



cogito

AI-Enhanced Soft Skills:

The Key to Superior Customer Engagement



Introduction.

Strong soft skills allow the best call center agents to outperform their peers and deliver superior customer engagement. Customer-focused organizations are leveraging these skills as a key competitive differentiator. This ebook outlines how organizations are effectively enhancing soft skills across their front-line operations, by augmenting their human agents with AI.

Specifically, this ebook explores:



The impact of enhanced soft skills on customer engagement



How leading brands are hiring and training for soft skills



How augmenting human call center agents with AI enhances empathy and soft skill development



Case studies of companies who are leveraging AI to enhance soft skills

The Rise of Soft Skills.

According to the World Economic Forum’s [Future of Jobs](#) study, workers will need a broader more developed skill set than before, including social, emotional, communication and collaboration skills, collectively known as soft skills. Soft skills are a combination of social skills, emotional intelligence, attitudes and character traits that enable a person to positively influence outcomes in a personal or professional context. These skills are typically perceived as elements of one’s personality - a.k.a common sense, people skills.

SOFT SKILL EXAMPLES



Problem Solving



Communication



Empathy



Consistency

However, to ensure employees are positioned with such abilities, many organizations will need to implement reskilling opportunities within workforce training and new hire onboarding. In fact, according to a [McKinsey Survey](#), this is a priority for 80 percent of C-suite executives worldwide. Further, reskilling significant portions of the workforce within the next 5-10 years will be required.

Hard skills, on the other hand, are specific knowledge and abilities that are typically used in a professional context. They have traditionally been perceived as more teachable, quantifiable or measurable abilities people have been honing most of their lives:

