Call Center Times

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Customer Feedback: Now What?

By Susan Gray, Marketing Director, Mindshare Technologies
sgray@mshare.net 801/743-7554

You are consistently measuring customer feedback on each contact. You're dutifully amassing your customers' praise, criticism and requests. But you know that simply gathering the information is not going to be constructive in and of itself. Your goal is to apply the feedback so that your organization will gain optimal benefit from each customer's appraisal. What do you do with the collected material? In particular, can you isolate recurring themes that warrant immediate action in order to tighten up the service you are providing?

- Is it the speed of resolution? Do customers get tired of waiting and hang up?
- Is it the customers' ability to understand your reps? Are reps trained to offer articulate, clear, respectful explanations?
- Do your reps have the authority to handle returns, resolve issues, etc.? Or do customers have to endure giving detailed stories to several people before mercifully being transferred to someone who can actually settle their particular difficulties?
- Do your reps have the training they need to answer questions?
- Do you know whether certain reps may be creating bottleneck issues?

Gathering customer feedback is not new, however, effectively using that feedback as a catalyst for affirmative change has been a consistent shortcoming among organizations. DMG Consulting LLC's 2008 Contact Center Surveying/Feedback and Analytics Market Report[1][1], stated that, "Another challenge facing vendors is that enterprises are not acting upon the survey feedback that they collect… Making recommendations and guidance on ways to improve operations, policies, procedures and agent performance a standard component of the analysis and reporting would position end users to immediately act upon the information, versus having to first interpret the data and then respond."

Generally speaking, customers want to be loyal to an organization, but organizations can make that difficult by not responding to feedback. The opportunity to learn from customers occurs each time a customer interacts with your company. Companies need to treat these experiences as a valuable asset. Who better to learn from, than a customer with compliments, complaints, and suggestions? Consumers' confidence and loyalty toward organizations is directly related to the specific, personalized responses they receive regarding their feedback, and

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"Contribution to Capacity" - A Transformational Term

By Kathleen M. Peterson

Chief Vision Officer, PowerHouse Consulting, Inc.

"Contribution to Capacity"... I coined this term on *adherence* in the late 90s, almost ten years ago. *Where does the time go?* Recently I was having a conversation with a Contact Center Director regarding the importance of adherence, the measurement of it, etc. The conversation prompted me to think about the meaning of "contribution to capacity" and its conceptual shift from adherence - one that frees supervisors for more valuable activities and makes agents responsible and accountable for their "contribution."

MOVING BEYOND ADHERENCE

Adherence is the measurement of an agent's logged on time, how the agent's time is utilized, and compliance with schedules for lunch, breaks, etc. This particular measurement causes all manner of friction for many Contact Centers. Far too often Contact Center managers set objectives using bad data, or worse, data taken from *someone else's* Center or from some "study" they read. While agent availability is a key success factor, it must be assessed and measured according to the unique attributes of YOUR Center to have any real merit.

When one looks at current practices around adherence, approaches vary significantly. For some it is simply whether the agent logs in/out on time and takes/returns from break on time. This is often done as a function of the Workforce Management System (WFM) which provides real time visibility to agent status against previously established agent schedules. Most ACD (Automatic Call Distribution) systems provide a supervisor interface to monitor agent status in real time and may set a threshold for time in state. The WFM system alerts supervisors to an agent being out of adherence to their particular schedule in real time by changing the color of the agent's cell on the screen or some other similar function. These mechanics are designed to allow management to improve its control of an agent's availability on an intra-day basis (which in turn improves Service Level, Abandon, etc.). Unfortunately, the communication around this particular level of performance is often reduced to treating grown up and working adults to interventions more familiar in grammar school or factories during the industrial revolution.

Efforts related to adherence are certainly well intentioned. *But are they always well executed?* In many cases I believe that there is room for improvement. *What about considering both a name change and a difference in perspective?* Think of an agent's "adherence to schedule" in terms of their "contribution to capacity."

A SHIFT IN RESPONSIBILITY

I coined "contribution to capacity" because I felt it better described where the responsibility for availability really needs to be - *with the agent*. The Contact Center lives by the development of a capacity model that is designed to accommodate the "demand." This takes much time and effort and is a management duty, whether it falls to analysts, supervisors, etc. This takes a lot of work! The forecast must be accurate and the schedules well planned. Non-phone work, training, coaching sessions, team meetings, absences and the like must be calculated, funded, and of course managed. But the key to success is in the hands of the *scheduled* and NOT the *scheduler*.

