



The State of Quality Assurance in Technical Support

By Roy Atkinson
Senior Writer/Analyst, HDI

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There are many reasons to monitor quality in the support center, and several ways to do so: call or chat monitoring and/or recording, ticket review and/or monitoring, coaching for quality, and many other measures, all aimed at creating good customer experiences and providing consistent, effective support. In an effort to uncover the state of quality assurance (QA) in technical support today, HDI fielded a survey in April and May 2015. The survey received 330 total responses, more than a quarter of which (27%) came from organizations that support between 10,000 and 50,000 end users.

HDI wanted to know how many organizations have QA processes in place, who is involved in reviews, and what is reviewed. And so our primary question was inclusive: “Does your organization review or monitor technical support contacts and/or tickets for quality assurance?” This encompasses monitoring and review of calls, email, chat sessions, and other forms of contact, as well as monitoring and review of tickets for quality, which may include categorization, assignment, and documenting the customers’ statements, any relationship to other tickets, and the resolution.

Key Findings

- More than half of respondents are doing QA work and have formal processes in place, while almost one-third have no formal processes. About one-sixth (16%) aren’t performing QA.
- The top three purposes for quality review and monitoring are customer satisfaction (86%), training and/or coaching (77%), and performance review (67%).
- More than half (57%) of support organizations record technical support calls, and 26 percent review all recorded calls. Fifty-four percent review randomly selected recorded calls.
- Almost three-quarters of organizations (72%) that do QA review both open and closed tickets in quality reviews, and they most commonly use randomly selected tickets for review. More than half of support centers that provide phone support (57%) record some or all technical support calls.
- Almost three-quarters (72%) of organizations review randomly selected tickets, while only 11 percent review all tickets.
- Only 13 percent of organizations have a dedicated quality manager or similar position; in most organizations that do quality monitoring, it’s done by the support center manager or a team lead. Many respondents indicated in comments that they would like to have a dedicated QA team or manager.
- Relatively few support centers require agents/analysts to use scripts.
- Slightly more than two-thirds of support organizations (67%) use a scorecard to assess the quality of phone calls, with or without subjective review. Forty-six percent use a scorecard only.

“Customers want and expect a consistent, positive attitude from everyone they come into contact with.”

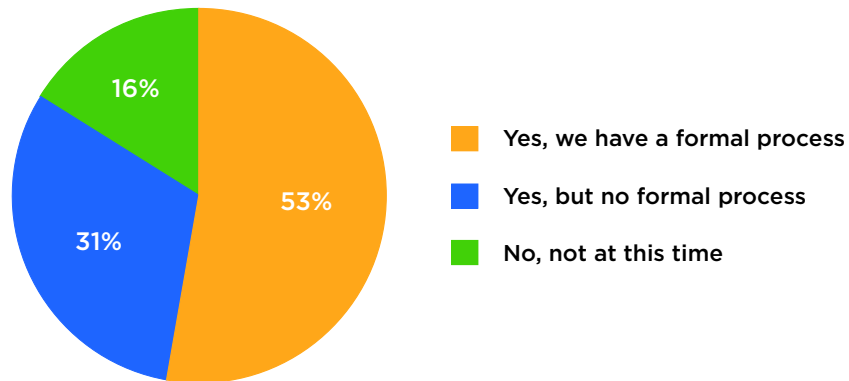
—Shep Hyken
 “15 Customer Service Tips for 2015”

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Are Support Organizations Doing Quality Assurance?

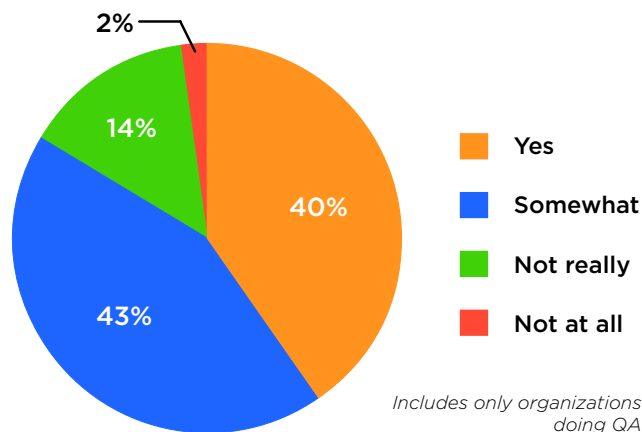
Before tackling any of our other questions, survey takers were asked to respond to our primary question about whether or not they have QA processes in place.

Does Your Organization Review or Monitor Contacts or Tickets for QA?



Almost one-third say they have no formal process but are doing QA. It's difficult to understand exactly what that means. It may mean that they only do QA work after someone complains, or that they only do it when "something bad" happens, or that they do it only when they have the time.

Does Your Organization Enforce QA Measures for Technical Support?

