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Contact!

The Executives Online contact centre report

Foreword

by Alex Coxon, Editor CCF

The UK contact centre sector has been hitting the headlines recently - not least because of the national press' fascination with the loss of British jobs to cheaper offshore alternatives.

The reality, however, is that our indigenous industry has a pretty good story of its own to tell. Employing nearly 800,000 people, including managers and IT support staff, the sector provides labour for just shy of three per cent of the UK's entire working population. In hotspots such as the North-West, North-East and Scotland, that figure rises as high as 4.3 per cent.

Naturally, the recent attention of unions, MPs and government bodies such as the Health and Safety Executive has pushed contact centres well and truly into the public domain. Yet their separate appeals for tighter controls and legislation are less a condemnation of contact centres than recognition of the sector as a permanent fixture: a professional industry on the cusp of maturity.

The authors compiled here represent just a fraction of the talent and expertise already present in the UK contact centre community. Hopefully their articles will offer fresh insight into this vibrant and swiftly evolving market.

Introduction

Running a contact centre must one of the most difficult management challenges in business today, a complex mix of people, processes, technology and of course, the general public.

The articles in this report have been written by highly skilled contact centre managers, people who have experienced that challenging environment at the sharp end. They write about fundamental issues such as managing staff, customer marketing and the growing role that contact centres are now playing in the corporate structure.

It is a testament to their individual skills and talent that this report captures a wealth of different ideas, approaches and experiences, all with one main aim – management excellence. Whatever part you play in the contact centre or CRM industry, I am sure you will find something interesting and thought provoking in this report.

If you want to contact the authors, or any of the more than one hundred high-calibre call centre and contact centre managers in the Executives Online Talent Bank, visit our dedicated website at www.callcentremanagementonline.co.uk

Norrie Johnston, Managing Director, Executives Online

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The Human Psyche – The Key to Performance Improvement

Jacqueline Campbell believes the human touch is often missing when call centre managers approach the thorny issue of improving performance. However, you don't need to have a psychology degree to do it well.

Performance improvement is the one universal indicator in the world of work that everyone is trying to attain. Call it what you like, productivity improvement, performance enhancement, efficiency gains; it all boils down to improvement of performance. You will always find managers at every level striving to achieve improvements in this area.

In a structured process where computers are involved, you get the experts to analyse data, translate the ideas, write new code, test the system, then implement the process and amend it after implementation if necessary.

Where human behaviour is concerned the mistake that is most often made is the failure to implement a structured approach. Managers need to understand the human psyche to unlock the key to performance improvement – don't despair however, you do not need a psychology degree! There is a wealth of tools out there, from consultants to highly experienced interim managers, as well as various reference guides charting different approaches to improve performance.

The one approach I have found successful time and time again, with some fantastic results, is the human and very interactive approach of performance management. This approach focuses on identifying successful behaviours. This is encouraged by the effective and timely use of positive reinforcement and where necessary negative reinforcement to eliminate certain behaviours that are inhibiting success.

The output of successful behaviours is easily drawn up into KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) and plotted in a BIM (Business Improvement Matrix). This process makes measurement a very structured, yet simple and highly effective process. The outputs are run in conjunction with a reward and recognition scheme, which does not necessarily have to be financial.

Behavioural Performance Management

There are a great many positive differences associated with working in an environment where behavioural performance management is utilised. The following behaviours are evident:

- Recognition of improvement in performance, however insignificant the improvement
- Recognition of consistent high achievers who are normally ignored and whose performance can suffer as a result of this "extinction" behaviour
- Continual displaying and updating of performance and winners leagues
- Substantial improvements in performance across the board
- Reduction in customer complaints
- Reduction in cost per sale
- A healthy competitive spirit
- Individuals dramatically changing their behaviour for the better

- Reduction in absenteeism and attrition
- A gradual elimination of poor performance

For example, when performance management was implemented in the call centre of a very well known FTSE100 telecommunications company the following improvements were experienced in the following six-month period:

- Absenteeism reduced from 19.5 per cent to less than 6 per cent
- Cost per sale reduced from £125 to less than £80
- Corresponding improvement to the bottom line of £2.2 million per annum
- Reduction in forced attrition by 45 per cent
- Performance improvement measured by BIM of 49 per cent

Human behaviour in the world of work is the one universal element that drives performance management and hence improvement. Yes, there are a myriad of influencing factors, but it is what humans actually do and how they do it that will bring about improvements.

After more than 15 years in the call centre industry, Jacqueline Campbell formed Call Centre Options in 2001. Jacqueline has worked at every level in contact centres in a wide range of sectors where her remit has included training, process migration, start ups, change management and business process re-engineering.

The Contact Centre's Role In Supporting A Changing Corporate Strategy

David Graham suggests that the contact centre can play an important part in how businesses manage their non-core activities as increased competition forces them to concentrate on developing their core offerings.

With mounting global competition, greater margin pressure and more demand for customisation and specialisation, businesses are being driven to focus more on their core activities. The issue of what their core business is and how they manage their non-core activities is an interesting dilemma many businesses are facing.

The contact centre has become an integral part of how companies manage their non-core activities. But what role does it play and is it being used effectively? With the level of public trust in companies plummeting to new lows and customer satisfaction in a downward free fall, is good old-fashioned customer service being lost in ever changing corporate strategy?

The 2003 National Complaints Culture survey from the Institute of Customer Service found that customers are increasingly frustrated with falling levels of service. In particular, there was dissatisfaction with the way companies handle customer complaints. Pre-recorded IVR messages such as "your call is valuable to us", "we know you are waiting", or "your call will be answered by the next available operator", are not helping the situation. It is this endless waiting time that gets under the skin of the caller, giving the impression that contact centres, and therefore the company they are calling, lack respect for people's time, which is an increasingly valuable commodity.

So what options and challenges do corporate companies face as they move into new markets or launch new products? What part can contact centres play in these developments? Questions like location, business collaboration, multilingual support, outsourced versus in-house and agent skill sets are just some of the issues that need to be dealt with.

It is important to remember that the principle purpose of a contact centre is to serve the customer better and to ensure that the service the company gives matches its product or proposition in quality.

Contact agents

Contact agents are the front-end of any business. Indeed as far as customers are concerned they are the company. Whatever perception the customer may have of a company has probably been derived through experiences of dealing with the agents. Normally customers have a limited understanding of who or what the company really is and therefore rely on the evidence of their own senses and the impression generated by the agent.

To this end, these brief encounters between customers and contact agents are often the most critical contacts for any company. It could be argued that the contact agents are some of the most empowered people in the company – with every call, the level of service they provide helps shape the company's future. The extent to which contact centres can make or break a company has been highlighted by a recent global survey carried out for Genesys Telecommunications Laboratories, a supplier of software for contact centres. The research found that customers base their purchasing and loyalty decisions on the quality of service they receive from agents more than on any other company product or attribute. This was reinforced by the 56 per cent of respondents that said “good service” made them loyal customers.

Indeed, companies that recognise the crucial role of the contact agent are largely customer-driven businesses. They have a business strategy that nurtures long-term and potentially lucrative customer relationships, and as a result are moving towards a more skilled and highly trained employee base.

These employers believe staff motivation, knowledge and higher skills will be a key selling point. They recognise that speaking intelligently and credibly to a decision maker is not easy and requires an experienced, knowledgeable and motivated contact agent.

Business collaboration

With companies focusing on core activities and establishing closer relationships with customers and partners, doing business has become a lot more complex. There is a strong business imperative to collaborate more effectively and build closer partnerships, which can be a source of sales growth and create stronger ties to the end customer.

A Booz, Allen and Hamilton study found that on average, partner sales have grown by more than of 40 percentage points to 65 per cent of revenue in 2002, up from 15 per cent of total revenue in 1995. In fact, additional AMR research predicts partner sales to account for 70 per cent of a projected $5.7 trillion in business-to-business e-commerce by 2004.

However, there is a danger that if partnership collaborations are not carefully managed, they could further fuel the perception that “good old-fashioned” customer service is being lost as companies introduce more changes. That is why it is important to provide a rich, branded customer experience, where customers are given unlimited choices in the way they buy and greater levels of service across all contact points.

There are a number of areas companies will need to consider if they wish to fully benefit from business collaboration. The areas for consideration include:

- A shared vision on Customer Service
- Appropriate agent profiles and skills
- Organisational and cultural fit
- Addressing security risks
- Collection and access to customer data

Outsourced Vs. In-house

Businesses need to fully understand the investment required in order to attract and retain a multi-skilled workforce that can deal with unscripted conversation and be able to build a rapport with customers. Not all companies are able or prepared to make this kind of investment. One of the most worrying aspects of outsourcing the contact centre agents role, is that companies are so dazzled by the potential savings on offer they do not stop to think through the full implications and potential issues.

The recent change in the provision of directory enquiries service has generated some interesting customer feedback. Some of the new providers have outsourced the services to overseas contact centres, but have not taken into consideration, issues such as lack of local knowledge, local customs and problems with dialect or pronunciation.

Whether the potential outsourced locations are in India, South Africa or the Philippines, the most important question needs to be "do you feel comfortable having a third party dealing with your customers?" This is a vital point in understanding and serving the customer's needs.

In-house sourcing gives a greater degree of control and the proximity of the contact centre agents tends to reinforce this. Local knowledge and customs do not present a problem, but new challenges appear, such as the quality of the workplace and attracting a multi-skilled workforce. The investment required in maintaining skill levels and motivation of contact agents must never be underestimated if the continued success of the contact centre is to be assured.

Location

With an increasing demand for companies wishing to sell and support existing or new products in international markets, the dilemma is how and where to establish contact centres that can support these global markets. In the case of greater business collaboration with partners, the questions are, "which contact centre operation do you use" and "how do you make them appear to be transparent to the customer"?

How do we deal with multi-lingual challenges that are present when dealing in an international market? Technology is already allowing centralised multi-lingual centres to function in such a way that a customer and the contact centre agent do not need to share a common language. Although this means contact centres could be located anywhere, it also poses the question of what constitutes the ideal location?

Other issues such as whether existing functions are merged or if a brand new operation should be set-up are all tough questions that need to be answered. The key factors in addressing these questions tends to be the abilities and flexibility of the contact centre agents. When combined with major issues like whether to outsource or not, and ensure strong ties with the customer, while working collaboratively with partners, these present a challenging opportunity that will test any corporate strategy.

Greater demands are always being placed upon us, both as businesses and individuals, making time a valuable commodity. As a result, customers are demanding far higher levels of service from contact centres, so organisations either have meet these demands or nurse bigger holes in their balance sheets and watch the slow migration of customers to competitors.

