

Bad Call Centre Advice

Commerce Magazine published two short articles on solving call centre problems. Here I repeat the articles and comment on them.

Call centres could become 'hotbeds of dissent'

Coercive management used in some call centres could bring back the "them and us" mentality that characterised industrial relations in the 1970s. Jane Phillipson, consultant at Hay McBer Management Consultants, has warned managers that their call centres could become 'hotbeds of dissent' unless more balanced and enlightened approaches to people management are adopted.

Phillipson said: "Call centres are becoming increasingly unionised and not simply because they are 'Other new factories'. The issues are not truly around pay but rather in the emotional reward that staff are receiving from their work and, consequently, in any feeling of partnership with their employers beyond the terms of their contracts." Phillipson believes that misguided attempts to boost customer service lie at the root of the problem.

"Initiatives to exert tight management control are being implemented at the expense of staff autonomy and, therefore, of staff satisfaction. If call centre workers are to feel fulfilled by their work, they have to be accountable which, in turn, means that they have to have some degree of freedom of action. The constant pressure to achieve a certain call rate leads to demotivation and real potential for stress. Ironically, when staff dissatisfaction translates into industrial action, these initiatives can end up damaging the very customer service they are seeking to improve."

Call centre management under fire Call centres should recruit 'caring characters' rather than red hot salespeople

Call centre staffing crises and performance problems are caused by fundamental problems in the recruitment, training and management of staff, according to business psychologists Kaisen Consulting. The consultants have published results of a six-month study into call centre operations, researched in association with multi-national clients in banking, retail, telecommunications, holiday and utility sectors. They claim problems of staff retention and poor service quality begin at the basic recruitment level.

Kaisen says too many people are recruited on the basis of characteristics associated with good sales performance - young, energetic and extroverted. But these are the very people who quickly become disillusioned with the job's lack of face-to-face contact, limited variety, rigid performance requirements and poor promotional prospects, according to Dr John Crump, who headed up the research team. "Call centre managers should be looking to recruit people with 'caring characteristics' rather than 'pure sales' men and women. Those who succeed as call centre operators tend to enjoy 'helping people' - even in thankless situations, are not competitive by nature, use common sense, appreciate structure to their jobs and clearly defined parameters by which they can measure their own performance."

Kaisen also recommends testing potential recruits for their ability to 'multi-task' - a skill which they say is crucial for call centre employees yet rarely appears on interviewers' lists of pre-requisites. Traditionally, the best operators are made into team managers, but this, too, is a mistake, according to Crump. "Those who flourish as operators rarely make good team managers because they don't want the responsibility or

pressures of looking after a group," he said. "And team managers need to have a nurturing or coaching quality which enables them to bring out the best in the group."

Training also comes in for heavy criticism, with the modular, step-by-step approach taken by most call-centre trainers shown to be incongruous with the multi-tasking environment of call centres. "Training should be holistic rather than deconstructed elements," said Crump. "Too much time is spent on product explanations, too little on so-called 'soft skills such as customer service. Carrying out training in the context of the call centre rather than the classroom would improve the effectiveness of training too."

It is the on-going management of call-centre staff and the environment within which they work that comes in for the most broad-reaching criticism, however, with technology, performance targets and quality control measures often proving more of a hindrance than a help.

"Advances in technology are automating the job to a level where people are encouraged not to think for themselves," said Crump. "The more a person's work is structured and dictated, the less productive they become. This results both in poor customer service and disenchanting employees.

"The other danger with sophisticated IT systems is the temptation to allow the data to manage the workforce rather than be used as decision support material. There is a trend within call centres to measure activity such as the length of frequency of calls when really it is the output or end result that matters. Not only is this demoralising and dehumanising for staff, it's also counterproductive."

The continuing phenomenal growth of the call-centre industry means addressing problems such as staff retention and customer service is critical, said Kaisen. "The sooner these problems are addressed - and there are relatively painless solutions for all of them - the sooner that call centres can boost their performance," said Crump. "In an environment which is as competitive as this, firm action needs to be taken if companies and their call centre operations are not going to be left behind."

So what does Vanguard think of the consultant's advice?

The Hay McBer report encourages managers to use "more balanced and enlightened approaches to people management". It describes these as serving the "emotional reward that staff are receiving from their work" in order to improve the staffs' feelings regarding the relationship between employer and employed. But what is management to do? Hay McBer rightly identifies the cause of the problem as the way managers control the work but provides no alternative other than an implication to 'soften' or 'balance' such control. Many call centre managers claim to do exactly this. We see large expenditures on 'people programmes' but the fundamental problem remains. These 'people-friendly' call centres are no more than benign sweat shops.

Kaisen Consulting would encourage managers to re-think their recruitment policies. An astonishing finding when one considers the unreliability of recruitment tests. They also encourage managers to buy more 'soft skills' training. I can think of a number of examples where call centre agents are totally fed up with being told what not to say (don't say 'bear with me', don't say 'my system is down') and just want their managers to appreciate what actually goes on in their work. Soft skills training can add to cost and cause cynicism amongst staff.

Like Hay McBer, Kaisen Consulting points to the real problem - the way call centres are managed. But neither offers a better management solution.

The problem with call centres is that they are designed on the principles of mass production. Decision-making is separated from work, managers make decisions on 'production' data, managers believe that the primary cause of variation in agent performance is the agents themselves. Both consultants' reports exemplify the latter assumption. Surprising for Kaisen as 'kaizen' in Japan is based on a different assumption.

The different and better assumption is that the primary cause of variation in agent performance is in the system - the way the work works. Failure to recognise the variation attributable to customers' demands; failure to recognise how much demand on the call centre is caused by the organisation itself; failure to recognise how measures cause agents to use their ingenuity to beat the system, not contribute to it, are all features of a mass production design. Not only is morale suffering, so are profits.

When managers of call centres learn to manage their call centre as a system - managing demand (why customers call), value (what matters to customers) and flow (how and how well the system does the 'value work') - and the measures associated with this method are put in the hands of the people, morale improves along with performance. The point is that the current methods of control are removed, not 'softened', for actually they are part of the problem.

Why don't managers of call centres work this way? Because it represents a fundamental challenge to what they currently believe and it requires a significant shift away from the current features of their IT systems. But they will change, for every call centre that has made this shift shows improvements in revenue, efficiency, service and staff morale.