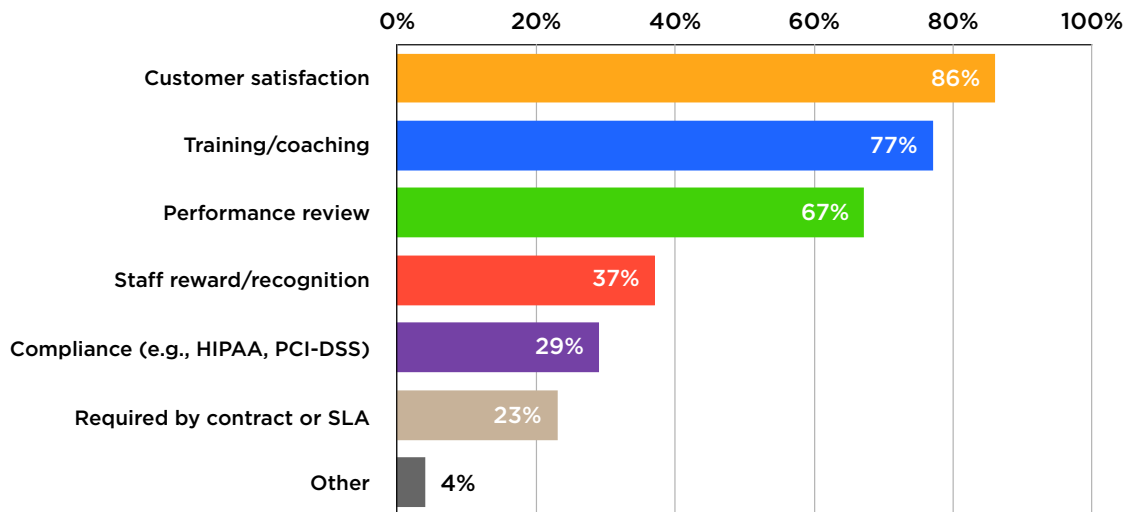


Likewise, it's difficult to understand why the highest percentage of respondents say they enforce QA measures "somewhat." Is enforcement arbitrary? Are QA measures enforced only when someone else (senior management, perhaps) asks for it to be done? Is it at the manager's discretion? It's impossible to say within the scope of this review. However, if QA is to be successful, there must be a degree of formality and uniform enforcement. Consistency is one of the outcomes of good QA; if QA itself is inconsistently performed and applied, the outcome will be compromised.

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Why Is QA Performed?

What Is the Purpose of Reviewing/Monitoring Contacts or Tickets?



Does not equal 100% (respondents were asked to select all that applied)

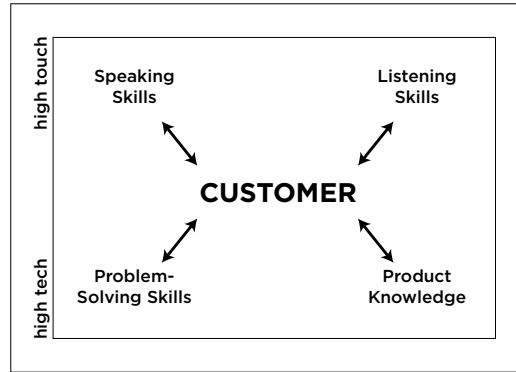
“Other” reasons listed by respondents include follow-up problem resolution and metrics/trends. One troubling response said, “Other possibilities also exist where certain team leads may use these details against staff,” pointing up the importance of recordings and/or documentation in cases of dispute.

Most organizations (86%) with QA practices monitor or review ticket handling to ensure customer satisfaction, to facilitate training or coaching (77%), and for the purpose of performance review (67%). Review also feeds rewards and recognition (37%).

One of the key factors in keeping customers working and happy is consistency of support. Customer satisfaction is all about meeting or exceeding expectations, and if the customer doesn’t know what to expect from one interaction to the next, the support center has a problem. Call monitoring and/or ticket monitoring and review are common ways to ensure consistency, as well as to check for the details of how support is being delivered. Review of recorded calls, for example, can allow QA reviewers to note tone of voice, clarity of speech, and understanding of the customer’s questions, and can help reviewers judge whether the agent/analyst is providing the best customer service experience possible within the parameters set by the business or organization. Ticket review can show that work is being done in a timely manner, that the details of a particular interaction (incident or service request) are properly recorded, that the categorizations necessary for good reporting are correct, and that knowledge is being used, updated, or created according to the organization’s guidance. Customers who know what to expect and have those expectations met consistently are far more likely to be satisfied with the service they receive.

The opportunities for training and coaching that come from QA monitoring and review should be obvious. If a supervisor, team lead, QA staff, or manager is listening in (monitoring) or listening back (recording), he or she can make comments or notes to guide the agent/analyst to make improvements. The QA reviewer can assess the key aspects of the agent/analyst’s relationship with the customer throughout the specific interaction.

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From *Effective Telephone Communication Skills*, by Mia Melanson (HDI, 2000)

Aside from providing feedback and training to the individual agent/analyst, QA can also help determine exactly where overall improvement is needed, which in turn can help determine what types of training and/or coaching are required, and for whom.

