Kayako's 2016 Customer Support

State of the Profession

Report

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About the report

The first ever Kayako Customer Support State of the Profession Report surveyed 116 respondents to understand customer support trends in salary, tenure, job satisfaction and challenges.

We created the report for, and with the help of, the customer support community. Until now, there has been little research done on the state of the profession so we worked with the support community to give them some deeper insight into their industry.

The report is anonymous, and designed to gain an overview the customer support function, different roles within the industry, and the challenges that teams of all sizes are currently facing.

This is the first report of its kind, and we hope to use it as a benchmark to measure against in our next annual report.

Executive summary

Salary

Median compensation ranges are as follows (in US Dollars):

Customer Support Agent - $45-60k
Customer Support Manager - $45-60k
Customer Support Director - $75-90k
VP of Customer Support - $105k +

Tenure

Most customer support professionals (41%) have worked at their current company for 1-3 years.

Team size

The most common size for a customer support team is 6-25 employees (36%), with the least common being single-employee support teams (8%).

Challenges

Managing time and workload was reported as the biggest issue faced in customer support, with 63% respondents saying they find this challenging or very challenging.

Job satisfaction

Most respondents (67%) reported feeling satisfied or very satisfied in their jobs, though when asked how satisfied they felt when they first started their jobs, this number was higher (77%).

Profile of the average customer support professional

Customer Support Manager

Team of 6-25

Worked for current employer for 1-3 years

Earns $45-60k

- Generally satisfied with their job and salary
- Spends most of their time handling customer enquiries
- Feels they have the tools / training they need for job
- Biggest challenge is managing time and workload
- Least challenging part of job is delivering customer happiness

About our participants

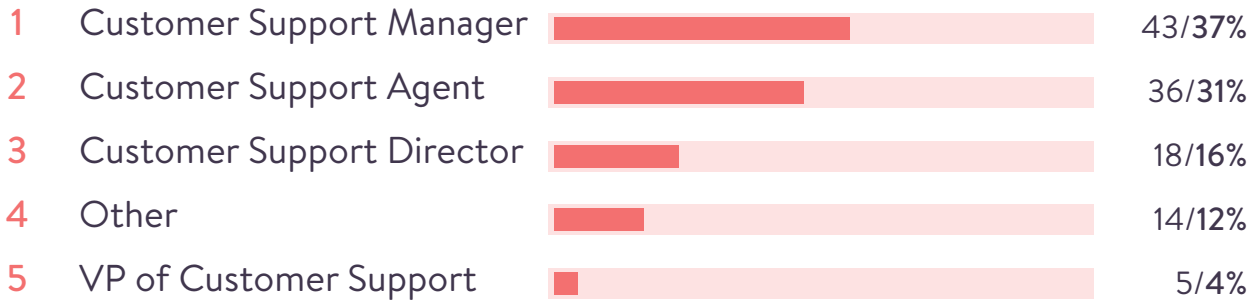
We conducted our survey online and reached out to customer support professionals via social media, our customer base, and online customer support communities.

As it was an anonymous survey, we don't know the demographics of the respondents or their locations, only their job titles. The majority of the respondents were Customer Support Managers (37%) or Customer Support Agents (31%).

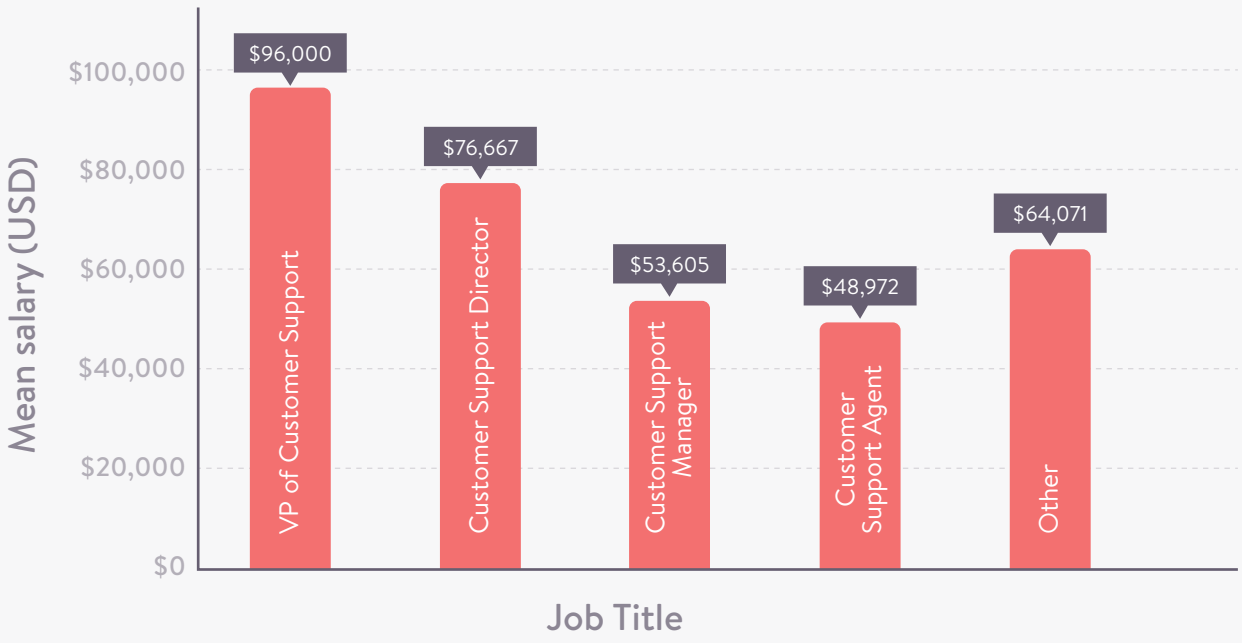
Customer Support Directors made up 16% of the respondents, and 4% of respondents identified their role as VP of Customer Support. The "Other" category (12%) is made up of business leaders and professionals in other customer experience-related positions.

This is a fairly accurate representation of the customer support community, though skewed slightly in favour of Customer Support Managers. This is most likely due to the way that we conducted the survey and the makeup of the communities which we reached out to.

Which of these best describes your job title?



Breakdown of salary



This graph shows the average salary by job title. On average, VPs of Customer Support earn the most, while Customer Support Agents earn the least.

On average, salaries for support professionals are reflective of the seniority of the professional. Customer Support Agents earn the least overall (an average of $48,972) while VPs of Customer Support earn the most with an average salary of $96,000.

Customer Support Agents are the most likely to earn a salary under $30,000, with 20% of Agents reporting this is as their salary bracket. However, the majority of Agents (40%) earn between $45,000-$60,000.

Most VPs of Support (80%) report earning more than $105,000. This makes sense as it is the most senior role in customer support, so it should command the highest salary.

Customer Support Directors are not far behind VPs in terms of salary, with 40% of Directors reporting a salary of $105,000 or more. However, salaries for Directors covered a broader range than VPs, with the lowest reported salary falling into the $45,000-$60,000 bracket.

It was Customer Support Managers who had the most varied salaries. The majority (32.5%) report earning between $45,000-$60,000. Another 10% of

Managers reported earning the lowest salary bracket of less than $30,000. Yet 2.5% reported earning more than $105,000 - the same as Directors and VPs.

This is a huge range, and there are several reasons why this could be the case:

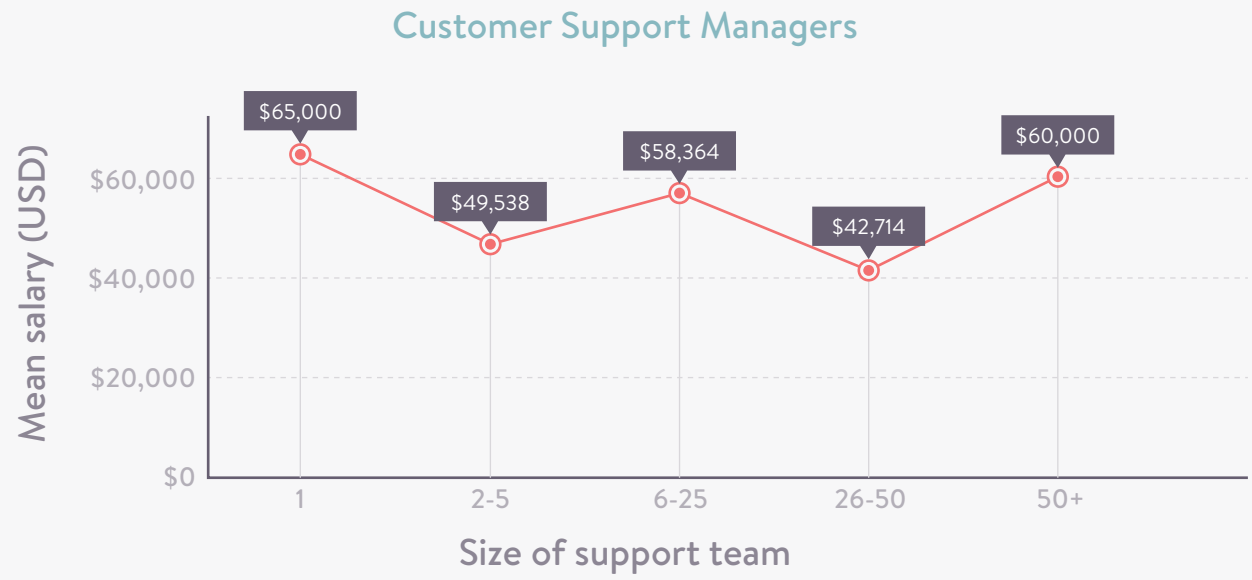
Customer Support Manager salaries

Unusually high salaries

High salaries could be attributed to the broad definition of the job title Customer Support Manager. In organisations with a flat hierarchy, Customer Support Managers could be acting as Directors or VPs without the title. This is reflected in the graph below, where the Customer Support Managers without a team earned significantly more on average ($65,000) than those who managed teams.

