IDE 712: Front-End Performance Analysis of Escalation Behavior in a Contact Center

Gregory P. Tidwell, Greg Vasquez, Billy Scott Jr., and Douglass Wilson

Syracuse University

IDE 712: Final Project

Dr. Pusch

24 April 2026

Abstract

Alorica El Paso East, a high-volume inbound contact center supporting a major telecommunications client, faces a persistent performance problem: Tier-1 agents escalate 37 percent of routine calls to supervisors, despite being trained and authorized to resolve them independently. The organizational target is 15 percent, resulting in a 22-percentage-point performance gap.

This Front-End Analysis (FEA) applies the Human Performance Technology (HPT) systems approach, gap analysis, Gilbert's Behavior Engineering Model (BEM), and structured FEA procedures to diagnose the root causes of this escalation behavior. Findings indicate that the problem is not due to lack of knowledge or skill. Instead, escalation is reinforced by environmental conditions, conflicting performance incentives, workflow friction, system complexity, and perceived risk of making incorrect decisions.

A systemic solution set is proposed, including metric redesign, AI-supported decision assistance, coaching realignment, scenario-based simulations, and governance safeguards aligned with the AI4PI framework. These interventions aim to reduce unnecessary escalations, improve agent confidence, and strengthen operational efficiency.

Front-End Performance Analysis of Escalation Behavior in a Contact Center

COMPONENT 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE PERFORMANCE PROBLEM

1.1 Organization Overview and Context

Alorica El Paso East is a high-volume inbound contact center that serves as a frontline support hub for a major national telecommunications provider. The center's mission is to deliver efficient, accurate, and customer-centered service experiences that reinforce brand loyalty and operational excellence. Its vision emphasizes scalable service delivery, empowered agents, and continuous performance improvement across key customer interaction channels.

The facility employs several hundred Tier-1 agents who handle a wide range of customer inquiries, including billing adjustments, authentication procedures, service plan modifications, and basic troubleshooting. These agents operate within a tightly structured environment that emphasizes speed, compliance, and consistency. The contact center functions as both a customer service engine and a performance-driven ecosystem, where agent behavior is shaped by real-time metrics, scripted workflows, and supervisory oversight.

Agents are expected to manage complex interactions while navigating multiple systems simultaneously. During a typical call, an agent must engage the customer professionally, retrieve relevant policy information, interpret account data, and execute resolution steps—all while adhering to strict time-based performance indicators. These indicators include Average Handle Time (AHT), First Call Resolution (FCR), Customer Satisfaction (CSAT), and Escalation Rate. Each metric is tracked continuously through dashboards and reinforced through coaching, feedback sessions, and performance reviews.

The operational culture at Alorica El Paso East is characterized by high accountability, rapid throughput, and a strong emphasis on compliance. Supervisors play a critical role in reinforcing expectations, managing escalations, and interpreting performance data. While the center's structure is designed to promote efficiency, it also introduces cognitive and motivational pressures that influence agent decision-making—particularly when agents must choose between resolving an issue independently or escalating it to a supervisor.

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

KPI	Description
Average Handle Time (AHT)	Measures speed of call resolution
First Call Resolution (FCR)	Measures whether the issue is resolved without follow-up
Customer Satisfaction (CSAT)	Captures customer perceptions of service quality
Escalation Rate	Tracks percentage of calls transferred to supervisors

These KPIs shape agent behavior and influence decision-making. However, the current configuration unintentionally creates tension between speed and accuracy.