If your staff shows up late, goofs off all day, or does not show up at all, you will not meet your objectives no matter how perfect the planning process. So of course, agent adherence is critical. But the *breakdown* is that there is a gap between what management works toward, wants, and needs and how agents understand and respond to that need. I believe that "adherence" sounds like something others *make you do*, where "contribution to capacity" clearly comes from the *contributor*.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CONTRIBUTION TO CAPACITY PROGRAMS

Am I proposing simply changing a term? No, I am proposing structuring a program in which each individual enjoys clarity around their role and the impact of that role on the overall achievement of the Contact Center. Here are some thoughts to consider.

Study agent time percentages. "Contribution to capacity" continues to measure logged on time, tardiness, breaks, and lunch. However it also includes how agents spent their time on a *percentage basis.* This is accomplished by taking logged on time and looking for the report that provides percentages of time in state - Available, Talk, After Call Work, and Idle (also referred to as AUX/Other depending on the manufacturer). In most cases, the Idle state can be further deconstructed via

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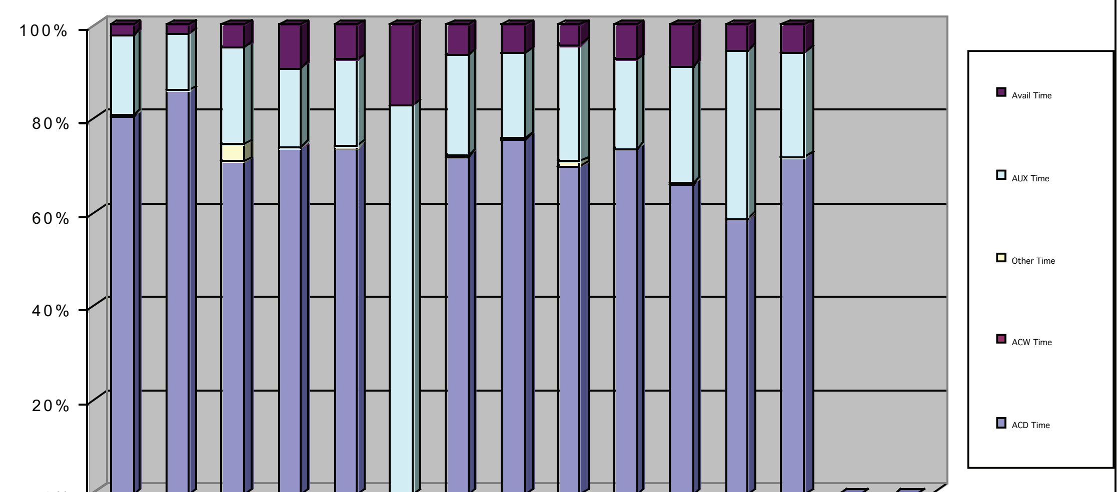
codes to identify time spent on making outbound calls, doing non-phone work, handling emails, etc. Many vendors now have this report as a standard in the ACD reporting package; some have a graphic version available as well.

Below is a sample of this output. This assessment follows the confirmation of on time arrival.

Agent Time % Allocation for Month of June 2009



This output shows that for one team, agents had a bit more deviation than would be expected. It also shows one agent logged on NEVER taking calls. This practice skews average agent data and is not recommended. This also shows only the AUX state being utilized; they have no After Call Work.

Study thirty days worth of data. To establish ranges of acceptable time in state, examining thirty days of data is a far better measure than absolute targets in today's more complex business environments.

Use output from an Erlang C calculator. The use of the Erlang formula establishes a framework for agents to understand. When agents are on the schedule but unavailable, the customer suffers in terms of a longer delay. As well, other team members and other agents now carry a load greater than was intended by the plan. *Agents must understand the role each individual contributor plays in achieving Service Level.*

Help agents connect the dots. Any human being mature enough to be hired by your operation is capable of understanding on time arrival and of managing their time. It is whether or not your message is constructed in a way that puts the onus on the individual to contribute rather than on the system to "monitor" for "adherence." Assist staff to understand the "contribution to capacity" concept. Show them that customers face the same frustration as they do, when as consumers, agents are kept waiting in the grocery line, at a restaurant, etc.