HARD SKILL EXAMPLES



Programming



Machine Operation

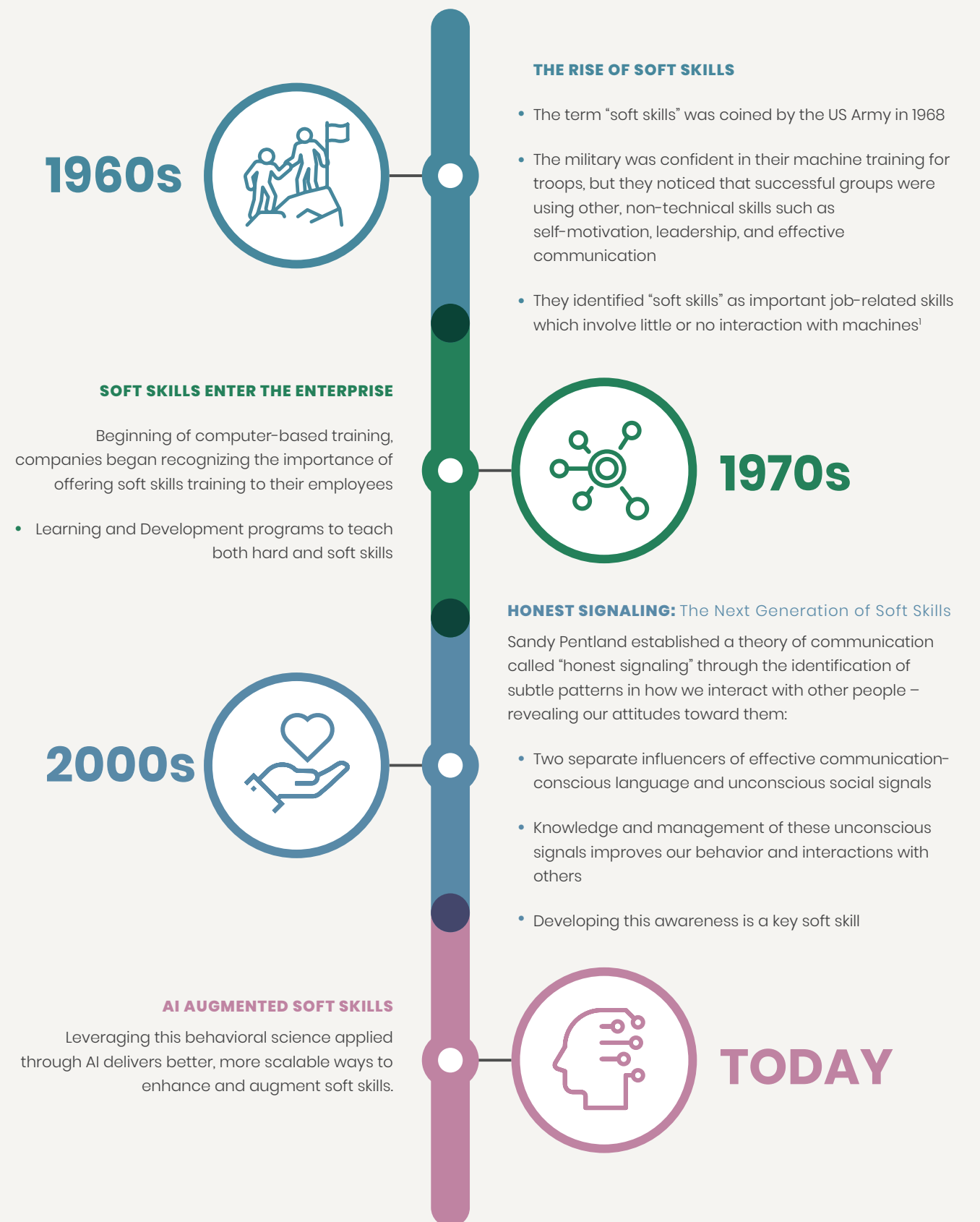


Playing an Instrument



Fluency in a Foreign Language

FIGURE #1: THE ORIGIN AND HISTORY OF SOFT SKILLS



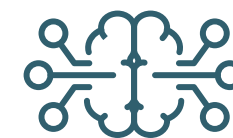
¹ Whitmore, Paul G., "What are soft skills?", Paper presented at the CONARC Soft Skills Conference, Texas, 12–13 December 1972



Combining Hard and Soft Skills to Increase Effectiveness.

For anyone in today's workforce, the need for strong soft skills is critical to be successful.

Take, for example, a call center agent speaking with a customer about an insurance claim. There was a small fire in the customer's home and they are unsure of how to file a claim. Although the damage was relatively small, the customer was shaken by the incident and requires an agent with a high degree of emotional intelligence. In this instance, the call center agent needs both hard skills and soft skills to provide quality customer service.



HARD SKILLS

To understand the policies, procedures, and technical tools for properly processing the claim



SOFT SKILLS

Such as empathy, to ensure the customer feels they have someone they trust to help (imagine what it would feel like to have a fire in the home) and communication (they are already flustered, so the agent must listen and provide clear and concise instruction on what to do next)

Why Soft Skills Matter Today.

While both hard skills and soft skills are vital in the workplace, many employees feel that soft skills are more valuable than ever for employee success. But how does the corporate world view soft skills today? A study conducted by Boston College, Harvard University and the University of Michigan has supported the idea that the [development of soft skills](#) increases ROI, specifically citing that soft skills training:

- Increased productivity by 12%
- Increased employee retention
- Delivered a 256% ROI

This is especially key within the customer service industry, which can become emotionally taxing – especially when conversations become difficult.

While soft skills were initially believed to be a key supplement to hard skills, additional research has found that employers now recognize soft skills as being more vital to career success than concrete/technical skills. In fact, [a study](#) conducted with Fortune 500 CEOs by the Stanford Research Institute International and the Carnegie Mellon Foundation, found that 75% of long-term job success depends on “people” skills, while only 25% is dependent on technical knowledge. Employees who receive training in real-time have improved performance, leading to a more satisfied and engaged workforce.

And employees understand the value that soft skills bring when it comes to the future of work. CNBC reported in Q4 of 2019 that people who are motivated to reach higher levels of achievement should learn new skills that can’t be replicated by future technology, as they are “much more likely to succeed in the face of setbacks.” This idea is supported by [McKinsey & Company](#) which indicated that by 2030, as many as 800 million global workers could lose their jobs to robots.

So, as emerging technology continues to threaten the elimination of jobs that can easily be completed through automation and machines, employees and job seekers who are increasingly driven and focused on developing a growth mindset to hone new skills, will have a distinct advantage.