1.2 Performance Problem Description

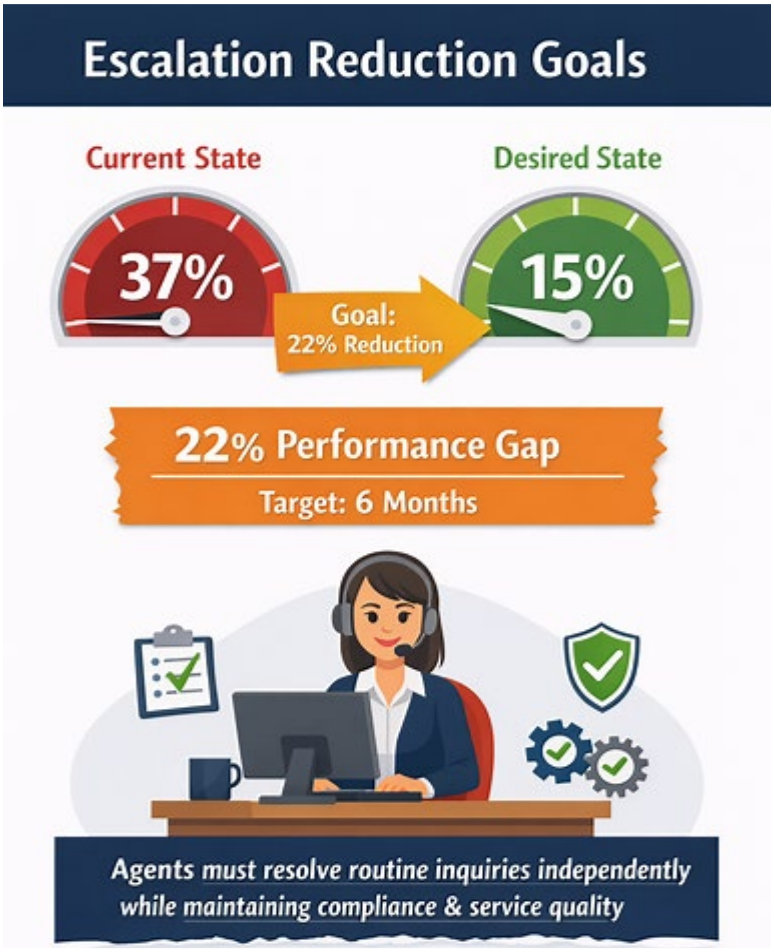
Tier 1 agents at Alorica El Paso East frequently escalate routine customer calls to supervisors even though they have the training, authority, and procedural knowledge required to resolve these issues independently. Routine calls include billing adjustments, authentication resets, basic service plan questions, and other inquiries that fall clearly within the Tier 1 scope of responsibility. Despite this, agents are transferring more than one third of these calls to higher support levels.

The current escalation rate is 37 percent, which is significantly higher than the organizational target of 15 percent. This 22-percentage point gap represents a substantial deviation from expected performance and signals a systemic issue rather than isolated agent behavior. The high escalation rate creates several operational challenges. Supervisors become overloaded with avoidable calls, customer wait times increase, and the center struggles to meet service level agreements. Unnecessary escalations also increase labor costs and reduce the efficiency of the tiered support model that the organization relies on.

The persistence of this behavior, even after refresher training and policy updates, indicates that the root causes are not related to agent skill or knowledge deficits. Instead, the pattern suggests deeper environmental and motivational factors. Agents may escalate calls to avoid perceived risks, protect performance metrics such as Average Handle Time, or compensate for workflow friction caused by complex systems and high cognitive load. These pressures shape escalation as a rational and self-protective choice rather than a failure to perform.

Understanding why agents choose escalation over independent resolution is central to this Front-End Analysis. The performance problem is not simply a matter of agents escalating too often. It reflects how organizational structures, incentive systems, and technological constraints influence decision making in a high-pressure environment. This section establishes the foundation for diagnosing those underlying causes and designing targeted, systemic interventions.

Escalation Gap Visualization



The persistence of this behavior after refresher training suggests that the root causes are systemic rather than instructional.

1.3 Needs Statement

- **Current State:** 37 percent escalation rate
- **Desired State:** 15 percent escalation rate
- **Gap:** 22 percentage points
- **Timeframe:** 6 months
- **Requirement:** Agents must resolve routine inquiries independently while maintaining compliance and service quality.

1.4 Environmental Scanning

A structured environmental scan identified multiple factors influencing escalation behavior.

Environmental Domain	Influence on Performance
Economic	High turnover reduces average agent experience
Social	Escalation perceived as safer due to fear of penalties
Technological	Multiple systems increase cognitive load
Organizational	Speed prioritized over resolution
Policy	Strict compliance rules heighten perceived risk
Supervisory Culture	Inconsistent reinforcement patterns

Conclusion: The environment reinforces escalation as a rational behavior.

COMPONENT 2: PLAN FOR FRONT-END ANALYSIS

2.1 Selection of Approaches and Procedures

A multi-method FEA approach was selected to examine the problem from multiple angles.