Balance your time in monitoring the queue. Keep in mind that Contact Centers are not baby sitting units. Every moment a supervisor spends trolling the WFM or ACD interface for intraday adherence is *valuable time* that could be spent coaching, evaluating a process, or participating in a project. I am NOT saying that monitoring the queue in real time is unnecessary. I am simply suggesting balancing rather than obsessing over intra-day adherence. Being tied to a machine that sends supervisors in "goose step" to intercept an agent's state is of questionable value. The most insane thing about it is that adherence often doesn't change over the long-term. *If your method for adherence works so well, how come you have to keep doing it? Look for performance plans that change behaviors for the long term!*

Have agents track their own time. Want results? Make agents responsible for a

PowerHouse Consulting, Inc.
360 Route 101, Suite 6
Bedford, NH 03110
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weekly report on their own “contribution to capacity.” You will be amazed how “into it” they will become, and even competitive. Your ACD reporting system and even your WFM system can be programmed to send these reports to individual agents every morning. When you meet for coaching sessions, consider reviewing “contribution to capacity” performance as well as the quality of the transaction and interaction. This presents a consolidated model of coaching to overall performance.

Talk	Work	Calls	SL
180	30	250	20

Reps	SL	P(0)	ASA	DLYDLY	OCC
30	22%	85%	214	252	97%
31	43%	68%	78	115	94%
32	59%	53%	40	74	91%
33	72%	41%	22	55	88%
34	81%	31%	13	43	86%
35	87%	23%	8	36	83%
36	91%	17%	5	31	81%

OCC represents the percentage of time agents spend “utilized” during the sample half hour. Look carefully at what happens to occupancy as number of agents goes down. OCC goes up which means that each person is doing more. Service Level also drops; this increases delay for the caller.

Hold them accountable. All too often, there is a link between an agent’s availability and performance. And actions can be slow and inconsistent. When it comes to “contribution to capacity” we all know that things can happen - 18-wheelers roll over on highways, buses and trains run late, etc. But chronic tardiness and lethargic performance is simply unacceptable; leaders must deal with these issues head-on and promptly. Check your HR policies and make sure that your entire management team understands them and uses them. If you have people with consistently poor performance and inconsistent “contribution to capacity,” set up the “tardy team.” This may seem a bit like the use of a dunce cap. But if maturity to perform is not present, repeated efforts yield no improvement, and HR policies are so convoluted that you can’t fire them, put them all on the same team and see what happens! At least these folks won’t be polluting the rest of the population! Seriously - training, communication, and management practices focused on the “contribution to capacity” concept will go a long way to reducing poor performance linked to lack of availability.

Good Luck! And if you want any discussion or assistance implementing a “contribution to capacity” model to replace your current “adherence to schedule” efforts, just let me know. I would be happy to help!

“You’re happiest while you’re making the greatest contribution.” Robert F. Kennedy

(#31, “Contribution to Capacity” - A Transformational Term, October 2009)

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whether or not their suggestions are acted upon. When customer feedback is not acted upon, the disregarded, dissatisfied customer becomes increasingly susceptible to being lured away by competitors. Measurement of customer satisfaction enables improvement. Improvement begets customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction impels loyalty. And loyalty is a time-tested foundation for increasing revenues and escalating your reputation.

Accordingly, a Fortune 500 telecommunications company, utilizing a customer feedback system from Mindshare, reported being able to increase their first call resolution by 25% in a ten-month period. The Mindshare system sends out reports to key managers who can then listen to verbatim voice comments [immediately after the contact]. Such a tool gave them the ability to swiftly pinpoint areas where training and agent knowledge were lacking as well as the insight they needed to launch immediate resolutions. Over time, this example clearly shows that continuously measuring customer response can help by minimizing weaknesses, emphasizing strengths, and gaining customer loyalty which, by the way, can engender employee loyalty. This culminates in improved sales, productivity, and profitability as well as repeat business.

An immediately useful feedback system must have certain key components that allow easy access to data so that managers can quickly respond and use the feedback to their organization's timely benefit. Some things to look for when evaluating an effective, cutting-edge feedback system would be:

- Real-time customer feedback with access to verbatim comments
- Clear, concise web reports by agent and team
- Manager call backs, alerts
- Incident/call-back tracking
- Customization to your organization's needs and culture
- Hosted; no software or hardware to install

The implementation of those key components needs to be followed up with **action**, in accordance with the information they yield.

Interestingly, social media has added a whole dimension of new considerations and perspective to call centers. Among their cyber pages, are numerous posts detailing poor customer service. Recently one blogger wrote about his unsuccessful attempt at getting an issue resolved through a call center. This example was published in at least three newsletters, and this sort of viral spreading of negative opinions is not untypical. On the other hand, such media sources can certainly have their hopeful, constructive uses as well.

SmartMoney[2][2] recently reported that, "Comcast, JetBlue and UPS have found a new use for Twitter: customer service." These companies are leading the charge for a new evolution of customer feedback. Still, the sum and substance will be determined by the action taken once customer evaluations are in hand.

