

Call Center Underperforming? Take a good look at your HR skills!

by Sue Elliott

Call centers are perhaps the most challenging area of an organization to manage. Managers juggle business and operational goals, customer satisfaction, fiscal responsibility, *and* staffing. Multiple systems, long operating hours and complex products combined with rigid scheduling, tight measurement and the need for accuracy and good customer service make call center work stressful and demanding.

In our consulting work we see centers with these symptoms:

- High staff turnover and difficulty attracting staff
- High proportions of temporary or casual workers
- Performance management issues that are not addressed
- Job descriptions that don't reflect the work done in the center
- Lack of career paths or training programs
- Measurements that drive undesirable behavior.

Often, one of the reasons for these symptoms is lack of consistent access to expert HR resources. Even when HR professionals are available, they sometimes try to apply standard, inappropriate, solutions to the call center environment. If that's the case in your organization, use this article to help your HR professional understand what is unique about call centers, and to get an idea of the types of solutions you need help with.

The Evolution of the Call Center

In many organizations, call centers evolved from back office operations that handled bulk, simple processing inquiries. Often employees were sent here when they did not succeed in other environments as the work was seen as low risk and straightforward. We've even seen situations where a manager, who was unsuccessful elsewhere, was put in charge of the call center.

Today most call centers deal with a complex range of products and services using a mix of tools and technologies. Agents handle multiple contact types from phone to email to web-chat, and deliver both service and sales. They are no longer simply processing transactions but are responsible for developing and building relationships with customers. This calls for highly adaptable, skilled, quick learning and customer focused CSRs.

Call centers also offer a number of additional HR challenges: They are often the career entry point for the organization, so there is a high training requirement. And because call centers often have a range of age groups employed, there is a need to manage the expectations of different generations effectively. Job roles that combine sales with service make the design of reward and incentive schemes challenging. A call center may employ a high percentage of part timers because of the complex staffing requirements of a 24 x 7 operation. Finally, the rigors of the call center environment can even lead to occupational health issues from typing, use of headsets, and voice strain.

Given the breadth of these challenges, how can your HR team be helping you today? These are just some of the areas where being guided and supported by sound HR advice can really make a difference.

Become the Local Employer of Choice

Take steps to ensure that people want to work in your call center and not the one down the street. Develop a reputation for treating people well and fairly:

- Ensure that the call center environment is attractive and that all equipment and furniture is ergonomically designed. And that it works!
- Provide additional facilities to make working unusual work patterns easier, such as childcare, exercise rooms, café, safe access and free parking.
- Develop contracts that allow the flexibility a call center needs, yet recognize all employees (regardless of tenure and number of hours worked per week) with good benefits.
- Develop a flexible benefits package so employees can choose the benefits that best suit their needs and lifestyle.

Find the Right People

Prepare well; know exactly what you need. There are many entry level positions in a call center, so it pays to get the hiring process right. Ensure that the job descriptions are accurate and complete. Define which competencies and skills are desirable and which are essential for success in each role. Work with the operations team, and use call center workforce management tools to really understand the work patterns before you advertise. Will staff have to work weekends, evenings, or holidays? If so, how will they be compensated? It is likely you need a lot of part-timers to cover sharp peaks and valleys during the day? Explore creative options that might best meet this need; would annualized hours contracts work? Could people work from home for very short shifts?

Advertise the roles honestly. Clearly describe the job function, the measures, and the work patterns. Is a permanent contract subject to successful completion of training? If so, you may need to offer training at weekends and in the evenings so that applicants needn't quit existing jobs until they know they are successful. Hold open-days at your center early in the process so that applicants can observe the work environment and meet other workers. Develop relationships with local colleges and other potential sources of employees. Identify courses that teach skills relevant for call center roles.

Design a multi-stage recruitment process that sifts applicants effectively. For CSR type roles consider telephone based application screening (also tests voice quality), call center job simulation tools, behavioral interviews, and reference checks. For other roles the mix of tests will be different.

Start People off on the Right Track

While getting the hiring process right will help reduce turnover, call center employees also need support early on. Studies show that more than 50% of new hires leave in the first year. Mercer (2003) shows US call center staff turnover at an average of 33%, with most turnover occurring in the first year. Roll out the red carpet to make new hires feel welcome!

Develop a good orientation process, and have the right people available to provide support and answer questions. Ensure initial training is directly relevant to their role, yet comprehensive enough to provide an overview of the entire center and the organization. Implement a graduation process; only those who pass training should move into the center.

Keep the Best People

Measure and Incent the Right Things

Only measure CSRs on things they can control e.g., schedule adherence, contact quality and accuracy. Don't set measures that drive undesirable behavior. If you focus on number of calls taken or call length, customers may be cut off quickly and treated tersely. Most centers include some team measures, too, to promote a culture of teamwork. Link measures effectively to the reward program so that pay and bonuses are driven by performance reviews and quality assessments, and align behavior with corporate goals. Performance-based pay is a great motivator in an environment where flat structures can limit traditional promotion opportunities.

Be fair and consistent in measurement and performance management and communicate expectations clearly and regularly. Take action promptly when people under-perform. Offer help, coaching, and support; if that does not work consider carefully if the person should remain in the role. Work closely with the HR team to ensure you comply with employment law. In a call center environment if people are allowed to under-perform, others have to carry the load. This will impact morale and may cause some of your better performers to leave.

Help Employees Grow

Empower CSRs to take responsibility and make decisions that drive customer loyalty and satisfaction. Offer them career paths across the organization. Call center work introduces employees to a wide range of company products and services, which is valuable background for other areas of the company. Call centers with flat structures may need to think in terms of skill paths as well as career paths. This means looking at ways to recognize and reward staff for acquiring additional skills and knowledge within their role. Examples are paying extra to staff who have second language skills, can handle multiple media types, or increase their product knowledge. Identify CSRs who are especially good at coaching others, or being the local expert on that tricky new product, and provide ways they can assist others.

Train Them on the Skills and Tools they Need

Training and development is a key to retention. To maintain consistency and standards, mass training is important to get new CSRs grounded in the basics. After that, ongoing training can be very important. A Merchants Benchmarking Study, 2003, shows that call centers spend an average of 6-8 hrs per month coaching each established employee. Some of that training can be in a group environment. But, also consider one-on-one coaching to hone skills and provide on-the-spot suggestions.

For formal training, call centers need help from training professionals to develop and deliver training using a mix of approaches; online learning modules, classroom sessions, role-plays etc. Some centers link training modules to external qualifications so that employees see their investment in learning as beneficial to their resumes. In addition to job skills and knowledge, some call centers include ergonomics training to avoid repetitive stress injuries (LL Bean schedules 5 minute stretch breaks for employees).

Summary

There are many ways that HR affects call center success. Use this article to work with your HR advisor and enlist their support so that they can help you by being available, informed and flexible!

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