How can I help you today?– The mental health of customer service agents

Working at the frontline of customer service in retail can be incredibly stressful. Customers expect quick and readily available assistance across various platforms and hours, putting significant pressure on service agents. Additionally, there's a growing awareness of mental health issues, prompting businesses to prioritize mental well-being alongside physical health.

To gain insights into this, we conducted a survey involving 517 customer service agents in the retail sector. We asked about factors affecting their mental health and what measures their employers could take to mitigate negative impacts.

Continue reading to discover our findings and our proposed action plan to support your team's mental well-being effectively.

Why does mental health matter?

While it might seem convenient for employers to view their employees' mental health challenges as strictly personal matters, the truth is these issues profoundly affect business outcomes.

> **"It is directly connected to employee satisfaction and engagement, increased productivity and a reduction in absenteeism. This is especially crucial for my team, given the potentially stressful nature of their role especially during peak periods,"**
>
> – says Eleanor Galtie from Boardriders.

13% More Productive

1,793 Telesales workers at BT

A study from **Oxford University** solidifies this link between employee happiness and productivity, revealing that happy workers are **13% more productive**. This study, conducted among **1,793 telesales workers at BT**, demonstrated that improved mood significantly enhanced sales conversion rates.

> **"I'm a big believer that happy teams contribute to being a high-performing team,"**
> – says Charlotte Laver-Bradbury, Member Happiness Manager at Beauty Pie.

Elsewhere, Glassdoor findings indicate a correlation between reported employee well-being and customer satisfaction, suggesting that happier employees lead to happier customers.

"The mental health of the entry level is vital as in our line of business that is the first touchpoint that a customer or any individual who has reached out to our company has," according to Martin Vatckov, at waterdrop®. **"The first impression is vital and we really strive to do our best in making sure that all of waterdrop®'s employees are able to perform at their peak every day, throughout the year"**

83% Impacting their mental health

95% Decreased productivity

However, the high-pressure environment of customer service roles can exacerbate mental health issues, endangering employee happiness. A survey revealed that **83%** of call center workers feel the pressure of their roles impacting their mental health, with **95%** reporting decreased productivity due to work-related mental well-being concerns.

Additionally, the costs associated with higher employee turnover due to stress and dissatisfaction, including hiring expenses and lost productivity, pose ongoing challenges to team performance.
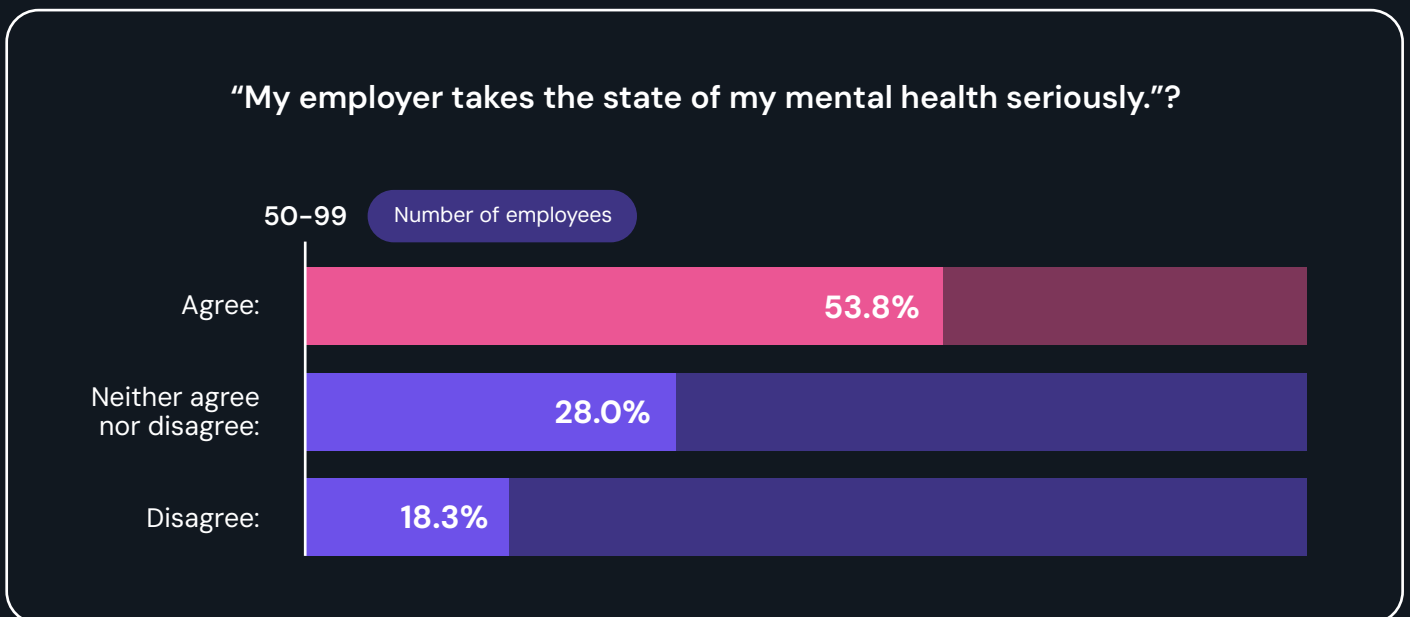
Clearly, there's a compelling business case for employers to prioritize supporting their employees' mental health. Beyond financial incentives, there's a fundamental human obligation for employers to actively care for their employees' well-being. However, our survey suggests that employees feel employers aren't meeting this expectation.