1 - DMG Consulting LLC's 2008 Contact Center Surveying/Feedback and Analytics Market Report
2 – SmartMoney, October 12, 2009 "Want Customer Service? Complain on Twitter

###

Are You Delivering on Your Brand Promise? Six Strategies to Align your Customer Experiences with Customer Expectations

By Diane Berenbaum

A well-designed customer experience means aligning every point of customer contact, every "touchpoint," with the brand promise. Many companies tout the uniqueness of their brand, but fail to consistently deliver on their promise. Expectations are then dashed and the brand erodes over time, as customers have a multitude of other options to consider.

Lippincott Mercer, a leading brand strategy consultancy, says that the brand is transmitted in every interaction with customers over the lifetime of the relationship. And, they found that human interactions have the greatest impact on how a customer feels about a brand.

Consider my recent interactions with one of the top brands of electric garage door openers. We lost one of our very old door openers, which we obtained 18 years ago, and needed a replacement. Here are a few touchpoints of our journey and their impact on our experience and impression of the brand.

A Website with a Clear Brand Promise and Values

Their stated brand promise was very reassuring: "*From the doors on Fort Knox to the doors on your home, it is our ribbon commitment to provide you with expert consulting, installation, and service. It's a total package we offer all wrapped up in a big red ribbon.*"

I was pleased to see that their stated corporate values aligned with their promise:

Customers: It is our business to provide for the needs of our customers and to strive for 100% satisfaction, in our attitude and in spirit.

Integrity: Always do what is right and conduct ourselves as professionals.

Communication: Create an atmosphere of open, consistent, two-way communication.

After this first touchpoint, I felt confident they would replace my old opener and treat me with respect in the process.

Follow-up Call Fails to Deliver

My plan was to pick up the opener the next day, so I called to ask about the company's business hours. The associate replied, "We are open Monday through Friday from 8 to 5". When I replied, "Hmm...I have a hectic work schedule. So you're not open after 5 any day this week?" She said, louder…and faster," We are open Monday through Friday from 8 to 5", as if saying it louder and faster would help. It didn't help me, nor did it help the brand. No alignment there.

A Discouraging Visit

My face-to-face interaction with the company cast further doubt on their promise. Arriving at their office at 8:00 AM the next morning, I could tell immediately who "she" was—the one I spoke to the night before. I knew it was "her," by her body language and facial expression. She was on the phone and had a look like I was an "interruption." I was looking at her with a very genuine, "Will anyone help me?" look. After all, I needed to get to work.

After telling her that my husband obtained the part number we needed, she replied, "If I didn't talk to you then I can't help you. Usually when I deal with a customer I have all the information I need and have all the paperwork ready. I can't be sure of what you need."

That was clear…and an understatement.

Associates Focused on Themselves, Not the Customer

Another associate walked into the lobby, talking rather loudly on his cell phone. This got on the nerves of another employee who looked directly at me and proclaimed that people shouldn't talk on their cell phones in the office. He proceeded to tell me that it is rude and *he tells any customer or vendor to leave if they start talking on their cell phones*! (I was glad I wasn't talking on my cell phone at the time!) He shook his head and then mumbled about the rudeness of his associates.

Clearly, some touchpoints with this company chipped away at the credibility of their stated promise.

Are these brand disconnects happening in your organization? Research shows we stay with a company that delivers an experience that matches our expectations and their promise. And you can understand why we stray, rather than stay, from the example I shared.

Six Strategies to Ensure Brand Alignment and Customer Loyalty

1. ***Determine the touchpoints of your brand—from the first contact to after-sales service***

   Plot them out so you capture the sequence of events and every possible contact point in every channel of interaction and in every stage of the buying process. Keep in mind that the customer experience often continues long after someone leaves a store or even a website.

2. ***Analyze how well your organization is delivering on your promise in each touchpoint***

   Identify gaps as well as any barriers to delivering on your promise, such as the most prevalent identified by Lippincott Mercer:

- Inadequate staffing and training
- Inefficient business processes
- Lack of timely and complete information
- Misaligned incentives and rewards
- Poor communication with associates and customers

1. ***Seek input and feedback from customers***

Customer input will help you further define the gap between your stated promise and the ideal customer experience. Once you obtain this feedback, align your people, processes, and products/services with the needs and expectations of your customers. Continue to seek feedback to stay attuned to their ever-changing needs, particularly in these shifting economic times.

2. ***Focus on those touchpoints that have the greatest impact***

Lippincott Mercer found that human interactions have the greatest potential for delight—and problem resolution and customer service are the top touchpoints for improving customer perception. Provide associates with a quality standard for these priority contacts, then provide training and coaching to ensure the consistent delivery of that standard.