As contact centres are becoming an integral part of virtually every organisation, their role in creating a positive customer experience should rank as one of the highest priorities for any successful business.

David Graham

With over 14 years of working within the call centre and contact centre industry, David Graham has first hand experience and knowledge of all facets of these environments. David's success has been built on accomplished call centre management skills, enabling him to identify, develop and implement best practices, leading to an unrivalled level of performance expertise in the fields of telesales, telemarketing and customer care.

Why Call Centres and Performance Measures Aren’t Good Bedfellows

Derek Williams suggests that a greater understanding of how a call centre works and a more proactive approach to managing the needs of staff and the customer is much more effective than simply implementing performance measures.

If people from the sales and marketing department sat in the call centre or supermarket checkout and served customers constantly, two things would probably happen:

1) They would see and fix problems their products and campaigns caused
2) They would be motivated to learn from their customer encounters and would prevent problems for reoccurring. After all, they won’t fancy a return visit to the “hot seat“!

If managers and supervisors dedicated most of their time and effort to dealing with their front-line customers, they would crack empowerment once and for all and fix other problem causes. They won’t fancy a return visit to the “hot seat” either!

If call centre IT systems forced users to enter and update an individual customer record for every enquiry, so the customer was given the equivalent of an Incident Report number, we would be able to make certain that agents followed through on their commitments to customers and would also provide accurate information. This would be appreciated by customers and would stop repeat calls and complaints. These sorts of problems are a classic symptom of what happens when agents look for “quickies”, calls where they can generalise and do not have to open up a customer record or do anything that takes time and is attributable.

Future Staffing Levels

If call centres measured and analysed incoming call demand properly, they would not just be able to project future staffing levels, they might also be able to establish how much of their work is predictable and therefore avoidable. This would then reduce telephone traffic so agents could be freed up to handle other calls quickly or make more sales.

If managers created an environment where improvement ideas were not just welcomed, but were actually demanded, they could radically re-engineer a number of customer-facing processes to save time and money as well retaining and attracting delighted customers.

A chief executive of a rapidly expanding, established, well-known, value-for-money airline at least had the decency to admit he did not want customers calling his airline! After all, it would tie up his staff all day!

We hear lots these days about market segmentation in call centres, but it invariably ends up as a “one size fits all” approach with undifferentiated processes and systems being operated by de-motivated, dis-empowered and generally disenchanted high-turnover front-line staff that are generally lower paid with performance measured on standard call rates and volumes.

When you automate a bad process, you get an automated bad process. Equally, when you outsource an under-performing and high cost call centre you get – surprise, surprise! – an outsourced under-performing, higher cost and worse performing call centre.

Why Customers Call You

If you do not take the time and trouble to:

- Fully understand and map your customer handling processes from start to finish
- Establish meaningful and relevant performance measures that truly track what is important to the customer
- Understand what truly effective and efficient service delivery really looks like
- Identify why customers call you
- Log all customer feedback and complaints, and analyse for trends or cause and effect
- Measure value-removing wasteful re-work such as hand-offs, understand why they happen and act to remove the causes
- Fully grasp that good customer service is a perishable commodity – you only get one chance, so use the opportunity once and wisely
- Get your head around the fact that call duration is a variable and one size does not fit all

...then you will lose hard-gained customers, gain a poor reputation in the marketplace, increase your cost to serve, and your business will ultimately decline and possibly even fail.

Customer feedback is absolutely free and is a truly powerful tool to shape your call centre and supporting structures. Your policies, processes and procedures should be geared around those all-important customers.

Develop it alongside meaningful performance measures that are relevant to the customer. Encourage your teams to listen for feedback and improvement opportunities, as well as developing their own ideas – yes, staff have ideas of their own! Reward your teams for the right customer behaviour and don't beat them up with ludicrous and childish "one size fits all" performance measures.

Managing Multi-Contact Centres

Lou Zonato ponders the challenges of the new breed of multi-contact centres and looks at how different mediums can be well managed and better integrated.

Over the past five years, what were previously known as 'call' centres, have now taken on the name 'contact' centres. This is mainly due to the fact that call centres now handle a multitude of ways a customer can contact an organisation. They now actively handle e-mail, white mail, web chat, 'call me' responses, and with the increased use of mobile phones, text messaging. This article focuses on the challenges that face contact centres and some recommendations on overcoming them.

E-mail

As more customers use e-mail as an alternative to calling businesses, one of the major challenges is handling the growing volumes received and increasing the efficiency of staff handling e-mails.

One of the first areas to investigate is the implementation of e-mail management software. This software enables intelligent routing and reporting of incoming and outgoing emails in a similar way to an ACD managing voice calls, i.e. delivering e-mails to agents as soon as they have completed their last message, which can assist in minimising downtime.

Other useful features of implementing such software are the creation of standard responses to commonly asked questions. Agents can simply 'top-and-tail' a standard response with a greeting and a 'signature' to ensure prompt turn-around times. To do this, the software simply recognises key words used by the customer and suggests a number of standard responses that the agent can either use verbatim or can alter to answer a customer's enquiry.

It is important to recognise that as a business changes, keeping all the information (the business knowledge) up-to-date is challenging. Consideration should therefore be given to the employment of a Knowledge Manager whose job involves ensuring that the database of email responses is regularly updated so that the agents have up-to-date information on-hand. There is nothing more frustrating than receiving incorrect or conflicting information from a business and having to send another e-mail or make another call to clarify information. This unnecessarily increases workload and can easily be avoided.

There will always be very specific e-mails from customers that cannot be answered via standard templates. In these cases the agent may have to draft a completely unique e-mail to send to a customer. The key here is to ensure that all agents have had significant letter-writing training from a professional such as a copywriter. One of the worst things a business can do is to send e-mails to customers with incorrect spelling and grammar! To ensure quality, it is recommended that a quality control process is in place that regularly distributes a sample number of e-mails sent by agents to customers to middle management. It only takes 10-15 minutes a week for a manager to review the quality of responses, but can greatly assist in maintaining accuracy and quality.

When considering purchasing this type of software, it is important that the business gets full and ongoing support from the vendor. The vendor will specifically need to provide up-front training to all levels of operational staff and very detailed information and assistance to IT staff. A reputable vendor should have no problem with inviting you to see its software in operation in another company. A request should be made to 'interview' the staff in this organisation to determine what their thoughts are about the whole implementation and ongoing support processes and also to determine what mistakes they made too.

It is crucial that your IT department is involved in the entire process, working alongside the telecoms and operational teams. The main reason for this is that the software must work alongside existing CRM software and the IT department will need to understand the product well enough to provide day-to-day support. The IT department will also need to ensure that agents have the ability to attach the e-mail they send to the relevant customer's records. This is because not all customers are exclusively web-centric and tend to use both telephone and e-mail. So when a customer contacts by phone, for example, the agent should have access to all forms of contact, including e-mails, so they can refer to them if necessary during the conversation. This is crucial for promoting an efficient and professional organisation to the customer.

Once the business has become accustomed to using such software, serious consideration should be given to multi-tasking, i.e. utilising call handling staff to answer e-mails and vice versa during quiet times, or if there is a backlog of e-mails and the SLA turn-around time is not being met. Multi-tasking can be a very difficult strategy to implement and manage and is not appropriate for all organisations. However, if after detailed investigations it is found to be suitable, it can deliver major cost savings and efficiency gains for the contact centre.

Of course, to help limit the number of e-mails a business receives, the best strategy to employ is to have an exhaustive list of FAQs (Frequent Asked Questions) on the public website and to ensure that the website is customer-friendly. The FAQs should be easy to find, easy to use and should be regularly updated as the business moves forward. The task of maintaining FAQs could also be a task for the Knowledge Manager. Creativity should be applied to encourage customers to use the on-line FAQs. This could include directing customers towards the FAQs via their monthly invoices for example, or offering entry into a competition for a prize for visiting the site. The cost of the prize will be far outstripped by the monies saved by having less calls and e-mails to handle.

Some vendors can supply intuitive FAQ features where customers can enter a question onto the site and have their question answered by displaying a short list of appropriate answers. This utilises the same technology as the e-mail management software that looks for key words in a customer's e-mail and then suggests possible answers.

If a customer has not had their enquiry answered and needs to send an e-mail to the business, then it should always be clearly stated what the expected turn-around time will be. By creating and living up to expectations, the business can avoid potential customer disappointment and often, depending on workload, exceed these expectations. The basic rule to remember is that the time and effort that is put into your FAQs, and the more closely linked to your customers requirements they are, the less e-mail you should receive and the happier the customer will be because they have had their query answered with the minimum of fuss.

White Mail

Although for many organisations white mail has been replaced by e-mail, it still needs to be treated with the same priority.

One of the main differences between managing e-mail and white mail is the pure physicality of white mail. It has to be opened, read, replied to, scanned and filed physically and electronically. The whole process is much longer than answering e-mail, so to drive efficiency, different parts of the team must be given dedicated tasks that should be rotated on a regular basis. For example, some staff should spend the morning opening and distributing mail to others who will do the replying. Others should be responsible for manually and electronically filing once the reply has been sent. The main idea here is to run the operation like a production line where the duties are rotated every few days.

One of the best ways to reply to white mail is to phone the customer and answer their enquiry over the phone. Not all customers will want this, however if they have supplied their phone number with the letter or they are an existing customer who has provided their phone number previously and is happy to be contacted this way, then a phone call can provide a more efficient reply and a better level of service to a customer's letter. If the query is answered by phone, it is well worth considering sending a follow-up letter to the customer to confirm the resolution and to offer further assistance if required.

As with e-mail, standard replies should be created and extensive training provided to all staff from professional copywriters or equivalent. State of the art printers and high quality paper (recycled for the environmentally responsible business!) should be provided and regular stock takes of inventory should be performed.

The one major difference between e-mail and white mail is storage. The business will need to make a decision (in consultation with the legal department) about how long a letter should be kept. This decision is often affected by securing the space to store them. Many companies opt to store letters and documents off-site after a predetermined period of time. As with e-mail though, every effort should be made to store an electronic copy of the letter and attach it to an existing customer's record. This can be achieved relatively easily through the use of a scanner that utilises software such as Adobe Acrobat. The IT department should be heavily involved in this decision as scanned documents can take up a lot of disk space and affect the efficient running of company systems.

Finally, to ensure a high level of quality is maintained, a random check of replies sent to customers on a regular basis is highly recommended.

Web Chat

Web-chat was heralded as the way forward with customer communication a few years ago. There are few companies utilising this technology and purely from a contact centre perspective, the main reason for this seems to be the difficulty in resourcing against this method of contact and therefore guaranteeing response times. As the Internet is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, the contact centre would also need to be open during these hours. Although web chat that is outside normal working hours could be outsourced or time restrictions stated on the website, only organisations who can support the IT infrastructure required and have known customer demand for this contact method should implement it.

