

CONTACT CENTER

# “Available Time” — How Much is Too Much?

ISG



**It can be nearly impossible to strike just the right balance, and smaller call centers or small standalone operations are particularly vulnerable.**

Call agent “available time” can be a nightmare to manage and a double-edged sword for inbound contact center managers. If you employ too many agents, agent productivity suffers. If you have too few agents, then agents can burn out and customer service quality declines. It can be nearly impossible to strike just the right balance, and smaller call centers or small standalone operations are particularly vulnerable.

“Available time” or “idle time” is defined as the time spent by an agent waiting for a call to handle when he or she is available to accept one. It is nearly the opposite of “occupancy,” which is the percentage of time that call agents spend handling incoming calls. So the equation is this: 100 percent minus the occupancy percentage equals the available time percentage.

Optimal levels are difficult to determine, and if you push too hard to reduce available time then customer service will almost assuredly suffer. Before we determine how to ascertain the optimum level in a given situation, let’s first look at the primary factor that is likely to affect agent productivity: Inbound call volume.



## INBOUND CALL VOLUME

The rule of thumb is simple — the larger the base number of incoming calls you handle (and subsequently, agent staffing levels), the easier it will be to keep agents productive and to balance productivity and service quality. So, a 300-agent center matched with the right tools and technology should be able to maintain an 85 percent occupancy level (15 percent available time) and achieve reasonable service quality goals.



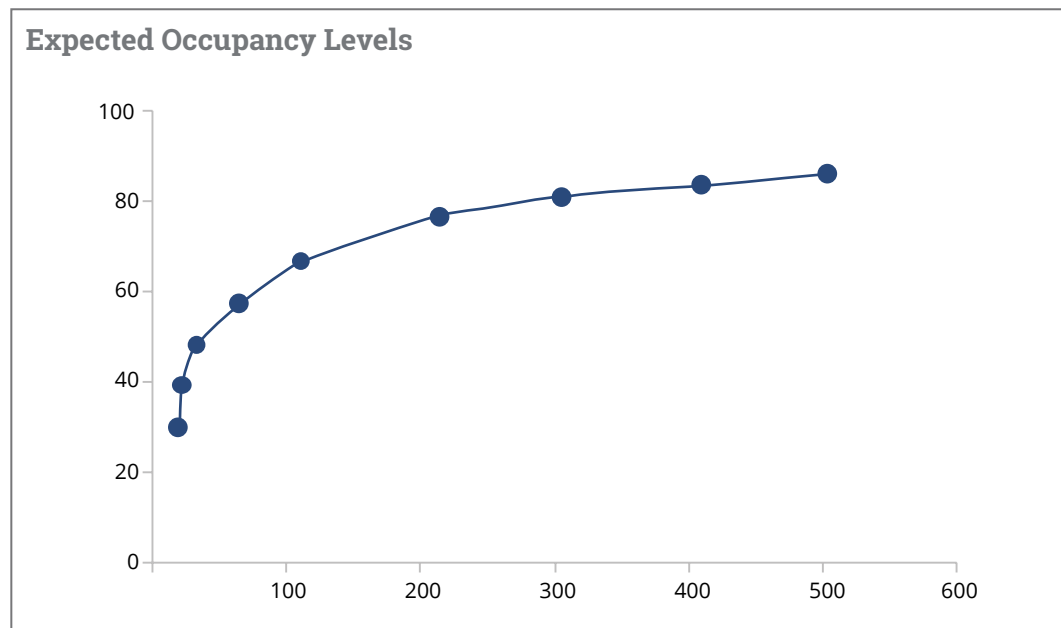
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### FOR VERY SMALL CENTERS MANAGING THE NUMBERS IS FAR MORE DIFFICULT

As incoming call volume declines, it becomes more difficult to effectively manage the operation. In centers with fewer than 20 agents for a single call type, it may not be uncommon to see available time in the 40 to 50 percent range. In centers with fewer than 10 agents, available time can jump to 50 to 70 percent, and service quality can spike and range widely.

These results are due to the random nature of incoming call volume. As call volume declines, the percentage variance for normal random call volume increases. For example, a normal distribution of call volume for a very small call function may range from zero to 10 incoming calls at any given time. So, sometimes four out of five agents may be sitting idle with nothing to do; at other times those same agents can experience five calls holding, causing a significant decline in service level. And to make matters worse, this is all normal!

The chart below illustrates the effects on occupancy levels. As incoming call volume (and subsequently the number of agents who handle calls) increases, agent productivity is likely to increase as well. But that productivity will grow at a decreasing rate, or by a smaller amount at each interval as agents are added.



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If you are staffed to manage a very small call function (fewer than 10 agents), chances are that agent productivity is low, and the quality of customer service suffers periodically as well.

Although there are a number of factors that affect productivity, large centers nearly always will be more productive and maintain a higher occupancy level than small centers. So, if you are staffed to manage a very small call function (fewer than 10 agents), chances are that agent productivity is low, and the quality of customer service suffers periodically as well.

How do we improve agent occupancy for small operations?

- 1. Cross-utilize agents.** It can be difficult, but one way to improve productivity is to cross-train agents to handle a second call or multiple call types to eliminate as many standalone call functions as possible. This requires detailed planning and testing, but it can be a good way to increase agent occupancy. If you are managing a number of very small call functions, it is a good idea to consider a strategy that includes this consolidation option.
  - Consider blending the work by adding outbound calls or other measurable call assignments to increase work volume. Outbound call requirements often can be assigned a lower priority during periods of peak inbound call volume and scheduled for completion at less frantic times.
  - Resist the temptation to improve productivity by handling immeasurable non call-related work in between calls. Although this may be the only alternative available to a call center manager, it will render your metrics meaningless. It's difficult to improve ongoing performance without proper measures and key performance indicators (KPIs).
- 2. Carefully manage agent scheduling.** If you have five agents handling calls and two are permitted to take a break at the same time (or go to lunch, training, meetings, etc.), you have just lost 40 percent of your call-handling capacity, and service quality is likely to suffer. Managing schedules is more challenging with fewer agents, but it is critical to maximizing productivity.
- 3. Manage customer expectations.** Advise clients through a short pre-call announcement what they are likely to experience, and how long they are likely to be on hold. Callers have a tendency to hold longer if they understand what to expect. This may help improve productivity over time and also reduce abandoned call rates.

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