



## Contact Centres Sector Skills Summary



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## Hinonga Kōkiri/Head Start Project

**The Hinonga Kōkiri/Head Start Project is an initiative from ServicelQ that brings together service sector stakeholders from industry, employers, schools, tertiary education providers, and iwi throughout Aotearoa New Zealand to reflect on the impacts of COVID-19.**

The purpose of the project is to hear stakeholder perspectives on:

- ▶ how COVID-19 has reshaped vocational pathways and business, and
- ▶ what people and skills, training, and learning pathways are needed to get a head start to COVID-19 recovery.

The stakeholder consultation began in August 2021 and concluded in October 2021 via industry focus groups. Their perspectives shaped the creation of this sector skills summary, and what support is needed for recovery.

The consultation results have been combined with industry insights, data and forecasting to produce

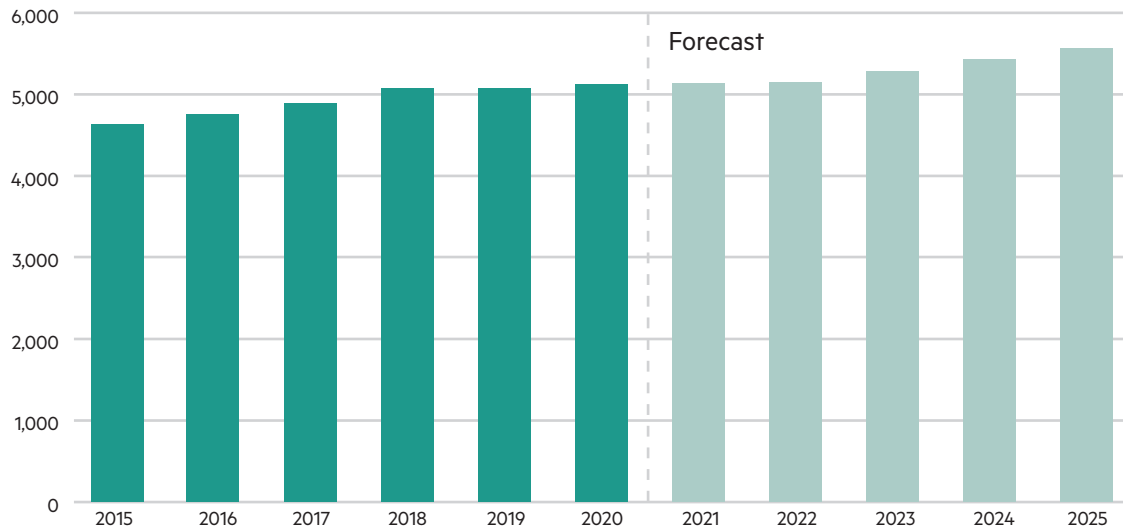
sixteen sector skills summaries, one for each sector represented by Ringa Hora Services Workforce Development Council. This skills summary is for the Contact Services sector. There are 15 other summaries for the accommodation, aviation; cafés, bars and restaurants; catering; cleaning services; clubs; financial services; local government; public services; quick service restaurants; real estate; retail and retail supply chain; security services; travel; and tourism sectors.

From this research ServicelQ will produce a workforce strategy for Ringa Hora Services Workforce Development Council. The strategy will include industry, employer, schools, provider, and iwi voices. In this way the project gives service sector stakeholders an opportunity to shape vocational education in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The report is structured into five main areas to show what impacts COVID-19 has had on the sector; the sector response to COVID-19; key drivers of future success; skills needed to support sector recovery; and skills initiatives and strategies.