'Contact Me' Button

The 'contact-me' button on a website, if used properly, can be a very effective tool in generating new business. The customer simply clicks on the button, enters their name, contact number, appropriate time to be contacted and their question and an outbound call can be scheduled. As with web-chat however, few companies are utilising this technology. The main reason again is the difficulty of providing staff resources against such an unpredictable form of contact. It is very difficult to build a model around a tool such as this and perhaps should not be attempted unless it is a major form of contact.

Text Messaging

With a great many people owning a mobile phone, one of the relatively new and effective ways for organisations to communicate with customers is via text messaging. Although not recommended as a form of inbound contact for a customer to use (unless it is to request automated services), as a form of outbound contact by the business it can prove to be very effective. Where it is of most use is when a customer may require a quick confirmation of a transaction. For example, after making a simple request via e-mail or call, if a customer does not mind having the confirmation sent to them via text message, then it should be utilised. The customer should always be asked whether this would be appropriate and if so, the mobile number should be captured.

Many vendors can provide this form of technology and it can offer great timesavings for the contact centre. Of course there are some pitfalls though. Firstly, the message must clearly state whom it is from. This can usually be set up by the vendor, but they must ensure that it works on all mobile networks and at the very least, the most popular models of phones. Secondly, it must be made clear to the customer that they will not be able to reply to the text message, which reinforces the fact that it should only be used for simple transactions and confirmations. Thirdly, as with e-mail and white mail, provision should be made for the agent to make a note on the customer's record that the answer was supplied via text message to inform other agents if the customer makes contact in the future. Finally, it should be free of charge to the customer! They will not adopt a new form of contact if it is not cheap or free. Therefore, it is obvious that the decision to use text messaging (as with all forms of new technologies) should not be made without a detailed and approved business case put forward.

Conclusions

To drive efficiency within today's multi-faceted, consumer driven contact centres, businesses must give serious consideration to automated e-mail software. I have not yet seen an organisation that has not benefited from its implementation.

All forms of contact should be reviewed both in relationship to each other, to assess the synergies and benefits, and relative to the way a business conducts its day-to-day operations. Above all, listen to what your customers are telling you by implementing effective feedback procedures that include listening to your customer service agents. They will tell you whether your customers are happy with the way you are managing each contact channel.

Lou Zonato is a professional with ten years experience working on both the supplier and client side within the contact centre industry. Having worked in Australia, Ireland and the UK and with companies such as Virgin and Vodafone, he has successfully developed and executed many successful contact centre strategies.

Managers Get The Organisation They Deserve

Rod Gibson explains why managers must be willing to open themselves up to constructive criticism from their teams to be able to become better at their jobs.

The objective of call centres is to deliver customer service, but to the average member of the public they have become the cause of more customer frustration than satisfaction. The British public is still pleasantly appreciative of simple service, efficiently and courteously delivered. Seven years ago Tom Peters said: 'It's not that hard folks. Fact is, it's about as hard as it ever was to get through a week (a day?) without confronting rotten service.' Has anything changed in the past seven years? Sadly call centres are fuelling the fire of discontent.

We all know the causes and the obvious solutions. How do you address a high rate of lost calls? Easy, put more staff on the phones. What do you do if customers don't like IVR, as every survey tells us? Easy, replace it with a human response. The problem is that all the obvious solutions need more money, but the company has already spent a shed load on the new IT system, which would be fine except unfortunately it doesn't work properly.

Meanwhile, the call centre is losing staff hand over fist and absence is soaring as frustration and stress at the coalface mount in parallel with caller complaints. As the one responsible, managers are working night and day trying to keep the plates spinning, the balls in the air and putting a finger in every leaking dyke. Contact staff will often say they never see their manager these days, but they're sure he is really busy.

Does any of this sound familiar? Ever stopped to wonder how, when you started out with the best of intentions, it could it have come to this? You know the causes and the obvious solutions, but in the absence of unlimited additional budget you need to come up with an alternative solution – if nothing else to save your own sanity. If you've tried all the other options, here is a novel approach: consider the possibility that despite all your hard work you are actually part of the problem. And possibly part of the solution!

How Well Equipped Are You?

You see, bad things happen in business all the time. We live in an unpredictable world with increasing uncertainty. When did your sales people last get a volume prediction remotely correct? Unpredictability is the new predictive model. So how well equipped are you and your team to handle the consequences? How flexible and responsive to change are you? How motivated and ingenious are you when it comes to solving problems? Is everyone involved and committed? Do you know the real potential of your people? If you have answered "very little" to all of these questions then don't bother to read on... you are doomed!

We often fail to appreciate that our particular part of the organisation reflects our personal priorities, values and behaviours first and foremost, and not necessarily those of the company. If it is deficient in any way then look to yourself first in the search for improvement.

You could start by taking stock. Forget 360-degree appraisals that are part of the highly politicised annual salary and bonus fiasco. Forget also last year's employee survey which is gathering dust somewhere on an HR shelf – it was largely designed to massage senior management egos; it fuels the false impression of the wonderful morale ("when benchmarked with other companies in the sector") of their "most important asset"; and the results don't apply to our department anyway.

A values related management style questionnaire (MSQ), where content and outcomes are private to those participating, is a better starting point for a structured process of feedback and improvement action – one that starts with you leading by example and making changes to what you do and how you do it. It's a tougher call than you think, so don't bother if you are not up for receiving feedback willingly and gratefully from your immediate reports, or are not committed to making personal change.

By cascade, team leaders rate their manager under a number of key headings and then in turn staff are invited to rate their team leaders on the same subjects. Openness, trust and therefore confidentiality are paramount. It takes courage to provide honest feedback and opinions on the personal performance to your boss.

However, I have implemented the process in three separate organisations and in each case almost invariably participants were:

- constructive in their criticism
- anxious to give credit where due
- thankful for the opportunity to get things off their chest
- respectful of their boss for submitting to the exercise
- initially optimistic about the outcome actions
- disappointed if they saw no real difference and no follow up

Catalyst for Positive Change

In the vast majority of cases it has proven to be a catalyst for positive change and improved togetherness within the team. You hear "I never realised..." a lot.

These are some typical outcomes:

- Managers who think they are protecting their teams by doing everything themselves find they are actually stifling growth by not delegating
- Managers who feel they are supposed to know all the answers find that they are not making use of all of the knowledge and talent available to them in the team or department
- Managers who are affable individuals in normal life learn that they have a habit of unwittingly upsetting staff, by rarely saying "Good morning" for example
- Managers who think the weekly operations meeting is a useful and informative event learn that the other attendees find it boring and uninvolving
- Managers frequently hear that they don't do enough to give praise for a job well done. These same managers will tend to give "Above Average" performance ratings in the annual appraisal to 90 per cent of the department

In individual cases concerns surfaced where personal habits or behavioural traits had not been recognised and needed to be addressed. For instance one manager had a habit of turning the nearest implement to hand on the table (pen, fork etc) repeatedly in his hands while talking. Seemingly, it drove everyone else mad! Once he realised, he stopped. A trivial example, perhaps, but easily addressed.

In another case a manager had to come to terms with strongly evidenced favouritism for one of his team over the others that was causing obvious division, not to say some embarrassment for the team member concerned. Another manager clearly revelled most in the fire fighting aspect of the job but lost sight of how her lack of attention to planning was causing unnecessary levels of stress for the team.

Analytical Expertise

These days, customer services managers have to demonstrate extensive knowledge and analytical expertise in a large range of areas such as budgeting, statistics, resource allocation, technology, marketing, selling and service delivery. There is also a demand for competence in letter and report writing, presenting, listening and influencing. Beyond this, managers are expected to exhibit virtually every known or suspected attribute of an effective leadership profile, including honesty, trust, integrity, intuition, imagination, drive, resilience, empathy, humour, purpose, and courage. Even on top of this, we want leaders to be mentors, coaches, counsellors and, preferably, visionaries.

Unfortunately, many of us are largely in the dark when it comes to learning how to do all of this. Acquiring knowledge is a relatively straightforward proposition, but finding the time to do it is a lot tougher. The MSQ can help managers in the more difficult soft skills areas, such as learning about their personal impact. It helps to prioritise what they need to address with those whom it effects most and where improvement has most realisable benefits for the firm in terms of improved team motivation, productivity, flexibility, personal satisfaction and so on. The list is endless.

If KPIs are good or at least improving, the typical call centre manager will selflessly deflect credit onto the team. But never forget, managers get the organisation they deserve, so bask in the glory yourself, just a little.

Rod Gibson has gained diverse experience as an interim across financial and professional services. He has managed most functions in operations and project management, latterly specialising in compliance and training. With lead involvement in achieving ISO9000, Investors In People and Business Excellence Model self-assessment, he has implemented several internal/external customer and employee satisfaction projects.

Don't Sell To Me, Help Me Buy

Rhys Williams looks at changes taking place in marketing and customer interactions and suggests a way to improve telemarketing effectiveness. In the face of increased regulation and hardening customer attitudes, he examines new techniques of buying facilitation to improve customer loyalty despite ever wider and more attractive choice.

You must have noticed a change taking place in the way we buy our products? During the last few years there has been a reversal of control in shopping, with customers exercising much more power. Not so long ago, if you went into a store and asked for a product you wanted and it was out of stock you would order it and wait patiently for it to arrive. Then you would trudge back down to the store to collect it. Nowadays many people will walk out if the store doesn't have the item in stock and go search the internet to get it delivered straight away. People are much less tolerant of delays and bad service than they used to be.

It used to be that the sellers were in charge, and customers accepted this and waited in line. Now the buyers are in charge. People are more prepared to shop around to get what they want now – and they have found through experience that this works very well. The art of shopping around has had a resurgence. So loyalty to the retailer has diminished – people don't care who they buy their products from any more.

Marketing departments have struggled to keep up with these changes in consumer behaviour and have dreamed up ever more imaginative ways of attracting customers. Much less effort has gone into retaining existing customers and the customer experience after the sale is closed is often a pretty sorry affair. Maybe they have given up on customer loyalty, but we all know that acquisition is much more expensive than retention. We need new ways to make retention work in the new environment.

At the Sharp End

Up to now, call centres have generally been merely a delivery mechanism and tended to do just what their marketing departments ask them to – run a campaign to acquire so many thousand new customers, run a service line, handle claims or complaints, and so on. I believe call centres need to take more of a lead in joining up the company's offering to its customers by working right across all the campaigns and the service functions on offer, understanding and managing the entire customer experience. Call centre people are at the sharp end and know better than anyone in the company how their customers interact. They know that the whole customer experience is all part of the buying process, and they know how to influence it.