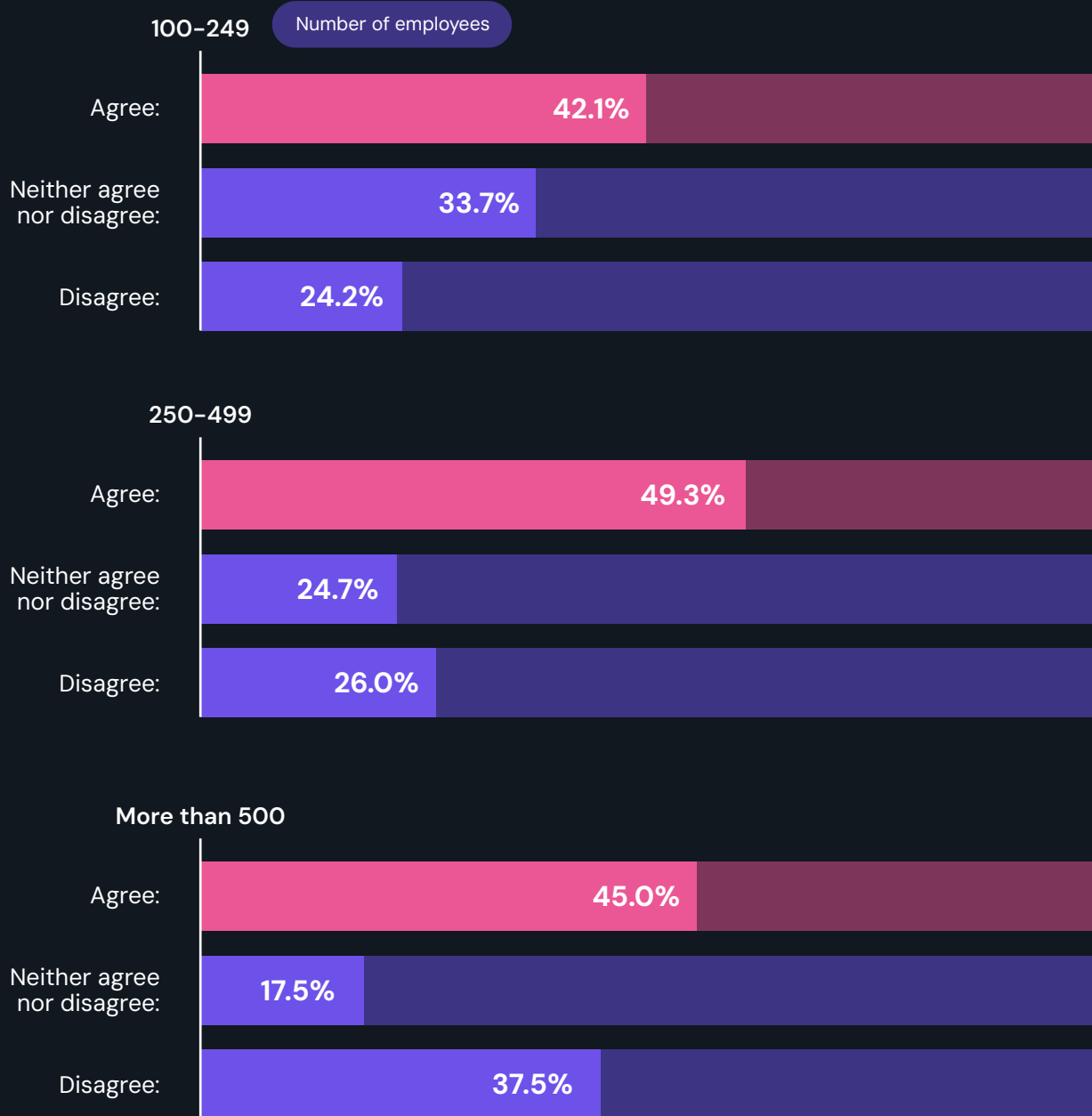# What employers are not doing, and what they are

Less than half of agents think their employer takes their mental health seriously. surveyed agreed with the statement **"My employer takes the state of my mental health seriously."**

"My employer takes the state of my mental health seriously."?

Agree:	**47.6%**
Neither agree nor disagree:	**25.7%**
Disagree:	**26.7%**
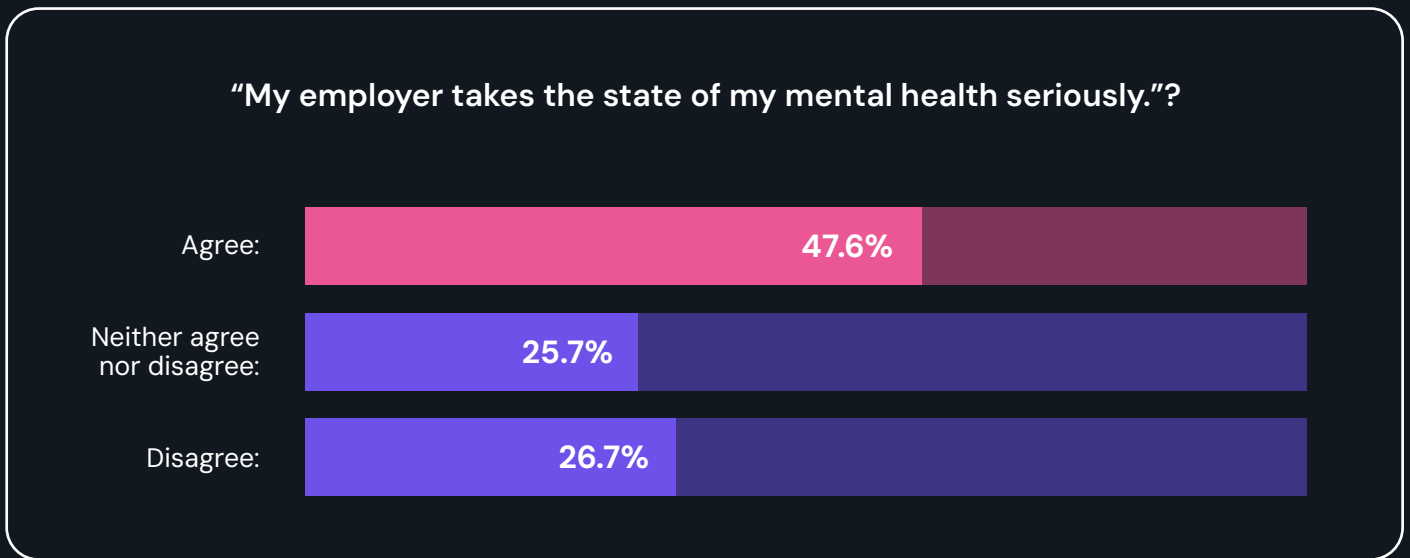
As company size grows, customers are twice as likely to disagree with this statement, suggesting that larger companies find it more challenging to provide an environment where agents feel supported.