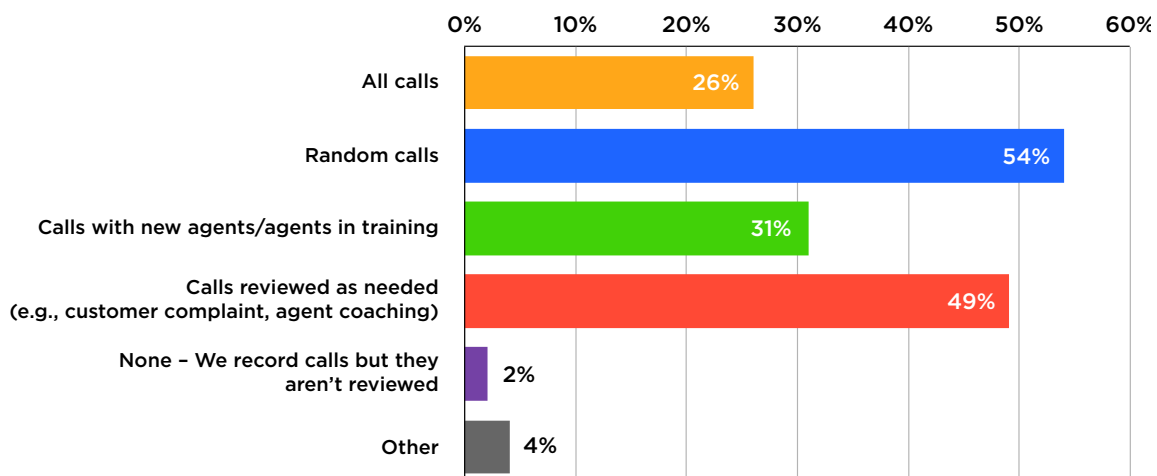
The third most common purpose for doing QA, chosen by 67 percent of respondents, is for performance review. Performance review is the time when agents/analysts are assessed on any number of criteria, such as adherence to schedule, completion of assigned tasks, and attainment of previously agreed-upon goals, but in this group, the quality of work as represented in contacts and/or tickets plays a role.

How Is QA Performed?

Call Monitoring/Recording

Over half (57%) of technical support organizations record calls, and most review at least some of those calls. Only two percent of organizations said they don't review recorded calls, while 26 percent said they review all recorded calls.

Which Recordings of Customer Calls Are Reviewed?



Includes only organizations that record calls; does not equal 100% (respondents were asked to select all that applied)

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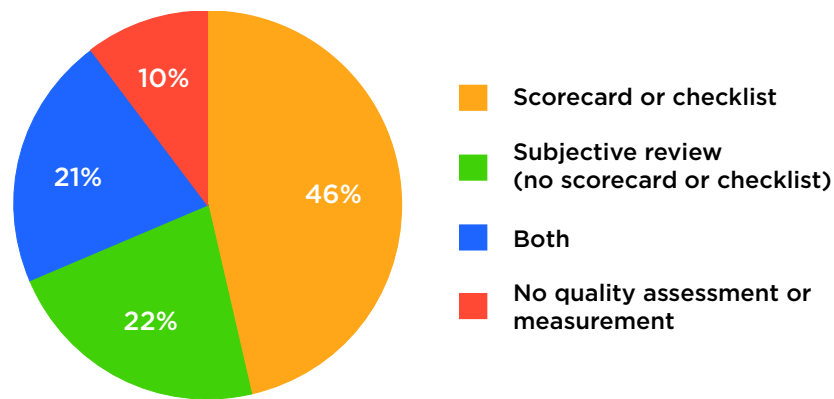
The “Other” recordings listed by respondents include:

- “We record calls handled by our offshore staff. Plans are to record all calls in the near future, both offshore and onshore.”
- “[Calls are recorded] when the agent feels they should [be].”
- “We have plans to review random calls but have not implemented yet.”

Thirty-one percent of organizations review calls with new agents/analysts. Monitoring and review can be integrated into the training provided to new hires, to teach them how to work with the end users and customers within their specific business culture and roles. New support staff members need to learn what the people contacting them expect, and how the support organization expects them to act in many different situations.

Unless there’s some reason (e-discovery, compliance requirement) for recording calls and then doing nothing, the two percent who don’t review calls are wasting resources. Just because you *can* collect data doesn’t mean that you *should* collect it. Data should have a purpose; the data represented by calls are an opportunity—one organizations may be missing.

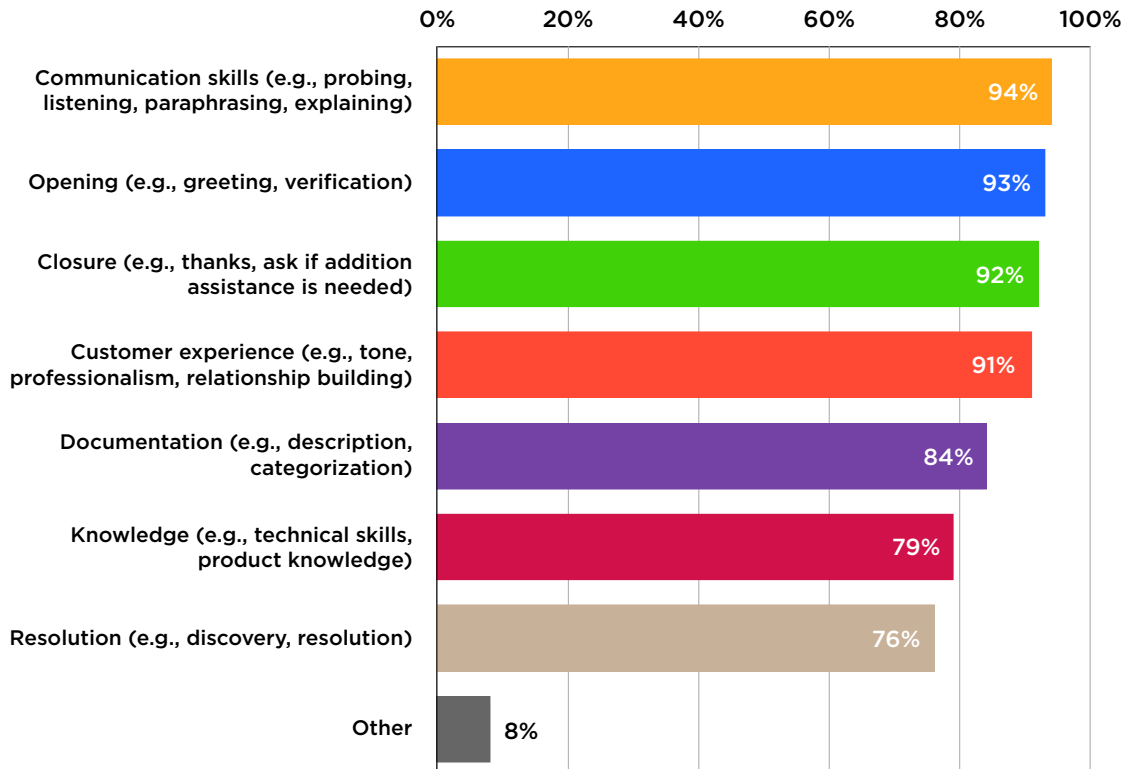
How Is Call Quality Assessed?