In fact, Customer Support Managers who are the only support employee in their company earn on average more than $12,000 more per year than Customer Support Managers who manage any number of Agents, for whom the average salary is $52,654.

In the same vein, people-managing Customer Support Managers could be responsible for one Agent, or a team of 50. The size of the team the Manager is responsible for is reflected in the salary, with the trend showing that generally the more people a Customer Support Manager manages, the more



This graph shows the mean average salary for a Customer Support Manager compared with their team size. On average, Managers who work alone or who manage teams of 50+ earn the most.

they get paid.

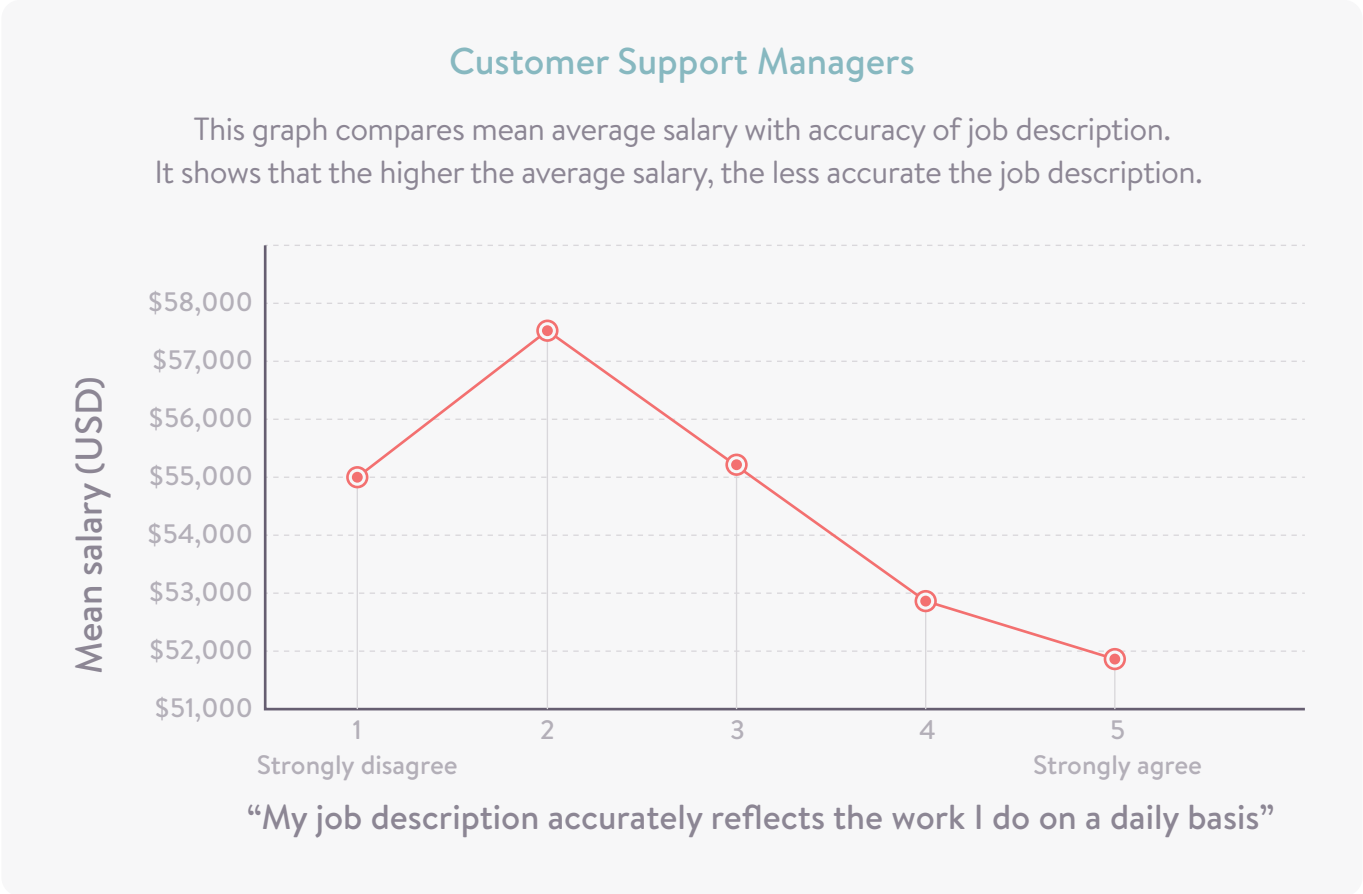
Unusually low salaries

At the opposite end of the scale, instances where Managers have salaries that are low (lower than the average for Support Agents) could be attributed to companies rewarding performance with increased status.

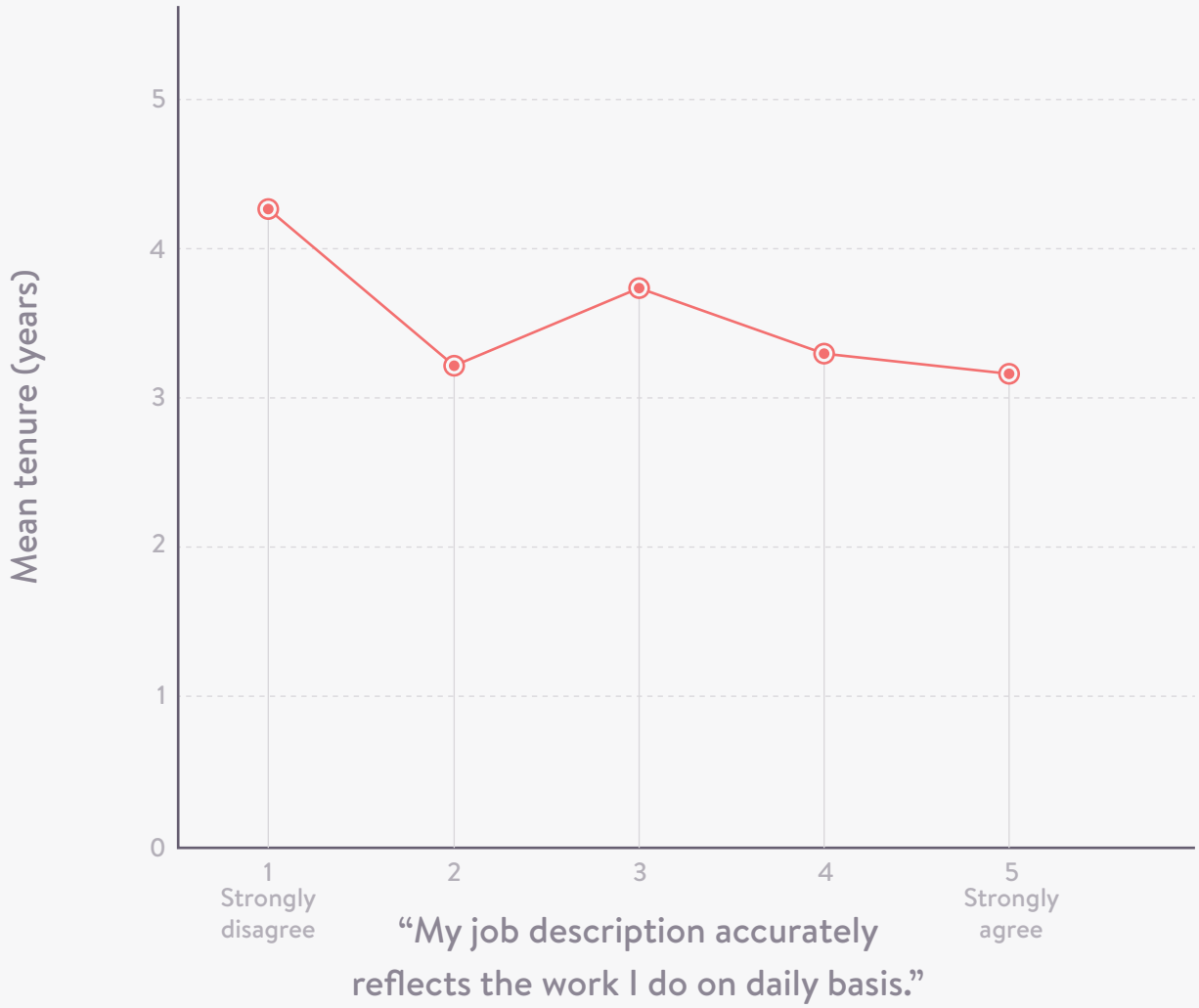
It's possible that these low-paid Managers may still perform the function of Agents and remain on an Agent-level salary, but have been awarded a Manager title in lieu of financial incentives.