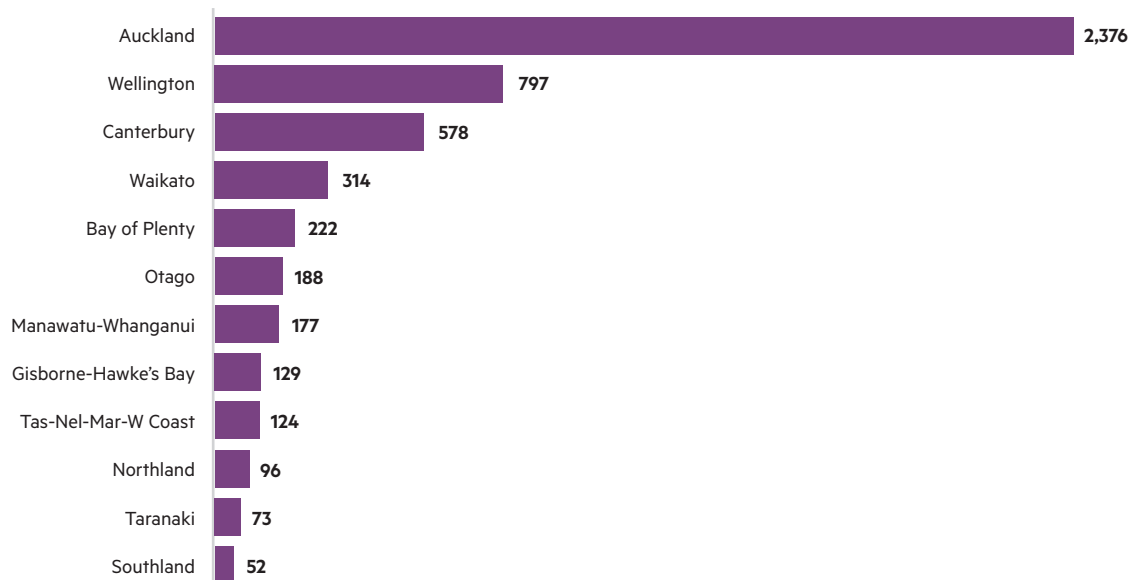
# Contact Centres Sector Snapshot

## Contact Centres sector jobs



- ▶ Prior to COVID-19 there were 5,126 jobs in the public sector and the sector was forecast to grow by 5.8% between 2020 and 2025. Informetrics now forecast no growth in the year to March 2021, growth of 0.4% (23 jobs) in the year to March 2022 and 2.5% growth (131 jobs) the following year.

