

Focussing on the People or the problems associated with staff working in your Call Centres

Call Centre working for the staff has long been recognised as a hard grind. So many calls to deal with, so little time. Management watching me all the time ... it's just pressure, pressure, pressure.

The problem is, Call Centres have evolved from what they were meant to be when they were instigated, that is a convenient way to service your customer's needs, to high tech centres with lots of hardware and software to 'enhance' the customer experience. The problem is, organisations that have Call Centres have rather missed the point.

To have a great Call Centre operation, which gives customer satisfaction and also services the organisations needs, it isn't about the technology or the processes that the business dictates. The only truly great Call Centres in South Africa are the ones that focus on the people working within it.

Organisations have lost the plot when it comes to people management. Call Centres are very demanding places to work in. Staff attrition rates within the industry are soaring, this is indicative of the way Call Centre staff are treated. The typical 'Sweat Shop' mentality that seems to be in the press weekly in Europe is, unfortunately, not too far detracted from the truth here. Organisations seem to be too hung-up on getting equipped with the latest technology in order to prove they are serious about servicing their clients. The mentality seems to be – 'Spend the budget on the latest piece of software and hardware, that way we can service our clients better'. Great plan, however it has a huge flaw.

Technology is an enabler – absolutely. However, who is it that deals with the clients? The technology?

It's the staff in your centre - remember them? Those guys that come in take oodles of calls and then you produce lots of lovely stats saying how good a job you are all doing.

Call centre staff management and development is probably at its lowest since the inception of the first Call Centres. This article is intended to get you to at least see their importance a little differently.

How to Approach the People focus

The people operating in your Call Centre need first to feel that they are there for a reason. These people, answering queries all day from your clients are in fact experts on your organisation. They could tell you how satisfied (or not) your clients are ... what things are wrong about your client servicing and more importantly, what to do about it.

To get great people doing a great job, you need to invest in them. Empowerment of the agent, consultation with them, having the correct training and development programs and the right recruitment strategy are probably at the bottom of the list of the 'Things to do'. However, if they are not moved up, you will continue to badly service your clients and continue to badly treat your employees ... none of which are good for the name of your organisation.

PRIME consulted in a Call Centre on an assignment recently, which was running out of control. Abandon rates were high, staff morale was poor, sickness and absence of the agents was rife and customer dissatisfaction was high.

On the surface it was difficult to see where the problem was. However, investigation found that there were some major issues that, if addressed, would pull that Call Centre back into the Client Centric centre that is was instigated to be in the first place.

Agent Measurement

A bit of a chestnut this one, as we see it all the time. The agents were expected to answer, on average, 70 calls per day with call duration of less than 3 minutes. This measurement, as a KPI (Key Performance Indicator) came about because somebody had worked out how many calls were going into the centre, divided it by the number of agents and – hey presto – a target!

Agents that weren't achieving targets were feeling bad about that, put under pressure and the result was they were going off sick, or worse – leaving the organisation altogether.

One of the changes that we made was to eliminate the calls per day measurement – much to the distress of the senior managers of the business!

Not only that, we also increased the call duration average time to 5 minutes. What? Madness surely ... indulge me, and read on.

Next we looked at the working environment that these agents were working in ... did they have an ergonomical sound working environment, have they been given the right training, do they have the relevant information means to answer queries or direct the clients appropriately?

What about the staff to team manager ratios? What was the call volumetric like into the Call Centre? Was the demographic of the staff mix in the Centre right? And finally, was there any real empowerment of the agents?

Not once during all of this review process did we recommend that they recruit more staff ... why?

Getting the Culture Right

The culture in this centre was all wrong ... it was an approach of getting people on the phone, and not concentrating on the pre-requisite requirements of a client centric centre – the people within it.

The training was re-assessed, the supervisor ratios changed, the ergonomics improved. Information was given to the agents to help answer the queries, management information was studied to ensure call patterns were understood and staffed accordingly. The recruitment process was assessed and was re-engineered to suit the environment and the people within it.

In short, the culture of the centre was re-engineered. Slowly, but surely, staff sickness was reduced. Staff morale improved, call abandon rates were reduced and the end result was that the clients were serviced to their satisfaction. No money was spent on technology, this was basically sound. Some re-engineering was needed, yes, but this was after the event as it allowed us to understand what the business needed from the technology in the first place.

The Result of this exercise was happier agents, happier customers and a cost reduction in the business bottom line. No increase in staff spending, no capital or operational expenditure increase either. Just sound, sensible Call Centre operational metrics that worked for the business, the people working in the Call Centre and most important of all the customers of the Call Centre.

**Simon McBeth – Director. PRIME Consulting
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