts. Forty-two percent of service and support leaders placed resolving customer issues in their top 3 most important priorities for supervisors.³ This creates a tension for supervisors, where one priority is making it difficult to make time for the other.

“The biggest challenge our supervisors face are interruptions and distractions. They’re trying to prepare for or having coaching, and then an agent who’s on the phone needs help. And administrative tasks always come up for our team, too. Things like fixing payroll errors, making sure agents get logged out if they have to leave early, responding to field inquiries ...”

Customer service and support leader

However, there is one group of supervisors who seems to be handling this tension with better results than others. Supervisors who work remotely 100% of the time report spending significantly more time on coaching preparation and scheduled coaching than their hybrid and on-site peers (see Figure 1).² And the increased time in scheduled coaching does not come at the expense of in-the-moment, ad hoc style coaching or handling customer contacts. In fact, there is no significant difference in the average amount of ad hoc coaching that remote, hybrid and on-site supervisors do. Likewise, there is no evidence that remote supervisors are handling a lower volume of customer contacts.²

Figure 1: Remote Supervisors Coach Significantly More Than Their Peers



So what is it about remote workers that makes them able to dedicate more time than their nonremote peers to preparing for and delivering coaching to their direct reports? Workers who are in the same place, and particularly workers located in the same place working in an open-plan environment like a call center, are interrupted more frequently than those who are not co-located. ⁴ And these interruptions take their toll. It can take significant time for someone who is interrupted to return to what they were working on before the interruption, and the longer and more demanding the interruption is, the longer resuming work can take. ⁵ One study found that it took workers an average of 23 minutes to get back to their original task. ⁴

In short, an unintended benefit of remote work is that supervisors are more protected from time-sucking interruptions. Thankfully, workers don't need to be remote to have their priorities protected. They do, however, need the support of leaders and a culture focused on making time for the most important responsibilities. One way this can be achieved is by encouraging supervisors to block off time on their calendars for particular tasks, such as preparation for coaching. It is important to communicate that these blocks of time should only be interrupted for emergencies.

Another approach is to create regularly scheduled development times during which supervisors are removed from all duties other than employee development, and to designate an alternative supervisor in their place. An example of this is Cygnific, an organization that provides supervisors with an uninterrupted week devoted to learning team members' development needs eight times a year.

Case in Point: Distraction-Free Development Week (Cygnific)*



Cygnific's supervisors wanted to coach effectively, but found themselves constantly interrupted. To ensure that supervisors had adequate time to dedicate to their rep's development,

Cygnific implemented a system to provide supervisors with regular rotation of distraction-free development weeks. These weeks were not in place of regular coaching, but instead were designed to allow supervisors time to dive deep into rep development needs through observation and analysis of performance data. As a result, the supervisors are able to provide more personalized, high-quality coaching.

During a supervisor's distraction-free development week, they are relieved from responsibilities not related to employee development. To facilitate this, Cygnific shields supervisors in three ways. First, clear expectations were set that the specified supervisor will not be available during their designated development week. Next, supervisors are instructed to focus on observing the rep's work, but to not get involved directly. Finally, main responsibilities such as handling escalations and general team management are shifted to a capable senior rep. A secondary supervisor is also designated for emergency situations and overflow management. * This case study, originally developed in 2009, describes a unique approach to a common and ongoing challenge that many customer service and support leaders struggle with today. It is based on interviews and internal documentation provided by the company.

Supervisors Are Burned Out on Change

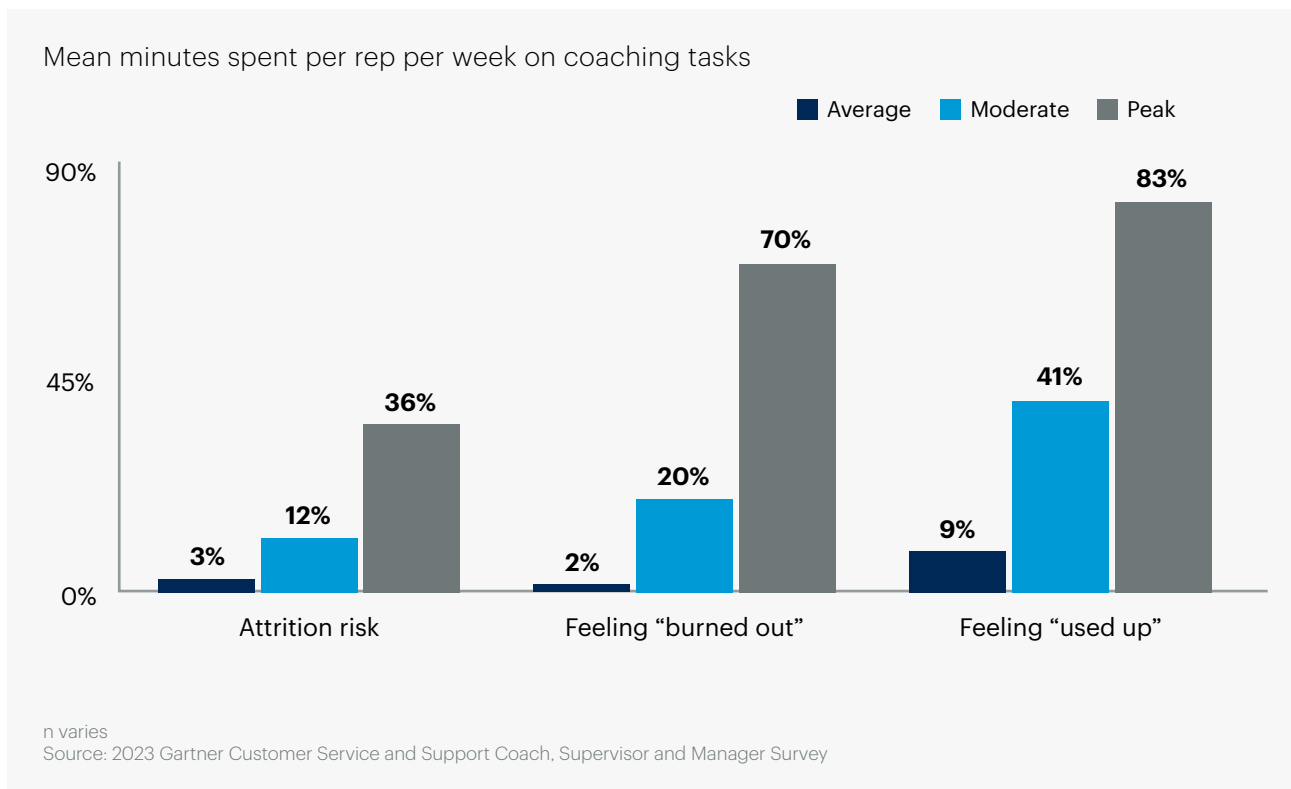
Change can be hard on all employees. And when employees experience change fatigue, their well-being and productivity suffer. Change fatigue can decrease employee enterprise contribution up to 17%, and reduce discretionary effort up to 22%.⁶