Interestingly, they also found that electronic interactions do not delight customers, but they have a great potential to destroy brand equity. So think first before replacing people with technology. It may help efficiency, but it could hurt brand equity.

3. ***Engage your associates in the process***

They are the true keepers of your brand. Ask for their input on how to delight customers and encourage their creativity and initiative. Focus on their continued development and find ways to empower and reward them to model the standard in every contact. Employee commitment and engagement will have a quantifiable impact on the customer experience.

4. ***Assess and reassess***

Many organizations

believe they are delivering a "superior customer experience," yet often only a small percentage of their customers give them this rating. Our perception may not be reality, which means it is important to objectively evaluate your progress on each of the identified gaps. Use customer feedback to determine if changes are needed in products, processes and people.

You may also need to refine your assessment process along the way to include new variables identified in customer satisfaction.

If the electric door opener manufacturer I visited implemented these six strategies, I am confident it would open the door to many more opportunities and satisfied customers.

Diane Berenbaum is Senior Vice President of Communico Ltd. (www.communicoltd.com) and co-author of How to Talk To Customers. She can be reached at 203-226-7117 or diane.berenbaum@communicoltd.com

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October 27th – Knoa -Toxic Technology: How Software Problems Are Killing Customer Experience - During a single customer interaction, an agent may have to access multiple software applications – a CRM application, a "soft phone", accounts receivable, order management, knowledge base, etc. Each agent uses the technology differently – sometimes well, sometimes clumsily and sometimes not at all. The technology itself often presents barriers to agent performance. Attend this webcast to learn how you can identify technology problems that are impacting customer experience. http://www.crmxchange.com/webcast/softwareproblems/knoaoct09.asp

October 29th- Genesys - " Contact Center Metrics as a Competitive Advantage - Transitioning From Numbers to Long-Term Organizational Value" Call centers are flooded with metrics, making it a challenge to figure out which are truly important — particularly since this is often a moving target. Too often, the focus of the center shifts from managing people to managing real-time numbers. Instead, you need to have visibility into the right metrics and use them to help everyone in the organization focus on where to spend more time – and where to stop wasting time. In this fast paced and engaging workshop, you'll learn how best in class contact centers use metrics as a competitive advantage - creating an creating an environment of continuous improvement and employee delight. http://www.crmxchange.com/webcast/genesysoct2.09/metrics.asp

###

10 Tips for Call Centers to Weather the Challenging Economy

Thrive, don't just survive!

By Chuck Ciarlo, CEO of Monet Software, Inc.

In these challenging economic times, every call and every dollar count. We established a list of tips to keep your call center running efficiently, keep service levels increasing, and your customer base and revenues growing. We would like to share this checklist with you and hope it proves to be useful in your daily call center operations.

1. Implement a flexible shift model

As we all know, the number of calls and the arrival patterns vary from day to day. Despite this, starting times, lunch breaks, end times, etc. are often fixed over the week, resulting either in overstaffing or understaffing. That's why more and more call centers switch from a fixed to a flexible shift model. Here is how to get started:

Gradually implement a flexible shift model by introducing it to some of your agents (existing and/or new hires) first, and over time move the whole center to a flexible shift model. This change can increase your service levels by 1 to 2 percent, and result in a similar percentage of savings in personnel costs.

2. Keep track of your shrinkage

Many companies underestimate the sheer volume of shrinkage (paid time but not available for calls). For example, in a 30 agent contact center, 20 minutes shrinkage per agent equates to 10 hours per day in shrinkage. Based on agent costs of $15 per hour, you are losing $150 per day or $39,000 per year. While it is not possible to recover all lost time, imagine you can reduce shrinkage from 20 to 10 minutes, resulting in almost $20,000 savings alone, plus improved service levels. Here is how you can reduce shrinkage:

- Better match call volume with agent availability through a flexible shift model (see #1)
- Increase forecast and schedule accuracy by including additional parameters (see # 6)
- Monitor and improve schedule adherence (see #3)

3. Monitor schedule adherence

Once you produce optimized schedules, it will be important for agents to stay on schedule, taking their breaks and lunches on time and returning on time. Here is how to improve schedule adherence:

- Inform and Educate: Agents need to understand the relevance of schedule adherence, how a mere 10 minutes here and there impacts other agents and the entire call center performance.
- Measure and Manage: Measure and track adherence in real-time using workforce management tools and run regular reports. Share these adherence reports with your agents and discuss how they are doing.
- Provide Incentives:

Reward agents that adhere to their schedule (95% target) through recognition within the team and tie bonuses to good scores. It is also critical that all agents are aware of the consequences for out-of-adherence behavior.