While 22 percent of respondents said they are subjective in their review of phone calls for quality, 46 percent use a scorecard only. Sixty-seven percent use a scorecard either with or without subjective review, and we asked these respondents to report on the areas those tools address.

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Which Areas Are Covered on Your Scorecard or Checklist?



Does not equal 100% (respondents were asked to select all that applied)

“Other” items shared by respondents include:

- Connection process, speed of call
- Use of team resources to assist with call
- Knowledge use, creation, and updates
- User authentication/verification
- Ability to hear and provide solutions to what the customer did not say
- Whether or not agents/analysts leave “dead air” during the call where the customer is left to wonder what’s happening or whether they’ve been disconnected

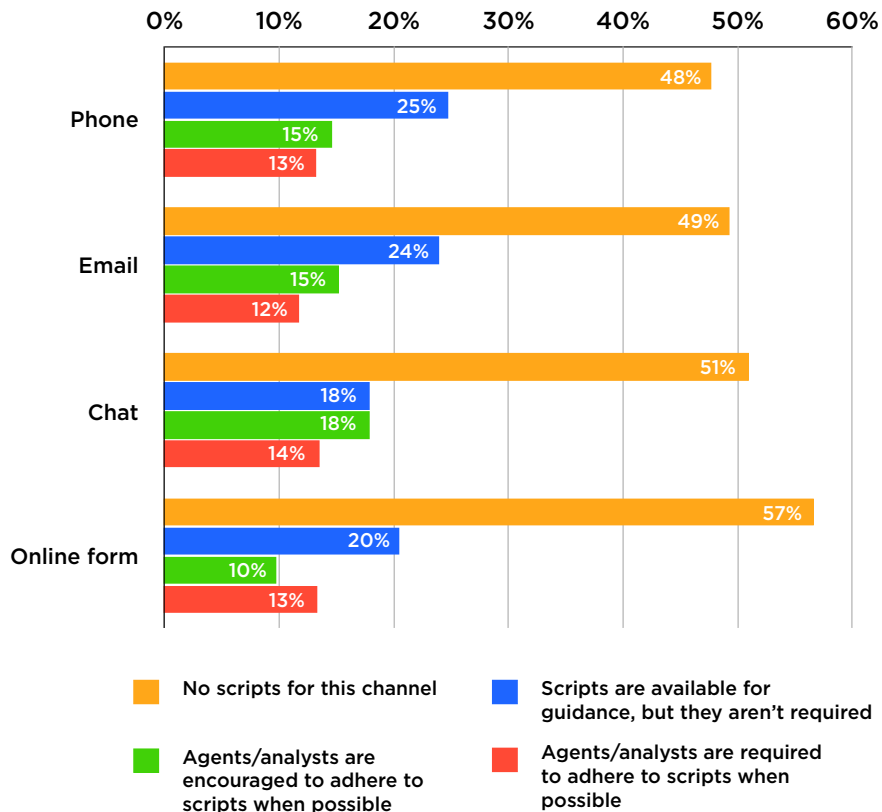
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While most of these items are aimed at internal processes (knowledge use and creation) and operational metrics (connection process, speed of call), the last is clearly from the customer’s point of view. Reducing or eliminating “dead air” will go a long way toward improving service and increasing customer satisfaction. The “ability to hear...what the customer did not say” goes right to the heart of the key skills every support agent/analyst needs to have: active listening and empathy.

When using scripts is required, organizations can use adherence to script as a quality measure; however, few support organizations require script use in any of their channels: phone, email, chat, or online form.

While customers desire consistency, they tend not to like strict adherence to scripts. For those reasons, some support organizations have scripts for guidance, or simply encourage agents/analysts to adhere to scripts without requiring script use. Using available guidance can help consistency, especially with new hires.

What Are the Policies on Script Adherence for Each Channel?

