



 RESEARCH REPORT · JUNE 2026

The Agent Exodus **Paradox**

Contact centers that deployed AI to replace agents are losing people faster than ever. The ones that deployed it to help agents are keeping them. Inside the strategy split quietly deciding who wins 2026.

Based on a survey of 294 CX and contact-center leaders (director level and above) at U.S. companies with 250+ employees, fielded in April 2026 by an independent third-party research firm.

37%

average annual agent attrition reported for the past 12 months



52%

deployed AI primarily to reduce agent headcount — the losing strategy



-11 pts

attrition drop at contact centers using AI to augment agents instead



 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AI was sold as the cure for agent attrition. Used one way, it's the accelerant.

The contact center has spent two decades fighting a war for retention — and by the numbers, it is still losing. Leaders in our study report **37% average annual agent attrition**, and 68% say hiring a qualified agent is harder today than it was two years ago. Every departure costs an average of **\$14,700** to backfill. The math has never been more punishing.

Into this, AI arrived with a seductive promise: fewer agents needed at all. A slim majority of contact centers — 52% — deployed AI primarily as a headcount-reduction play. One in three took the opposite path, deploying AI to augment the agents they have: absorbing after-call work, answering repetitive queries, surfacing answers in real time.

The two paths have now produced two very different scorecards. **At “replacement-first” contact centers, attrition rose from 36% to 41%.** Agents saw the strategy for what it was and left before it reached them — the best performers first, because they could. **At “augmentation-first” centers, attrition fell from 39% to 28%**, and customer satisfaction rose an average of nine points while replacement-first centers slipped four.

The paradox resolves cleanly once you see it: AI doesn't decide whether agents stay. It tells them whether they should. The market is now correcting — 71% of leaders say their 2026 AI strategy is shifting toward augmentation, and 44% privately regret framing AI to their own teams as a cost-cutting measure. This report maps how the split happened, what it cost, and what the winners did differently.

68%

say hiring qualified agents is harder than two years ago

\$14.7K

average fully loaded cost to replace a single agent

+9 pts

average CSAT gain at augmentation-first contact centers

71%

shifting their 2026 AI strategy toward augmentation

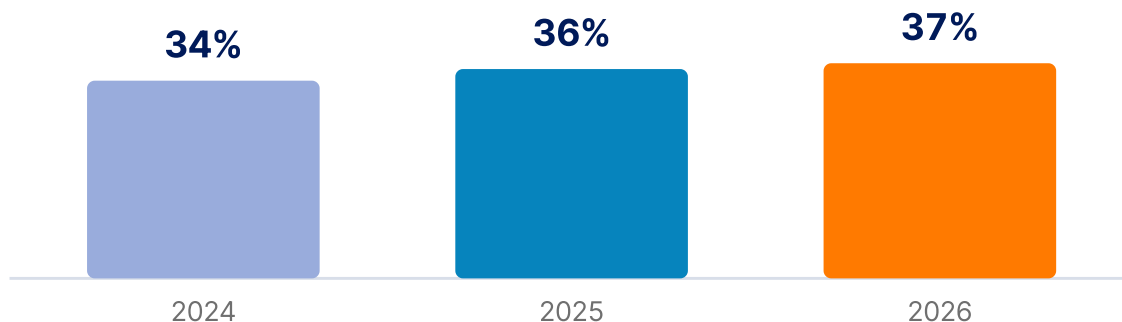
FINDING 01

The attrition fire never went out — it just stopped making headlines

The “great resignation” officially ended years ago. Nobody told the contact center. Average annual agent attrition has climbed for the third consecutive year to **37%** — meaning the typical contact center replaces more than a third of its front line every twelve months. And the replacement pipeline is thinning: **68% of leaders say hiring a qualified agent is harder than it was two years ago.**

Average annual agent attrition, 2024–2026

RESPONDENT-REPORTED TRAILING-12-MONTH RATES · N=294



WHY THIS MATTERS

At \$14,700 per departure, a 500-seat contact center running 37% attrition burns roughly **\$2.7M a year** just standing still — before counting the CSAT cost of rookie-heavy queues. Attrition is no longer an HR metric; it is the largest unbudgeted line item in the CX P&L, and it is compounding while attention has moved to AI.