4. Cross-train agents
If you have agents trained to handle multiple skills and use skill-based routing, you can reduce the number of agents needed to handle your call volume. The productivity gain from giving each agent two skills can easily be 10-15%. The importance of multi-skilled agents is that they form overlapping groups. For example, having one group that can handle calls type A and B while another group takes calls type C and D, can be substantially improved by adding a group that is able to handle calls type B and C (or one of the other three combinations). This model provides a lot of flexibility that is especially useful in times of fewer resources and changing call volumes and patterns.

5. Compare ACD logon time to time-clock entries
In our discussion about reducing shrinkage and improving adherence we discovered various ways of improving overall call center performance. Related to this discussion is the topic of ACD logon time. You need to make sure agents are logged in and ready for calls coordinating with the clock time.

6. Smarter scheduling
A schedule driven by

forecast and basic agent requirement might work, but won't boost performance and productivity. When developing your schedule, you should also consider the following elements:

- Include all agent activities: Make sure to include breaks, multiple skills of agents, training, time-off, and a realistic buffer for shrinkage into your schedule.
- Rank your agents: You can rank agents according to call completion time, call per hour or other performance measures including sales and order size.
- Match personality and team: Studies have shown that a good relationship with colleagues drives motivation and performance in call centers. Your schedule should leverage this by teaming up the "right people".

7. Keep top talent on your team

Accommodate scheduling needs and provide schedule visibility to your call center team members. Top agents will be more likely to stay loyal and productive because of their understanding of how their requirements and your schedule can match up.

8. "Check out" your spreadsheets

Call centers that still use spreadsheets to manage their workforce pay dearly every day due to inefficient schedules, overstaffing or missed service levels. Spreadsheets might work for 5 to 20 agents based on a fixed shift model. If you are serious about realizing the benefits of a flexible shift model, reduce shrinkage and improve and track schedule adherence you need a more flexible and accurate call forecasting and scheduling solution. Here is what you should look out for when evaluating WFM (workforce management) solutions:

- Ease-of-use: Using a WFM solution should be easier and faster not harder
- Complete functionality: Forecasting, flexible scheduling, roster, intra-day management, reporting, agent

collaboration and real-time adherence

- Time-to-implement: Get a realistic picture of how long it takes to go live
- Cost: Compare total-cost-of-ownership including purchasing, implementation, internal costs, operations and upgrade and maintenance costs when comparing offerings.

9. Think big for small or medium size centers

It may be ironic, but smaller or medium-size call centers are more difficult to manage because every agent and every call has more effect on the overall performance. If you have a 20 agent center and one agent does not show up you have a "5% resource problem" immediately. However, this is an opportunity for positive improvement such as more accurate forecasting; a flexible schedule and better schedule adherence, which will have a huge positive effect on costs, services levels and service quality.

10. On Demand solutions reduce cost and risk

2009 is the year of extremely tight budgets and the mandate "to do more with fewer agents". Specifically, small to medium-size centers have shied away from workforce management software because of the capital expenditures and resource requirements. Well, this has changed. On demand or software-as-a-service (SaaS) solutions have also evolved in the call center and help you increase operational efficiency without the capital investment, IT resources and long and painful implementation times.

About the author:

Chuck Ciarlo successfully owned and operated multiple call centers and is the founder and CEO of Monet Software. Monet provides affordable and easy to use call center forecasting and employee scheduling solution which includes ACD integration, real-time agent adherence and intra-day management. For more information about Monet Software please go to www.monetsoftware.com. You can reach Chuck Ciarlo at cciarlo@monetsoftware.com or 1-310-207-6800.

###

Assessing the Assessors: Choosing the Right Assessment Tool for Your Contact Center And Using Measurement to Build a High Performance Culture by Colleen O'Brien-Wood, Ph.D.

In recent years, Contact Center Human Resources professionals have suffered a lot of debunking and even bashing. While a Contact Center's culture is usually established in the early days of the company, many HR professionals see themselves as the "culture-keepers" by default. Today, Human Resource professionals are emerging as cultural leaders in the Contact Center's effort to become a high performance culture. Human Resource and recruiting professionals are successfully using advanced statistical methods and science to position their departments as change agents. By strategically partnering with data-driven consulting companies, they can add a new level of credibility to their important work and can use pre- and post-diagnostic tools to measure the ROI of any change initiative.