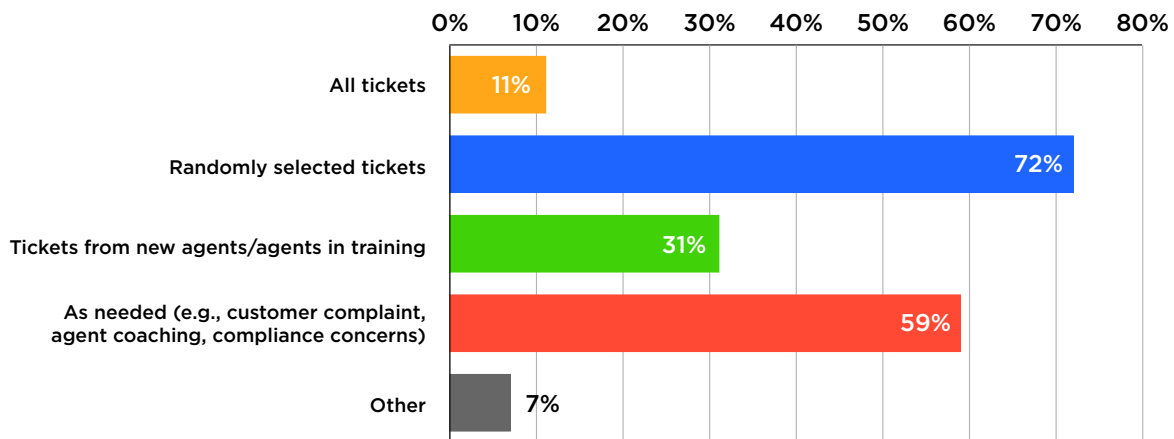


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Ticket Monitoring/Review

In addition to call recording and monitoring, ticket monitoring and review also play a large role in QA for support centers.

Which Technical Support Tickets Are Reviewed?



Includes only organizations that review tickets; does not equal 100% (respondents were asked to select all that applied)

Nearly three-quarters of organizations that review tickets say they review randomly selected tickets, while 11 percent review all tickets. More than half review tickets “as needed.”

Reasons given under “Other” include:

- All tickets related to new services, escalations
- All critical incidents are reviewed
- Tickets from calls that the speech analytics tool flags based on set triggers
- Closed [on the] day prior

In a similar fashion to calls and contacts, 31 percent of organizations review tickets from new agents/analysts. This practice helps new hires understand what’s expected of them with regard to categorization, assignment and documentation. Review can be performed on closed tickets, open tickets, or both open and closed tickets. Seventy-two percent of organizations review both open and closed tickets; 24 percent review closed tickets only, and just four percent review open tickets only.

Ticket monitoring and review can take place in organizations that do not record or monitor calls. This QA method requires no additional software or expenditure other than the time invested by the manager or supervisor doing the review, although such reviews can take considerable amounts of time, depending on the volume of tickets and the span of control.

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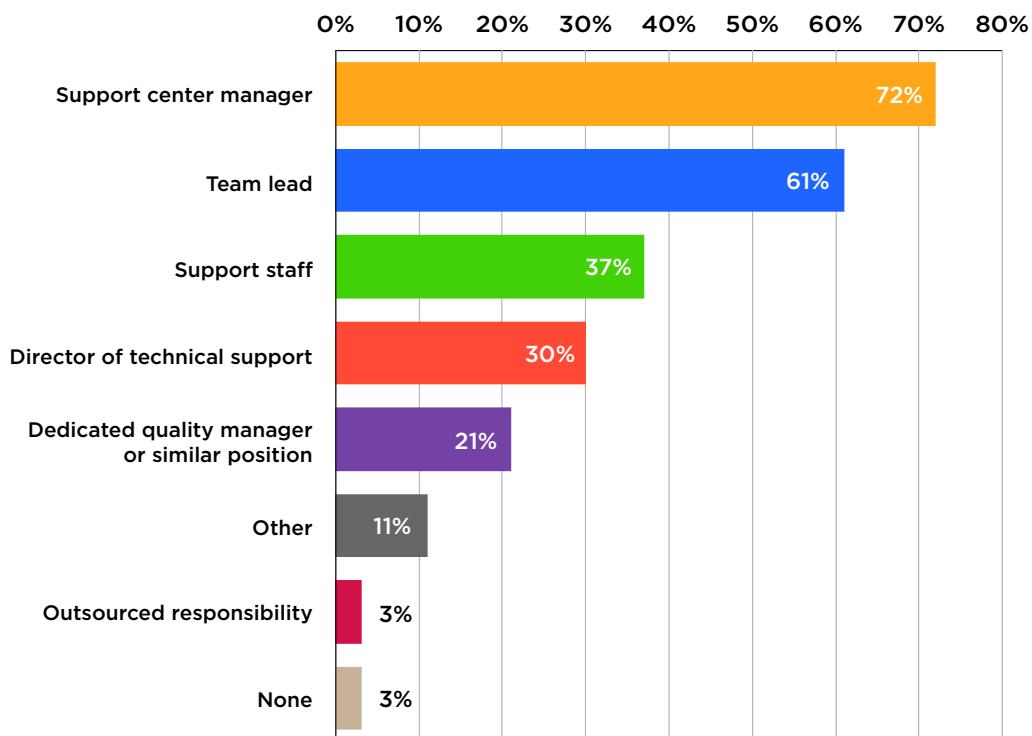
Everyone knows the database rule GIGO: Garbage In, Garbage Out. Reviewing the tickets in the service management or ticket management tool can assist in making entries more uniform and correct, which makes reporting more accurate and useful. Many ticketing systems contain an Other category, usually created when the system was set up, and intended to provide a “bucket” for items that don’t seem to fit anywhere else. In practice, the Other bucket becomes a catch-all for items that agents/analysts don’t fully understand or don’t take the time to properly categorize. When reports are pulled, the Other bucket obscures the nature of what’s really happening, and a percentage of tickets—sometimes a large one—must be removed from reporting entirely because the Other tag is useless. Ticket monitoring and review can minimize and even eliminate improperly categorized tickets and greatly increase the accuracy of reporting. In addition, if coaching takes place in conjunction with the review, analysts can learn how configuration items and/or services are related to each other, enabling them to make better decisions in the future.