We looked at mean salary and tenure for Customer Support Managers compared with how accurate they felt their job descriptions were in order to see if this is the case. Surprisingly, the results showed that the less Managers were paid and the less time they'd been in the role, the more accurate they felt their job description was.

This is likely to be due to the fact that as salary and tenure increases, responsibility or expectation increases and individuals experience "role creep", whereby they takes on more and more responsibility over time until the point where their role no longer reflects their job description.

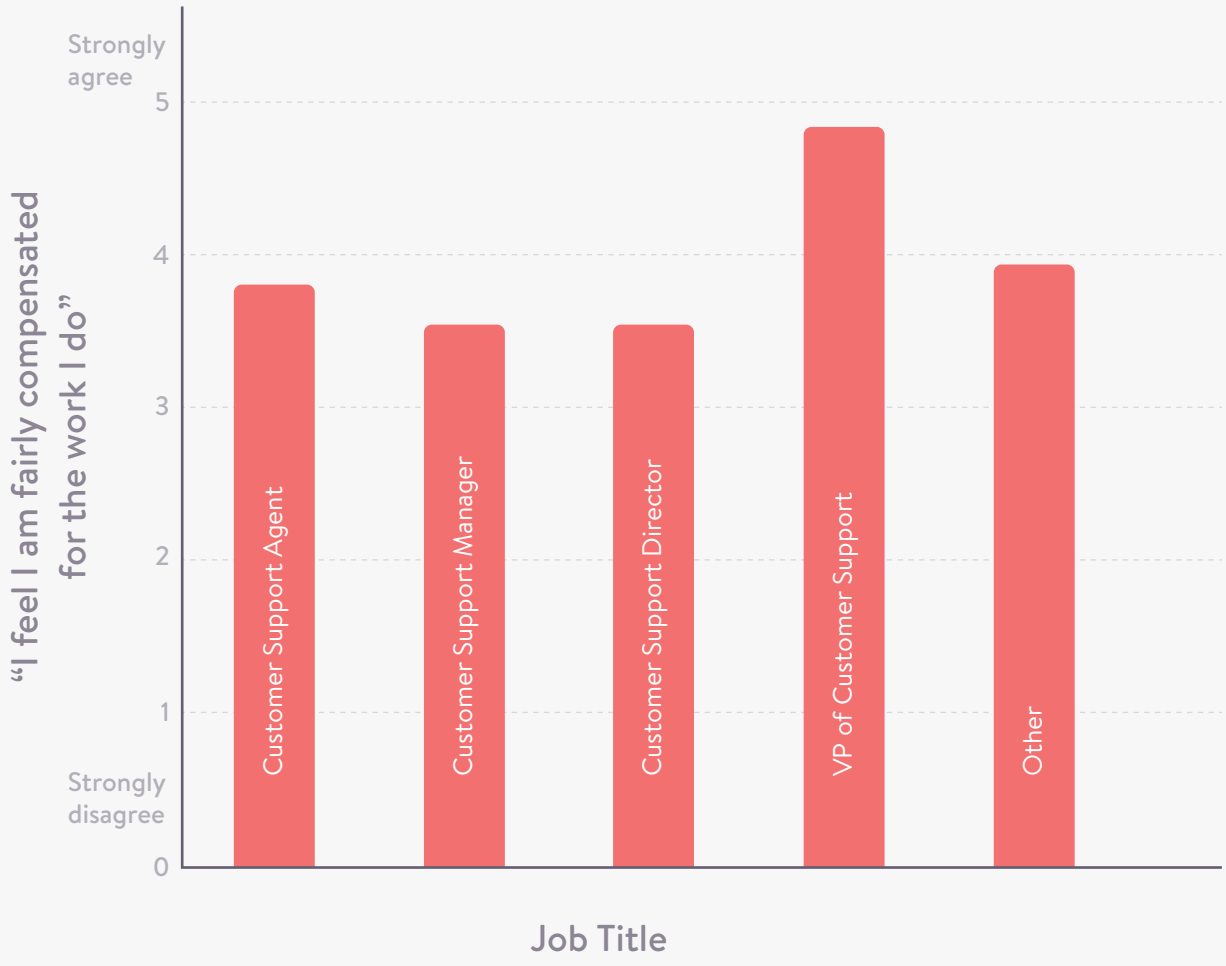


Customer Support Managers



This graph compares mean tenure with accuracy of job description.
It indicates that the longer the average tenure, the less accurate the job description.

Satisfaction with salary

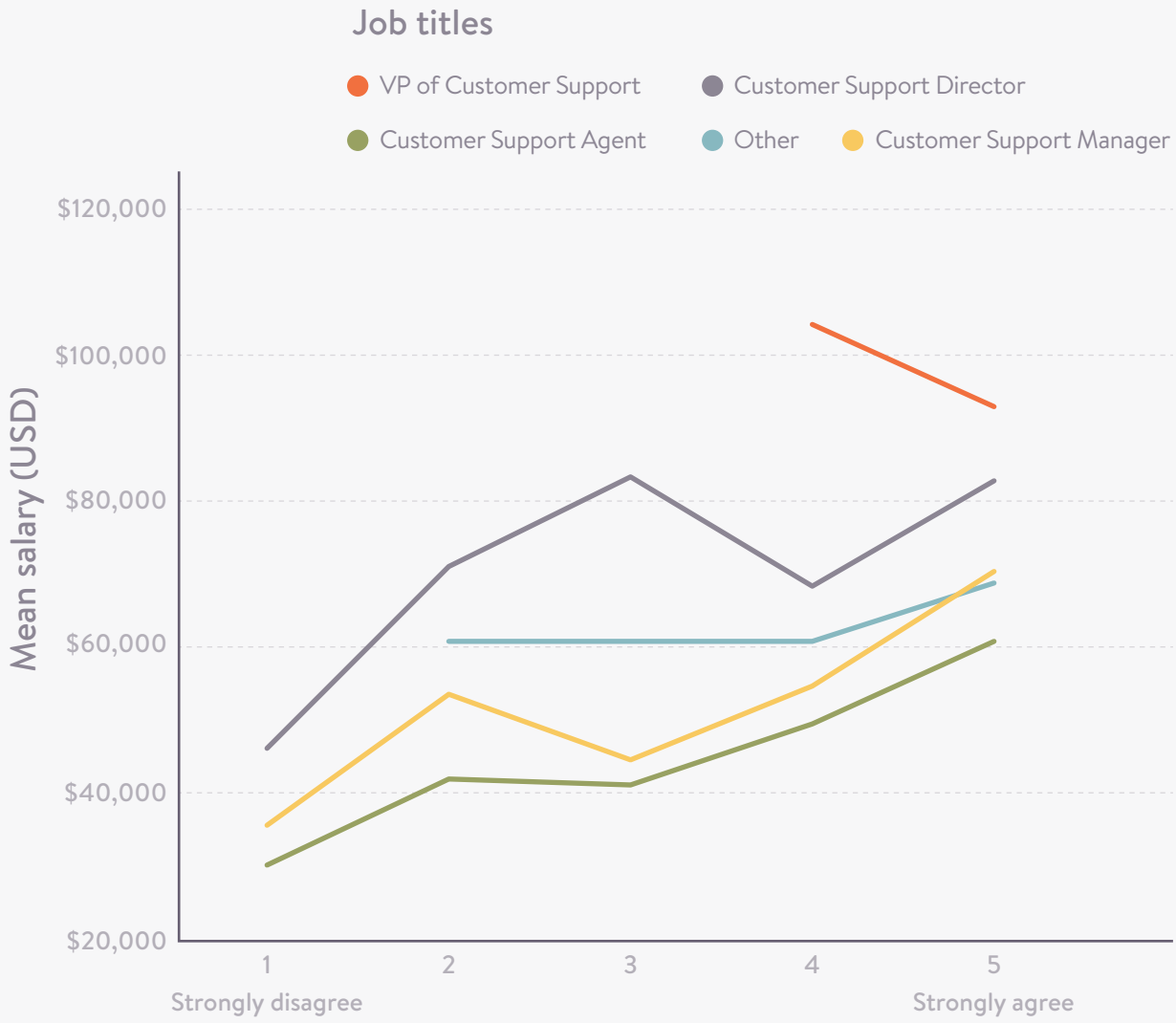


This graph shows mean responses to fairness of compensation by job title. VPs of Customer Support feel notably more fairly compensated than other roles.

We also asked how happy respondents were with their salary, asking whether they felt they were paid fairly for their job. Generally, sentiment was positive here, though there is a distinct jump in salary satisfaction among VPs of Customer Support.

Looking into this further, there is a clear correlation between individuals who earned a higher salary and their satisfaction with what they are paid - which is unsurprising, and what we would expect to see across all industries.

In the graph below, it's clear to see that in all roles (apart from VPs of Customer Support), the respondents who were least satisfied with their salary are paid the least, and the respondents who are most happy with their salary are paid the most.