"My employer takes the state of my mental health seriously."?

50–99 Number of employees

Agree:	**53.8%**
Neither agree nor disagree:	**28.0%**
Disagree:	**18.3%**

"My employer takes the state of my mental health seriously."?

100-249

Number of employees

Agree:	42.1%
Neither agree nor disagree:	33.7%
Disagree:	24.2%

250-499

Agree:	49.3%
Neither agree nor disagree:	24.7%
Disagree:	26.0%

More than 500

Agree:	45.0%
Neither agree nor disagree:	17.5%
Disagree:	37.5%

It appears many retailers are falling short in prioritising their team members' mental health. According to our survey **52.4%** of respondents hesitated to agree with the statement: **"My employer takes the state of my mental health seriously"**
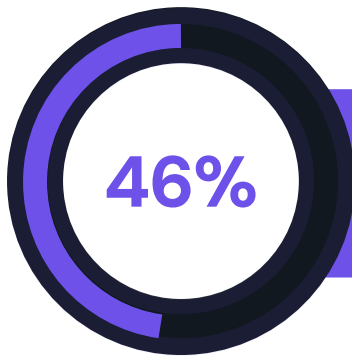
46% said that their employer does not provide any initiatives or resources to reduce stress or to help with mental health.

Simply providing mental health resources is not enough for some employees, but nor is it essential for retailers to provide resources in order for employees to feel that their mental health is serious.

For those that agreed with the statement **"My employer takes the state of my mental health seriously" 22%** said that they were not provided with any resources. Meanwhile, for those that disagreed, **25%** said that their employers did in fact provide resources.

This suggests that providing resources is not essential to have your team members think you take their mental health seriously. So what do team leaders need to do?

Employers need to listen to and acknowledge employee concerns

When we asked agents what actions they would like their employers to take, we started to understand why providing resources wasn't enough on its own. We grouped and categorised responses, and the most popular type of response was **"Listening, awareness, and acknowledgement"**. For example responses like:

"I would like my employer to listen more to employees' health concerns."

"Offer help and understanding"

And simply

"Listen more"

Most actions employers could take are cash-neutral

Beyond listening and acknowledging, most of the actions that agents wanted their employers to take were cash-neutral (i.e. may have a cost associated, but wouldn't necessarily cost money).

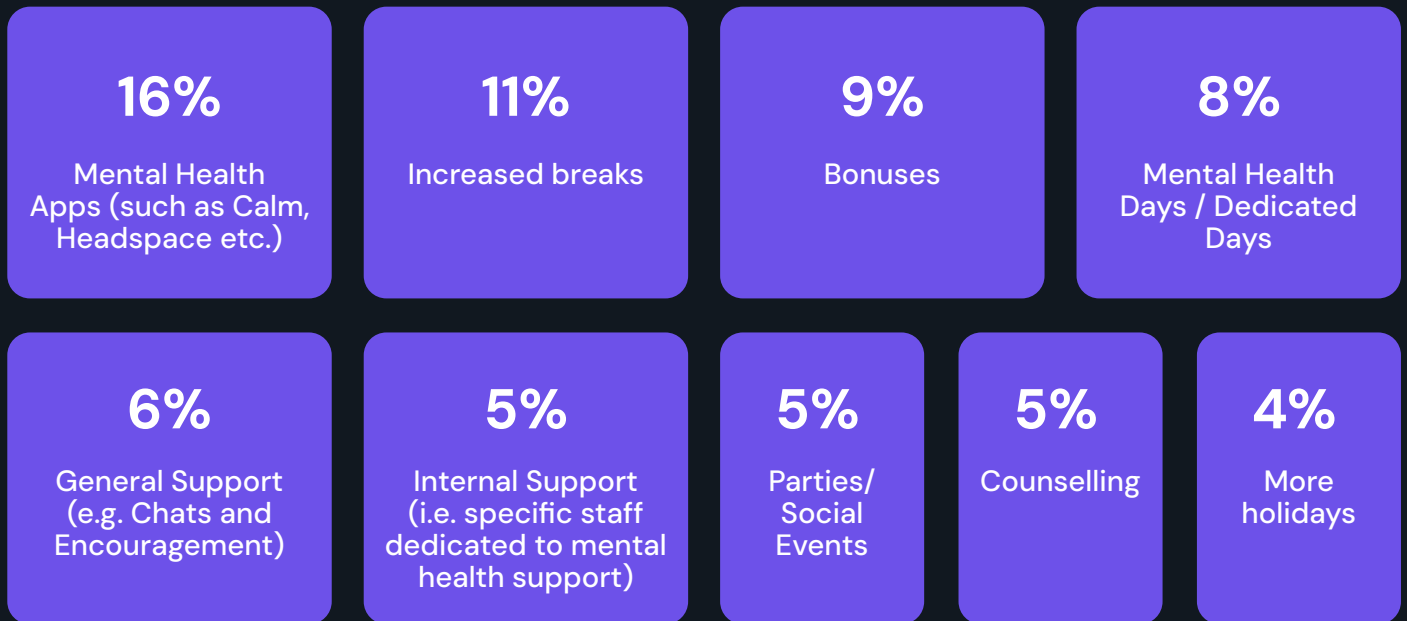|			
23% Listening, awareness, and acknowledgement	**18%** More breaks	**11%** Offering "more support"	**11%** Dedicated days for mental health or recovery
9% Reduced workload	**8%** Speaking to someone	**6%** Increased pay or benefits	**5%** More holiday

Note: selected responses. Staff could choose more than one option, so percentages do not add up to 100.