In this way they can provide the organisation with strategic input about how to handle customers best, and thus make the organisation's customers more likely to stick with them. In particular they can take a lead in understanding the steps in the customer experience and buying process by ensuring the sales, service, repairs and complaints functions help to enhance the way the customer thinks about the firm, thus creating greater loyalty. They can understand customers' differing buying behaviours and help the customer make the decision to buy.

So what about this new paradigm, and how can we understand it better?

A couple of years ago Brann Worldwide, a large international direct marketing company now part of EHSBrann, commissioned research into the changes they saw developing, so that they could advise their clients better. Working with the Future Foundation's 'Changing Lives' programme in the UK, and Yankelovich's 'Monitor' research in the US, the company developed a new approach called Helping Buyers Buy ™. Brann worked out that rather than simply pumping selling campaigns into the market, companies would get better results by focusing their efforts into helping their customers to buy from them. Lets face it, we are all lazy to some extent, and if someone makes it easier for us to use them rather than anyone else, we'll use them. So the customer experience emphasis shifted and, for those companies who implemented the new approach, it is paying dividends.

Brann's research identified these distinct buying behaviours:

- **Brand-led:** I know what I want. Don't bother showing me anything else
- **Confident:** I like to buy smart, so I check things out on the web and do a lot of research
- **Cautious:** I'm afraid I'm going to buy the wrong thing. I try to find someone who knows
- **Price-led:** Shopping is difficult. I try to buy exactly what I need at the lowest price
- **Bargain-hunting:** Sometimes I buy things I don't really need because they're such a good deal

So if we can identify the customers' preferred buying behaviour we can work that way and help the customer buy our product. Looking at it like this it is obvious that a brand quality pitch will not work on a bargain hunter, and that cautious and confident buyers may respond best to near-opposite approaches. Unfortunately people are not consistent and do not stick to just one of these behaviours for every product or every time they buy. They may use any behaviour on different occasions, so you cannot just put each customer in a box and expect it to work – you have to establish it each time.

We need to be able to sell to all of these, so the early part of the call guide needs to identify what behaviour best suits the particular prospect on that occasion or for that product, before the salesperson can expect them to receive the rest of the selling message.

The Buying Decision

But we may still be missing something. Often the customer is not ready to buy regardless of how attractive the offer is, or how much the product meets a need we have just spent time identifying. The customer has to be ready to buy. They need to be comfortable that making the purchase will not throw their home, business or life into chaos and confusion. They need to understand how their buying decision will affect them and become comfortable with it. Continuing with the pitch while the customer is not ready is a waste of time – you won't be heard and you certainly won't close the sale.

The would-be seller needs to do the groundwork by asking the right questions so that the buyer is fully prepared to buy and we know the best approach to take with them. Sharon Drew Morgen, an American sales guru, calls this Buying Facilitation. She has built a model for taking these principles into practical application, with great success. Formulate and ask the right questions and the prospective buyer will lead the way into the purchase. Sometimes they'll even close the sale themselves! For field sales people where they are face to face with a customer, good listening skills and thinking on their feet will do the job (given the right intelligence, training and experience). But call centre transactions are much more time-bound and scripts or call guides have to be prepared to deal with these situations. Good quality design, training and ongoing coaching is vital and the IT system should run like an Expert System, so that the answers to one line of questioning open up new more targeted questions and ultimately go into product information from the right angle. We do need to train and encourage agents to use their brain – scripting won't cover every eventuality.

But this still only takes care of a small part of the Buying Process, yet the rest of the cycle is important too, and companies often do not join it all up, so lose the potential for maximum improved loyalty.

Most Call Centres split teams between sales, service, complaints, repairs, claims, etc., with inbound and outbound still only occasionally mixed and multi-function quite rare. The reasons for this are understandable – it is obviously much cheaper to train staff for a limited range of functions and split the calls at the IVR to get them to the right person. But is the customer happy with the disconnection between what they see and feel are entirely separate departments when dealing with different aspects of the company's service? And staff turnover is high in call centres for much the same reason. The agent will be more fulfilled working on a range of tasks and looking after customers more fully, so staff retention should also improve.

Companies need to be able to join together all the customer interactions at the call centre so that customers get seamless service, whoever they talk to, and the separate functions need to be augmented by some glue that holds it all together. According to a recent Yankelovich study, one important thing for marketers to do is offer customer service that includes education and advice. I'll leave aside the contortions that we're getting into about 'advice' in regulatory terms, and advocate it anyway. B&Q offer education and advice on their shop floors both informally and in customer education classes. Why? Because it obviously works for them. Customers appreciate that they can ask and expect to get worthwhile help, albeit not necessarily professional or expert help. As a result B&Q's customers are pretty loyal. Advice is often acceptable 'glue' to customers.

According to Brann's work, the Buying Process consists of seven stages:

- Awareness
- Information
- Consideration
- Purchase
- Use
- Repurchase
- Advocacy

As you can see there are three early stages (Awareness, Information and Consideration) and three later stages (Use, Purchase and Advocacy) identified for proper consideration as part of the customer experience. In tele-marketing we often try to operate just in the Purchase stage, and wonder why it's so hard. The extra stages are arguably the most cost-effective parts of the whole process, and they all produce results. For example, attention to the early and later stages when Peugeot launched its new 206 generated 35,000* qualified leads for the car before the first advertisement was aired. They made new prospects aware in their Information stage and worked existing customers in their Repurchase stage with a wide and effective range of activities.

A Unique Position

The call centre is in the unique position of being able to handle much of this across a company's customer base, and glue it together. They can educate and advise customers at all stages on both outbound and inbound calls. They need access to the customer's whole interaction history as well as training and education about how they can best help at each stage. All these make for an enjoyable complete customer experience and thus improve loyalty and retention.

In developing and implementing our call centre strategy we need to make sure we feed this wider thinking into business strategy formulation about how we should deal with customers, and get out of it support for a much fuller set of interactions with customers that are well thought out and tested. I still go into call centres in organisations who feel they are at the leading edge, but where the sales and servicing functions are dealt with by separate divisions with separate targets, separate training, separate technology, without real time updating of the customer database or easy ways to get information in and out. This does not make it easy for customers to buy. So they are much more likely to respond to an offer from a competitor and take their business elsewhere. If you can make it easy enough for them to buy from you they simply won't think of going elsewhere.

All this sounds a tall order for the call centre agent. They now have to lead the customer through a real change process and not just pitch a product's benefits. They need training, coaching and support and the business needs to understand and adopt the new approach strategically and systematically, so that activity takes place in a coordinated fashion over all the stages, investing in the systems and people needed. Marketing and call centre working together to make this work can gain a uniquely valuable payback – investing in intelligence in the call centre rather than just aiming for cheapest transaction processing can produce much higher returns.

*Source: Brann Worldwide

Rhys Williams is an established Interim Manager who has built and managed call centres and other customer sales and service operations for more than ten years. Part of the creation of the call centre concept and practice, he is a strong advocate of the principle that highest sales performance comes out of truly excellent service, and buying facilitation is one of the strongest techniques yet seen to achieve this. He is currently writing a handbook for call centre management and also carries out training and consultancy.

It's Only Managing People!

Jacqui Woodham says: "It's only managing people! It's simple, anyone can do it!" But as she explains there is more to being a good manager than going on a training course – it's how you put that knowledge into practice that counts.

Managing a call centre is largely about 'managing people'. But if you have ever been a call centre manager you will know just how difficult this is and how the art of managing people is under-rated.

In many organisations, a manager has a variety of tasks and objectives outside of managing their people. Therefore the more a manager can rely on their team to work it out for themselves, the easier it becomes for the manager to fit in all the other tasks they have to do. It's a reality in today's environment that no manager has the luxury of just managing people. However, managing people can take up 150 per cent of a manager's time and lead to 100 per cent of their stress. The key to a successful call centre lies with the ability of the manager to create a self-regulating team.

We've all been on management training courses and listened to all the theories, but putting them into practice is not so straightforward. Any call centre manager will identify with the following:

- Absenteeism
- Organising breaks, lunches, holiday cover, shift cover
- Maintaining SLAs and KPIs
- Managing the "I know it all" and "I could do your job" types
- Attrition

Being an agent in a call centre is a pressured and stressful life. There is rarely room for error or having a quiet day! The SLAs and KPIs are the focus for everyone and failure to achieve them leads to even more work and pressure on the manager and their team leaders when they have to explain why they failed to meet the targets.

The stereotypical call centre has a group of agents sitting in long lines of desks with a team leader who bellows at them whenever they move away from their desk, or the service levels fall. The inexperienced team leader finds it easier to be dictatorial than empower the group. Empowering a group can feel like letting go of the wheel in a car – you lose control. However, imagine how nice it would be if you could let go of the wheel and you still reach your destination safely and on time.

How do you let go of the wheel?

The success of a call centre largely depends on the output, morale and motivation within the team. Selecting the right team members is a start. However, it doesn't matter how good a new recruit is if they are not able to fulfil their potential and become de-motivated, meaning your good recruitment skills will have been wasted. And anyone can become de-motivated.

In Maslow's hierarchy of needs we understand that as we fulfil a basic need, we then have a desire to fulfil the next. Everyone likes to 'feel wanted' – it's a basic instinct. In a working group this manifests itself by people wanting to be part of the team and have an identified role within the team. A person will always perform at their best if they feel good about themselves. Therefore maintaining or improving a person's self esteem is vital. This can be done in a variety of ways and actually getting to know the individuals better and what makes them tick.

Giving people the power to make their own decisions and drive their own success is a good way to improve self-esteem. However, this needs to be controlled because failure will lead to the opposite effect. Individuals are more likely to be successful when they are part of a team as the value of the whole is greater than the component parts. Classic team building exercises have proven this. Therefore the manager needs to focus on the team to create the environment of high self-esteem amongst the individuals within the group.

A manager or team leader has a difficult job. It is not until someone has taken the next step into the supervisory role that they appreciate just how difficult and controversial team members can be! A new team leader will, without exception, say "I never appreciated how difficult this was when I was an agent". If you could package that feeling and sell it to a team, they would be more understanding and less likely to blame the management team for everything they are unhappy with.

Packaging that feeling

Putting the team into the supervisor or manager's shoes is a sure way to gain their respect and understanding. You will need to gather the team into a forum and allow at least two to three hours. For those teams with shift working, you may also need to address the team in shifts, but explain that they all need to communicate with the other teams to ensure overall success.