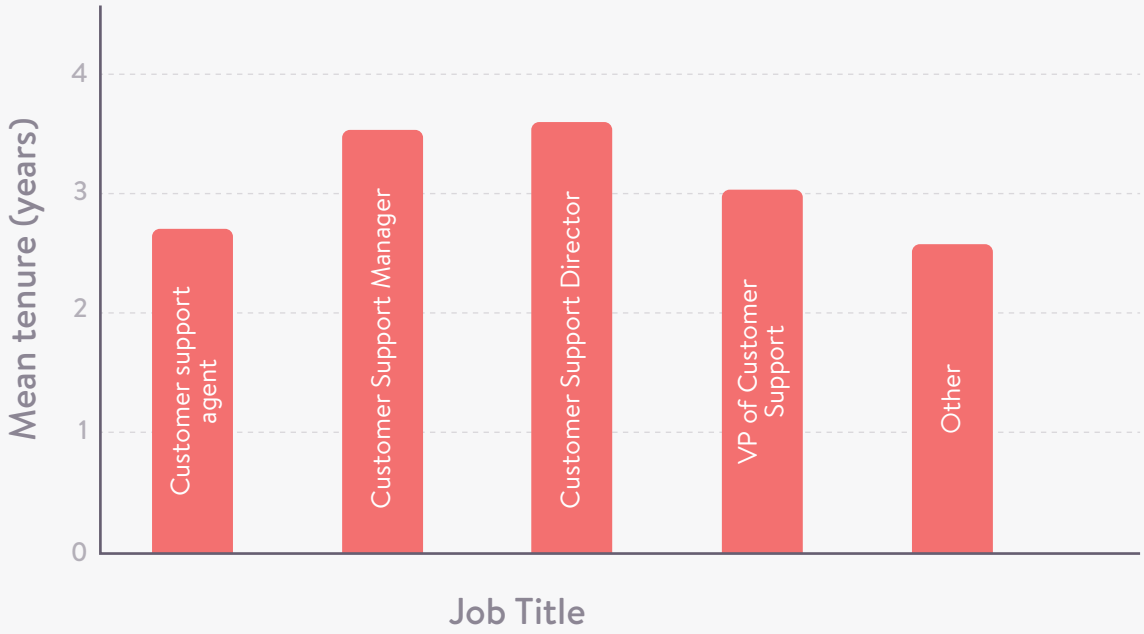


This graph compares mean salary satisfaction score with average salary, by job title. It indicates that the more customer support professionals are paid, the more satisfied they are with their salary.

Key observations:

- On the whole, customer support professionals feel they are fairly compensated for their work
- Job title doesn't necessarily correlate with salary - especially at middle-management level
- The Customer Support Manager role is very broad and so is the salary range for this role
- VPs of Customer Support are paid the most and are the most happy with their salaries

Length of service



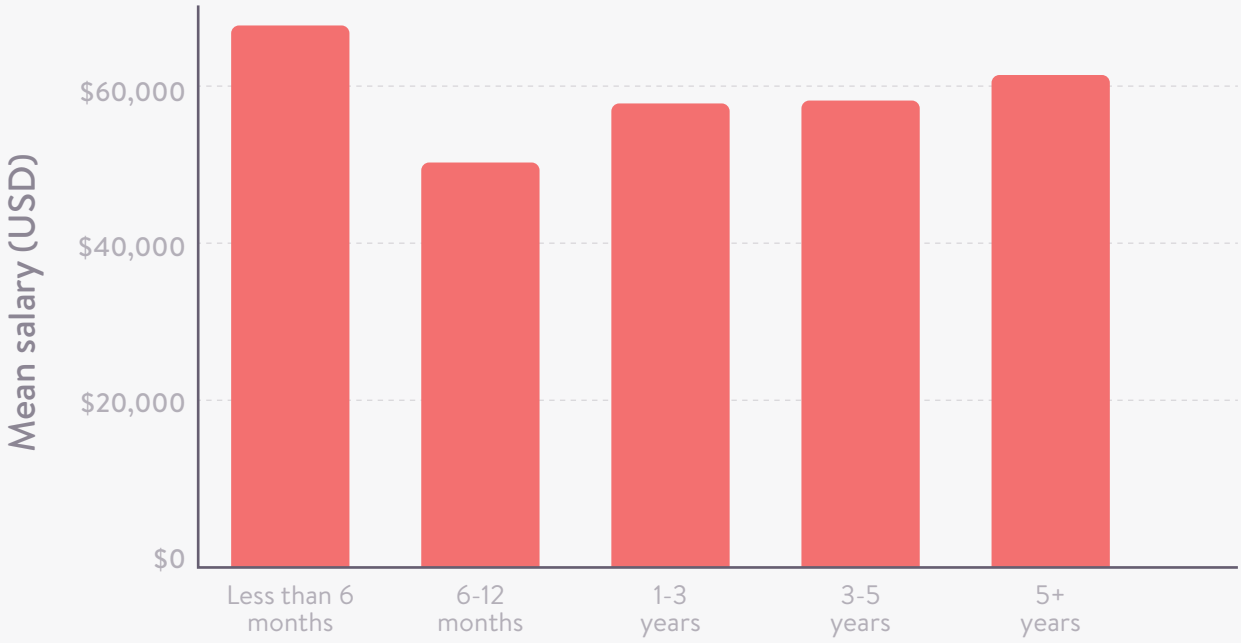
This graph shows the average tenure per job role. It shows that, on average, Agents stay in their roles for significantly less time than Managers and Directors.

The majority of customer support professionals across all roles report being with their current company for between one and three years (40%). This is a shorter-than-average tenure for today's workforce, which is a reported 4.6 years (according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics's 2012 study).

The graph reveals that of the four main job roles, Customer Support Agents stay at a company the shortest length of time, with a mean tenure of 2 years and 8 months. This supports a widely held belief that customer support at entry level is a springboard into other positions. It could also be indicative of the fact that Customer Support Agents are often quickly promoted into further roles.

The Customer Support Directors and Customer Support Managers in our survey have stayed with their companies for the longest time, both sharing a mean tenure of 3 years and 6 months. Surprisingly, VPs of Customer Support, the highest level position of the four, were not with their companies for the longest time reporting a mean tenure of just 3 years.

It is arguable that the VP role has a shorter shelf-life, as VPs are often brought in by the business leaders to make a change in the strategy of the customer support team. Once this change has been implemented the VP will often move on to another company to do the same thing.



"How long have you been working in customer support with your current employer?"

This graph shows the average salary by length of time at the company. In general, the graph shows that mean salary increases with tenure.

On the whole, the longer a customer support professional has stayed at their company, the more they are paid. However, there is an anomaly on this list in the less than six months group (brought up by one VP of Customer Support who joined their company less than six months ago).

Key observations:

- Customer support professionals stay with their employers for a shorter than average length of time
- Customer Support Managers and Directors stay in their roles the longest length of time
- VPs of Customer Support stay in their roles for the shortest length of time

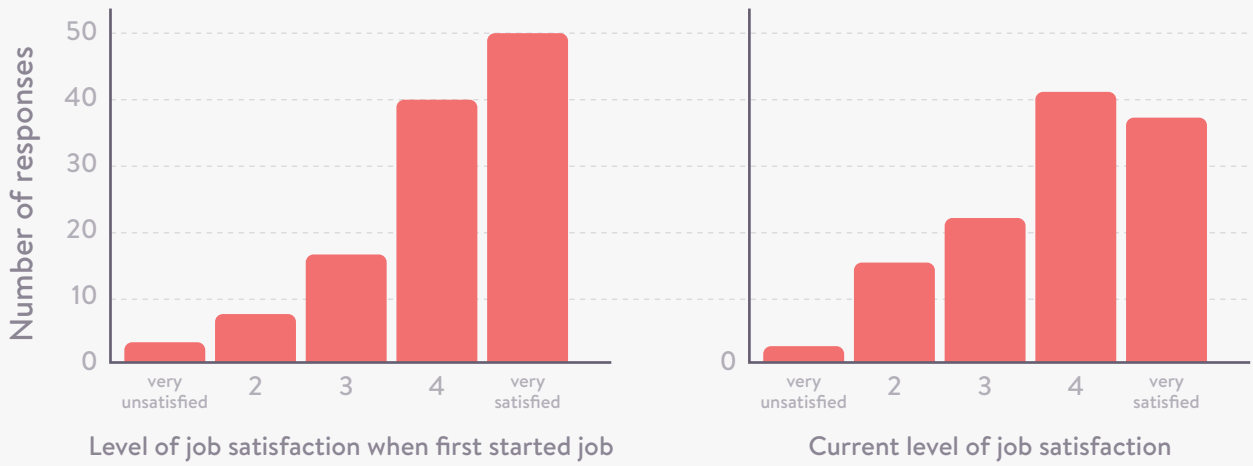
Job satisfaction

We briefly covered job satisfaction in the salary breakdown chapter, but let's look at it in a bit more detail.

This graph shows the average level of current job satisfaction per role. Responses are fairly positive, and fairly consistent across the roles. Notably, VPs of Customer Support are significantly more satisfied than any other role.

Respondents were asked to rate their current level of job satisfaction. They were then asked to think back to when they first started their current role, and to rate their level of job satisfaction at that point. Respondents rated their current level of job satisfaction at an average of 3.81 out of 5, compared with 4.09 when they first joined their current company – a 6.8% decrease in satisfaction.

You can see this more clearly by comparing the two graphs below. The one on the left shows reported mean job satisfaction across all roles when respondents first started their jobs, while the graph on the right shows current level of job satisfaction across all roles.