With the exception of **"Increased pay and benefits"**, enacting these would not directly cost money, but with some there may have to be a tradeoff in terms of productivity. Would the productivity gains made by improving agents' mental health offset a reduction in working days because of holidays or mental health days? A **13% increase in productivity** would surely outweigh a mental health day per quarter.

What initiatives are retailers doing?

The most common initiatives that retailers were providing for staff were:

16%
Mental Health Apps (such as Calm, Headspace etc.)

11%
Increased breaks

9%
Bonuses

8%
Mental Health Days / Dedicated Days

6%
General Support (e.g. Chats and Encouragement)

5%
Internal Support (i.e. specific staff dedicated to mental health support)

5%
Parties/ Social Events

5%
Counselling

4%
More holidays

Note: selected responses. Staff could choose more than one option, so percentages do not add up to 100.

" waterdrop® take these kinds of initiatives seriously as Martin Vatchkov told us:

"Making sure that we have access to the gym in our HQ or to different sports activities, access to a doctor visiting us in the office bi-weekly is just a glimpse into what our company is trying to do in order to make sure that we are able to cope with the high intensity work with which each and everyone of us is involved in."

" Thomas Staudte, Head of Customer Engagement at air up®, told us that his team are provided with:

"stress reduction workshops and motivate them with flex times to add breaks in their day. We offer activities and support sport club memberships to actively motivate them to balance their life."

But he also points out that what retailers should be doing is: "Listening. Taking agent concerns seriously and providing actions to help them address their needs."

For Beauty Pie, alongside free therapy options and mental health days, a successful strategy is built on a culture of support.

> "Line managers need to be able to showcase soft skills of being trustworthy and empathetic, as well as having the ability to recognise when people are struggling, and knowing how to support those who are."
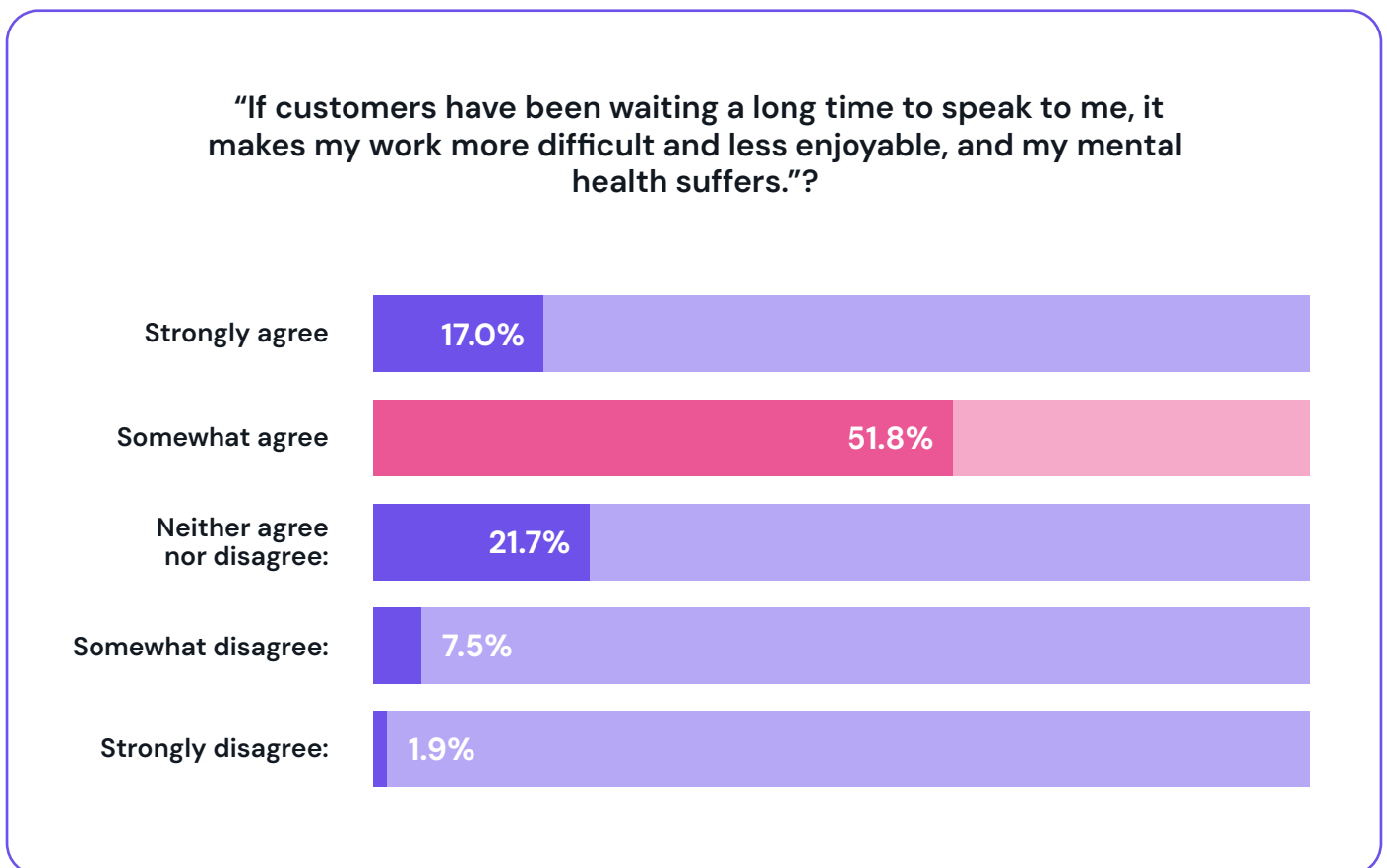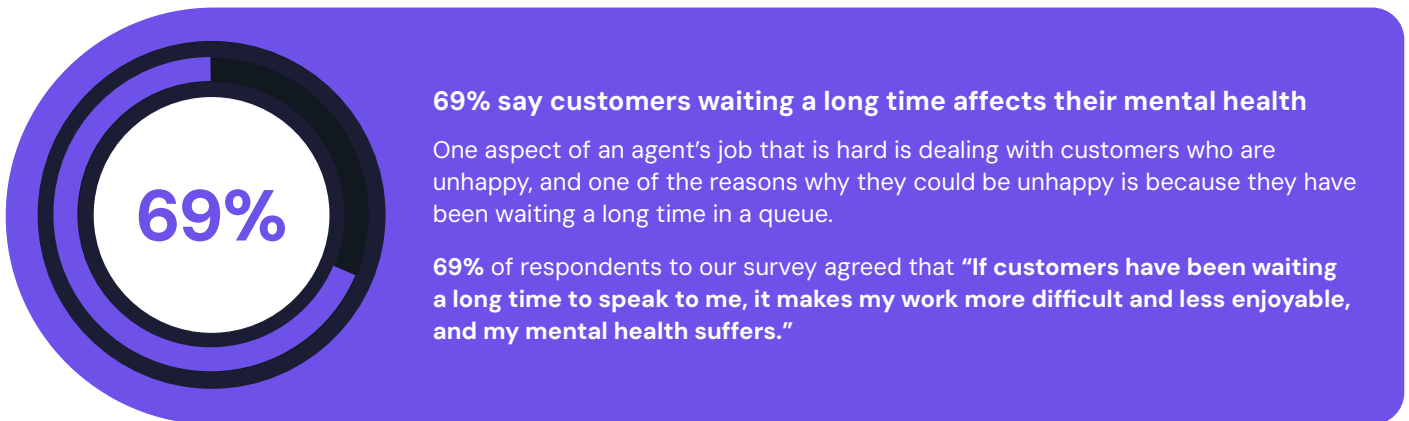>
> – Charlotte Laver-Bradbury told us.