Although all employees are at risk of change fatigue, the supervisor's critical role in communicating and championing change makes them especially vulnerable. With an average of six years in role,² it's safe to assume that the supervisors we studied have experienced quite a bit of change. They have guided their reps through large shifts in the way they work due to COVID-19 — first adjusting to remote work and now, more recently, through return-to-work initiatives. They've also had to communicate organizational changes, promote countless tech upgrades, and support changes in processes. So it's not entirely surprising that 56% of supervisors agree that there is more change now than in the past.²

All this change is taking a toll. Nearly 30% of supervisors are experiencing moderate to high levels of change fatigue, increasing their risk of feelings of burnout and attrition (see Note 1).²

For example, an average supervisor is at a relatively low risk of feeling “used up” or “burned out” at the end of their work day. They also have a fairly low risk of attrition. In comparison, if that same supervisor is experiencing a moderate or peak level of change fatigue, we see a significant increase in these negative outcomes (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Negative Outcomes of Change Fatigue



Change is inevitable, but change fatigue doesn't have to be. There are ways to protect supervisors (and other employees) against the ill effects of change. Taking action begins with understanding three of the root causes of change fatigue:

- **Reactive rest:** Most organizations offer rest only after symptoms of fatigue are noticeable.
- **Unsettled relationships:** Changes in process or organizational structure can disrupt the valuable, supportive relationships that help employees get work done. Breakdowns in relationships between teams and managers can deteriorate levels of trust.
- **Top-down change initiatives:** Change plans that are developed and implemented in a top-down way are often disconnected from the day-to-day reality of workers. This can be draining for employees.

To address these root causes of change fatigue:

- **Normalize proactive rest: Proactive rest has three qualities.** First, it is available, meaning that employees have access to a variety of tools that support rest. Second, it is accessible, meaning that employees are encouraged to rest without guilt. Finally, it is appropriate, meaning that the tools for rest provided meet employees' individual needs.
- **Embed psychological safety as a team norm:** Psychological safety, or shared beliefs among a team that it is safe to take risks, voice opinions and share concerns, can help maintain and rebuild cohesion in the presence of disruptive change.
- **Encourage team-owned implementation planning:** Actively shifting ownership of the change initiative to the team relieves some of the burden on the supervisor, and increases ownership (and acceptance) of the change across the team.

Conclusion

Supervisor's diverse responsibilities create challenges specific to the role, such as the tendency for some work to be invisible, and for priorities to be in conflict when it comes to prioritization. Furthermore, a supervisor's location in the organizational structure places additional strain on them in times of change, as they're the ones responsible for communicating these changes to the front lines. Left unaddressed, these role-specific pain points may lead to lost productivity and other negative outcomes that harm organizational outcomes. Customer service and support leaders must take action to define the role clearly, protect supervisor time, and address the underlying causes of change fatigue.

Evidence

¹ 2023 Gartner Customer Service and Support Coach, Supervisor, and Manager Study Interviews.

² 2023 Gartner Customer Service and Support Coach, Supervisor and Manager Survey. This survey was conducted to better understand the responsibilities of customer service and support supervisors, with an emphasis on tasks related to coaching and developing their direct reports.

³ 2023 Gartner Customer Service Organization Structure and Role Survey.


⁴ No Task Left Behind? Examining the Nature of Fragmented Work, CHI.

⁵ The Effect of Interruption Duration and Demand on Resuming Suspended Goals, Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied.

⁶ 2022 Gartner Workforce Change Fatigue Survey. This survey was conducted to understand the levels of change fatigue in employees and the manager's role in mitigating it.


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