Method	Purpose	Rationale	Cause Tested
Metrics Review	Analyze KPI structures	Detect incentive conflicts	Environment
Call Observation	Observe workflow	Identify friction and cognitive load	Environment, Knowledge
Survey	Capture perceptions	Measure risk and motivation	Motivation
Interviews	Explore reinforcement patterns	Understand cultural norms	Social, Motivation
Usability Testing	Assess system navigation	Identify system inefficiencies	Knowledge Access
Job Task Analysis	Break down tasks	Identify breakdown points	Skills, Knowledge

2.2 Cause Analysis Using BEM

BEM Category	Guiding Questions	Tools	Findings
Information	Are expectations clear?	Interviews	Mixed signals from KPIs
Resources	Are tools adequate?	Observations	System friction increases load
Incentives	Are rewards aligned?	Metrics Review	AHT outweighs FCR
Knowledge	Do agents know policies?	JTA	Knowledge exists but is hard to access
Capacity	Do agents have bandwidth?	Observations	High volume reduces capacity
Motivation	Do agents want to resolve?	Surveys	Fear of penalties drives escalation

Instrumentation Examples: Tools for Diagnosing Root Causes

To investigate these causes with precision, the FEA plan includes four complementary instruments. Each is designed to capture specific dimensions of the performance problem and provide actionable data.

A. Agent Survey (12 Items)

The survey instrument uses a 5-point Likert scale to measure agent perceptions across four domains:

- Confidence — Do agents feel capable of resolving routine issues independently?

- Risk Perception — How strongly do agents fear penalties or negative consequences?
- System Usability — Are tools and systems perceived as efficient and supportive?
- Incentive Influence — Do performance metrics shape escalation decisions?

This instrument quantifies psychological and motivational factors that are not observable through behavior alone.

B. Observation Protocol

The observation protocol captures real-time agent behavior during live calls. Key variables include:

- Issue Type — Routine vs. complex
- Search Time — Duration spent retrieving policy information
- Systems Accessed — Number and type of systems used
- Decision Point — When and why escalation occurs
- Supervisor Availability — Immediate vs. delayed access
- Resolution Feasibility — Whether the issue could have been resolved independently

This protocol reveals workflow friction, cognitive load, and decision bottlenecks that contribute to escalation.

C. Structured Interview Protocol

The structured interview protocol is designed to elicit deeper insights into the decision-making processes of both Tier 1 agents and their supervisors. While surveys and observations capture quantitative and behavioral data, interviews provide the qualitative depth necessary to understand the psychological, cultural, and organizational dynamics that shape escalation behavior.

These interviews are semi-structured, allowing for consistency across participants while enabling follow-up probing based on individual responses. The protocol targets both agent and supervisor populations to ensure a balanced perspective on escalation drivers, perceived risks, and reinforcement patterns.

Interview Objectives

- Understand the internal logic agents use when deciding to escalate
- Explore how performance metrics influence agent behavior
- Identify cultural norms and coaching practices that reinforce or discourage escalation
- Capture suggestions for improving agent confidence and autonomy
- Clarify discrepancies between policy expectations and lived experience

Sample Interview Questions

Focus Area	Sample Questions
Escalation Drivers	What factors typically lead you to escalate a call? Can you describe a recent example?
Risk Perception	What do you believe happens if you resolve a call incorrectly? How does that affect your decision?
Metric Influence	Which performance metrics do you pay the most attention to during a call? Why?
Supervisory Coaching	How do supervisors coach you on escalation decisions? Are expectations consistent across teams?
Confidence and Autonomy	What would make you feel more confident in resolving calls independently? What support do you need?

Interview Format and Logistics

- **Participants:** 10–12 Tier 1 agents and 4–6 supervisors
- **Duration:** 30–45 minutes per interview
- **Mode:** In-person or virtual (depending on shift availability)
- **Recording:** Audio recorded with consent, transcribed for thematic analysis
- **Analysis Method:** Thematic coding using NVivo or equivalent qualitative analysis software

Expected Insights

These interviews are expected to reveal:

- The emotional calculus agents perform when weighing escalation versus resolution
- How inconsistent coaching and metric emphasis create ambiguity in decision-making
- The role of psychological safety in agent autonomy
- Opportunities for targeted interventions that reinforce independent resolution without increasing perceived risk

D. Job Task Analysis (JTA)

The JTA breaks down the resolution process into discrete steps:

1. Authenticate customer
2. Identify issue type
3. Retrieve relevant policy
4. Apply policy to situation

5. Communicate resolution
6. Document interaction
7. Close call

For each step, the JTA identifies potential breakdowns in knowledge access, decision-making, and confidence. It clarifies where escalation becomes a default strategy due to perceived risk or system inefficiency.