We used to lose agents to the call center across the street. Now we lose them to any job that doesn't involve wearing a headset. The pool isn't shrinking — it's evaporating.

VP OF CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE · HEALTHCARE SERVICES COMPANY · 2,400 EMPLOYEES

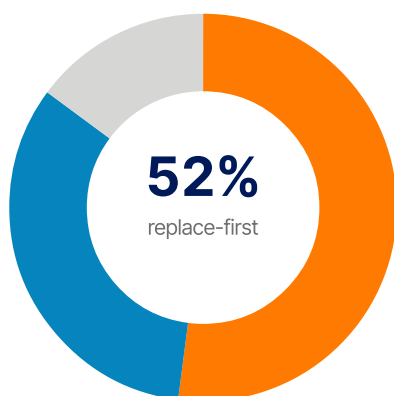
FINDING 02

The industry split into two AI strategies — and told its agents which one it picked

When contact centers bought AI, they bought it for one of two jobs. A slim majority — **52%** — **deployed AI primarily to reduce agent headcount**: deflect contacts, automate containment, shrink the roster. A third — 33% — deployed it primarily to augment agents: kill after-call work, surface answers mid-call, absorb the repetitive queue. The remaining 15% have not meaningfully deployed AI. Whatever the press release said, agents learned the real strategy within a quarter — from staffing plans, from backfill freezes, from what the bots were pointed at.

Primary objective of AI deployment in the contact center

SINGLE SELECT · N=294 · SUMS TO 100%



- 52%** — reduce agent headcount
deflection, containment, roster reduction
- 33%** — augment existing agents
after-call work, real-time assist, FAQ absorption
- 15%** — no meaningful AI deployment yet

WHY THIS MATTERS

Strategy is legible from the inside. In follow-up questions, 61% of replace-first leaders said their agents were “aware or very aware” that AI investment was tied to headcount targets. You cannot run a quiet replacement strategy past the people being replaced — and their response shows up in the next finding.

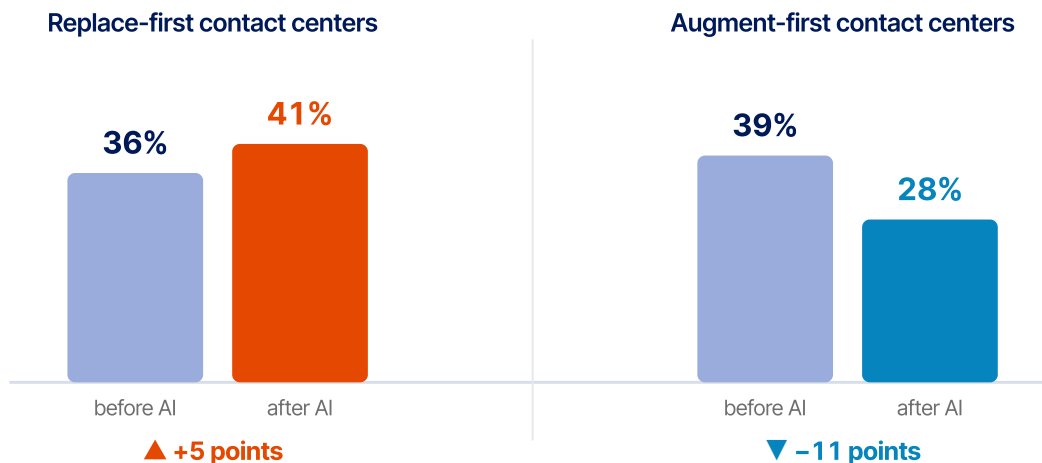
FINDING 03

The paradox: replacement strategies drove attrition up. Augmentation drove it down.

Here is the number that should reorder every 2026 roadmap. Contact centers that deployed AI to shrink the roster watched attrition **rise from 36% to 41%** over the deployment period. Centers that deployed AI to help agents watched it **fall from 39% to 28%** — an 11-point drop, from a worse starting position. The replace-first group also reported the departures skewing toward tenured, top-quartile agents: the people with options left first.