When you have the group together, you should begin by acknowledging that you understand how frustrating it is for them when their management team tell them what to do and how to do it, shout at them when the calls in the queue are high, won't allow them to take breaks, and so on. You need to enhance their self esteem by explaining that you are aware of how much skill and expertise there is within the group and that they are the key to the team's success.

Explain to them that you are about to give them the power to make their own decisions and have a say in the way the team moves forward. You need to be clear about what they are expected to achieve. For example:

- Service levels
- A percentage improvement by a given date on the service levels and targets

You then need to set the boundaries and ground rules:

- Operating within the company's policies
- Operating within the regulated environment (e.g. Data Protection, FSA guidelines etc)

Then explain that the exercise you are about to set them will also provide opportunities for career development for those who want it, and that the management team will help them in any way they can. For example, it is likely that the team will need to have access to management information – this will require additional training to show them how to manipulate the stats from their particular technology.

Explain that you will leave them for two hours when they should:

- Elect someone to be the chair person for the meeting
- Elect someone (or a few people) to feed back to the management team at the end of the two hours
- Agree ground rules, for example, no one is allowed to talk over a person speaking, the chair has the final word etc

Tell them that at the end of the two hours you would like to see a presentation outlining how they plan to achieve their objectives as a team, for example, new ways of working. This should include:

- Managing breaks
- Managing annual leave
- Ensuring SLAs are maintained
- Suggestions for interacting with the management team

Explain that part of the presentation needs to include:

- What went well during the two hours and why?
- What didn't go well during the two hours and why?
- What have they learnt from the two hours and what will they do differently in the future?

However, explain that if the SLAs are in jeopardy, the management team reserve the right to intervene at any time. Therefore if meal breaks are being mis-managed and the result is that there are major drops in service, the management team will step in and work with the team to make changes. This could be enforced if necessary.

In summary, you need to explain to the group that you are empowering them, but as you are responsible for the team's results, you will have no choice but to intervene if SLAs are failing. In addition, if disputes within the team cannot be amicably resolved and it is detrimental to the rest of the team, the management team will also intervene.

Their future is in their hands!

Before carrying out this exercise you need to check that the team wants to participate. It is unlikely that they will not, but if they do not, they will have no case in the future for complaining that their management team gives them no flexibility or a say in how things are done!

After the exercise is completed, the team will be ready with a presentation and you should move straight into the presentation. At the end of the presentation, you should discuss the points that are raised and help them to address concerns.

Any ideas that they have for implementing their new strategy that you feel will breach company policy or cause other problems need to be discussed. Ensure you praise their ideas, but explain the reason why it will need to be done differently. Help them to identify ways in which this can be achieved, and gain their agreement. Identify and record action points of things that individuals need to do, for example, requests for training by the team leaders.

Empower the team in future to make notes of all meetings and record action points. If they intend to hold meetings, and they are almost certain to do so, ensure they are committed to recording notes and making sure those who do not attend are briefed upon their return.

You need to identify all the good management practices that they will need to do and gradually introduce them. It is a good idea to give them as many key ones at the beginning as part of the objectives. Do not forget you are putting them in your shoes, so they need to understand every aspect of being a manager or team leader.

Additional boosts

You may want to include a staged approach to the objectives, e.g. at the end of one month teams should achieve one set of targets and then at the end of the first quarter these should be increased. The targets must be realistic and achievable. If you have the budget, it is a good idea to say that if the teams achieve their targets they will receive a reward. It does not have to be an expensive one and you don't have to tell them what it will be.

If you are not already doing it, you should include team member of the month voting as part of the exercise. The team and the management will nominate the team member of the month. If there are several people with the same number of votes, the management team will have the casting vote to ensure everyone is given a fair chance of winning each month to maintain good balance.

When voting, it is a good idea to ask each member of the team to say whom he or she are voting for and specifically what they have done to deserve it. Explain that this information will be put into individual's personal files as part of their ongoing feedback that will also contribute toward their appraisals.

This technique offers the group the opportunity to give and receive specific feedback. It particularly shows them how difficult it is to provide feedback, although it is something they expect managers to do. Often team members expect their managers to see and acknowledge everything they do, but when they are asked to observe behaviours themselves and give feedback to others, they find it extremely difficult. This exercise makes them more aware of the manager or team leader's role and usually makes them more appreciative of the feedback they get.

Getting feedback Is helpful

Getting feedback from the team is helpful for the manager and team leader, as the team will be in a position to observe things they do not always see. Likewise it gives a more balanced view of an individual, in particular with regards to team member competence. When individuals know that feedback can be from all team members and that ultimately it could also raise their profile by being a winning team member, they tend to make better team players by considering the impact their actions have on others.

Feedback from peers is often more powerful than a member of the management team. Quite often an agent will accept instructions from their peers that they would not otherwise accept from a team leader or manager. This has been proven in call centres where team leadership is revolved amongst agents, where agents were careful not to make life difficult for the current leader because they knew they would be the leader at some point in the future. Agents realised that if they were antagonistic or rude, their attitudes would come back to bite them when it was their turn to take charge! You should try to encourage the team from the beginning to rotate responsibilities, as it is important for as many people as possible to experience as many roles as possible, in particular those that rely on leadership skills.

When this ethos has been introduced it eventually becomes 'business as usual' and therefore when new team members join, they accept it as the 'norm'. It promotes greater team working and more experienced staff, as demonstrated by promotional interviews that have shown that agents subsequently have a wider breadth of knowledge and expertise and are able to demonstrate competences at the higher level, more so than before the self regulating culture was introduced.

The management team is more relaxed and able to concentrate on the more important aspects of their role, such as carrying out one to one sessions and coaching. They also find time to take on more ad-hoc tasks that in turn will help develop their own skills. The greatest benefit however is that the team take responsibility for their success and the results therefore improve. Generating new ideas becomes a way of life and therefore the call centre is able to move forward instead of standing still.

Conclusion

Use your understanding of managing customers and apply it to your team. Provide a support network to your team and be clear about objectives and boundaries. Allow your team to take equal responsibility for their success. It takes a brave call centre manager to implement such a strategy, but understanding human nature will guide you through to success, creating a motivated and self-regulated autonomous team, thereby freeing you up to add value in other ways and impress your hierarchy!

Jacqui Woodham has worked on a number of major projects for blue chip companies, including BT, the London Congestion Charging project and major high street banks and retailers. She specialises in project managing the build of new contact centres and helps to improve the efficiency of existing ones using recognised training and quality methods.

Segmentation and Success

Stephen Jacobs and Stephen Barr examine the use of segmentation and profiling within contact centre operations and suggest how they can be used for improving customer loyalty and business returns.

Segmentation and profiling are accepted disciplines for refining direct mail campaigns. They have been proven to improve prospect identification, uplift response and reduce waste. Better-targeted communications to customers both in terms of messages and treatments have improved response and returns on investment. However, within telephone marketing, segmentation and profiling have not been widely utilised and all but the largest inbound contact centres hardly consider them at all – yet on the whole they deal with the same target audiences and customer bases as any direct mail campaign. This is in part missed opportunity, but it is also due to a lack of maturity amongst contact centres as exponents of direct marketing disciplines.

The changing contact centre environment
Contact centres are extremely dynamic environments – their lack of marketing maturity is not a signal of failure, rather that they have had other priorities. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, many contact centres are built from an operational perspective rather than a marketing perspective – there tends to be very little professional marketing expertise or involvement in the specification of their activity. The operational focus is on activity levels, processes and technology driving a transactional approach to the activity rather than a relational view of the customer.

This can be seen in the way in which a contact centre typically handles the activity it receives. Workflows are likely to be identified by channel (eg mail, call, email) and allocated according to segmentation of the workforce based on simple availability business rules – who can handle the type of contact (very often who has access to the necessary systems), or who is currently available and ready to take a call. The focus is very much on the 'what to do' rather than the 'how to do' nature of the task in hand.

Secondly, there is the nature of the contact. Contact centres do not generally deal with a single type of communication, therefore the 'creation' of messages is driven far more by the nature of the customer contact than by a pre-defined message based on criteria assigned to the customer. It would be a considerable effort for an Advisor to communicate a new product offer based on improved quality to a customer who has called in with a complaint about the quality of an existing product no matter how well the customer is profiled as needing the upgrade! The customer dictates the content of messages far more in a telephone-based environment.

Another significant constraint on the use of profiling and segmentation in the contact centre has been the lack of flexibility in being able to present data as a 'single customer view' (SCV). Many contact centres still work directly on to legacy systems or have a thin, front-end, customer management overlay (usually used for reporting statistics on customer contact), but still have to flip into legacy systems to find any detail on transactions and previous contacts. In addition, manipulating the data to show which segment a customer belongs to and presenting this to an Advisor can be an insurmountable obstacle.
And finally, many segmentation systems simply do not provide a useful translation to a conversational environment. Geo-demographic and other systems can provide a 'picture' in terms of where they live and

what they own, but the categories are too numerous to translate into conversational guides. Besides this, an often-overlooked consideration is that these systems can also offend contact centre workers by the analysis of the categories to which they belong.

Categorisations like FRV (frequency, recency, value) have their place in identifying the future potential of customers and give a clear indicator of a customer's value, but they still do not provide salient guidance on how to interact with customers in real-time on the telephone.

Drivers for the Use of Segmentation in Contact Centres

Contact centres are maturing from their operational heritage based on a time and motion mentality to becoming customer-focused channels that see themselves as the custodian of the customer. In this environment the quality of the relationship and conversation is equally as important as the efficiency of the call or contact handling. In addition, the drive for call centres to become contact centres means that they will increasingly be responsible for the most regular, high-touch contact with customers.

As customer focus increases, so to does the contact centre's awareness of its role in reinforcing brand values and attributes. Some contact centres have developed style guides, a concept more at home in the marketing department, for customer interaction. In doing so they have found that they need conceptual frameworks to explain how to talk to customers and prospects that go beyond the more traditional approach of conversation control techniques and standard opening and closing statements.

Contact centres tend to have a very results-focused mentality, even if currently these results relate predominantly to operational efficiency. In the future, the focus on customers will drive this results-minded environment to look for ways to leverage and measure results in the arena of customer management. By understanding customers as different groups that require different contact strategies, contact centres can develop more fine-grained analysis of their results.

Contact centres are also moving from the traditional inbound/outbound split to a 'whatever it takes' approach to customer contact. There is more multi-skilling of Advisors to handle a broader range of channels and to be confident in both sales and service conversations. Multi-skilled, adaptable advisors will mean that contact centres will have the people with the knowledge and capability to introduce more sophisticated approaches to interacting with customers. As contact centres look for more and more ways to leverage customer contact they will start to develop strategies for how they interact with customers in addition to what they do with customers.