Instrumentation Summary

Each instrument is aligned with specific cause categories:

Instrument	Primary Cause Categories
Survey	Motivation, Confidence, Incentives
Observation	Environment, Workflow Friction
Interviews	Motivation, Supervisory Culture
JTA	Skills, Knowledge Access

Together, these tools provide a comprehensive diagnostic framework that supports targeted, evidence-based interventions.

COMPONENT 3: SOLUTION SET SPECIFICATIONS

3.1 Solution–Cause Alignment

Cause	Solution	Rationale
Incentive conflict	Metric Redesign	Aligns rewards with desired behavior
Workflow friction	AI Decision-Support Tool	Reduces cognitive load
Risk avoidance	Coaching Realignment	Reinforces psychological safety
System complexity	AI Tool	Accelerates policy retrieval
Confidence gaps	Scenario-Based Simulations	Builds decision confidence
Skill inconsistencies	Micro-Training	Reinforces targeted skills

The proposed interventions are designed to address the root causes of escalation behavior identified through the Front-End Analysis. Each solution targets specific environmental, motivational, or cognitive barriers and is structured to be feasible, scalable, and ethically grounded.

1. Metric Redesign

Purpose: Realign performance incentives to encourage independent resolution rather than speed-driven escalation.

Key Actions:

- Increase weighting of First Call Resolution (FCR)
- Introduce a Decision Quality Index to evaluate policy adherence
- Reduce emphasis on Average Handle Time (AHT)
- Add a Positive Autonomy Score for agents who resolve previously escalated call types

Expected Impact: Agents will be rewarded for thoughtful, accurate decision-making rather than rapid call closure, reducing the incentive to escalate unnecessarily.

2. AI Decision-Support Tool

Purpose: Reduce cognitive load and improve access to policy information during live calls.

Key Features:

- Real-time policy lookup based on issue type
- Step-by-step guidance for resolution pathways
- Risk alerts for compliance-sensitive scenarios
- Supervisor-approved decision templates

Expected Impact: Agents will make faster, more confident decisions with reduced reliance on escalation as a safety mechanism.

3. Coaching Realignment

Purpose: Shift supervisory coaching from speed metrics to decision quality and agent autonomy.

Key Enhancements:

- Weekly coaching sessions focused on reasoning and resolution
- Positive reinforcement for independent decisions
- Structured feedback templates
- Supervisor calibration to ensure consistency

Expected Impact: Agents will feel supported in making independent decisions and less fearful of penalties for incorrect resolution.

4. Scenario-Based Practice Simulations

Purpose: Provide low-risk opportunities for agents to practice resolving routine and compliance-sensitive issues.

Simulation Types:

- Billing adjustments
- Authentication exceptions
- Plan changes
- Regulatory compliance scenarios

Expected Impact: Improves agent confidence and decision-making accuracy, reducing the perceived need to escalate**.**

5. Micro-Training Modules

Purpose: Reinforce specific skills and knowledge in short, targeted formats that fit within operational constraints**.**

Module Topics:

- Policy interpretation
- System navigation shortcuts
- Decision-making under time pressure
- Customer communication strategies

Expected Impact: Strengthens agent proficiency without disrupting workflow, supporting long-term performance improvement.

3.3 Resources and Responsibilities

Solution	Human	Financial	Technology	Time	Responsible Parties
Metric Redesign	Ops Manager	Minimal	Dashboard updates	4–6 weeks	Operations
AI Tool	IT Lead, Vendor	Licensing	AI module	3 months	IT, Vendor
Coaching	Supervisors	Minimal	Templates	6 weeks	QA, Supervisors
Simulations	Training Team	Moderate	LMS	8 weeks	Training
Micro-Training	Designers	Minimal	LMS	4 weeks	Training

Implementing a multi-layered performance improvement initiative inevitably introduces operational, cultural, and technological challenges. Anticipating these barriers allows the organization to proactively design mitigation strategies that support adoption, reduce resistance, and maintain momentum throughout the rollout.