The graph on the left shows responses to job satisfaction across roles when professionals started their jobs. The graph on the right shows responses to current job satisfaction across roles. It is apparent that satisfaction reduces over time.

Interestingly, there is significant variation in job satisfaction when correlated with job title and time in the role. A possible cause of this decrease in satisfaction is burnout. With most customer support professionals ranking managing time and workload as a top challenge (see the Challenges section below), it's reasonable to assume that this would become more overwhelming over their tenure.

It becomes more interesting when we take a look at how salary affects job satisfaction on the whole. The graph on next page shows job satisfaction compared to mean salary for each role. On the lower end and middle of the satisfaction scale, there isn't much correlation between salary and job satisfaction.

At the top of the satisfaction scale, it's easier to see a correlation for each of the roles. When we look at whether people answered 4 ("Satisfied") or 5 ("Very satisfied") compared to their salary, VPs of Customer Support is the only group to buck this trend.

Customer Support Directors are the only role where there is a clear distinction between job satisfaction and salary throughout, which could be due to the broad range of salaries commanded by Directors. It is perhaps unsurprising that Directors with salaries matching Agents on this graph report being very unsatisfied with their jobs.

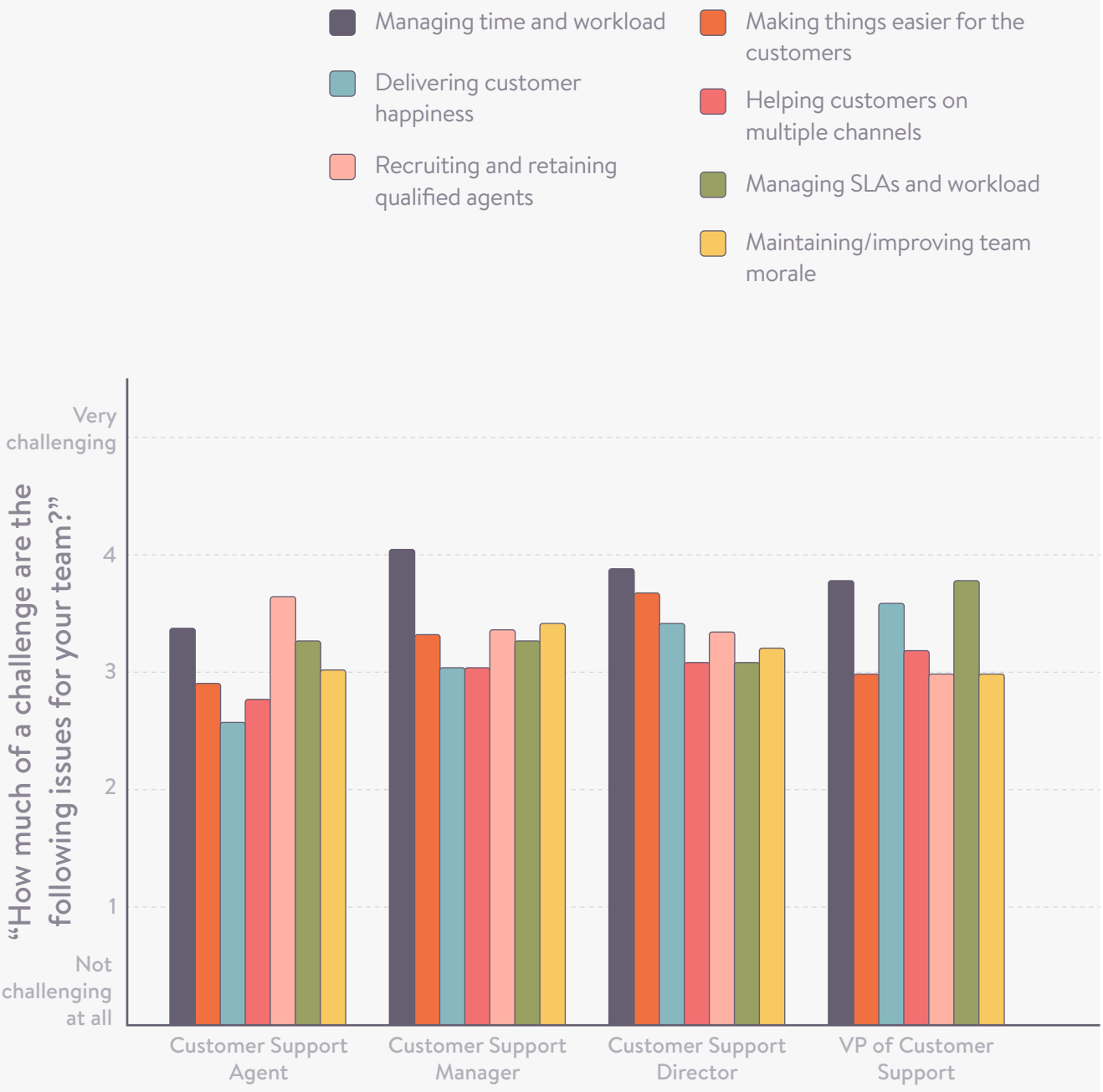
This graph shows mean job satisfaction compared with mean salary, by job title.

It seems that for customer support professionals who are already satisfied with their jobs, they will become very satisfied if they are being paid that little bit more. In fact, it seems like it takes about $10,000 per annum to boost a customer support professional's job satisfaction from satisfied to very satisfied.

Key observations:

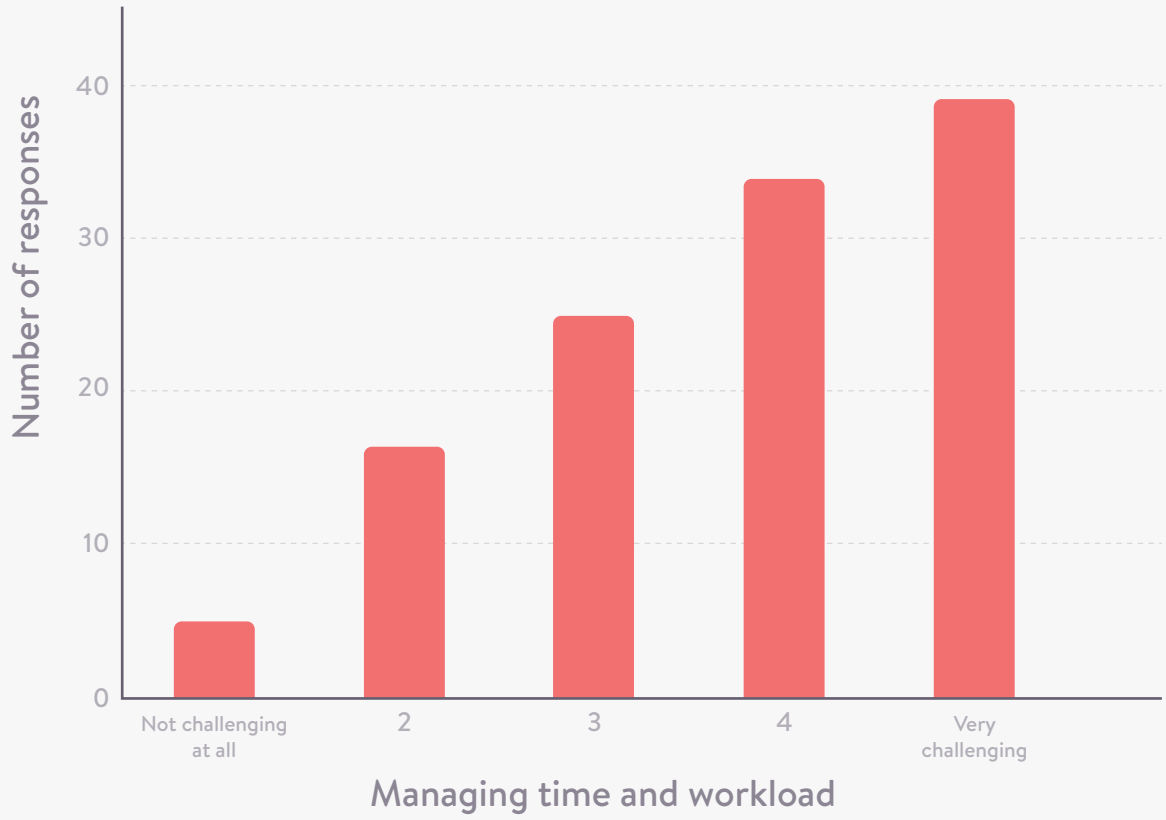
- Customer support professionals are generally fairly satisfied in their jobs
- Customer support professionals lose satisfaction in their jobs over time
- It takes $10,000 per year to take a customer support professional from satisfied to very satisfied with their job

A breakdown of challenges



We asked respondents to evaluate how challenging they found seven aspects of their jobs. The graph shows mean responses for each question by each role.

Managing time and workload



This graph shows the number of responses for degree of challenge across all roles.

The majority of respondents (73%) answered that most significant challenge faced across the customer support industry is managing time and workload. Customer Support Managers in particular found this to be their most difficult challenge, standing out far above all the other challenges they face.

As mentioned above in the job satisfaction section, this could be a cause of burnout. As they experience burnout from the workload, professionals become less satisfied and less engaged in their role. It's important to arm Customer Support Managers with the tools they need to manage their time and to practice self care, reducing burnout and employee turnover.