Managers and supervisors have lessons to learn as well, especially where extraordinary circumstances occur, such as in critical incidents. Reviewing the escalation path and timeline, the remedial steps taken, the people contacted, the communications sent, and overall adherence to processes and procedures can minimize confusion, clarify necessary steps, and help improve processes for the future. Likewise, reviewing tickets related to new services can greatly assist in planning for future upgrades and rollouts.

Who Is Involved in QA?

Support center managers are involved in QA in most organizations (72%), but they’re the primary owners of QA in just one-third (34%) of organizations with QA practices in place. Other roles, such as team lead (61%), are also involved in managing QA.

Which Positions Are Involved in Managing the Quality of Technical Support?



Does not equal 100% (respondents were asked to select all that applied)

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Among the “Other” positions identified by respondents were:

- CIO/CTO
- All other IT support functions we interact with
- Customer service supervisor
- Computer operations manager
- Senior manager of service delivery
- HR training
- Training manager
- The entire management team

Some respondents said that the support team is involved in managing quality—either the help desk/service desk team itself, or a portion of it, such as tier 2 or senior analysts.

When asked whether they would change (add/remove) positions currently involved in quality management if they could, 62 percent of respondents said that what they’re doing works well, while 38 percent said they would change something. Overwhelmingly, the comments from the latter group indicate that they would like to have people dedicated to QA.

- “I’d love to have someone to handle this. I’m the director and don’t have time to do as much as I wish I could.”
- “I would add a dedicated quality manager and staff.”
- “[I] would love to have a QA manager.”
- “[I’d] add a full-time QA manager.”
- “A dedicated QA team would be great to have, if we had the funds for such a group.”
- “[We would] sample a greater number of tickets if someone was dedicated to the task.”
- “We could use an additional layer for this purpose; everyone is too busy.”

Others who want change would like to broaden the scope of involvement:

- “I would involve every level of support.”
- “I would like to add peer audit process to our current process to look at the quality of the tickets/support itself.”
- “[I would] have senior staff review and mentor other staff in their team.”

One respondent had a different take entirely: “[This is a] bad set of answers. The positions aren’t the issue, but the actions are.” While this statement is true, one of the primary reasons stated by respondents for wanting to make changes to current practices is that those currently involved in managing QA simply don’t have the time to do as much as they would like, making the action they do take far less effective.

Both approaches can be equally valid and helpful: Having dedicated QA personnel allows support center managers, supervisors, and leads to concentrate on the business of getting the work of support accomplished; having the team involved can help create a culture of continual improvement. In either case, it’s important to remember that quality assurance is not blame assurance. The goal is to produce overall improvement and consistency, not to point fingers. (This principle also holds true with regard to performance review, the third most commonly cited reason for doing QA.)

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Conclusions

While having all the right equipment and software in place and gathering metrics every week or month is vital to a support center, it's ultimately in the interactions with end users and customers that a reputation is built and customer satisfaction is achieved. Ensuring that the right people are doing their work well is the true purpose of QA in technical support, and high percentages of support centers are utilizing monitoring and review to achieve good results, get their staff trained, and keep performance high.

More organizations need to wrap formal processes and tools like scorecards into their QA efforts. Thirty-one percent say they currently have no formal process for monitoring and/or review. If one of the outcomes of QA is consistency, then the work of QA needs to be done consistently and enforced consistently.

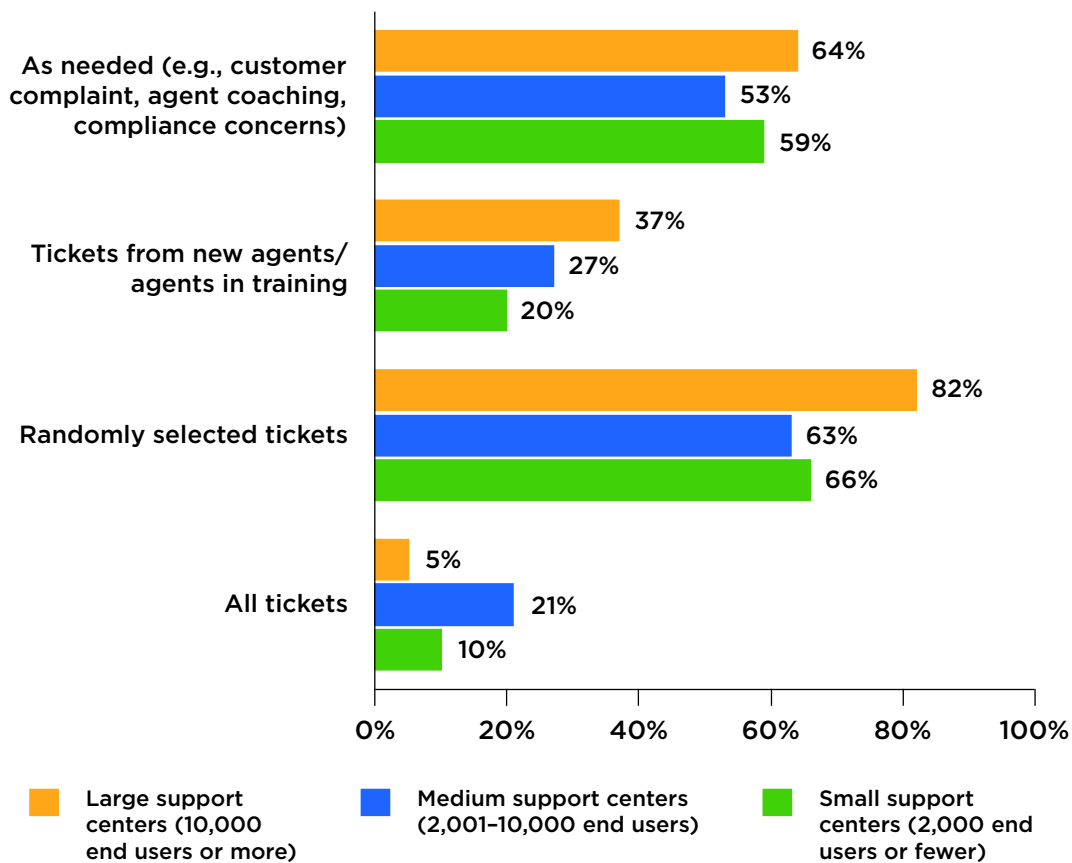
Support center managers and team leads are shouldering the brunt of the work in QA, and may not have the amount of time they need to do a thorough job. Depending on budgetary constraints and staff availability, having a group or individual dedicated to quality assurance may be a good idea, and it could drive more improvements throughout the organization.