FIGURE #2: FIVE VALUED SOFT SKILLS

The customer service industry emphasizes the following soft skills as hiring considerations and predictors of job success:



MetLife conducted a report on advisor-client (cs rep/agent-customer) relationships and found that the top three desired attributes of the customer service rep are all soft skills

- “The advisor genuinely cares about me”
- “The advisor speaks in an easy-to-understand language”
- “The advisor is honest and trustworthy.”

Based on these findings, MetLife has encouraged a culture in which these soft skills are valued.

PROOF IT WORKS: About 60% of respondents rate their adviser as very good” or “excellent”, driven by a high rating on soft skills.



Teaching Soft Skills.



- How can an organization help its population of agents be more competent in their soft skills?
- How does one control aspects of communication like pitch, tone and pace when communicating with a customer?
- How does an agent show empathy at just the right time?

Unfortunately, coaching soft skills is not as straightforward as coaching hard skills.

Soft skills are situational by nature, and are often developed and used unconsciously. As such, measuring soft skills objectively and coaching for them at scale has also been more difficult to tackle in the enterprise. In short – enhanced soft skills don't come overnight. In fact, according to LinkedIn Learning data, managers spend **30% more time** learning soft skills than the average learner and CEOs spend 20% more time learning soft skills than the average learner.

But as machines become more prevalent in our daily lives – automating simple tasks – we increasingly crave human connections to help address complex problems and meet our emotional needs. As a result, there is a greater demand for **soft skills** and emotional intelligence, especially in the workplace. And luckily, like the mundane simple tasks technology helps us manage each and every day, technology can also help build and enhance soft skills.



Consistent Delivery.

Consistency is a key driver of employee performance – and for call center agents, consistency is especially important. Agents are tasked with consistently creating high-quality experiences regardless of the customer or the topic they are addressing. On each call, an agent must simultaneously **problem-solve and interact with the customer** – which means being familiar and proficient in all policies, procedures and tools, communicating clearly and demonstrating empathy, all while maintaining energy, interest and a positive attitude.

All this mental effort and emotional engagement across numerous repetitive tasks make it extremely difficult to project strong soft skills.

HERE'S WHY...

1 It's difficult to establish quality customer connections when your days are often full of distressed and emotionally-charged interactions.

- Cognitive Overload and Compassion Fatigue
- Objective Measurement and Actionable Real-Time Insights

2

Call center professionals are especially prone to cognitive overload.

- Imagine speaking to a dissatisfied customer with 3 monitors and over 20 different tools and apps that are up at any given point in time. Imagine also trying to remember policies, procedures, and compliance language.
- With so many distractions, the agent's focus becomes less about empathizing with a customer and more focused on just trying to find that one form in the knowledge management system needed to finish the call. There's only so much that a human brain can process at any given time.

3

Much like trauma nurses and army medics, phone professionals can experience compassion fatigue.

- After a series of difficult emotional situations, one can become emotionally exhausted and withdrawn to the point that basic social signals in conversation become hard to recognize.
- For call center agents, that means they can come across as uncaring or apathetic in conversations with the customer.
- This is a major reason why interactions one would hope to have when calling customer service – for a first notice of loss or an issue with a claim – don't go well from the start.
- There is only one opportunity to establish a strong connection and if it starts badly, chances of improvement lessen with each moment that passes.

4

Objective measurement of soft skills is now possible.

- Historically, it has been difficult for organizations to measure the effectiveness of soft skills without significant amounts of manual labor.
- Real-time insights on soft skills can help mitigate variance in agent performance – even if cognitive overload and compassion fatigue are not occurring, it's natural for agent performance to vary throughout the day.
- Cogito uses real-time coaching to reduce inconsistency so every customer call has all of the elements of a successful conversation.

Case Study.

How a Fortune 100 healthcare provider is enhancing soft skills in the workplace.

At large, multibillion-dollar corporate entities, encouraging employees to adopt new behaviors can be a daunting challenge. At the heart of this company's challenge – especially with their newly relocated work-from-home population – was how to support and encourage new behaviors to achieve better results, not just for their employees but also for members and health care providers.