For any retailer looking to take a more considered approach to their agents' mental health, the first step is to listen to employees and take their concerns seriously. While there are a range of positive actions you can take, simply listening and putting some small actions can go a long way to showing your employees that you take this seriously.
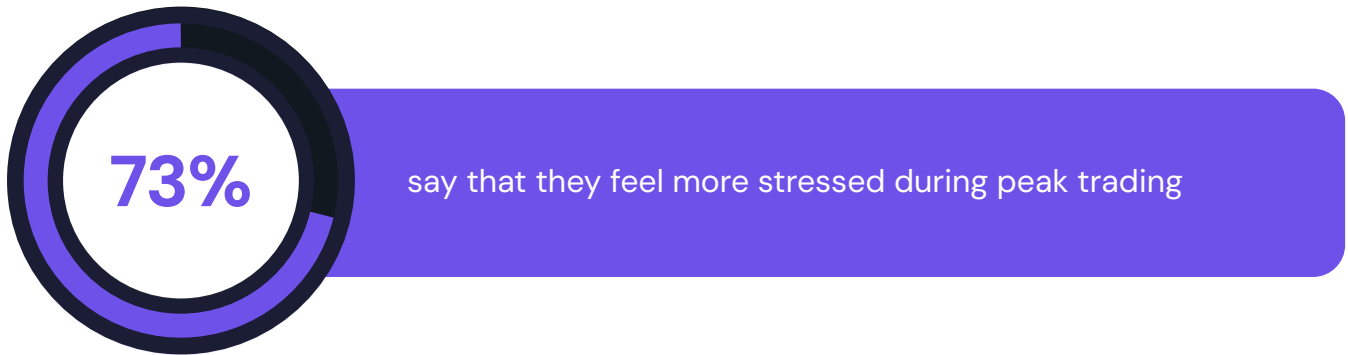
Next we take a look at what contributes to agent stress in retail, and how retailers can tackle this.
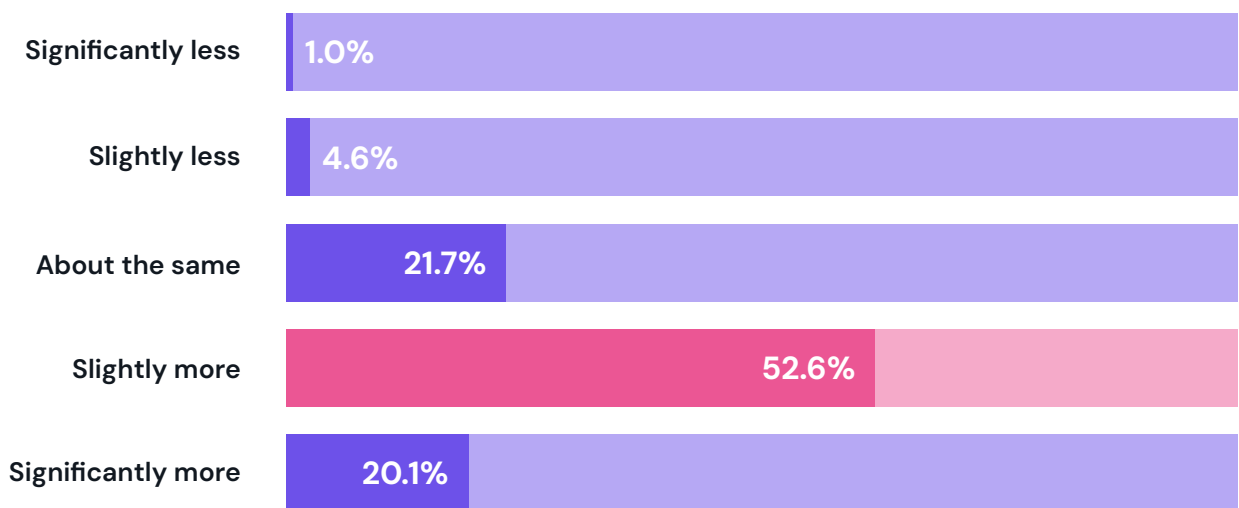
What makes agents' lives more difficult?