Key Implementation Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

Challenge	Description	Mitigation Strategy
Resistance to KPI Changes	Agents and supervisors may be accustomed to the existing metric structure and skeptical of changes to AHT, FCR, or decision-quality weighting.	Conduct pilot testing with a small cohort, share early success data, and provide clear communication on the rationale and expected benefits.
AI Adoption Hesitancy	Agents may distrust AI recommendations or fear that AI will replace human judgment.	Provide hands-on training, demonstrate real examples of AI support, and establish continuous feedback loops to refine the tool.
Supervisor Inconsistency	Supervisors may vary in how they coach, reinforce expectations, or interpret escalation criteria.	Implement supervisor calibration sessions and standardized coaching templates to ensure consistent reinforcement.
Training Time Constraints	High call volume limits the availability of agents for lengthy training sessions.	Use micro-learning modules under 10 minutes and embed learning into coaching sessions.
Technology Integration Risks	AI tools may introduce temporary disruptions or require system adjustments.	Use a phased rollout, maintain fallback procedures, and ensure IT support is available during deployment.

COMPONENT 4: AI4PI FRAMEWORK

The AI4PI Framework ensures that AI-supported decision tools are implemented ethically, transparently, and responsibly. Each principle includes specific mechanisms that safeguard human judgment, protect data, minimize bias, and maintain governance oversight.

4.1 Human Oversight

Human oversight ensures that AI enhances decision-making rather than replacing it. The goal is to maintain agent autonomy while leveraging AI for efficiency and accuracy.

Oversight Mechanisms:

- Human-in-the-loop model: Agents retain full authority to accept, modify, or reject AI recommendations.
- Supervisor review of AI-influenced decisions: Supervisors periodically evaluate calls where AI guidance was used.

- Override logging: Instances where agents override AI suggestions are logged for analysis and improvement.
- Escalation pathways: Agents can escalate cases when AI guidance is unclear or incomplete.
- Transparent AI reasoning: The system displays the logic behind recommendations, including policy references.

4.2 Data Integrity, Protection, and Privacy

AI systems rely on sensitive customer and operational data. Ensuring data accuracy and privacy is essential for ethical use and regulatory compliance.

Data Integrity Safeguards:

- Data validation checks
- Version control for policy updates
- Audit trails for all AI recommendations

Data Protection Measures:

- Customer data masking
- Role-based access controls
- Encryption of stored and transmitted data
- Alignment with telecommunications compliance standards

4.3 Minimizing AI-Induced Bias

Bias can emerge from historical data, inconsistent supervisory practices, or uneven representation of call types. Proactive monitoring prevents inequitable outcomes.

Bias Mitigation Strategies:

- Quarterly fairness audits across customer groups and issue types
- Balanced and diverse training data
- Human review of edge cases and unusual recommendations
- Automated bias alerts for supervisors
- Agent feedback loop for reporting unclear or biased guidance

4.4 Governance and Risk Management

Governance structures ensure that AI tools remain accurate, ethical, and aligned with organizational goals throughout their lifecycle.

Governance Components:

- AI Oversight Committee

- Quarterly AI performance reviews
- Incident reporting protocol for AI errors or concerns
- AI lifecycle management (updates, retraining, decommissioning)
- Compliance integration with internal and external regulations
- Risk mitigation strategies for over-dependence, outages, and data breaches

REFERENCES

Cleveland, B. (2016). *Call center management on fast forward* (2nd ed.). Call Center Press.

Deery, S., & Kinnie, N. (2004). HRM in call centres. *Human Resource Management Journal, 14*(2), 1–17.

Generoso, M. (2025). Designing meaningful learning experiences in blended environments. *Journal of Adult Learning and Instruction, 12*(1), 44–59.

Holman, D. (2003). Employee stress in call centres. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 24*(3), 123–130.

Pusch, R. (2022). *Foundations of instructional and performance technology*. Syracuse University Press.

Ripley, D. (2014). *Front-end analysis: A practical guide for performance consultants*. Performance Improvement Press.

Wilmoth, F. S., Prigmore, C., & Bray, M. (2014). HPT models overview. *Performance Improvement, 53*(9), 14–24.

APPENDIX A: AI-USE DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

This project incorporated the use of Microsoft Copilot as a brainstorming and drafting tool. AI assistance was used to:

- Generate initial outlines
- Refine language for clarity and cohesion
- Format tables and matrices
- Strengthen alignment with the course rubric
- Ensure consistency across sections

All ideas, interpretations, decisions, and final edits were reviewed, validated, and approved by the student author. AI was not used to replace critical thinking, analysis, or academic judgment. The final submission reflects the student's own understanding and application of Human Performance Technology principles.