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Appendix A: Deeper Dives

Correlation Between Organization Size and Ticket Review Practices

Medium-sized support centers (2,001-10,000 end users) are much more likely to review all tickets than either small (2,000 end users or fewer) or large ones (10,000 end users or more). Medium-sized organizations are likely large enough to have resources to go through all tickets, while small ones are not; in large organizations, the volume is probably too high to permit individual review.



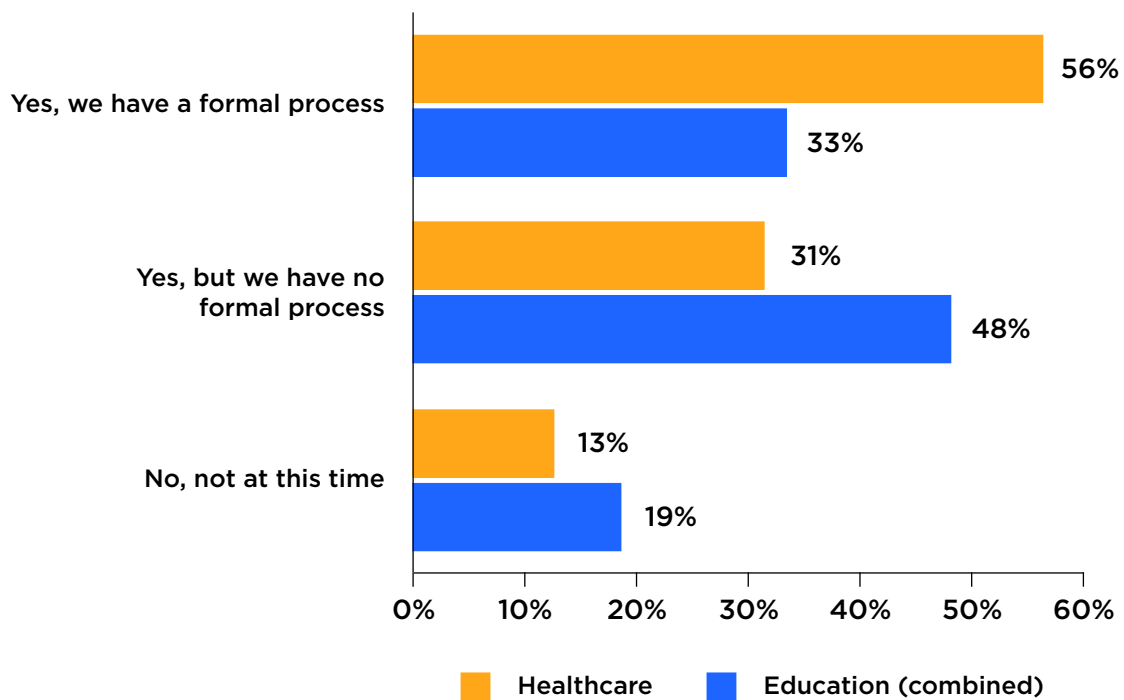
Correlation Between Languages Supported and Call Recording/Monitoring

We included the following question: “How much support does your team provide outside of their primary language?” Analysis of the responses from those who selected an answer other than “None” tells us that of support centers that provide support outside their primary language, 70 percent have a formal process in place for QA, compared to 53 percent in the overall group. Sixty-three percent of the multilingual respondents record calls, and 53 percent monitor live calls.