Any job comes with its stresses and strains, and the initiatives we've spoken about already are by no means unique to customer service roles.

But customer service comes with its own inherent stresses. Let's take a look at what makes life harder for agents.

69%

69% say customers waiting a long time affects their mental health

One aspect of an agent's job that is hard is dealing with customers who are unhappy, and one of the reasons why they could be unhappy is because they have been waiting a long time in a queue.

69% of respondents to our survey agreed that **"If customers have been waiting a long time to speak to me, it makes my work more difficult and less enjoyable, and my mental health suffers."**

"If customers have been waiting a long time to speak to me, it makes my work more difficult and less enjoyable, and my mental health suffers."?

Response	Percentage
Strongly agree	17.0%
Somewhat agree	51.8%
Neither agree nor disagree:	21.7%
Somewhat disagree:	7.5%
Strongly disagree:	1.9%

73% say that they feel more stressed during peak trading

To what extent do you feel more or less stressed/overwhelmed during busier periods at work, such as peak trading? (typically November – January)?

Significantly less	1.0%
Slightly less	4.6%
About the same	21.7%
Slightly more	52.6%
Significantly more	20.1%

Long wait times can make stress worse, especially when it's busy. And during peak times, when sales are really important for a brand's success, this pressure is felt by frontline workers.

Planning for busy times is tough for retail brands because ticket numbers can suddenly shoot up. If you have too many resources, it's a waste. But if you don't have enough, your team gets stretched thin, making customers unhappy.

A sudden increase in tickets can also bring down your team's morale, as we saw.

59% of agents say their mood is worse at the start of the day if there are significantly more queries to handle than normal

My mood is significantly better – **1.9%**

My mood is slightly better – **9.3%**

It doesn't affect my mood at all – **29.8%**

My mood is slightly worse – **49.5%**

My mood is significantly worse – **9.5%**
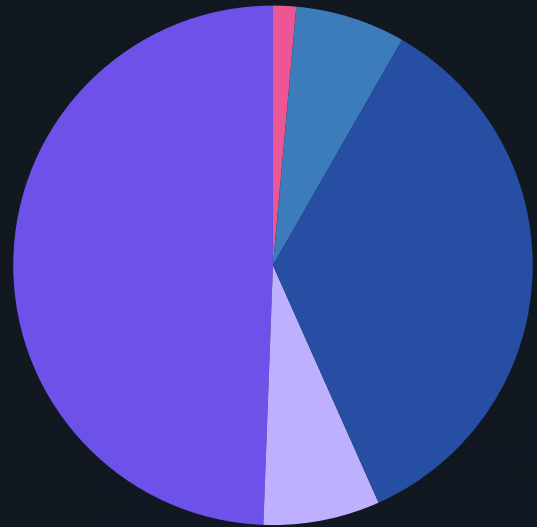
We all know the sinking feeling you get when you see that your inbox has suddenly exploded. Customer service agents are no different.

Seeing high ticket volumes at the beginning of the day is a source of stress. So should customer service leads hide this information from agents? The answer is, probably not.
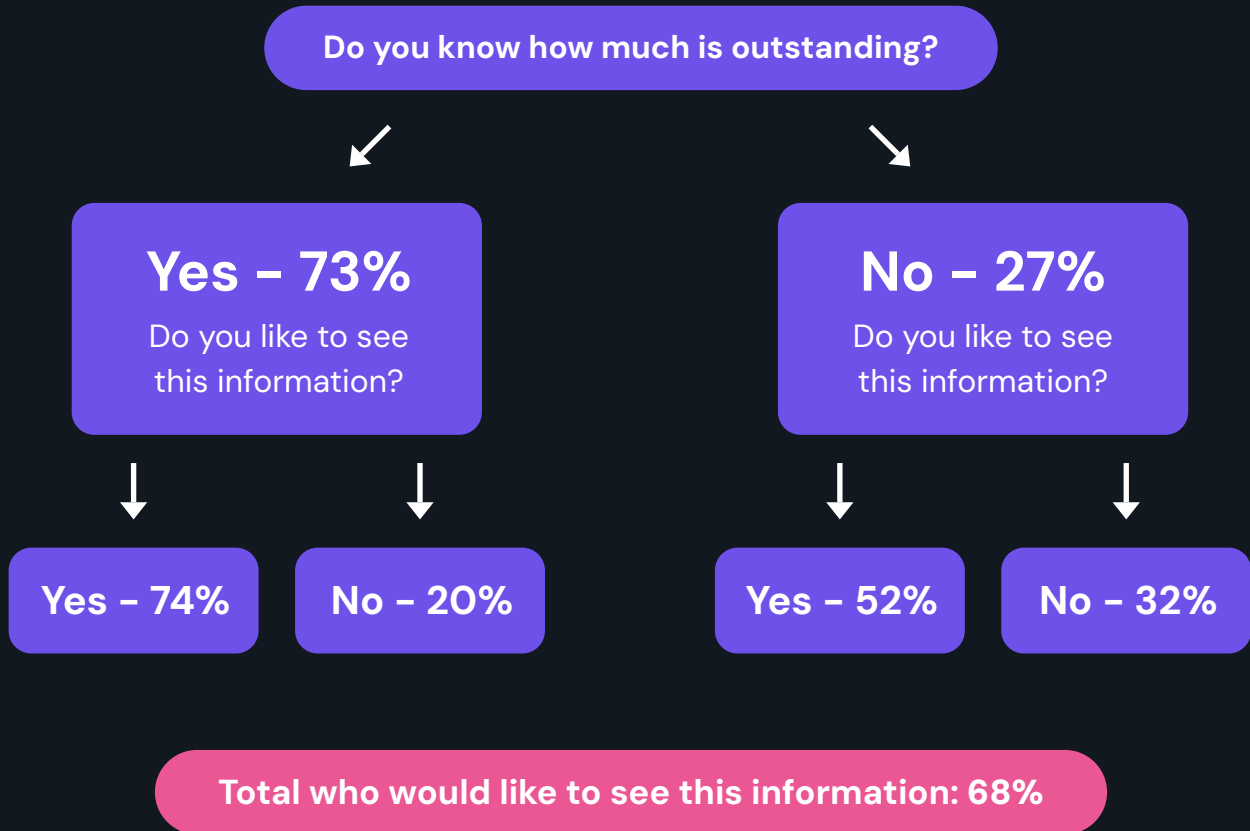
Two thirds of agents like to know how much work is outstanding