Working from home poses many challenges, specifically:

- Mounting feelings of loneliness and “not being a part of the team”
- Continuous home office distractions (children, pets, unoptimized work space, etc.)
- Additional external stressors due to pandemic, heightening anxiety for both customers and employees, making for more tense customer calls

ENTER A HUMAN-AWARE AI COACH

Deploying Cogito, the F100 Company was able to foster higher employee performance, resulting in better customer interactions and easier management and coaching for supervisors (able to virtually walk the floor, guide agents and check in at key points where support was required) – increasing overall customer satisfaction.

Specifically:

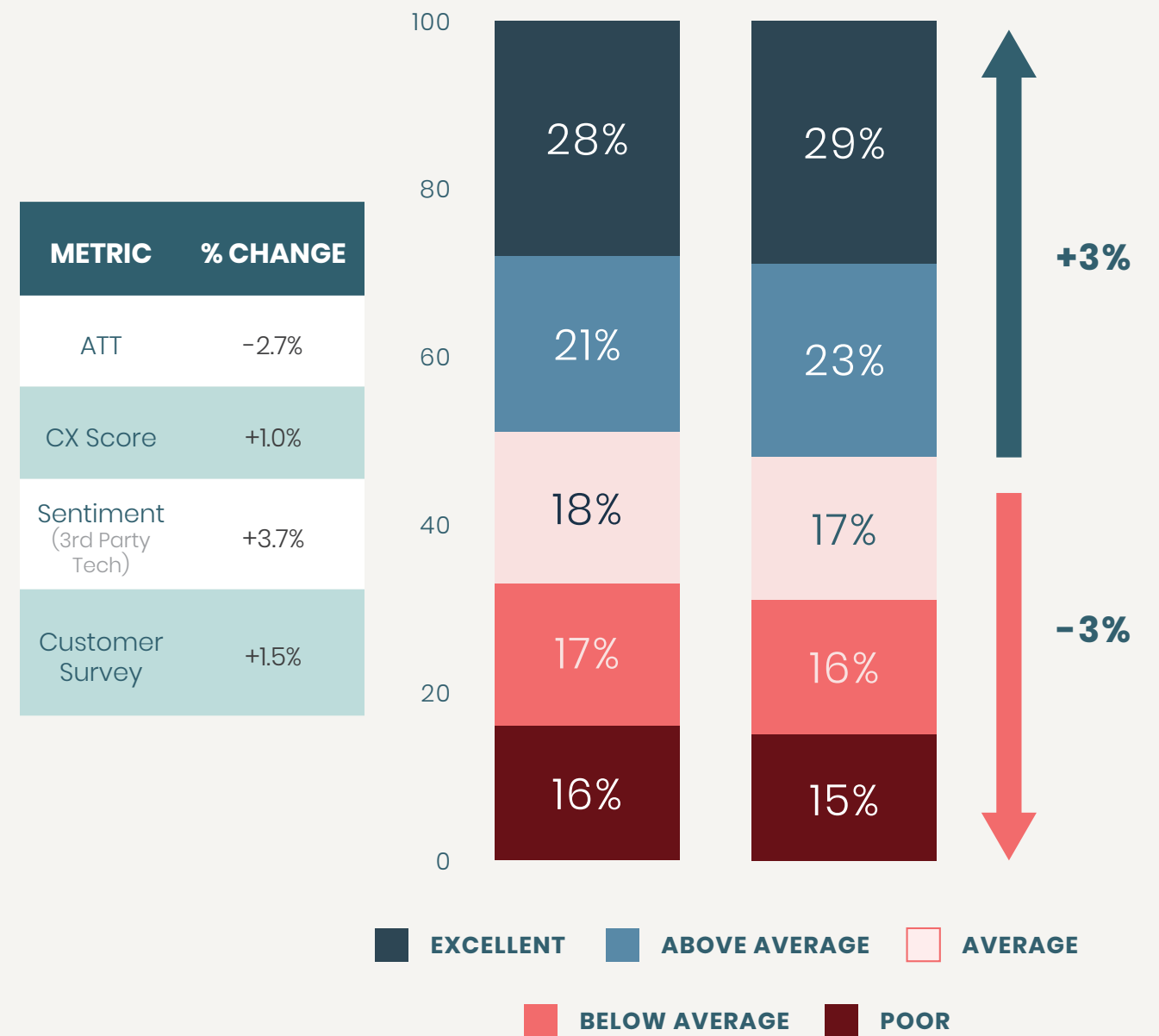
- During a 4-month period, F100 company and Cogito tracked improvements in call quality and agent engagement, as well as the “reach of Cogito” by tracking any change across other metrics.
- F100 tracked Cogito CX Score with other 3rd party metrics, where +1% in CX Score resulted in positive movement of both a 3rd party sentiment score and their traditional customer surveys.
- Additionally, the test users increased their Excellent & Above Average calls while decreasing their Average, Below Average, and Poor calls.