Managing SLAs and workload

On the whole, managing SLAs was considered much less of a challenge for the majority of customer support professionals than managing time and workload. VPs of Customer Support stood out as being the group who found this more challenging; in fact, VPs considered this just as challenging as managing time and workload.

The reason for this could be to do with the fact that VPs are the top of the chain when it comes to responsibility for adhering to service level agreements. If something goes wrong, it is ultimately up to the VP to make sure that it is made right. While customer support agents and customer support managers have to adhere to SLAs on a day-to-day basis, VPs will often be responsible for defining SLAs and resolving issues when things go wrong.

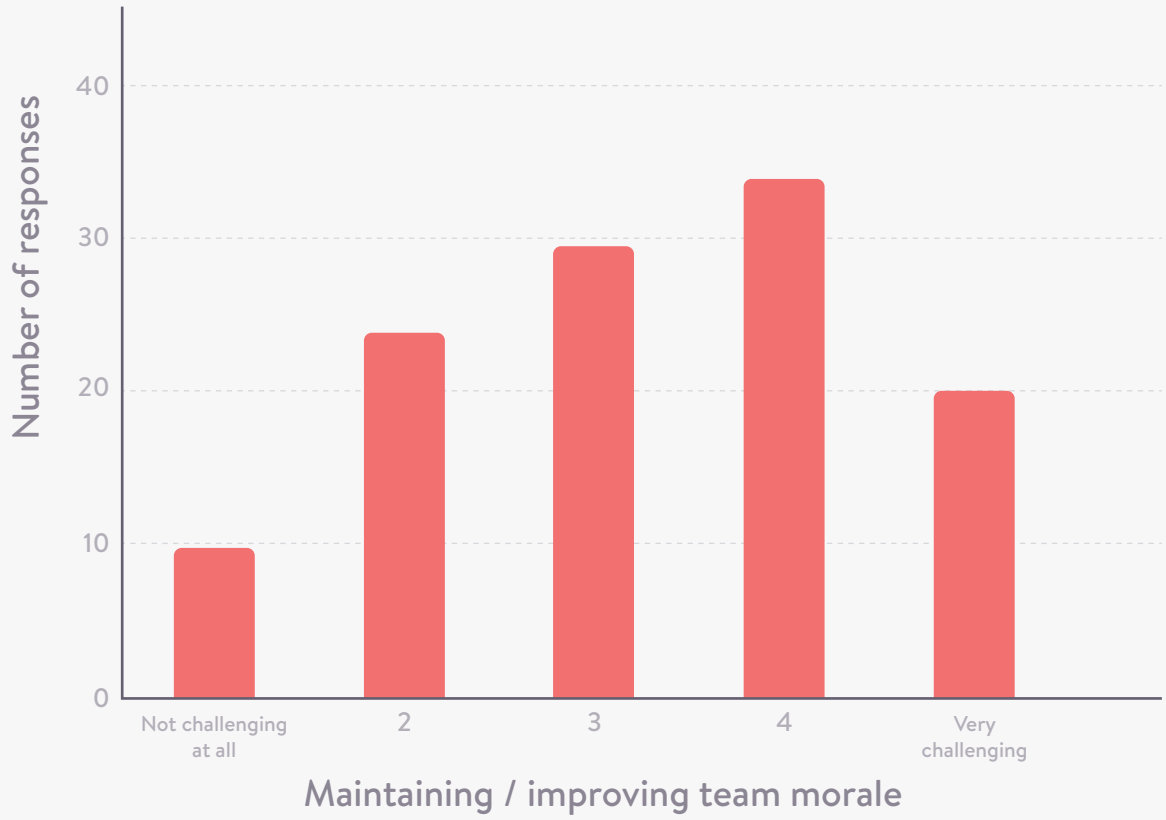
Recruiting and retaining qualified agents

Customer Support Agents were the only group for whom managing time and workload was not the top challenge - in fact, they named recruiting and retaining qualified agents as their top challenge. This is surprising as they are the only non-managerial group, and we would not expect them be involved with recruitment.

It is possible that this points to the fact that Customer Support Agents do not feel that their peers and coworkers are adequately qualified coming into the role of a Customer Support Agent, and may feel that turnover in their team is high, which could be the case looking at the tenure results for Agents shown in the Length of Service chapter above.

Customer Support Managers named recruiting qualified agents as their third top challenge, while Customer Support Directors named this their fourth-top challenge. For VPs of Customer Support, recruiting was joint bottom of the challenges list. This indicates that the more senior the role, the less involvement support professionals have with recruitment.

Maintaining and improving team morale



This graph shows the number of responses for degree of challenge of across all roles.

Though maintaining and improving team morale was not seen as a major challenge across the industry, Customer Support Managers were the group that found it to be the most challenging. This is likely because they are dealing with the largest number of direct reports (Agents), so they have a greater challenge when it comes to team morale.

Equally, Customer Support Agents have a difficult job that relies heavily on team morale in order to maintain job satisfaction. This responsibility lies first with the Customer Support Managers to make sure that their Agents are satisfied with work and problems within the team are ironed out quickly.

Delivering customer happiness, multichannel customer help, and making things easier for the customer

Delivering customer happiness seems to become more challenging the more senior the role. Customer Support Agents did not find this a challenge, while Directors and VPs of Customer Support found it to be one of their top challenges.

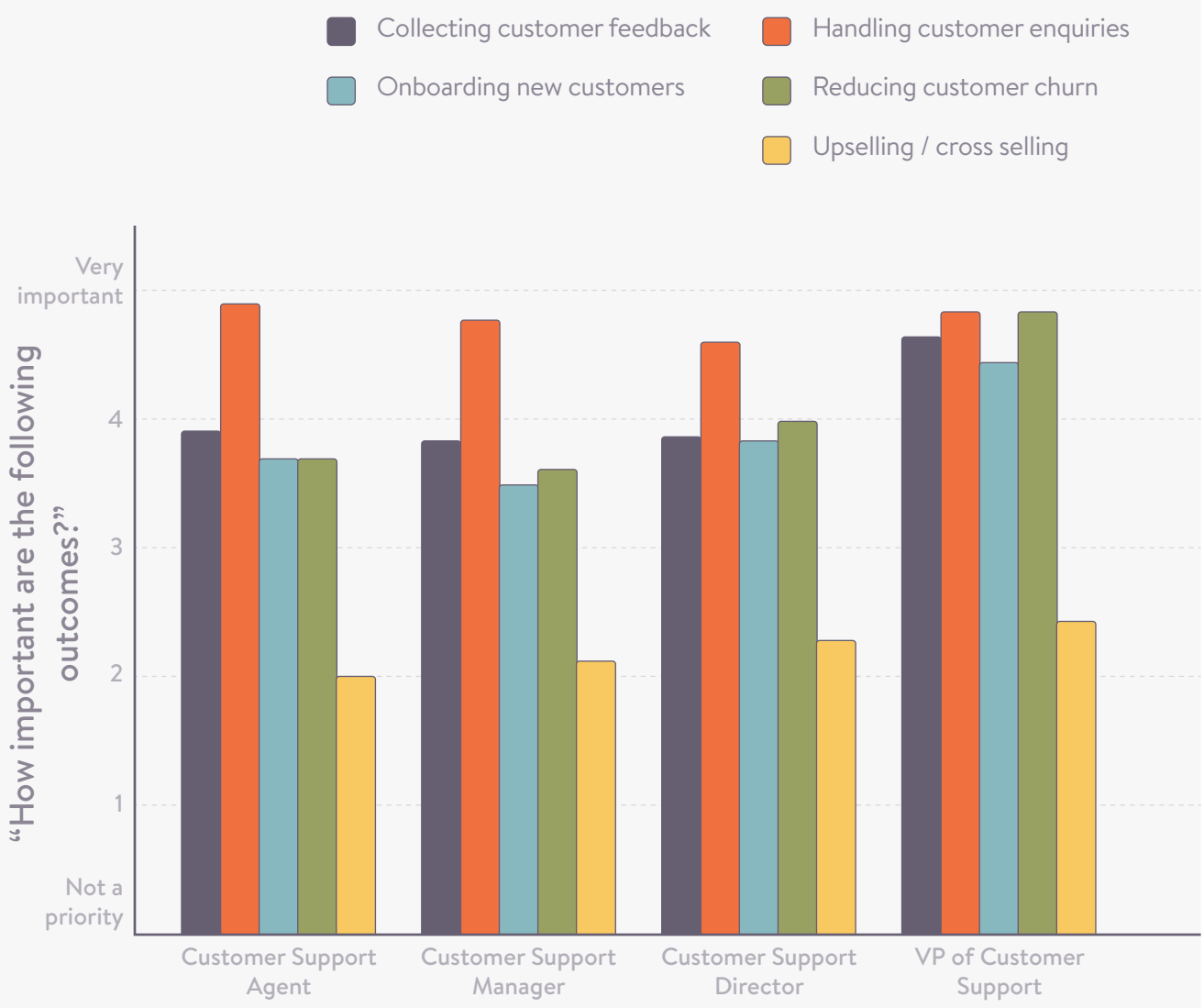
The same pattern can be see in the responses for multichannel customer help and making things easier for the customer. Agents find this one of the least challenging parts of their job, but for Customer Support Directors, it is the second biggest challenge they face after managing time and workload.