We asked two questions. First, if agents knew how much work was left. Then, depending on their answer, we asked if they liked knowing or preferred not to.

73% of agents see this information from their organization. Among them, 74% like seeing it, while 20% would rather not.
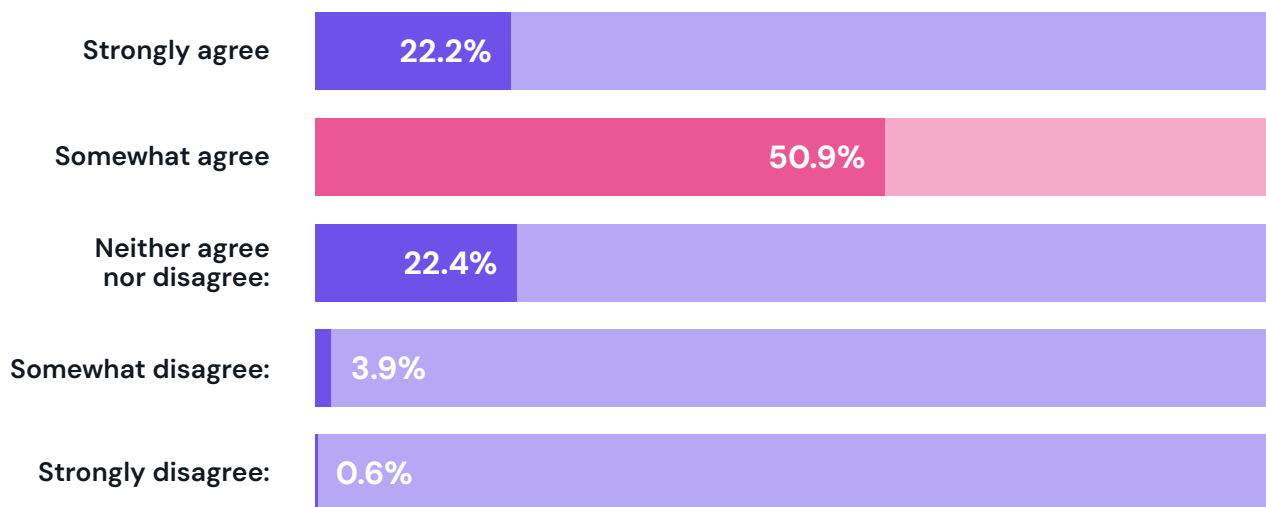
On the other hand, of the 27% who don't see this info, 52% want to, while 32% prefer not knowing.

That meant that 68% of respondents across both groups wanted to see how much work was left.

Do you know how much is outstanding?

Yes – 73%
Do you like to see this information?

No – 27%
Do you like to see this information?

Yes – 74%   **No – 20%**

Yes – 52%   **No – 32%**

Total who would like to see this information: 68%

73% of agents think having ticket targets increases stress

statement: "Having a daily or weekly target of customer cases to respond to contributes to increased stress levels."?

Strongly agree	22.2%
Somewhat agree	50.9%
Neither agree nor disagree:	22.4%
Somewhat disagree:	3.9%
Strongly disagree:	0.6%

This is the heart of the challenge for customer service leaders. Do you prioritise quality or quantity, and how do you strike a balance between the two?

For agents, being expected to hit volume targets increases stress for most. Of course, not every ticket is created equally – some can be answered with a single response, while others require back and forth. As an agent with a daily target, being tied down by a difficult customer with complex demands can mean you fall behind and the stress goes up.

When it comes to striking this balance, Martin Vatchkov from waterdrop® has this to say:

"Quantity shouldn't be a stand alone KPI unless there is quality attached to it and vice versa, quality should not be looked at individually unless there is quantity involved."
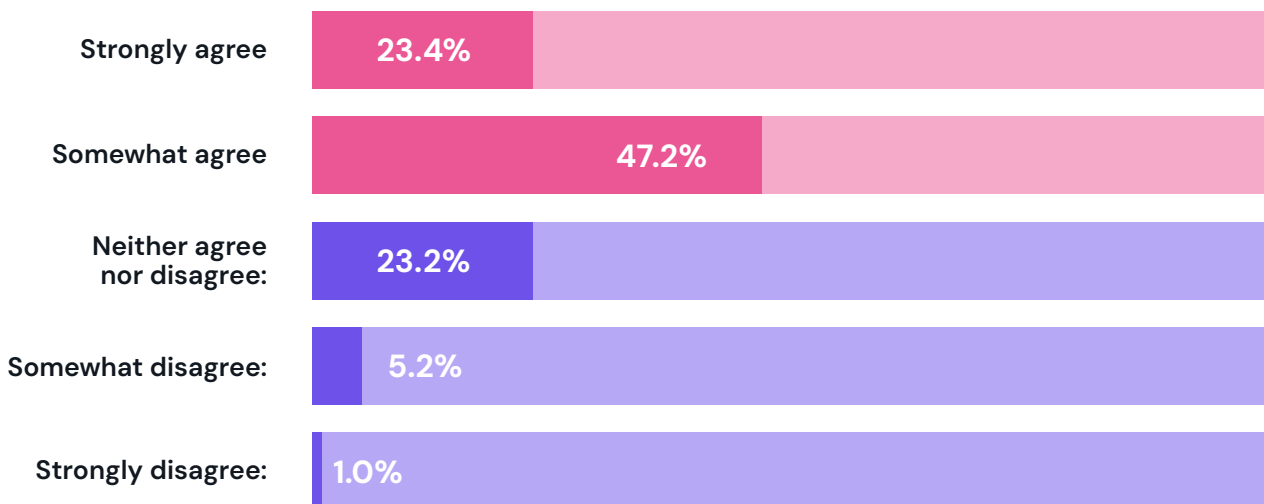
But yet, Thomas Staudte, Head of Customer Engagement at air up® comes down on the side of quality. Put simply, "It is much more fulfilling."