So where do you start? EQ, IQ, Validity, Ipsative, Normative, Psychometric, Type Indicator, Style, Core Character Traits …evaluating the various assessment tools on the market can easily become confusing. They range from icebreaking tools, like "What kind of dog are you?" to sophisticated performance-predicting psychological evaluations. So how do you know which one is right for your organization? And more importantly, how do you know which assessment company is best suited to assist you in your efforts to turn HR into a mission critical function?

The first step to picking the right tool is to understand how the profile you choose fits into your culture and your existing recruiting and training strategies. A good assessment tool helps your organization recruit more top performers and identifies the training investment needed to turn potential into performance. A good assessment company can partner with you and become an extension of your team. For example, if you're just looking for a tool that can be used as an icebreaker, an inexpensive "Type Indicator" could be all you need. If, on the other hand, you want to improve your Contact Center selection and development and you want to position your HR department as a change agent in the process of becoming a high performance culture, you'll need a more costly and more detailed performance predicting, normative tool that can be validated.

What role will the tool play in your coaching and training system? A good, validated, normative assessment provides detailed output and can serve as a growth and coaching guide for years. It provides the manager and the test taker with detailed feedback. By using a thoroughly validated tool, the HR professional can back up developmental strategies with hard science and detailed reporting. These reports give the employee and the manager the tools they need to self-manage their own career development within the company, thus improving retention and contributing to a robust succession plan. Look for internet-based tools that provide interview suggestions, coaching considerations, matching strategies and details on individual strengths and growth opportunities in their on-demand reporting systems.

Does the assessment company provide free interpretation and support? The most supportive profiling companies look to build real partnerships with their clients. They recognize that their success is dependent on your organization's ability to use and understand the report. If you can't understand the report then the assessment won't do you much good. Look for tools that include easily interpreted "snapshot" reporting.

Can the tool be used as a Contact Center selection tool? If your responsibilities include selection and recruitment or if you want to bring some statistical accuracy into your training and development efforts, look for a predictive, normative assessment. Make sure your profile partner is committed to continuous improvement. If a tool does not predict performance, it cannot be used as a selection tool. The best profiling companies proactively validate their performance predictions and continuously refine their understanding of what ideal performance looks like for each company they serve.

How will the tool support your recruitment and selection system? A good internet-based assessment tool can be used as part of your company's application process. These tools pay for themselves by increasing retention; reducing the risks that come with hiring the wrong person and eliminating wasted time. The world's leading companies are winning the "talent war" by leveraging psychometrics and state of the art technology. Good systems should screen the individual and knock out obvious non-fits. If the candidate passes the screen they are invited to complete a psychometric that provides a report to the manager in real time. The process helps to exponentially increase the flow of available candidates while exponentially decreasing the time spent interviewing and selecting. Only those candidates that would actually be considered for the position move on to the interview. Look for assessment companies capable of developing your career center and that provide complimentary applicant tracking so that you can easily organize your candidate pool and identify your best recruiting sources.

What will you need the tool to assess? One size does not fit all. Trainers looking to provide their employees and organizations with a process that will have a lasting impact will benefit from a tool that measures the core characteristics most applicable to the individual's work. Measuring job-specific factors rather than general variables helps make assessment tools easier to interpret and helps position you as an expert.

Is the profile fair and free from bias? Make sure that the profile you are using meets relevant anti-discrimination laws as well as privacy legislation. Responsible profiling companies regularly conduct research consistent with local legislation and work to demonstrate that their profiles do not discriminate against minority groups when used in the selection, promotion or succession planning process.

Is the profile available in a variety of languages? This is of particular importance to HR professionals working in large companies with decentralized recruiting or in companies looking to expand globally. If you are working with the head office team in Vancouver and the company you are working with has offices in Italy and Mumbai, being able to assess candidates in Italian and Hindi and provide management reports in English and French will be important. The best assessment tool companies store the numeric responses to their tests, not the reports. This means that the assessment can be completed in the candidate's native language and the report can be instantly generated, in real time, in the hiring manager's language.

Will the profile detect deliberate distortion? A good tool cannot be fooled. Some tests will incorporate so-called "lie scales" as they identify those subjects who try to fool the assessment and present themselves in a more favorable light.

In our work with the world's leading organizations, we have begun to see Human Resource professionals emerge as leaders in the development of high performance cultures. If you are looking to leverage science in your effort to improve your screening, selection and training system or position your department as a change agent, make sure you partner with the right organization. The bottom line is to trust your gut and find a firm that you feel you can trust and with one which you can build a real partnership.