## 2020 Regional employment

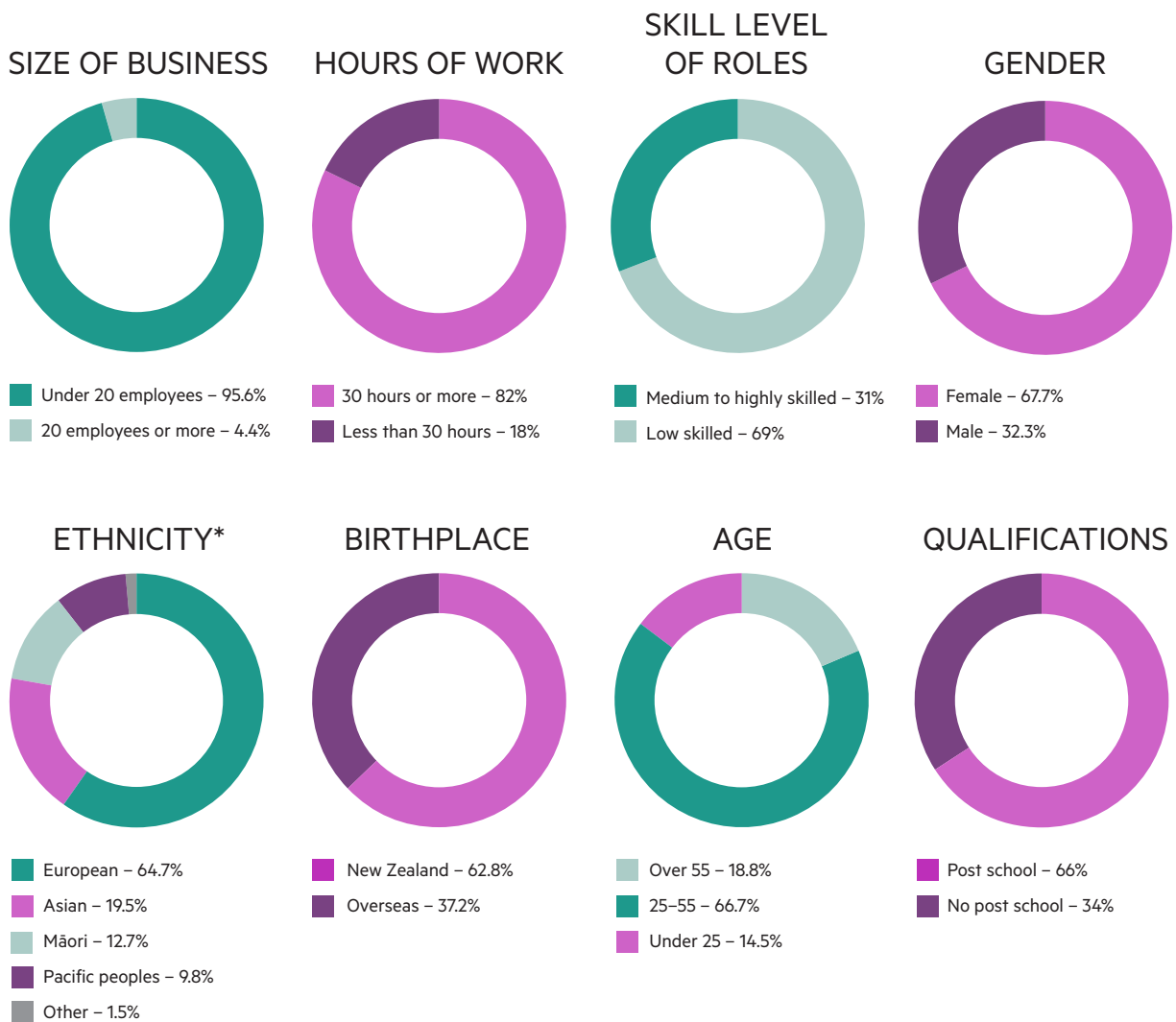


- ▶ The main occupations are call or contact center operators, call or contact center managers, and call or contact center team leaders.
- ▶ The contact center sector self-employment rate in 2020 was 10.5%; lower than the overall economy which was 16.8%.

2020 Contact Centre sector data



- ▶ GDP per FTE (full time equivalent) was \$188,551 higher than the GDP per FTE for the overall economy which was \$139,983.
- ▶ The proportion of females has decreased over the past decade from 72.6% in 2010 to 67.7% in 2020.
- ▶ In the 2018 Census, 37.2% of the sector workforce was born overseas, with 15.2 % born in Asia.



\*Ethnicity percentages may add up to more than 100% as people may identify with more than one ethnicity.

- ▶ The average age of contact center workers was 40.8 years, compared with 42.4 years for all workers in New Zealand.

## Māori in the Contact Centre Sector workforce

Figure 1: Employment by ethnicity in the Contact Centre Sector in New Zealand

Ethnicity	Contact Centres				Growth
	Employment		Share of total		
	2013	2018	2013	2018	
European	3,139	3,282	73.0%	64.7%	4.6%
Asian	588	989	13.7%	19.5%	68.2%
Māori	469	646	10.9%	12.7%	37.7%
Pasifika	327	497	7.6%	9.8%	52.0%
MELAA	46	78	1.1%	1.5%	69.6%
Not elsewhere included	14	0	0.3%	0.0%	
Other	90	77	2.1%	1.5%	-14.4%

*Ethnicity percentages may add up to more than 100% as people may identify with more than one ethnicity.*

According to census data, while overall employment in the contact centre sector increased by 17.9 percent between 2013 and 2018, the increase in those identifying as Māori employed in contact centres was 37.7 percent. Māori in 2018 accounted for 12.7 percent of the contact centre workforce, compared with 10.9 percent in 2013 (Māori accounted for 13.5 percent of the total workforce in 2018). Please see the Contact Centre Sector Snapshot (p.2) for post-COVID-19 workforce forecasts.

The increase of the number of Māori in the contact centre sector reflects the overall growth of nearly 50 percent in the number of working Māori between 2013 and 2018, which accounted for more than a quarter of the growth across the total labour market. The total Māori population also grew substantially, with 180,000 additional Māori living in Aotearoa New Zealand. BERL suggests some possible explanations for the level of growth: Māori returning from overseas; actions taken by Statistics New Zealand to remedy the low response rates of Māori in the 2018 census; and the possibility that more people chose to identify as Māori in 2018 (BERL, 2020).



# Sector Consultation Insights

## 1. The impacts of COVID-19 on the Contact Centre sector

This section discusses the immediate impacts of COVID-19 on the Contact Centre sector. While impacts varied depending on the sector the contact centre served, there were several common themes:

- ▶ A very quick turn-around to remote working or socially-distanced workplaces
- ▶ For many sectors, significant increases in call volumes (and recruitment of new staff in some organisations)
- ▶ Customers with more complex needs and high levels of anxiety
- ▶ A need to monitor the emotional well-being of staff
- ▶ The need to swiftly move training online.

### Staff

The immediate impact of COVID-19 was the move to working from home for many Contact Centre staff, while those in essential services who remained in the workplace had strict social distancing requirements. The logistics of transitioning the staff of a large Contact Centre to be able to successfully operate from home, within 48 hours, are extraordinary. For some organisations, the ability of Contact Centre staff to be able to maintain services was crucial and was prioritised over home-based arrangements for other staff.

The move to working from home revealed differences in the suitability of the home environment, both in terms of physical layout and of pressures from household size and composition. All of these considerations were set against a backdrop of significant uncertainty about the time frame that the new way of working would be required.



**Lotto NZ reported a 600 percent increase in call volume as a result of their move to digital gaming and the learning curve associated with that for many of their customers.<sup>1</sup>**

## Increased workloads

Many Contact Centres became the first (and often only) point of contact for people as New Zealand went into lockdown. In some sectors, call volumes increased exponentially; one centre reported their call volume tripled on the day of the lockdown announcement, and stayed at double the normal rate for the next four months. Lotto NZ reported a 600 percent increase in call volume as a result of their move to digital gaming and the learning curve associated with that for many of their customers.<sup>1</sup>

Queries also often became more complex, and in some sectors the information necessary to deal with queries changed rapidly, with almost daily updating in some areas. For example, a government agency Contact Centre had to swiftly develop their knowledge base in order for staff to provide information and answer queries on several new initiatives that were rolled out during the weeks of lockdown.