Agent attrition before vs. after AI deployment, by strategy

TRAILING-12-MONTH ATTRITION · DEPLOYERS ONLY · N=250



The week we announced our 'automation-led efficiency program,' my two best team leads updated their LinkedIn profiles. The bots didn't take their jobs. The announcement did.

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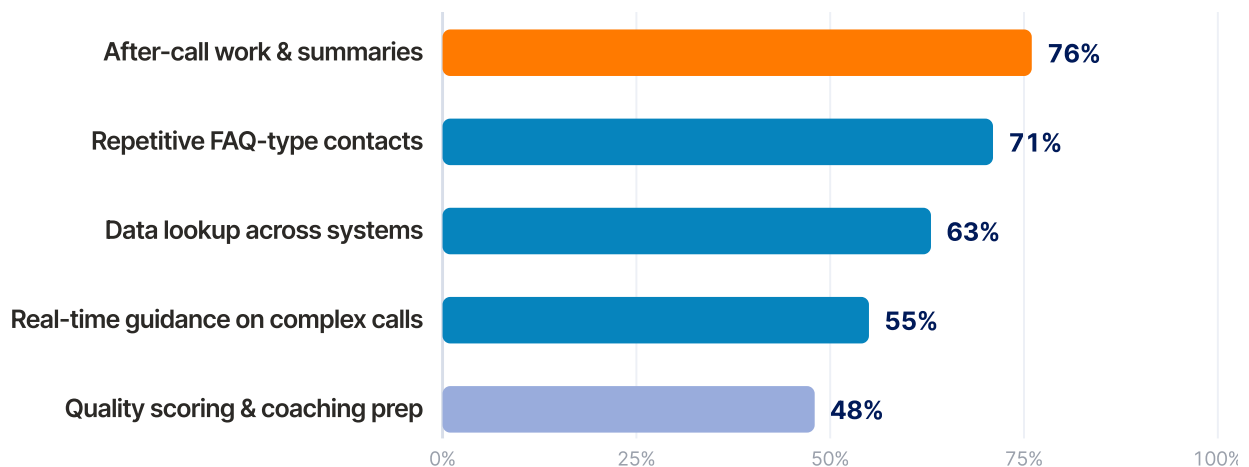
FINDING 04

Agents aren't afraid of AI. They're afraid of doing robot work forever.

Leaders report their agents spend **31% of every shift on after-call work** — summaries, dispositions, CRM updates — plus a steady diet of questions a search bar could answer. When we asked leaders which tasks their agents most want offloaded to AI, the list was unambiguous. It is also, precisely, the augmentation playbook: the drudgery goes to the machine, the judgment stays with the human.

Tasks agents most want offloaded to AI

PER THEIR LEADERS · MULTIPLE RESPONSES ALLOWED · N=294



WHY THIS MATTERS

The retention lever is hiding inside the workload. Nearly a third of every paid hour goes to work agents actively want to surrender — work AI already does well. Offloading it is simultaneously a capacity gain (~2.5 hours per agent per shift), a CSAT play, and the clearest possible signal that AI is there to back the agent, not to replace them.



Nobody quits because the job is hard. They quit because it's hard and mindless at the same time. Take away the copy-paste and suddenly this is a career, not a countdown.

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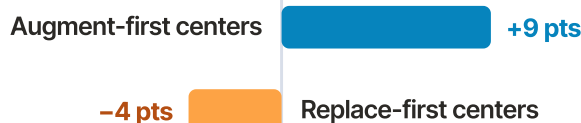
FINDING 05

The correction is underway: 2026 is the year replacement quietly becomes augmentation

The scoreboard is doing what memos couldn't. With augment-first centers posting a nine-point CSAT gain while replace-first centers slipped four, **71% of leaders now say their 2026 AI strategy is shifting toward augmentation** — including a majority of those who started replace-first. And 44% admit they regret how AI was framed to their own teams. The technology didn't change. The understanding of what it's for did.