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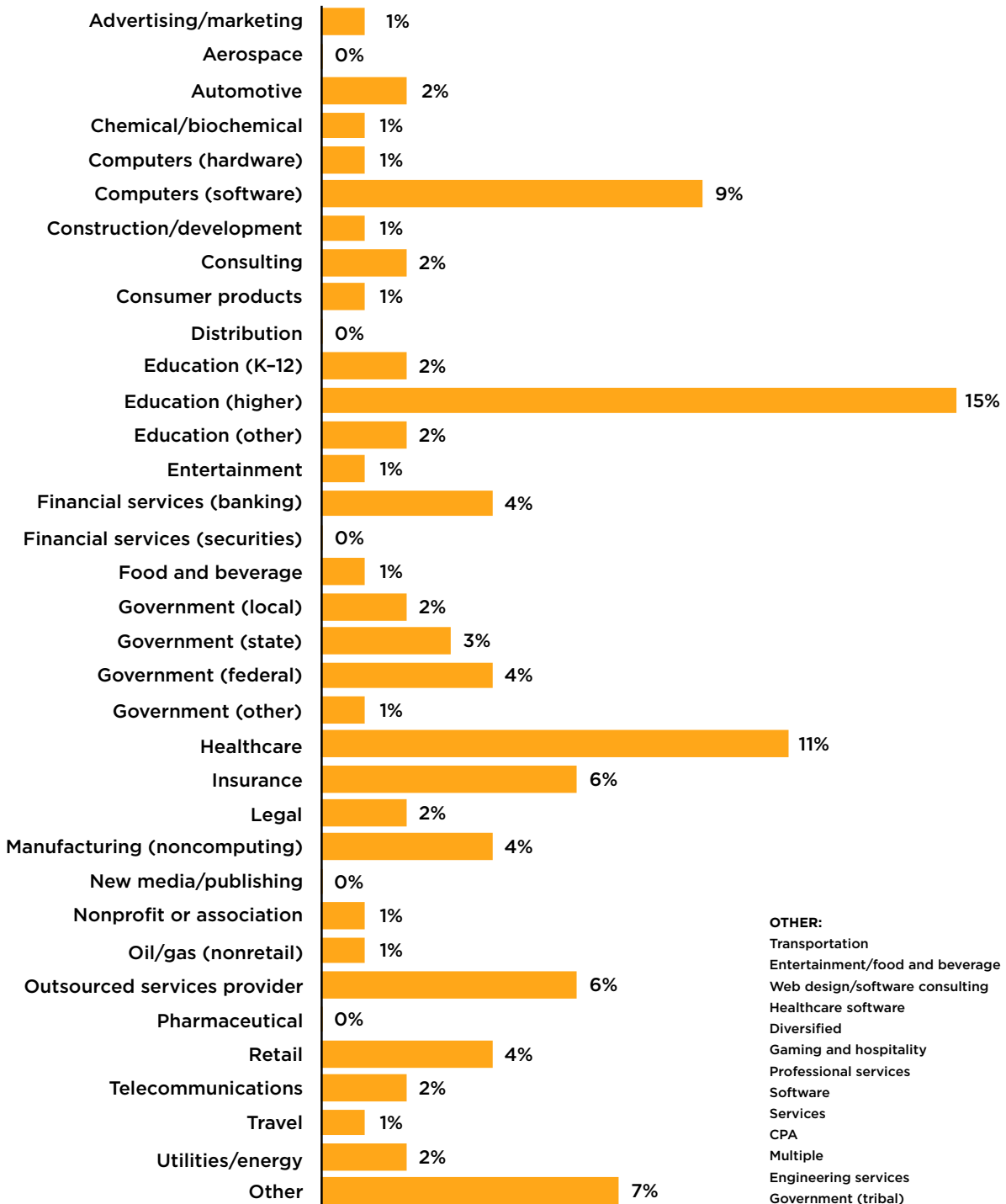
Variance Between Overall Respondents and Largest Verticals (Healthcare and Education)

Because of the number of responses from the healthcare and education verticals, we were able to do some deeper analysis. Healthcare organizations are slightly more likely to have a formal quality monitoring process (56.3% of healthcare organizations vs. 53% of all organizations). Education organizations (includes all levels combined) are more likely to do quality assurance without a formal process in place than healthcare organizations; only one-third of education organizations say they have a formal process in place.



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Appendix B: Industries Represented



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Appendix C: The Silent Monitoring Scorecard

Professional: _____ Call Date: _____

OPEN		
Did the professional:	Yes	No
Use the scripted opening?		
Assess the customer's business impact immediately?		
Confirm the customer's contact information as it appears on the system?		
ISSUE DISCOVERY		
Did the professional:	Yes	No
Ask the customer to explain the issue?		
Use probing questions to understand the issue?		
Paraphrase the issue to the customer?		
Use a proactive statement?		
Access the problem to determine the resolution of the issue?		
ISSUE RESOLUTION		
Did the professional:	Yes	No
Manage the customer's expectations appropriately?		
Educate the customer on the impact of this solution?		
Check or test the resolution to the issue?		
Complete the case management documentation correctly?		
CLOSE		
Did the professional:	Yes	No
Offer additional assistance?		
Attempt an up-sell on the product of the month, if appropriate?		
Summarize the call?		
Use the scripted close?		

Score: _____

Feedback Date: _____

Support Professional Signature: _____

Supervisor Signature: _____

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About the Author

Roy Atkinson is HDI's senior writer/analyst, acting as in-house subject matter expert and chief writer for *SupportWorld* articles and white papers. In addition to being a member of the HDI International Certification Standards Committee and the HDI Desktop Support Advisory Board, Roy is a popular speaker at HDI conferences and is well known to HDI local chapter audiences. His background is in both service desk and desktop support as well as small-business consulting. He holds a master's certificate in advanced management strategy from Tulane University's A.B. Freeman School of Business, and he is a certified HDI Support Center Manager.

About HDI

In 1989, HDI became the first membership association and certification body created for the technical service and support industry. Since then, HDI has remained the source for professional development by offering the resources needed to promote organization-wide success through exceptional customer service. In other words, we help professionals in service management better connect with customers, and that's just good business. We do this by facilitating collaboration and networking, hosting acclaimed conferences and events, producing renowned publications and research, and certifying and training thousands of professionals each year.

Technical service and support professionals love HDI because it provides them with a profound sense of community. At 150,000 people strong, HDI is a community built by industry peers and leaders that gives you the resources, knowledge, and drive to be great at what you do.