Depending on the sector being serviced, recruitment of new staff was necessary to support increased workloads. For example, as at 17 April 2020, Healthline had employed and trained an additional 600 people, including 100 new work-from-home staff, to help reduce waiting times.<sup>2</sup> A government agency also had to recruit new staff, some of whom had been made redundant from the sector the agency serviced, with 'virtual' induction and training required. Conversely, another organisation saw a dramatic drop in calls initially over lockdown and was able to use this downtime to offer virtual resilience workshops.

## Consumers

Depending on the sector involved, COVID-19 had a massive impact on the Contact Centre experience for many consumers. During lockdown and after, Contact Centres were often the only source of vital information, especially in terms of health and income support, for many people. As well as significantly increased call volumes, many centres saw increases in average call length, as Contact Centres were a major source of connection and support for people.

*'People were craving human contact, the call length has gone up, people want to talk to people when they're feeling isolated, so Contact Centres play quite a role in emotional resilience in the community, because our agents are sometimes the only other human being that a person who is isolated gets to speak to, and you simply can't hurry them off the phone, because you're doing more than just the business at hand.'*

– FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.engageinteractive.com.au/cloud-contact-center-wfh/challenges-and-benefits-from-lockdown-and-after-how-managers-are-adapting-to-a-remote-contact-centre/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/health/coronavirus/121060304/coronavirus-demand-for-healthline-many-times-higher-than-last-year>



A larger number of calls, of greater length, led to longer wait times and a lot more frustration for consumers. This was compounded by new ways of dealing with queries made necessary by people working remotely. Customers were often on-hold for longer due to Contact Centre staff having a greater reliance on Teams or Zoom calls to answer questions – there was an increase in time as they sought colleague support through websites rather than physically checking with a co-located colleague. There could also be more background noise with home based offices, requiring training in the etiquette of what is deemed acceptable if staff are working from home.

### Well-being

Working remotely, increased workloads, more challenging queries and dealing with anxious customers meant heightened levels of stress for Contact Centre staff. While grateful for a ‘stable’ job, staff members also had their personal circumstances to deal with. Pastoral care for staff was really important over the height of lockdown, as some staff had to deal with extremely upsetting conversations resulting from the actual and potential impacts of the pandemic on people’s lives.

*‘Really, really tough conversations... people with financial struggles, people saying they just wanted to end their lives - really, really hard time and time again. And certainly that was one of the things that we’ve built around coming back from lockdown, all those the conversations around resilience, having those difficult conversations...’*

**- KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW**

### Training

The working from home model required new ways of inducting staff, with some Contact Centres doing their induction training via webinar, in order to open up their positions for people nation-wide, as opposed to just in the main centres.

Many companies moved all of their training online, with webinar training becoming more popular. While this is a practical solution, it raises concerns about the quality of the training. For example, there is not the opportunity for ‘buddy training’, which may result in calls being coming more ‘scripted’, as new recruits aren’t able to discuss with a more experienced operator the nuances of how to respond to various issues.





*Working from home has now become the norm for many contact centres. While this model had been under consideration by some organisations, the pandemic provided the 'nudge' needed to make it a reality.*

## 2. Responses to the impacts of COVID-19

In this section we consider the ways in which the Contact Centre sector has responded to the impacts of COVID-19. While some of the actions taken were in direct response to the pandemic, in other cases the actions were already in train or under consideration. The key themes in this sections are:

- ▶ The logistics and support required for working from home
- ▶ The importance of, and different skills required for, managing staff remotely
- ▶ The impacts that COVID-19 has had on the talent pipeline and recruitment practices
- ▶ Changes to training models and the ability of the qualification content to address new demands
- ▶ The ways in which business models have changed in response to the impacts of COVID-19, including more emphasis on a diverse workforce.

### Working from home: logistics and impacts

Working from home has now become the norm for many Contact Centres. While this model had been under consideration by some organisations, the pandemic provided the 'nudge' needed to make it a reality. There is a feeling that, for many centres, a return to the office-based model is unlikely. As mentioned above, some centres now have staff from widespread geographical locations, while others who have maintained staff in the same city or area may operate a hot desk system, with team leaders meeting with the team in person weekly or fortnightly.

While both employers and staff may appreciate the flexibility that working from home provides, there are several areas of concern:

- ▶ What happens if the hardware breaks down, or if the internet connection fails?
- ▶ How is the privacy of information managed in the home setting?
- ▶ How do employers ensure the health and safety requirements for staff are being met? One employer has clearly defined the 'workplace' in contracts to clarify their liability.
- ▶ What are the impacts on individuals' utility bills and home environment?