CSAT change over the AI deployment window, by strategy

DEPLOYERS ONLY · N=250 · INDEX POINTS VS. PRE-DEPLOYMENT BASELINE



The 2026 course-correction

ALL RESPONDENTS · N=294



WHY THIS MATTERS

This is an inflection point, not a pendulum swing. Leaders aren't abandoning automation — 65% still expect a smaller, better-paid agent workforce long term. What's changing is the order of operations: augment first, earn containment second. The centers that get the sequence right keep their best people through the transition. The ones that don't will fund their competitors' recruiting pipelines.

 RECOMMENDATIONS

What this means for CX and contact-center leaders

Five moves, drawn directly from what separated the augment-first winners from everyone else.

1

Declare your AI strategy to your agents before the rumor mill does.

Agents inferred the real strategy within a quarter at 61% of replace-first centers. If AI is there to remove drudgery, say so explicitly, in writing, with the workload changes to prove it — silence gets read as a layoff plan.

2

Point AI at after-call work first.

It's the highest-volume, lowest-risk, most agent-welcomed target: 76% want it gone and it consumes 31% of every shift. Auto-summaries and dispositions pay back in weeks and buy credibility for everything after.

3

Track attrition as an AI-program KPI, not just containment.

A deflection dashboard that ignores resignation letters is measuring half the P&L. Put retention, ramp time, and top-quartile-agent tenure on the same scorecard as containment rate.

4

Reinvest a visible share of AI savings into the agents who remain.

The 65% who foresee "fewer, better-paid agents" are describing a bargain. Honor it: skill-based pay, career paths into AI supervision and QA, and let agents see automation improving their compensation, not threatening it.

5

Sequence: augment, stabilize, then automate the queue that's left.

Augment-first centers earned an 11-point attrition drop and then automated from a position of strength. Run the sequence backwards and you lose your senior agents exactly when the bots still need human backup.

 METHODOLOGY

About this study

This research was designed to quantify the relationship between contact-center AI deployment strategy and workforce outcomes, and was conducted by an independent third-party research firm on behalf of RingCentral.

SAMPLE

294 qualified respondents: CX and contact-center leaders at director, VP, and C-level, each with budget or operational authority over a contact-center organization.

COMPANY SIZE

U.S. companies with 250+ employees; 41% of respondents from organizations with 2,500+ employees. Contact-center sizes ranged from 25 to 3,000+ seats.

INDUSTRIES

Healthcare, financial services, retail & e-commerce, technology, travel & hospitality, business services, and public sector.

COLLECTION

20-minute online survey fielded in April 2026, supplemented by 15 qualitative follow-up interviews. Respondents screened for role, seniority, and direct knowledge of AI initiatives.

STRATEGY CLASSIFICATION

"Replace-first" vs. "augment-first" assigned by respondents' stated primary deployment objective, validated against reported use-case mix.

REPORTING NOTES

Percentages rounded to whole numbers; single-select distributions sum to 100%. Before/after comparisons cover a minimum 12-month post-deployment window.

KEY METRICS ANALYZED

- Trailing-12-month agent attrition rate
- Fully loaded per-agent replacement cost
- Primary AI deployment objective and use-case mix
- Pre- vs. post-deployment attrition, by strategy
- CSAT movement over the deployment window
- Share of shift consumed by after-call work
- Task-offload preferences reported for agents
- 2026 strategy direction and internal-framing regret



The contact centers that win 2026 won't choose between agents and AI. **They'll refuse the choice.**

The paradox in this report resolves into a simple operating truth: AI is a multiplier, and it multiplies whatever strategy you feed it. Feed it a replacement strategy and it multiplies attrition, ramp costs, and rookie queues. Feed it an augmentation strategy and it multiplies capacity, tenure, and customer satisfaction.

The correction is already moving — 71% of your peers are steering toward augmentation this year. The remaining question is execution: whether your platform can put AI beside every agent, on every interaction, without a two-year integration project.

Humans and AI agents. Better together.

RingCX pairs every agent with AI that writes the summaries, surfaces the answers, and absorbs the repetitive queue — while RingSense analytics shows you the retention and CSAT payoff in real time. One platform, AI-first, live in weeks. Learn more at ringcentral.com/ringcx.

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