

A Better Way of Thinking about Information Technology

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Without Information Technology (IT), no call centres. But does that mean IT is always beneficial? The simple answer is no. In many ways IT can be a significant cause of costs in Call Centres.

The Call Centre needs technology for routing - no routing, no call centre. But even this apparent benefit is no more than a feature. Managers rarely seem to ask 'when is basic call routing not a benefit?' One answer is when continuity is required. Perhaps because they recognised this, managers of a blue-chip Call Centre invested in CLI to route the caller to the same agent that he or she was speaking to previously, if the customer called back within twenty four hours. Nobody, least of all the IT consultants, asked what the probability was of an agent being available when the call came through. It was a wasted investment.

Managers are, it seems, easily persuaded of the benefits of technology, for example CTI, for up selling, cross selling and so on. When the solutions are installed sometimes call duration suffers and the ability to service customers diminishes.

In many Call Centres I have witnessed expensive failure of IT projects - in the worst cases they fail to work, more often they fail to deliver the promised benefits. There is a simple procedure that managers rarely follow and I recommend it to anyone who is going to invest in IT.

It goes like this: Understand, improve, ask if IT can further improve.

Understand

Work first to understand the 'what and why' of performance as a system. For example, if you want to improve sales or service, get a thorough understanding of the 'what and why' of current sales or service performance as a system. In simple terms this means look outside-in and end to end; find out about performance versus purpose, establish what we systems thinkers call current capability, what is being predictably achieved, and then look for waste and the causes of waste.

Improve

If you have done a good job in understanding you should be able to improve performance by cutting out waste, re-designing to do the value work or whatever. The consequences will be an improvement in sales or service - and without any investment in IT.

Ask 'can IT further improve this process or system?'

Now and only now should you ask about IT; to ask if IT can improve the way the work works from a position of knowledge about the work leads to prediction about what benefits IT solutions will bring to the way the work works.

The result is always less investment in IT and much more value from it - IT then truly improves performance. IT is 'pulled' into the work rather than dictating, 'pushing' the way work works.

But why don't Call Centre managers work this way? Because IT functionality leads the design and management of work in a Call Centre. The continual innovations in IT functionality are assumed by IT consultants and managers alike to be beneficial in terms of their impact on performance. Features are assumed to be benefits.

Managers are persuaded that features will be benefits because, generally speaking, the IT changes fit with their current views regarding the design and management of Call Centre work (see the first article in this series). For example managers are persuaded that new developments in IT routing technology will lead to the reduction in costs of call handling - but that can only be true when managers know why customers call in from their point of view.

Similarly, when managers see the potential benefits of tools like CTI and CLI for up selling and cross selling, they do not assess the same from an understanding of why customers call in. If they first established the truth of their sales or service flows they would be able to predict the value of IT in improving performance.

The value of IT should first be questioned from a thorough understanding of the 'what and why' of current performance, something Call Centre managers can only achieve through first taking a systems perspective. And that starts with looking at the Call Centre from the customers' point of view.

In the next and final article in this series, John Seddon talks about the better way to think about the design and management of work in the Call Centre

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