We occasionally hear that some agents like to get a few "easy" tickets under their belt at the start of a day as a warm up, but is that true across the industry?

Most agents would prefer fewer, more complex tickets

71% of respondents agreed that "I would be happier if I had fewer tickets to handle in a day, but each one required a higher degree of care and attention, rather than a higher number of average quality tickets."

I would be happier if I had fewer tickets to handle in a day, but each one required a higher degree of care and attention, rather than a higher number of average quality tickets overall.?

Strongly agree	23.4%
Somewhat agree	47.2%
Neither agree nor disagree:	23.2%
Somewhat disagree:	5.2%
Strongly disagree:	1.0%

Customer service agents are just like any other profession in that they want to take pride in their work. We hear from retailers all the time who are looking for talented team members to join a customer service team and deliver great experiences for the customer. At the same time, these agents want fulfilling jobs that are satisfying. Doing the same thing over and over is unlikely to be satisfying for customer-facing roles.

So, these are some of the main triggers for stress. But what can customer service leaders do.

An action plan to improve your team's mental health

1. **Assess Mental Health Impact:** Begin by understanding what factors affect your team's mental health the most. Create an anonymous survey for your agents to gather insights into their well-being and identify key triggers.

2. **Offer Support Resources:** Go beyond surveys and provide dedicated spaces and resources for mental health discussions and support. Actively listen to your team's feedback and take appropriate actions.

3. **Consider Mental Health Days:** Recognize the importance of mental well-being by offering periodic mental health days. Research shows that happier employees are more productive, making this investment worthwhile.

4. **Flexible Target Setting:** While volume-based targets are necessary, consider flexibility to balance quality and quantity. Ensure targets are realistic and achievable to reduce stress among agents.

5. **Transparency with Ticket Volumes:** Make ticket volumes accessible to those who want to see them, but not constantly visible. Respect agents' preferences while providing necessary information.

6. **Optimize Ticket Management:** Analyze common ticket issues to identify opportunities for improvement. Streamline processes and provide easily accessible answers to common questions to reduce agent workload.

7. **Reduce Customer Wait Times:** Focus on reducing customer wait times to alleviate stress for both agents and customers. Utilize automation to acknowledge customer concerns promptly and efficiently.

8. **Embrace AI Solutions:** Explore AI applications to support your team, such as summarizing conversations, analyzing tickets, and resolving repetitive queries without agent intervention. Leveraging AI can enhance efficiency and reduce agent workload.

By implementing these strategies, you can create a supportive environment that prioritizes mental health and enhances overall team well-being.

How AI Can Enhance Your Customer Service Team

We've identified key areas for improvement to support agents in their work and mental well-being:

Addressing Repetitive Tickets: Many customer inquiries, such as "Where is my Order?" are recurrent and time-consuming. AI can swiftly respond to these queries, either with simple solutions like tracking links or by delving into complex integrations with order management systems, carriers, and CRMs.

Managing Surge in Ticket Volume: During peak trading periods, ticket volumes skyrocket, particularly for common inquiries like order status. AI can efficiently handle these inquiries around the clock, minimizing the workload on agents and potentially reducing the need for additional seasonal staff.

Reducing Customer Wait Times: Swift first meaningful responses are crucial for customer satisfaction. AI can instantly address and resolve some queries, freeing up agents to handle more complex issues promptly and ensuring customers feel heard.

In conclusion, AI can have an immediate impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of customer service as well as positively impacting the mental well-being of personnel.

Customer service leaders should prioritize listening to frontline staff and proactively address stress-inducing factors, such as repetitive tasks, high-pressure environments, and challenging interactions with customers or internal systems.

While AI isn't a cure-all, it can significantly alleviate these challenges when integrated effectively into existing processes. Finding the right balance between human intervention and technological support is key, as emphasized by Thomas Staudte from air up®, highlighting that while "hands" (i.e. human intervention) are essential, machines can handle repetitive tasks more efficiently and effectively.

To explore how AI can support your team, reach out to DigitalGenius today.

About this survey

This survey was conducted among 517 customer service representatives of mid to large retail and ecommerce organizations based in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom.

The data was collected by Censuswide, an international market research consultancy and commissioned by conversational commerce vendor DigitalGenius. The survey complies with the Material Research Society's Code of Conduct and the ICC/ESOMAR International Code on Market, Opinion and Social Research and Data Analytics to ensure it was broadly inclusive, objective and egalitarian.

About DigitalGenius

DigitalGenius allows online retailers and ecommerce brands to fully resolve customer service queries using the power of AI and automation. Leading brands such as Reebok, AllSaints, On, Holland & Barrett, Rapha, Beauty Pie, and Boardriders use DigitalGenius to provide 24/7 customer service support, reduce response times and improve their customer experience.