Colleen O'Brien-Wood, Ph.D.
Vice President
Professional Services
Self Management Group
416 746-0444 ext:231

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Progressive or predictive dialers – What choice is right for your call center?
By Patrick Conroy, CTO, Callfinity

"This is James Smith. Sorry I can't take your call at this time but if you will leave your name and number, I'll get back with you as soon as possible." That scenario probably sounds all too familiar. There's a good reason for that and the odds are definitely not in your favor. Unless your business call has been pre-scheduled, the odds are only about one out of ten of that you will connect with the right party on your first attempt. The probability improves to one out of four when calling a residence number, but that still means 75% of the time you reach voicemail, an answering machine, a busy signal, or no answer at all. For employees that do a lot of outbound calling, this inability to connect wastes a lot of time. Employees may spend hours shuffling through phone numbers, placing calls, and leaving messages that don't get returned.

Over the years, several innovations were developed to help deal with this problem. In the 70s we saw the first auto dialers. These devices called pre-programmed numbers by touching a single key. Auto dialers and speed dial were for individual use. In the late 80s and early 90s, a new generation of dialing devices emerged that were designed for contact centers. There are currently three classes of large scale automated dialers: preview dialers, progressive dialers, and predictive dialers.

With a preview dialer, agents initiate the call by clicking on a phone number that has been programmed into the dialer. This method assures that an agent will be available if a connection is made. A progressive dialer monitors an agent's status and then initiates outbound calls only when an agent is available to take the call. Like preview dialers, this method assures that an agent will be available when a connection is made, but the timing of the call attempt is determined by the device, not the agent. Predictive dialers use sophisticated algorithms to match agent availability to live connections. Most systems "learn" from actual experience and adjust the call pacing to match agent availability. Since availability depends on the algorithm, there will unavoidably be many instances when a live contact is ready to accept the call but an agent is not.

Predictive dialers are the most sophisticated solution. They automatically place calls from call lists, detect a live answer, and then direct the call to an available agent. Predictive dialers use advanced heuristic algorithms to predict when an agent is available to take a call. The object is to consistently get an answered call to an available agent, thus maximizing agent productivity and cutting costs by as much as 300% by reducing headcount and achieving better utilization of network services.

The key difference between predictive dialers and progressive dialers is the level of certainty that a live call will actually be connected to an available agent. Predictive dialers rely on past history and data inputs like the number of agents on staff and average time to process each call. In collection environments, handle time is notoriously variable. Further, agent availability is highly irregular. Unless some programming action is taken or the dialer is tightly integrated with an advanced workforce management system, the device does not know if some agents called in sick that day, were late to work, or are off on vacation. The predictive dialer will continue to place calls at the same pace it did the day before until it "learns" that agent availability is significantly lower and adjusts the calling pattern.

In business-to-business telemarketing or sales lead generation, predictive dialers are often not practical. The call list may likely only have the main number of a business, not the direct line of the desired party. With a progressive dialer, the sales rep can intercept the call at the auto attendant and enter the correct extension number. If the sales rep reaches voicemail then he or she can leave a personalized message. The downside of progressive dialers is that the likelihood of connecting to the desired party has not changed. There will still be time spent listening to call progress tones and failing to connect with the right party.

However, predictive dialers aren't ideal for every environment. Despite sophisticated algorithms, there's always the possibility of call abandonments because the agent was not promptly connected to the called party. Few business practices are more annoying to consumers than being called by someone you don't know for reasons you don't understand and then placed on hold for an extended period until the agent is ready to talk to you. This is not good business etiquette and in some cases it's against the law. Progressive dialing differs from predictive dialing in that calls aren't dialed until an agent is known to be immediately available to take the call. For business-to-business calls, progressive dialing is the only practical option. In general, the more important it is to connect to the called party, the more advantageous it is to go the progressive dialing route.

Fortunately, organizations do not have to make a choice. The ContextDialer from Callfinity is available in three modes and the difference between those modes is important. Preview mode allows an agent to see the record first then dial when the agent clicks a button. Predictive mode dials automatically and predicts both agent availability and performs optional answering machine detection. This results in a delay between the time the called party answers the call and when it's transferred to an available agent. Progressive mode is a happy medium between preview mode and predictive dialing. Calls are placed automatically, but only after an agent is "reserved" for the call and determines if the person answering is human or not. There is no delay. Both parties are immediately connected.

Callfinity provides the easiest to use telecommunications software, systems, and services to contact centers, service providers, and enterprises. Since 1999, over 270 customers in six countries around the world have selected Callfinity's on-premise equipment and hosted services. For more information about Callfinity, please visit Callfinity's Web site at www.callfinity.com or call (877) 897-2962 (within US) or +1 585-278-1940 (elsewhere.)

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