It is important not to forget that the principles of segmentation have always been used in contact centres to route calls to groups of advisors with specific skill sets or product knowledge – based on the principles of the division of labour. This segmentation has been driven by internal, activity management considerations rather than by customer considerations, however it does mean that all contact centre management understand the concept of segmentation and have the ability through their ACD or their database to segment the customer base on other criteria.

Understanding Values-based Segmentation

Having established that there are real benefits to be gained from applying segmentation strategies within the contact centre, it's important that the model chosen is appropriate to the complex and individual nature of contact centre communications. From this perspective, values-based segmentation is ideal for this environment as it sets out to understand why individuals behave differently. Why, for example, do some people seem to seek a human connection when they call while others simply want their problem sorted or their order processed as quickly as possible? Values-based marketing is all about answering these vital questions and using that insight to improve the effectiveness of your marketing and customer relationship activity, whether its direct marketing, above-the-line advertising or a customer service function.

Understanding people's motivations is the foundation of values-based segmentation and the best way to develop this in-depth understanding is through large panel-driven surveys. In these surveys, thousands of people are asked hundreds of questions – questions that focus on why people do things, rather than focusing on behaviours and attitudes. The reasons for this are simple.

- First, behaviours change all the time, so making predictions from them will never produce insights that work beyond a certain level
- Second, attitudes are simply superficial reflections of a person's underlying values. Without knowing the values that drive the attitude it's not possible to know what the attitude will lead to, or whether it will lead to anything at all

A person's values, however, change very slowly, and for many people they don't change at all – ever. That means that if it's possible to find out the values of a person when they're 25, it's also possible to make a very accurate prediction of their values 10 years later.

The process of finding out a person's values starts with the application of factor analysis to refine the answers to the hundreds of questions asked on the panel surveys. Over time, the results of the surveys have identified 57 trends that are used as shorthand descriptions for different aspects of a person's emotional life. It has been found that these 57 trends are espoused by different people in each of seven very different archetypal patterns for which the underlying drivers are either inner-directed, outer-directed or sustenance. These patterns form the seven social values life strategies that are used when helping companies understand and target those individuals with whom they wish to communicate. They also guide the development of appropriate motivational messages for each group.

The problem, of course, is that for companies with an existing customer database who wish to start using values-based marketing within their contact centre, the individuals comprising the database will not have completed a values survey. In order to segment the database and allocate customers to their appropriate social values life strategy, other external data needs to be used such as social values. Using this kind of data enables distinctive behavioural patterns to be identified. These behavioural patterns can then be matched with the behavioural patterns proven to be typical of 'consumers' within the seven social values life strategies and so the customer can be allocated to his or her appropriate group.

For example, self-explorers often appear inconsistent when we look at what they buy and do. A wealthy self explorer might live in the right MOSAIC code to drive a large BMW but, because a trend in their life strategy is to see a car as simply a way of 'getting from A to B' rather than a lifestyle statement, they actually drive a car that does not command a brand-related premium price.

A series of complex, statistical models are applied to a company's customer or prospect database in order to actively hunt out these patterns of values-driven behaviours. A statistical assessment is then made regarding the values of each individual on the file and this information forms the basis for values-based tagging of customers and prospects.

Values-based Segmentation in Contact Centres

Values-based marketing can enable companies to develop a deep understanding of the underlying values, beliefs and motivations of the individuals being communicated with through their contact centres and enables them to tailor their communications for that individual. Framing communications in the type of language and style that most appeals to the prospect or customer results in a smoother conversation, a deeper connection being made and, as a result, clearer communication and absorption of what is being said. This means that communications are more successful. So, for example, sales calls conversion rates will be higher, complaint calls will be handled with more empathy and so pacify customers more effectively, and generally, whatever the purpose of the call, customers and prospects will have more positive emotions towards a company.

In values-based marketing, scripts or call guides are designed and the type of language is tailored to resonate with the individual by focusing on the issues/concerns/benefits as perceived by the individual rather than by the 'corporate mind' or some mythical 'Mr Average'.

For example, when making a complaint an experimentalist wants the problem fixed. Brisk business-like language like 'Let's cut to the chase' and 'What needs fixing here?' will work for an experimentalist. In contrast, a self-explorer will want to be heard and know that the emotional distress has registered. Speed is not as important as the emotional connection, so the script will suggest the advisor spend more time listening and acknowledge the distress using phrase like 'I can certainly understand why you are upset'. When making a complaint everyone wants it sorted out and put right, but the experimentalist prioritises how fast it happens, the self-explorer prioritises the human connection in the call.

Relating the Seven Life Strategies to Verbal Interactions

The seven life strategies have to be adapted to the context of the communication. The following gives some examples of how the life strategies can be applied to two common types of contact centre communication, the outbound sales call and the inbound complaint call. In reality this would be a more comprehensive exercise that would take into account the nature of the call, the desired outcome and the product or service offered.

Self-Explorers

OB) Focus on the benefits and the value, not the price. The call is likely to take longer than average to get to 'yes'.

IB) Focus on being human and reasonable, acknowledging any distress caused.

Experimentalists

OB) Get to the punch line quickly and mention price last. Don't bother making the call unless the product or service you're selling is going to be perceived as new, interesting and sexy by the prospect. Keep the call short.

IB) Just sort the problem out quickly and DON'T make excuses

Conspicuous Achievers

OB) Play on the 'be better than The Jones' angle. Emphasise the brand if you've got one as they're focused on that, not price.

IB) Zero tolerance of errors so accept that you're wrong and that the best you're going to achieve in terms of redeeming the situation is to get back to zero from your minus position. Give a no nonsense apology immediately and then describe exactly what you're going to do and when to sort the problem. And then stick to it!

Belongers

OB) Emphasise the product is everyday, not transformational; just something to help and make things a bit better/easier/etc. They don't like or buy transformational products but prefer products that are just a few percentage points better than the competition or what existed before. Be reasonable. Don't over claim. Come across as one of 'us'.

IB) They're friendly reasonable people who probably thought hard before complaining. Be reasonable back. They're not trying to score points. They do want to feel affirmed that they've done the right thing by phoning. They want to know you take everyone seriously and that they're not out of the ordinary or being troublesome.

Social Resistors

OB) For most products it's not even worth calling them. They won't be pleased you did and the outcome is likely to be a short call that inevitably ends in 'no'.

IB) Potential nightmares. You are so 'wrong' in their mind and what they are thinking and feeling is the way every reasonable person would think and feel. If they are right, agree as quickly as you can. Affirm their actions and feelings and thank them for their call. Fix the problem quickly. One bright spot – these people will sing your praises if they are impressed with you as much as they'll bad mouth you if they're unhappy.

Survivors

OB) Focus on price first, on the deal, especially if you've no relationship with them. No matter how wealthy they are, they're always looking for a deal. Price is the biggest obstacle. Everything else comes second.

IB) If you've got a historical relationship with them, emphasise that you and the complainant are on the same side – against 'them', 'them' being other companies. "A N Other company wouldn't handle your complaint the way we're going to, because you're part of our tribe/club and they're not. "

Aimless

OB) Never try to sell anything to the aimless. Even if they say yes they'll probably change their minds. They are predictive only in their unpredictability. Poor ambassadors for any product.

IB) Often they won't complain because they assumed up front the product/service would not live up to the promise. If they do phone and you fix the problem, you won't change their perception. A complete no win situation.

Three Stages to Successful Implementation

A values approach will only work if it underpins the strategic direction and all the activity in a contact centre operation. It is unlikely to be effective as a tactical tool to leverage response or results on one-off campaigns. It requires research and forethought coupled with an implementation plan that places sufficient emphasis on skill and familiarising the Advisors and their management with the approach.

The key to making this work has three related elements. First, it's necessary to identify the life strategy of the person being communicated with. Second, appropriate scripts/guidelines for communication need to be developed and third, scripts need to be applied effectively.

The initial research stage is critical. This determines the values profile of the audience or customer base and enables the organisation to identify their approach for the specific life strategies. It also provides insight into any existing (subconscious) elements that will either work for or against specific life strategies.

This first stage would use the customer database or prospect file to determine the key groups by matching it against an existing consumer database that has values tags developed from full-scale questionnaire research. Inbound calls that are not from a tagged database are more problematic. An assessment of an individual's life strategy can be made simply on the basis of where they live. This initial tagging can then be supplemented by specifically designed and sector-specific questions used during the call. At the same time a call and communication audit needs to be conducted to evaluate the categories of communication, call flows and how rapport is currently being established during the conversations.

As part of this first 'fact-finding' stage, it is also important to identify the front-end systems capabilities and constraints for providing information to Advisors. For instance, are you limited to putting a simple values tag in a field to show the life strategy of the individual or is there a facility for prompting Advisors on the profile and handling of the life strategy? This is also the time to formulate plans for how you will handle the unmatched customers on the database, or if you do not have a database, how you will profile callers, where this information will be captured and how it will be turned into a values tag.

The second stage is to develop the information gathered in the first stage into a strategic plan for communications. This involves a 'creative framing' approach to translate the life strategies into call guides or scripts for all the different call types. The basic principles and approaches can usually be done in a day with a specially selected project team. Ideally this should involve Advisors and representatives from all levels of the contact centre environment, in particular those people who have responsibility for writing scripts or briefing Advisors must be included, and if appropriate any trainers dedicated to the contact centre operation.

The workshop has to use a mix of detailed briefings on the model and different life strategies and combine these with NLP type role-play techniques to help the participants develop an empathetic and data-based understanding of the people a company wishes to talk to that will inform their development of the call guides or script.

This can be a good opportunity to start profiling the life stages of the contact centre employees. It can help people identify with each of the life strategies and these people can also add insight into the development of contact plans. Again, this needs to be handled well, and the sensibilities of the individuals taken into account.

Finally, and crucially is the roll out in the live environment. The values approach needs constant emphasis and attention to ensure it becomes part of the 'way we do things around here' in the contact centre. It is a truism that what gets monitored gets done, but it is essential that reporting in the contact centre analyses results by life strategy. It is not just the outcome or results that need to be analysed in this way. The values approach may also impact operational statistics such as call duration so these statistics must be re-examined in this context. Many contact centres also have a defined call evaluation process – often linked to performance assessments and bonuses. If the correct use of a values approach can be integrated into the evaluation criteria this will provide a clear signal of its importance and encourage its use.

Ultimately the defining measure of success is life time value (LTV) but initially key performance criteria would need to be established for the project such as higher conversion rates, higher cross sell and up-sell, higher customer satisfaction and reduced customer attrition.