One organisation had a team of 'home agents' prior to the lockdown so understood what was required for this to work. Those home-based workers had gone through quite a rigorous process to be 'licenced' to work from home and now the organisation is going through the process of making sure that all staff who will now work permanently from home meet the same standards.

It is also reported that in some cases COVID-19 has affected the workforce such that the move to working from home is developing a culture of people continuing to work while sick, because they are staying at home. This leads to strain on staff and reduces resilience. On the other hand, one organisation reported that the pressure of the lockdown period enhanced team morale, with staff 'virtually' sharing experiences and becoming a more tight-knit 'family'.

## Managing remote staff

In terms of monitoring performance levels, because of the automated nature of the sector and high level of analytics captured, there were few concerns about a decline in productivity. Managing staff remotely, however, requires a higher level of awareness from managers about the potential impacts of isolation on staff's mental health and well-being:

*'You have to be aware as a manager about touching base with people; when you're at work it's automatic. When working remotely you might be checking on their results but you've got to make a conscious effort to follow through on the stuff that really matters, that personal stuff...'*

– FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

*Managing staff remotely requires a higher level of awareness from managers about the potential impacts of isolation on staff's mental health and well-being.*



Managers and team leaders themselves also need to be supported to be able to provide the level of care required. In line with these concerns, Contact Centre Network NZ (the industry association) partnered with CRM Consulting and LearningPlanet to offer two free 10-minute training videos on working from home effectively and leading teams remotely.<sup>3</sup>

## Recruitment/talent supply

The impacts of COVID-19 have seen different types of people moving into the Contact Centre workforce. The first group were those who'd been displaced from their jobs by the pandemic. A Ministry of Social Development (MSD) project, in partnership with Contact Centre Network NZ, LearningPlanet (an organisation with 30 years background in the industry) and Phone Plus (an outsource provider who are undertaking the pre assessment and recruitment phase), was quickly initiated, with the first group beginning training on the second day of lockdown.

The programme comprises of pre assessment for programme fit, four weeks of online training with LearningPlanet videos and workbooks in Contact Centre skills and all matters customer service, communication and self-development, weekly zoom meetings with course tutors, weekly coaching on CV and recruitment techniques then recruitment placement.

Over 150 people have been retrained in the last 18 months, with over a 70 percent success recruitment rate for COVID-19 displaced people, placing them in Contact Centres or customer service related areas. MSD have just renewed the contract for another 100 people based on the success to date. Once people have been placed, they are able to undertake the NZ Certificate in Contact Centres (Level 3). The cost of the qualification is also met by MSD.

*'Once they've been in the Contact Centre for a while they can go on to the qualification as well, (they're) really hungry for that training and learning. Need to get that interview to say, I can do this, this and this, and these are my transferable skills, and for them to be able to realise that and sell themselves enough to be able to get into these roles, which can be quite scarce sometimes.'*

– FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

The second group of people entering Contact Centres in greater numbers than previously is new graduates. They tend to pick up the processes and procedures quickly, but may sometimes lack the life experience and emotional maturity to deal with some of the issues they encounter. Employers recognise that Contact Centre work may be a transition space for these younger people, but value the skills they bring (and the fact that some of them may stay on as casual workers if they continue their studies).

Recruitment practices have also changed since the pandemic, with an acceleration in the use of 'robot interviewing', an automated set of questions used as a screening process. This has not been positively received, with providers having to train people in how to answer automated questions, and some candidates 'shopping around' for recruitment companies who do face-to-face interviewing. One Contact Centre uses phone screening prior to an in-person interview, finding that an unexpected phone call is a useful way to judge if a person can be responsive and 'think on their feet', important skills in the Contact Centre environment.

<sup>3</sup> <https://ccnnz.org.nz/free-training-videos-for-our-members/>



## Training

The changed environment due to COVID-19 and the recruitment of different types of people have both impacted on the nature of training offered. In general, there has been a bigger uptake of formal training since COVID-19:

*'A lot of people are retraining, and training has become the thing, they're reskilling and upskilling, because they had to in 2020, and now it's set a trend.'*

– FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

As the Infometrics data show, there are a significant number of people in the Contact Centre sector who do not have any formal qualifications. For some of these people, undertaking study can be quite nerve-wracking, and they require extra support. But the results can be very satisfying:

*'It's incredible when you have someone in their 50s, who came out of school with nothing, and the impact on their whole life, their attitude, their confidence, when they achieve their first qualification, it's transformational stuff.'*

– FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

The qualifications were reviewed three years ago and at that time emotional and mental well-being components were added, in order to future-proof the qualification. These have become even more salient in the current environment and need to be extended, and also need to be included in the leadership / mentoring component of the Level 4 qualification. The focus on resilience is also supported by resources other than the formal qualification. LearningPlanet, for example, has a series of video modules about resilience and well-being that are well-subscribed, and one employer has developed her own 'psychological first aid' training.