THE IMPACT OF REMOTE WORK ON SOFT SKILLS

From February 4 to May 31, Cogito's behavioral science unit analyzed approximately four million contact center calls from leading healthcare and insurance companies to determine the pandemic's effect on frontline customer engagement. Over this timeframe, as a result:

- Prompts for CSRs to display further energy rose by 38%
- Prompts for CSRs to display further empathy rose by 8%
- Global Customer Experience scores dropped by 3.9%

FIGURE #3: IMPROVEMENT TRACKING AFTER INTRODUCTION OF HUMAN AI



You can sense when you have those cues how it's impacting that customer experience in the moment as opposed to waiting for feedback from a supervisor or manager. [It] is probably the best experience I've had for customer service.

- WFM Customer Representative

Delivering Consistent, Positive, Human Experiences to Customers.

As AI continues to develop and shape the enterprise, there is an opportunity for humans to collaborate with technology like never before – and AI coaches are undoubtedly the future of professional development.

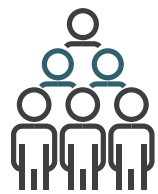
For technology to realize its true potential, it must work in concert with each individual to help make them better, considering innate human characteristics like emotion and stress and how it can positively augment those abilities. While traditional technology has successfully automated simple tasks, it has fallen short with human-specific applications, like increasing emotional intelligence and soft skills, enhancing behavior or helping humans build stronger connections.

By advancing human-aware technology, in order to help make individuals better versions of themselves, brands can create a better customer and employee experience.



FOR EMPLOYEES

This creates opportunities to build or expand upon existing soft skills, creating more opportunity for current job success and continued career growth.



FOR MANAGERS

This enables opportunities to coach high-performing employees on consistency and low-performing employees to become higher performing – positively impacting a company’s entire customer experience.



FOR EXECUTIVES

It provides meaningful insight into the emotional state of customers – and the correlation of their emotion to key business outcomes – as well as the ability to provide employee soft skills training at scale.

AI coaching technology is redefining the human-machine relationship, helping enhance human behavior and supporting frontline service professionals.

There are more than 13 million call center professionals worldwide who, on a daily basis, must handle the emotional burden of numerous complex customer calls. As such, agents are prone to cognitive overload and compassion fatigue as they take on each customer’s burden. To be successful and help manage this emotional load, representatives need coaching and technology to bolster emotional intelligence and soft skills – all while avoiding burnout, which is especially high during COVID-19.

AI coaching helps employees feel empowered, more productive, more engaged, and have improved soft skills on the job – positively impacting enterprise-wide agent populations and the overall customer experience.



About cogito

Based on advanced research from MIT, combined with data from millions of sales and service calls analyzed, Cogito offers one of the only Artificial Intelligence (AI) platforms that truly understands human behavior.

Cogito performs live analysis of conversational behavior – between phone professionals and customers. Detecting more than 200 behavioral signals within milliseconds, Cogito analyzes the behavior, content and context and provides frontline workers with in-the-moment guidance to enhance productivity – improving company performance and customer experience.

Through human augmentation Cogito elevates the performance of frontline workers – creating positive behavioral change and empowering them to better engage with customers in the moments that matter. With Cogito, phone professionals are able to better handle conversations that often involve tough emotional topics and high stress situations, positioning them to build trust by delivering more empathetic interactions.

Is your contact center operation set up to deliver empathy that drives this kind of impact?

[Find out with our Empathy Assessment.](#)



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