Unlike the controlled environment of say, a direct mail piece, there are many people who influence how Advisors interact with customers (not least the Advisors themselves). It is important that they are all involved in the evaluation and refining of the values approach, using both the empirical data from reporting and direct feedback from the front-line through debriefs and focus groups with Advisors. In addition to the Advisors, consider the IT team who provide the information on screen, the trainers who develop the skills and knowledge of the Advisors, and the coaches and team leaders who reinforce behaviours and drive performance standards.

To maximise the impact of the values-based approach, it would ideally be integrated into values-based DM, above the line advertising, brand and proposition development in an integrated customer relationship management strategy based on the individual's values, beliefs and motivations… but that's another challenge.

A final word of caution, using values in a contact centre environment is not a panacea for all ills! If the different elements that go to making up the contact centre – recruitment, induction, staff development, technology, systems etc - cannot be held up as best practice then adopting a values approach is merely a sticking plaster solution that will at best drive sub-optimal results. Putting alloy wheels on an old banger isn't going to make it go any faster!

In summary

A values approach in a contact centre is not just a “nice to have”, we would argue that it is an essential tool to help increase sales, improve customer loyalty, raise customer life time values and propel customer satisfaction into orbit! OgilvyOne Worldwide talk about there being two types of bonds that customers have with an organisation – emotional and behavioural. Behavioural bonds are based on habit and past experience; they are weak and can change at any time. Emotional bonds can last a lifetime and the values approach provides a framework that can help strengthen these bonds in a defined and structured way.

Contact centres have the opportunity to lead the customer management challenge. A key achievement on this road to leadership will be developing a strategic approach to the analysis and management of customers based on in-depth customer knowledge and understanding. When a contact centre can demonstrate its impact on the relationship with the customer, on customer loyalty and ultimately on the brand, then it will be recognised for the corporate asset it is.

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Why Have Managers of Large Call Centres Forgotten How to manage?

Mike Ablitt says that too many managers have forgotten that the key to a successful call centre is the people. He believes managers should take the initiative and not leave it up to the HR department to sort out people issues.

Are we all so busy that we have forgotten that our business is all about people?

What other areas of business would dream of promoting someone into a job and giving them no support or development? And yet we do it all the time. I've found that this happens in many of the call centres where I have worked recently. In one case, none of the managers had been given appraisals for years; one of the managers had been there three years but still had no job description; and team leaders had learnt their trade by sitting next to Nellie (not her real name) for two weeks and then left to get on with it!

It's no good you senior managers saying: "Yes, you're absolutely right. I'm waiting for HR and training to sort this out." It is your fault. You have let this happen and so now you have got to do something about it. Promotion without management development kills performance... or have you found that already?

So what can you do about it without waiting for anyone's help? I'm going to make an assumption here, which is that either your bonus is in some way based on the success of the Call Centre (and sometimes it isn't, being based on something like total company performance over which you have very limited control) or that you are very altruistic.

To me, success means delivering the numbers whilst maintaining and improving staff morale and keeping staff turnover down. You can not do this on your own so you need to get your junior managers to help you, and they have got to get their team leaders (the real heroes of modern Call Centres) to help them.

People

- Translate success into simple objectives through a short workshop with your team so that they are more likely to buy in to these objectives.
- Work together with each of your managers to develop or align their objectives with the new department objectives. One of the objectives must be to have fun
- Set targets for each manager to encourage them to deliver their objectives
- Put a reporting framework in place to report progress against objectives for you, your managers and team leaders, and make sure the reporting happens
- Ensure that your managers do the same process with their team leaders so that team leaders have objectives and targets for each of their teams
- Talk to all of your staff; tell them what you are doing and why, and ask them what helps them to do a good job
- Keep talking – do not just do this as a one-off

Process

- Look at what you personally do and how you do it. Does each aspect add some value to the objectives of the department? If not, why do it?
- Get some of your staff to review the way information flows and the processes used to see if they can come up with better ways of working. I'm a strong believer in Champion-Challenger strategies from previous days of working in a collections department. Try a different way. If it works, great, roll it out. If it does not, try another way. But do not stop telling the staff what you're doing
- Do not forget to involve other departments where you need to, especially if you need approval, for example by compliance

Technology

Technology? Yes it is great, as long as it helps the agents to do their job. What does doing their job actually mean? In these days of getting the most out of every contact with your customer, it means LISTENING to what the customer is saying. So what you want your technology to do is to make it very easy for the agents to find and give information to customers. They can then spend their human processing (brain) power on listening to what the customer actually wants, giving the customer excellent service to answer their need, and still have the energy left to catch a lead or capture missing information or advise about a new service that you can provide.

Energy

I do mean "energy". It takes a lot of energy to be a really good agent. But of course we all know that. To be a really good team leader – does that need energy? I think I hear you saying yes and of course you are right. But what about being a really good manager? Does that need energy? I don't mean stamina to cope with the long hours and the mass of meetings. I mean the energy to show enthusiasm and motivate all of your staff all through the week, no matter how tired you are feeling inside. The energy to argue the toss with your director, who wants you to reduce your costs and does not understand how your department works. The energy to keep trying to get HR to understand that your staff are people and not just another resource (since they stopped calling themselves personnel they seem to have forgotten that their job is about people, now it is just about numbers).

Do not just sit there in your office sending e-mails. Get out there and make a difference. Start doing the job you are actually paid to do. Get managing. You'll enjoy it!

Mike Ablitt has been designing, setting up and running insourced and outsourced contact centres for more than 13 years. He is passionate about the importance of delivering service excellence to customers in order to deliver tangible business benefits to clients. He instils this enthusiasm and motivation in all levels of staff.

Call Centre or Sweatshop?

Prit Ahluwalia says call centres have become the sweatshop industry of the 21st Century. Here he looks at the growing concerns for the sector and debates measures that need to be taken to safeguard its future.

The telephone over the last decade has become a powerful and profitable business tool and at the same time, customers are becoming more demanding, less patient and more unforgiving. Analysis by Datamonitor predicted that the number of call centre agent positions in the UK would top 274,000 by 2002, meaning more people would work in call centres than in farming and teaching combined.

Much has been written and reported in the media on the state of the UK call centre industry. Whilst there have been good stories, the majority are bad:

Some of the good reports say:

- Estimates indicate that 2 per cent of the UK population work in call centres
- The industry remains buoyant with the continued predicted growth in call centres, mirroring the state of the UK economy
- The UK leads the way in Europe for the size of it's call centre population
- The UK has over 37% of European call centre agent positions
- We have seen the expansion of the call centre population, particularly over the last 5 years during the government's tenure, from around 160,000 in 1997 to almost 300,000 today
- Inward investment from overseas has supported the growth in the UK economy and provided commensurate employment opportunities

But here's the bad news:

Call centres are characterised by:

- Low pay
- Poor conditions
- Lack of breaks
- Mismanagement of staff
- Modern day sweatshops
- Management bullying and intimidation
- Plethora of monitoring and measuring of activity
- High stress levels
- An industry suffering from low morale
- 10% workforce absenteeism
- 20% attrition - staff turnover

Concerns

We have a very serious issue here to contend with. As a leading global player in both national and call centre terms, we cannot allow some of our standards to prevail in our call centres. We cannot allow this situation to fester, nor should we be complacent or accepting of the term 'sweatshop' with which the UK industry is currently saddled.

If the 10 per cent and 20 per cent figures for absenteeism and attrition, respectively, are averages, then many companies will be guilty of figures far in excess of the averages. Indeed as far as attrition is concerned, the figure rises to 32 per cent for call centres with more than 250 seats.

Unfortunately, the overall situation for absenteeism and attrition is probably far worse, as it is generally the less efficient companies that do not measure these key indicators. It is true, as with most things, we hear more of the bad stories than the good, but we must clearly understand the degree to enable us to address this situation head on.

How was all this allowed to happen?

- There are many strategic reasons for the establishment of call centres. Companies in their drive for excellence look to the combination of any of the following:
- Improve customer service
- Increase sales and revenue
- Improve the value of the customer base
- Increase customer retention levels
- Reduce costs and expense ratios

In the competitive environment and continued deregulation of many industries, the low cost option is becoming the increasingly attractive business case. Companies can do the sums, which lead to branch and office closure in favour of the customer contact centre. However, the business model does not end there with the sums!

Many companies do not really understand how call centres work let alone the intricacies of:

- Call centre dynamics
- Service levels
- Agent occupancy levels
- The effect of caller demand
- The random nature of call arrival
- Call-queuing theories and the number of trunks/lines required for call volume

All these have an effect on the caller; call wait times and the stress experienced by the call centre agent. If we do not get the staffing numbers right, we end up beating up call centre agents because they are not working harder or fast enough, despite the majority probably giving all they have got.

In a nutshell the poorer performing companies are not resourcing adequately, either due to the cost implications or lack of understanding of call centre resourcing requirements. At the end of the day this is the driver of the 'sweatshop', which means we have created this new call centre phenomena ourselves.

Poor Management Skills

The rapid growth of the industry means we are running faster than the skill set behind it – we are running short of call centre management and supervisory skills – staff are being promoted ahead of time without the appropriate skills of leadership, coaching and call centre dynamics, the latter of which must not be underestimated. We could face supervisory skill shortages on a level currently faced in teaching.

It is well known and understood that call centre resourcing methodology differs significantly from that required in other areas of production. Workload in call centres is measured in Erlangs – Erlang C formula calculates predicted wait times for queues using given variables.

To forecast staffing requirements in a call centre with the complexities of randomness, call queues and the desire to answer calls within a certain time threshold (service level), it is necessary to apply a teletraffic engineering technique (generally done through software or simulations). The software applies the appropriate engineering techniques, to calculate the full time equivalent staffing requirements.

If we don't let our staff have breaks, then we certainly wouldn't allow them any off-phone time, never mind attending to their training and development needs (sounds like someone has not done the shrinkage calculation!). If shrinkage is not applied then clearly staff will not have cover for off-phone activities.

Inadequate Resourcing

If we look at the proximate cause of some of the stressful issues and let us say, for arguments sake, inadequate resourcing is a leading contender. We can see how this exacerbates an already stressful existence for the call centre agent talking to customers day in day out.

Inadequate resourcing could mean one of two things:

a) Not enough lines for callers to get through on
b) Not enough call centre agents to answer the calls

With (a), all the lines are taken up with callers, the number of lines maybe inadequate; callers who can't get through receive busy tone treatment, the 'engaged' tone. Callers may attempt a number of subsequent times and still be unsuccessful. We, therefore, start turning the customer into an unhappy customer.