The scenario of degree-level graduates undertaking a Level 3 qualification raises some interesting points. Rather than being 'easy', one assessor argues that 'reality of assessment can come as a surprise' and some graduates quickly see the future value in the skills they are learning, especially the communication skills like active listening. Gaining these skills is particularly valuable in some of the larger companies, where Contact Centres are a 'feeder' to other career pathways within the company. Other business qualifications, like team leadership, are also being taken up in Contact Centres.



***In general, contact centres are growing and expanding their capabilities, against a backdrop of the need for business continuity and contingency planning for future lockdowns or other equally impactful events.***

It is also important to note that the formal qualification is just one component of the training provided in Contact Centres. Contact Centres where a large knowledge base is covered describe lengthy training programmes, where new staff are exposed to one new area of knowledge at a time, gradually building their expertise over several months. This may be accompanied by online modules, and often includes a 'buddy' or mentoring relationship.

### **Business models/workforce diversity**

As well as the move to remote working, some Contact Centres have had to revise their business models in light of COVID-19. For example, one Contact Centre that was funded on a per consumer basis is now renegotiating its contract to a call volume basis, so that it is easier to expand services in the event of another lockdown. As a result of deploying new Cloud technology during lockdown, Lotto NZ is now permanently placed to support spikes in demand, able to do bursts of up to 200 agents (outsourcing when needed) – a phenomenal 1600% burst from their original size.<sup>4</sup>

There is now a greater emphasis on training, not only to improve staff well-being and customer service, but as an aid to better staff recruitment and retention.

The opportunities and constraints of the COVID-19 environment have also accelerated the value of a diverse workforce. There is an increase in the recognition and celebration of different cultures in workplaces. People who have different languages 'under their belt' have become a lot more sought after rather than the use of translation services. Some centres will have internal directories of languages spoken and the ability to speak multiple languages is of interest to recruiters.

Some Contact Centres are specialising in sign language as an additional offering. This is now possible with the growth of the multi-channel Contact Centre, where access to video chat with someone opens the ability to be able to use sign. The existing option is NZ Relay Services which makes calls significantly longer and can be difficult to navigate.

In general, Contact Centres are growing and expanding their capabilities, against a backdrop of the need for business continuity and contingency planning for future lockdowns or other equally impactful events.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.enghouseinteractive.com.au/cloud-contact-center-wfh/challenges-and-benefits-from-lockdown-and-after-how-managers-are-adapting-to-a-remote-contact-centre/>



### 3. Key drivers of future success for the Contact Centre sector

As highlighted in the previous section, the keys drivers for future success for the Contact Centre sector revolve around the need for adaptability and agility to make the service offerings fit-for -purpose for the business the centre is serving, and the environment within which it is operating. The dimensions identified for future success include:

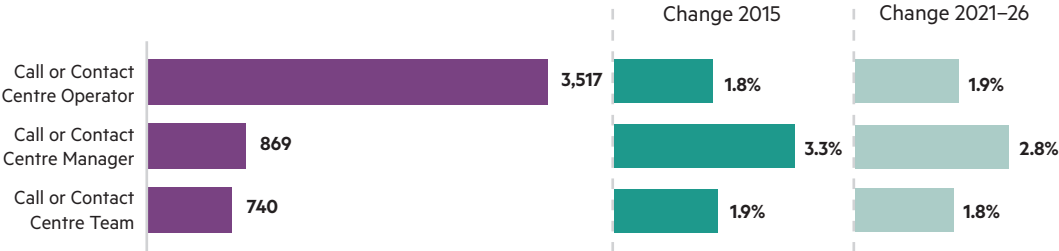
- ▶ Choosing and utilising the correct ‘tools’: across technology, education and training, and business processes
- ▶ Modern management techniques that focus on well-being, engage staff and ensure buy-in
- ▶ Encouraging and celebrating a diverse workforce:

*There is a definite openness from the sector to recruiting a wide range of people: ‘you recruit for attitude because you can teach anything else’.*

**– FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT**

- ▶ Promoting the career pathways available within the sector, both within the Contact Centre itself and as a pathway to the wider business.