This is likely due to the fact that Directors and VPs of Support are more concerned with developing and implementing processes that deliver delight at scale, rather than delighting customers on an individual basis.

Key findings:

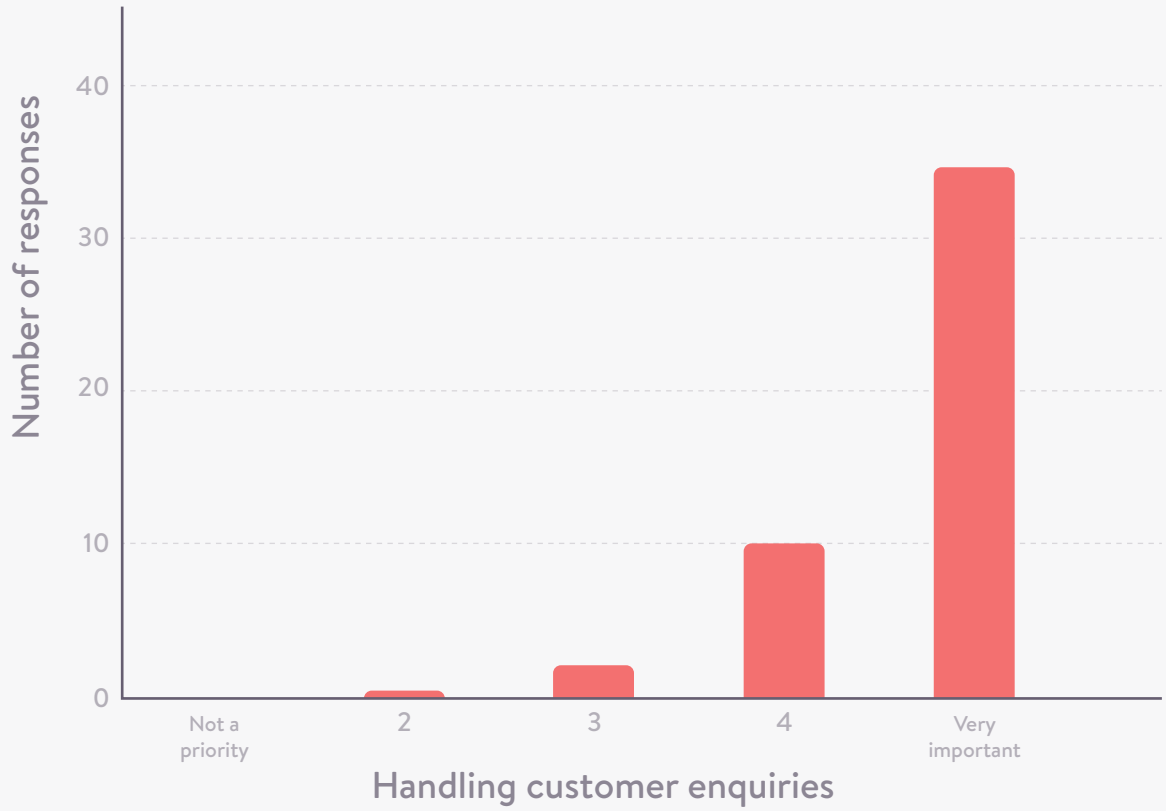
- Managing time and workload is the biggest challenge that customer support professionals face
- The more senior customer support role, the less involvement they have with recruitment
- Customer Support Managers find it hard to maintain and improve team morale
- Delivering customer happiness becomes harder the more senior the support role

A breakdown of priorities



We asked respondents to evaluate how much of a priority certain parts of their role were. The graph shows the mean responses to each question by role.

Handling customer enquiries



This graph shows the number of responses for degree of priority across all roles.

All roles agreed that handling customer enquiries was by far their top priority (95%). It was the only question where nobody answered that it was not a priority. This is as we would expect - the most important part of any customer support role is to help customers and handle their enquiries, no matter how far along in the support process they are.

Handling customer enquiries was marginally more of a priority for Customer Support Agents than for senior roles. This makes sense as Agents are usually the first point of contact for customer enquiries, while Managers, Directors and VPs often deal with customer enquiries later down the line, after they have been escalated when an Agent does not have the seniority to deal with a specific issue.

Collecting customer feedback

Collecting customer feedback was more of a priority for Customer Support Agents and Managers than it was for Directors or VPs. In fact, this was the second highest priority for Agents and Managers, but the third highest priority for the more senior roles. This is likely down to the fact that Agents and Managers are in more frequent and direct contact with customers, and will have more of an opportunity to gather customer feedback.

That's not to say that collecting feedback is not a priority for Customer Support Directors and VPs of Customer Support - in fact, for VPs, collecting feedback is close behind reducing customer churn as a high priority. This makes sense as customer feedback is vital information for VPs, helping them to streamline their team's processes, add value to services, and build relationships with other departments.

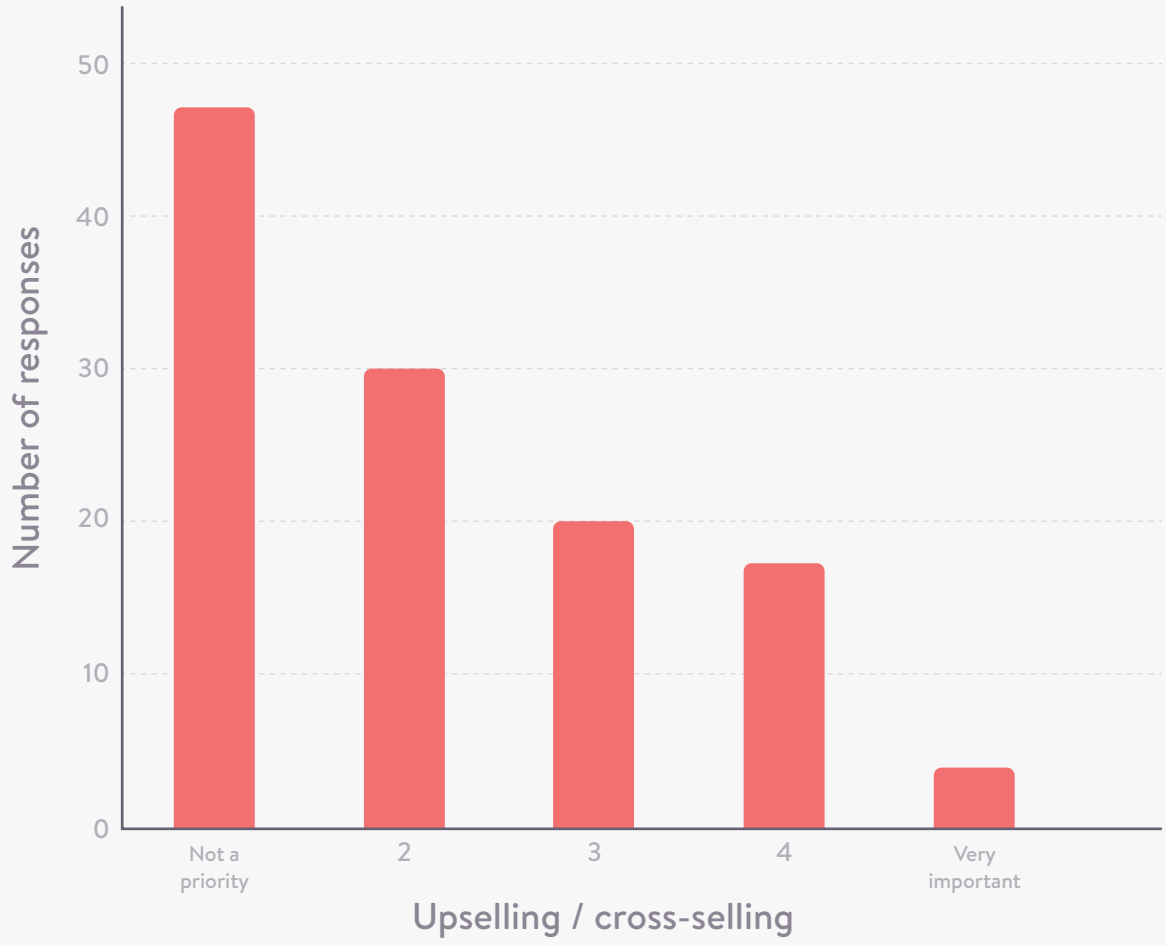
Reducing customer churn and onboarding new customers

For Customer Support Agents, Managers, and Directors, reducing churn and onboarding new customers were of medium priority, with handling enquiries far more of a priority for all three roles. Generally, both reducing churn and onboarding customers become more of a priority the more senior the role, and follow the same pattern of priority across roles.

Reducing churn is marginally more of a priority than onboarding new customers for all roles except Customer Support Agents, where both share equal priority. VPs of Support ranked reducing customer churn as their joint highest priority, alongside handling enquiries. This makes sense, and is indicative of the fact that the more senior the position, the greater the need to connect their team's activities with broader business goals.

Onboarding new customers was more of a priority for Agents, than Managers and Directors, which can be attributed to the fact that new customer onboarding duties would most likely fall to Agents in most support teams.