Turning to (b), if there are sufficient lines but insufficient staff, callers get through but could experience significant hold times until a call centre agent becomes free.

We certainly have an irate customer now and it is not uncommon for callers to go through (a) and (b) any number of times. Hold times of up to 45 minutes are not uncommon.

When the caller gets through it is not senior managers or supervisory staff they get through to, but the call centre agent, who has to bear the brunt of the caller's anger. In this situation, it is likely the call centre agent has just finished their previous call and does not enjoy the luxury of wait times between calls due to the number of calls queuing.

It is not a viable reason to cite, as some companies do, high customer demand as a reason for poor customer service and large wait times. The corollary of large wait times is insufficient resources and having to over occupy available staff to compensate.

This all leads to high levels of stress for call centre agents inevitably leading to the high levels of absenteeism and attrition.

High Occupancy Levels

Fundamental to many of the issues is agent occupancy - the results of the callers queuing and inadequate resourcing, means we need to occupy our staff more to meet demand. Occupancy reflects how busy we are in call centres.

This in itself leads to the behaviours prevalent in some call centres, where we have to chain our staff to their desk, question where they have been, what they have been doing, to the ludicrous extent that some staff need permission to visit the toilet. The pressure comes from senior management due to the levels of abandoned calls, which supervisory staff take as the 'ok' to manage how they see fit.

It is not common for call centres to measure how busy they are, other than in customer wait times. However, I believe there to be a significantly important metric that can ease and reduce the burden of call centre stress. When occupancy reaches a certain level, it becomes particularly stressful and unhealthy.

The measure of occupancy at call centre, team and agent level, will, basically, identify how busy the agent is during the day. By setting maximum occupancy levels we can begin to drive senior management in the right direction as far as resourcing levels are concerned.

Refreshment Breaks

Whilst comfort breaks will be allowed, in some cases with permission – fixed scheduled breaks, ideally one each in the morning and afternoon, are surprisingly not a 'given'. We all enjoy the easy item from our 'in-tray', but we are starting to take more of those items away from call centre agents. The simple calls, the ones they can do on automatic pilot, and hence, have a little breather are being absorbed in FAQs or being routed away from agents by IVR and skills based routing to less experienced agents. This means the agents can be left with the more complicated calls.

In some call centres, no consideration is given to job design, which means occupancy is maintained at high levels, with limited breaks from both call handling and screen work.

It is common for call centres to have wallboards for the display of historic and live activity. This is to improve awareness of performance, current activity and for staff to remain alert to queuing calls. However, these can be very demoralising for staff as they can see there will be no rest bite ahead when there are considerable calls in the queue.

Some call centres have alert buzzers when calls have waited a certain length of time, to 'shimmy' agents to answer calls when undertaking other activities. These would have to be disengaged in call centres with continuous queuing calls.

Symptoms of High Occupancy

The signs for high occupancy levels are there for all to see, whether you are a customer, call centre agent, supervisor or director.

- Customers being unable to get through on a line – engaged tone
- Get through but considerable hold time – even times as low as 2-3 minutes result in high occupancy rates for call centre agents
- Continuous playing of delay message and apology
- Calls abandoned due to hold times
- Call centre agent 'promise' remains unfulfilled
- Repeat calls are necessary until fulfilment achieved
- Fulfilment and quality are erroneous

As a result of inadequate resourcing and the requirement of over occupancy, we have to impose unrealistic targets on call centre agents to help meet caller demand. If resourcing is realistic, then we need not impose unrealistic targets as the call centre agents will answer the calls offered.

To meet the targets, sometimes requires extraordinary effort and concentration on the part of the call centre agent propelling high stress levels. We then start talking about call centre agent 'burnout', which leads to low levels of tenure in a call centre or attrition to other call centres to see if the grass is greener.

Handling complaints and problems all day long is very stressful. We know ourselves as managers, when we receive a complaint; we want to do as much as we can to resolve it because we don't necessarily want to face the complainant again. Yet the call centre agent may receive continuous complaint after complaint, but quite often, is powerless to do anything about it.

Lack of breaks and wait times between calls exacerbates the position and if the agent is not found taking the next call, they may well face supervisory rebuke, at a time, when they just need to take a minute or contemplate 'punching the wall'!

If you add, handling of complaints to inadequate resourcing, and high occupancy levels, which itself can be the result of the latter two, and then add unrealistic targets, we start getting a really unhealthy situation developing.

Not uncommon, is facing verbal abuse from the customer involving offensive language. In many cases this can be the cherry on top of a most unwanted cake for the call centre agent.

Lack of Training and Support

One of the biggest problems created by the high attrition rates, is the urgent need to recruit and get staff on the phones as quickly as possible. This means we cannot afford the luxury of appropriate induction, product and service training. Quite often this will be diluted with the call centre agent being asked to 'get on with it'. There is nothing worse than facing irate customers and not having the appropriate knowledge.

It is not always possible to receive 'live' support as the supervisor may be tied up with another agent. Quite often in the poorer managed call centres, quality monitoring, feedback and coaching does not take place. Refresher training can be non-existent, as this means we have to take agents away from already congested lines. Obviously, adequate resourcing and good practice should bring to the equation the inclusion of staff 'shrinkage'.

It is probably fair to say that you would need to be in an intensive care ward to be monitored anymore than in some UK call centres. As ACDs become more sophisticated, they are now able to provide a plethora of agent information. The trace report literally traces activity all day – the purpose may well be to challenge the number of times in Idle or why After Call Work took six minutes, against the average of one minute prescribed, when there are a number of calls in the queue. You know start to understand why the 'big brother' terminology is used.

The supervisor will be observing all the ACD statistics live from their screen and, where there are calls queuing, will challenge staff who are not taking a call and pressurise them to move from After Call Work mode, where they maybe genuinely wrapping up the previous call, to take another call. Agents then start piling up their after call work, adding more pressure.

Despite the fact the ACD produces so many statistics, it doesn't mean supervisors should use them all. Sometimes it is also the way the statistics are used and disseminated which causes anguish and stress to the call centre agent. These may be pinned on the notice board or circulated within the team – poor agent statistics can be highlighted by name or league table-wise. This being a rather poor attempt to motivate the poorer performers to improve performance. In addition, where team/group performance is incentivised, the group easily identifies who the poorer performers are.

More often than not, good performing agents are identified as those with the shortest call handling times or the highest call volumes. Their performance statistics are circulated and identified as benchmarks. However, scrutiny of some of their calls, quality and fulfilment may tell a completely different story. This pure statistical analysis does lead some agents to cut callers off or short in an endeavour to reduce their averages and increase their volumes.

The poorer performers are not always supported by their supervisors to improve performance, the assumption being, that if the targets can be reached, all staff should be able to reach them. Regular and unreasonable criticism of work performance and the publication of performance results may be perceived by call centre agents as bullying and intimidation. It is this kind of action and lack of support which inevitably leads to absenteeism and attrition.

Quite often, supervisors do not perform quality monitoring, as it is the first thing that drops off the table when they are managing a dynamic live environment or do not have the skill set to cope with all requirements. Difficulties then arise when staff, defend their statistics by playing the Quality versus Quantity card, asking quite rightly, 'do you want a happy customer outcome or quick, abrupt calls'.

Call Recording

Some call centres record all calls, but are we over doing it? Do we need to record all calls? This is when call centre agents have the feeling of being 'spied on', when all their calls are recorded coupled with the extensive ACD statistical monitoring.

From zero monitoring, we can go to automatic call recording of every call, every minute of the day. If you can imagine, from above, some of the pressures faced by call centre agents, for them to know every word they speak is recorded, can be the final straw.

The Most Pressing Managerial Issues

According to the Merchants International Benchmarking Report 1999/2000, the top 10 most pressing managerial issues for call centre managers are:

1. Improving service quality / customer experience
2. Improving service levels
3. Optimising the use of available resources
4. Becoming more efficient
5. Recruiting quality staff
6. Becoming more proactive / selling
7. Maintaining motivation / developing culture
8. Retaining staff
9. Using data / information more effectively
10. Improving query resolution rates

As you can see, staff related issues do not figure high in the rankings. Interestingly, recruiting quality staff ranks higher than retaining staff – paradoxical, when you consider the costs of recruitment and training.

Over 20% of US call centres ranked maintaining motivation / developing culture as their number one. This may mean either that the US has considerably more people issues or that they are more focused on these key issues.

What Are We Doing About All This?

During 2001, the HSE published its "Initial advice regarding call centre working practices", a small-scale study, undertaken by the Health & Safety Laboratory. The raison d'être for the research was to draw attention to the emerging issues rather than to offer guidance on remedial measures.

However, the research only covered six organisations and due to time constraints were, only companies close to the laboratory were visited and just 22 interviews were undertaken.

In February 2001 the TUC undertook an encouraging exercise with call centre agents in the 'It's your call' campaign, where call centre agents called in with anecdotes of incidents where they were unhappy at the way they are treated.

Call centre bodies have not taken the lead. Whilst the Call Centre Association provides a framework for its members, processes in support of the framework and inputs are entirely at the discretion of participants.

The Call Centre Association is not highly representative of the industry, with only around 460 members in an industry with over 5,000 call centres. As with most things, representation is not likely to be made up of companies who display poorer practices.

We Face Some Real Threats

We do face some real threats and concerns and we must move to improve our standards. Failure to do so would be negligence on all our parts.

The threats and concerns in particular:

- Reducing the inward investment opportunities to the UK.
- The growing threat of outsourcing to Asia, particularly India, which has a large pool of low cost, well educated English-speaking labour.
- Despite the fact that the UK has over 37 per cent of all European call centre agent positions, it has only 26 per cent of the outsourced positions. We need to ensure that the UK is number one for call centre outsourcing.
- Attrition costs UK call centres an estimated £1.1bn each year.
- We will continue to make the call centre agent role only a 'temporary' assignment and thus induce recurring attrition costs.
- The costs of absenteeism to the industry are enormous, around £220m
- Cost of repeat calls and rework to the industry is unquantified but likely to be enormous.
- We may face a danger of staff avoiding the industry due to the working conditions and environment.
- We could face supervisory skill shortages currently faced by the teaching profession.

The Way Forward

The Government has to share some of the responsibility to drive the improvement of standards in UK call centres, given the growth under their tenure. The UK, as a leading European call centre player, needs to play a larger role in driving up standards.

Prit has gained considerable experience in the call centre industry, having headed call centre operations in a number of sectors. He has a track record of significantly improving call centre operations – and has consistently produced excellent performance though his desire to improve people and culture. Prit now focuses on promoting operational excellence, quality and best practice in call centres and is a keen activist in improving call centre working conditions for staff.

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