#### Top three call centre occupations in 2020



## 4. Skills needed to support the Contact Centre sector recovery

In this section, we discuss the skills that have come to the forefront since the onset of COVID-19. These are generally skill sets that were already identified and valued but the pandemic has shone a spotlight on their importance and intensified the need for greater development. We also profile a regional response to skill development. The key skills noted are:

- ▶ Enhanced capability to manage resilience and wellbeing:
  - ▶ For managers, the need for more empathetic, person-centred management skills
  - ▶ For operators, the need for empathetic listening skills
- ▶ Technical skills to manage higher levels of automation, e.g., for multichannel Contact Centres
- ▶ Analytical and problem-solving skills to handle more in-depth queries
- ▶ Soft skills, e.g., communication and conflict management.

### Resilience and well-being

One outcome of the pandemic is that people are more 'fragile' and anxious. This requires Contact Centre managers and team leaders who can empathise with and support their staff:

*'For myself as a leader, sometimes I feel that I have 'counsellor' tattooed on my forehead.'*

– FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Operators themselves are at the frontline of dealing with people who, depending on the sector and the issues, may be anxious, confused, and sometimes belligerent.

*'There is definitely more of a need to have the ability to listen and respond with empathy, to be able to let people know on a very human level that they've been heard and then move the call on to business. And in quite a skilled way certainly...'*

– FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

### Automation

There are two strands to the automation occurring in the Contact Centre sector. First is the gradual introduction of multichannel Contact Centres, requiring skills in handling multimedia communications; webchats, for example. Second is the move to more routine matters being handled by automated intelligence options, removing some of the more transactional queries. This means that the remaining queries that must be handled in person by an operator can be more in-depth and complex, requiring deeper listening, analytical and problem-solving skills.

*'Automation can take away the routine queries but what's left is more in depth. And you probably have to have skills and probing to get to what the actual issue was and presenting the range of options. And that's a different set of skills from just answering the basic query.'*

– FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT



For one local body Contact Centre, the move towards digitisation of services is a Council-wide strategy. This means that customers are driven to source what information they can online but for those that struggle with aspects of this, the Contact Centre staff need the both digital skills to support them, and the ability to explain to them what is required.

*'The customer service representative of the future needs to be able to help a customer who rings and announces, 'I'm trying to do this. I can't work out how to do it online. Can you help me?'... It's about being able to having a base digital acumen that is enough to feel really confident. So that means an understanding of different operating systems, language and not being scared of technology, being able to use more than one system at a time.'*

– KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW

## Soft skills

It appears that a lack of soft skills in some areas can be a particular issue for some of the younger people joining the sector. They are often 'tech-savy' and can use a range of communication channels, but the conversational skills required in a business environment may need developing. The 'faceless' nature of social media also means that face-to-face conflict resolution skills have been neglected and require building.

## A regional skills response: a Contact Centre microcredential

Industry sources noted a move towards regional locations for some Contact Centres.<sup>5</sup> In response to growth in the numbers of people employed in Contact Centres in the Manawatū, and calls for more staff, UCOL, with support from the Manawatū Chamber of Commerce Contact Centre Cluster Group, developed the Certificate in Customer Experience Management (Contact Centre) microcredential.

This aims to provide an accelerated pathway into the Contact Centre workforce for new staff and to update and upskill those already in the industry. The first three weeks of the 10-week Level 4 qualification is full-time and based in UCOL's classrooms. Learners develop their customer service skills, understanding of equipment, and 'soft skills' like resilience, teamwork, and workplace etiquette. They then spend seven weeks on placement in a real-life Contact Centre, a good chance for employers to recruit new staff.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> It will be interesting to note the impact that this trend will have on regional workforce numbers in the next Census.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.voxy.co.nz/national/5/390799>



## 5. Skills initiatives and solutions to support the sector over the next two years

In this section, we present a range of future-focused considerations and ideas. We draw together different threads of the information provided to make three Contact Centre sector 'workforce development' recommendations. In summary, these are:

- ▶ A broader conception and greater recognition of 'training' across the Contact Centre sector
- ▶ Acknowledgement and clearer mapping of the role that the Contact Centre sector plays in career pathways and transferable skills development
- ▶ Investigation of a stronger role for the Contact Centre sector in providing 'good jobs' and career pathways for traditionally underserved groups.

The section ends with a description of a South Auckland employment initiative, which provides a working model for elements of each of these recommendations.

### Broadening the concept of 'training' in the Contact Centre sector

The Contact Centre sector appears to be only lightly served by the formal qualifications on offer. While the content of the qualifications did not raise any concerns, there appears to be several barriers to organisations putting their staff through the qualifications:

- ▶ Some organisations were not aware there was a qualification
- ▶ Others reported that the criteria the workplace must meet for learners to achieve the qualifications 'seems to keep changing'
- ▶ The cost of the qualification was mentioned as barrier by some
- ▶ There was also a feeling that a climate of uncertainty resulting from the changes occurring as part of the Review of Vocational Education was making some businesses and learners adopt a 'wait and see' attitude to undertaking qualifications.