Upselling and cross-selling



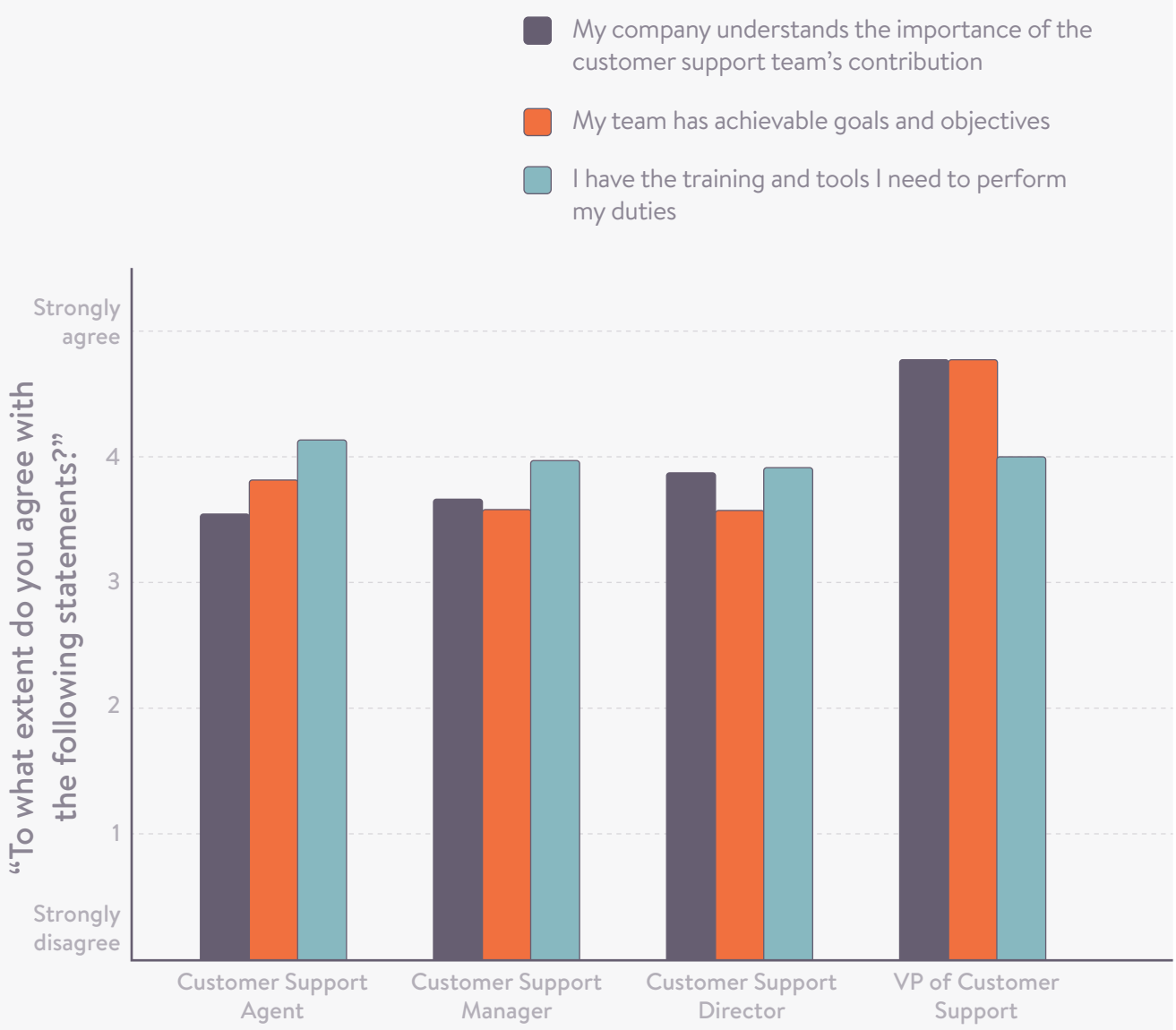
This graph shows the number of responses for degree of priority across all roles.

This was by far the lowest priority for all roles, and in fact the largest proportion of respondents (40%) stated that upselling or cross-selling was not a priority for them at all. This indicates that on the whole, customer support professionals are far more concerned with helping customers than seeing them as a revenue source.

Key findings:

- By far the top priority for all customer support professionals is handling customer enquiries
- Collecting customer feedback is a priority across all levels of seniority
- Upselling and cross-selling is very low on the priority list for customer support teams

Breakdown of sentiment



Respondents were asked to rate how they felt about certain aspects of their jobs. This graph shows the mean responses to each question by role.

We asked respondents how strongly they agreed with the the following statements:

"My company understands the importance of the customer support team's contributions."

Although on the whole answers to this question were positive, there is a notable increase in positive sentiment as the roles become more senior. Customer Support Agents reported the lowest level of agreement (3.6), while VPs of Customer Support reported the highest (4.7).

Responses to this question echo the responses for job satisfaction and salary satisfaction. Agents are on the whole less satisfied with their salaries and their jobs, while VPs are more satisfied with both, which could in turn impact the feeling of being appreciated by their company.

Interestingly, the responses to this question matched very closely with the responses to job satisfaction across each role, indicating there is a link between feeling support professionals feeling valued by their employer and feeling satisfied in their job.

"My team has achievable goals and objectives."

This graph shows the number of responses for levels of agreement across all roles.

The average responses to this statement were mixed, and these mixed results are apparent when looking at the responses for each role too. This goes to show that there isn't a clear consensus on whether customer support professionals have achievable goals and objectives. VPs of Support reported the highest level of agreement with this statement (4.7), followed by Customer Support Agents (3.8).

This is likely due to the fact that it is easier to set more concrete goals and objectives for Agents than it is for more senior team members, where objectives can be more fluid and difficult to achieve. On the whole, VPs set goals and objectives for the team as a whole so they are likely to report positive responses to this question, but it's clear that their sentiment isn't necessarily shared by the rest of their team.

"I have the training and tools I need in order to perform my duties."

This graph shows the number of responses for levels of agreement across all roles.

Sentiment was generally positive for this statement, with an average agreement of 4.0 across all roles. This indicates that on the whole, customer support professionals feel they are well equipped to do their jobs.

Interestingly, Customer Support Agents reported the highest agreement rating (4.1) on this statement, while Directors reported the lowest (3.8). This is reassuring for Agents, and clear when we look at their challenges - delivering customer happiness is the least challenging part of their jobs, which is also related to their top priority (handling customer enquiries).

Key findings:

- On the whole, customer support professionals feel appreciated in their roles
- Most support professionals feel they have the tools and training they need to do their jobs

Conclusions

The customer support profession is extremely varied in terms of salary, team sizes and responsibilities, which indicates that the industry is evolving and changing regularly. This will make it interesting to compare this year's findings with next year's to see if we can identify trends and changes in the industry.

But for now, here is the state of the customer support profession in 2016:

1. Burnout is a real issue across the support industry

The main challenge support professionals face is managing time and workload, which leads to burnout. This is a particular challenge for Customer Support Managers, who appear to suffer burnout more readily than other roles. It appears to affect Agents too, as Customer Support Managers report that maintaining and improving team morale is one of the top challenges they face.

In spite of the fact that most professionals feel they are equipped with the tools to do their jobs, this indicates that productivity and efficiency are problems across the customer support industry. It suggests that there is a desperate need for many support professionals to be able manage their workload more effectively, whether that's through better tools, greater resources, or stronger leadership.

2. Support professionals prioritise customer happiness above revenue

Across the board, support professionals reported that handling customer enquiries was their top priority, and they appear to be doing well. Delivering customer happiness was reported to be one of the least challenging aspects of support Agents and Managers' roles. On the other hand, revenue-related questions ranked low on the priorities list industry-wide, though it was more of a priority for more senior roles.

We are however starting to see that customer retention and onboarding is starting to become more of a priority, and reducing churn is a growing part of

support's day-to-day role. This indicates that the industry is maturing, as it is more deeply involved in nurturing the customer throughout their lifecycle, from onboarding to retention.

3. Delivering customer happiness is easy - "delight" is unnecessary

For Customer Support Agents and Managers, delivering customer happiness is one of the least challenging parts of their role, in spite of the fact that so many companies put customer delight the top of the agenda for support teams. While companies place focus on going above and beyond to delight customers, those support professionals who deal with customers daily know that it's not about doing more.

Support professionals find that it's easy to deliver happiness to customers by simply providing them with the support they require, without having to aim for "delight" every time. Instead, the focus on collecting customer feedback shows that organisations are setting the remit to use support as the way to keep a finger on the pulse of the customer and drive product insight. By improving the offering for customers in ways other than aiming for "delight", companies are able to invest in raising standards overall.

4. Reducing customer effort and multichannel support are the future

Multichannel customer help and making things easier for the customer are reported to be low on the challenge list for Customer Support Agents and Managers, but for Customer Support Directors and VPs, these are notable challenges. Support leaders are more concerned with developing and implementing processes that deliver delight at scale, rather than delighting customers on an individual basis.

Reducing effort and multichannel support represent the biggest challenges facing the support industry today. As support leaders establish strategies to deliver support across multiple channels and reduce customer effort, we expect these methods to roll out across support teams, and are likely to become a significant challenge for Customer Support Managers in the near future.

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