We also noted the breadth of training that occurs across Contact Centres that is not necessarily credentialised. This training includes: technical and specific content relating to each organisation; training provided by external organisations 'on demand'; and the mentoring and coaching that occurs within organisations.

*'We rely very heavily on the work of LearningPlanet with the videos and workbooks and modules and so forth. And a lot of Contact Centres do because you can't pull all your staff off at once if you want to do training. And so with the LearningPlanet set up, being able to roster people off to do training, that works really well.'*

– FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

This is certainly not to suggest that all of this training should be captured in the national qualifications; rather that there should be a mechanism for individuals to record and share the skill sets they have gained, and for organisations to be able benchmark themselves internally and across the sector.

## The role of Contact Centres in providing transferable skills and developing career pathways

The Contact Centre sector provides three main career pathway directions: development and promotion with the contact sector space, i.e. team leader and management pathways; a conduit to, and knowledge base for, other business areas of the same organisation; or 'transitional' roles where many transferable skills can be developed, e.g., communication, empathy, problem-solving. In the post COVID-19 environment, with the different recruitment patterns that the pandemic prompted, it is important that organisations are able to map pathways and support employees to systematically capture and be able to 'market' the skills they have gained.

There appears to be little connection with schools in promoting Contact Centres as a career option; however some larger organisations who have in-house Contact Centres do have partnerships with schools, where the range of career options across the organisation are promoted.

## Kia Puāwai: An innovative South Auckland employment partnership<sup>7</sup>

Kia Puāwai is a programme that brings South Auckland people who are currently unemployed into Auckland Council's Contact Centre workforce.

The programme involves a partnership between:

- ▶ Auckland Council – which offers permanent employment opportunities in Manukau
- ▶ the local Manukau office of Work and Income (WINZ) – which helps identify potential candidates, and
- ▶ the Solomon Group – a Māori training provider which offers a 12-week training course in Contact Centre skills.

Auckland Council recognised the need in South Auckland through specific goals in its 30-year Auckland Plan and the establishment of The Southern Initiative (TSI), which is a place-based regeneration programme. In 2017, the Customer Services department consolidated six council Contact Centres, and based the new Contact Centre in Manukau. The goal was to provide permanent employment opportunities in South Auckland – specifically for people struggling to find employment.

<sup>7</sup> Information sourced from key informant interview and [https://taituara.org.nz/Article?Action=View&Article\\_id=203](https://taituara.org.nz/Article?Action=View&Article_id=203)



**The programme has now been going for three years and the Council can show long-term sustainability and retention, with six or seven people from the original programme still working in the contact centre.**

The programme began in early 2018. It is based on cohorts of around 20 to 25 people, who have all been put through a basic assessment to provide evidence of commitment and willingness to learn. Each cohort undertakes a 12-week training course, with four days a week on campus and one day a week at the Council premises. After the course, the learners are put through the same assessment that is used for all customer service recruits, with similar levels of success.

Several key components for successful outcomes for the candidates have been identified:

- ▶ Selecting candidates who have a drive to change their lives
- ▶ The time spent in the Council building, which takes away the fear of the unknown and allows candidates to meet future team leaders and colleagues
- ▶ Celebrating success, with a 'big' graduation ceremony for each cohort
- ▶ A job is guaranteed for everyone who meets the assessment level
- ▶ A gentle transition into the working environment, often starting with a .5 role so that (for example) childcare arrangements can be sorted out
- ▶ Comprehensive on-job training, supported by a 'nesting' environment.

The programme has now been going for three years and the Council can show long-term sustainability and retention, with six or seven people from the original programme still working in the Contact Centre. Others have moved on, within the organisation and externally. For Auckland Council, Kia Puāwai has achieved recruitment efficiency, cost savings, and improvement in recruits' performance:

- ▶ Fewer assessment centres – which saves the time, effort and cost of Contact Centre team leaders and training staff attending many assessment centres.
- ▶ It also saves the time and cost of normal recruitment - standard recruitment processes are expensive.
- ▶ Having two to three courses a year enables planning for intakes to provide CSRs at high-volume times of the year, such as rating periods.
- ▶ The graduates who are now working in the Contact Centre have a generally higher quality of calls and lower unplanned leave than standard recruits.

As important as these factors are the stories of transformation resulting from the programme:

*'We have amazing stories of people whose lives have been changed... the thing that motivates a lot of the ones that are successful are their children: 'I want a different life for my kids'.*

**– KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW**



ServiceIQ.org.nz  
Level 14, Plimmer Towers  
2-6 Gilmer Terrace, Wellington 6011  
PO Box 25522, Wellington 6140

**Service IQ**

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HELPING OUR CUSTOMERS SUCCEED  
BY GROWING THEIR TALENT

