

AGENT DEVELOPMENT AND QA: WORKING IN TANDEM

BY ELIAS DIAMANTOPOULOS

“The process starts with understanding the customer and ends with how the customer perceives you.” p. 2



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Align your agent recruiting, development and QA processes to drive customer service excellence.

by Elias Diamantopoulos, Ascentify Learning Media Inc.

IN AN INTENSELY COMPETITIVE AND INTERDEPENDENT GLOBAL ECONOMY, CONTACT CENTERS NEED TO RELENTLESSLY FOCUS ON CUSTOMER RETENTION AND LOYALTY TO GENERATE SUSTAINABLE REVENUE AND PROFITABILITY. Research by Bain and Co., found that a 5% increase in customer retention can increase a company's profitability by 75%. Further research by Gartner Group found that, typically, 80% of an organization's revenue stream is derived from just 20% of its customers. The bottom line is that while acquiring new customers is an important driver of growth, customer acquisition costs are five times greater than the cost of generating incremental revenue from existing customers. To succeed in this type of competitive environment, your contact center's "best practices" and systems must seamlessly work together for one ultimate purpose: customer service excellence.

Elements of a Well-Managed Contact Center

A well-managed contact center is a model of process automation, yet getting to this point is not a trivial exercise and the organizations that do this best are driven at all levels to put the customer first. When a contact center is running at its peak performance, things look simple, however, many pieces have to come together to make this happen. Others might categorize things differently or include additional factors, but at a high-level I like to group the major elements as follows:

- Understand to the greatest extent possible your customer's requirements and expectations. This will evolve over time as your customer base grows and your products and services diversify.
- Establish goals and objectives with corresponding metrics to monitor and measure your performance compared to your customer's expectations.
- Translate those goals and objectives to KPIs that span the whole organization so that everyone is motivated to work toward common goals.
- Implement the right communication channels so that your customers can reach you in the manner and method they prefer.
- Streamline what your agents focus on and route issues to the most qualified agents to shorten handling and resolution times.
- Define an agent profile and develop corresponding assessments to ensure that you are hiring the appropriate candidates for your business processes.
- Ensure that your agents are properly trained through continuous improvement programs, not one-off training activities.
- Implement a quality assurance program that monitors and reports on the pertinent elements. Include regular touchpoints so that representatives from key functional areas are able to review the results and work together to continuously improve the process.

The relative importance of each of these elements depends on your perspective, and to a great extent on where you are within the lifecycle of your

contact center. I might be a bit biased, but I firmly believe that continuous HR development and how it interrelates with the QA process is fundamental for service excellence.

Key Differentiators: What Makes a Great Center?

Once established, your contact center suite of products becomes a great equalizer. To clarify, although there are obvious leaders in the industry in terms of features and functions, most vendors offer a common set of functionality for multichannel recording and quality monitoring, call routing/automated IVR, workforce management, customer feedback management, speech analytics, and elements for social and mobile customer service.

While vendors differ in their ability to package these components and the ease of implementation may vary, once everything is running properly the end-customer experience is not drastically changed. Don't get me wrong, without a well-implemented contact center suite of products, a contact center will not run efficiently and you will not be in touch with your end-customer. However, what truly differentiates the mediocre, good and great contact centers are the following fundamental factors:

- How in tune are you with your customers?
- How well is your QA process implemented?
- How well are you continuously training your agents?

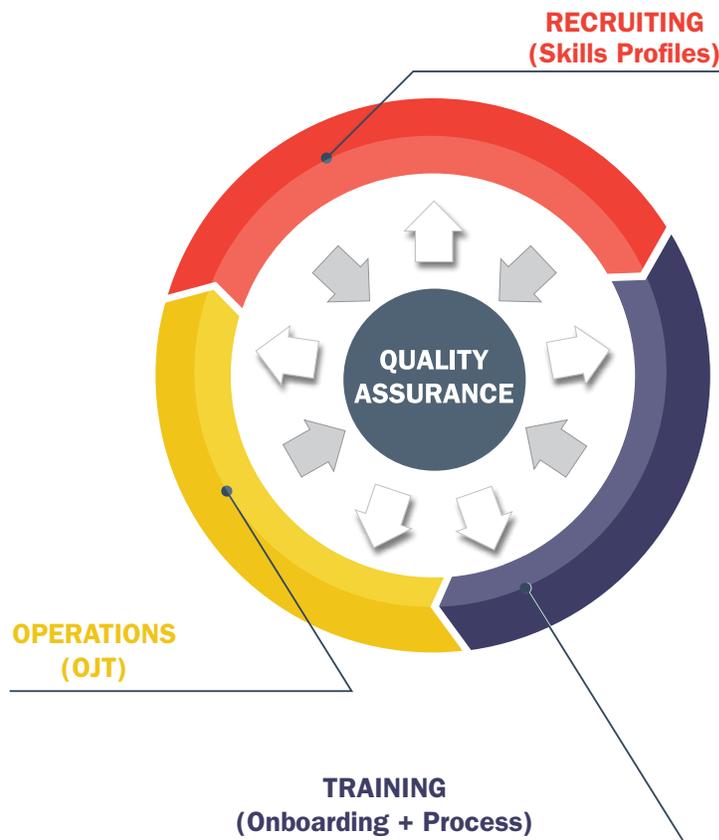
The process starts with understanding the customer and ends with how the customer perceives you. When this is the overarching impetus for your QA process, operational metrics are also improved, which increases contact center performance and profitability. After all, very few contact centers operate as “cost” centers. Unfortunately, what is often forgotten is the need for continuous

CONSUMERS HAVE AN UNWAVERING LIST OF DEMANDS, AND FIND IT EASIER TO SWITCH BRANDS WITH A QUICK SWIPE OF THE FINGER.

employee development, especially when times are tough, as HR training budgets tend to feel the pain first. However, if we go back to the premise of customer service excellence, a well-trained agent can have the most significant impact on customer service. A positive experience significantly enhances customer loyalty, as customers are more likely to recommend your products and services, which is the basis for the Net Promoter Score (NPS). This ultimately results in increased business—either from existing customer renewals, additional sales or net new customers. The companies that perfect customer service are able to grow and weather all kinds of storms.

A Continuous Process

So what do I mean by continuous employee development? It starts at the very beginning with recruiting, flows to



the training department for the initial training, and is ongoing within operations as on-the-job training.

RECRUITING THE RIGHT PROFILE

During the recruiting process it is critical for the recruiting organization to be in sync with both the training department and operations. What candidate profile is required by operations? What does the QA process say about agent deficiencies? What challenges does the training department face in preparing candidates for operations? All these considerations need to be factored in at the recruiting level.

Once the requirements are clearly understood, the recruiting team needs to have an automated way to assess each candidate. It doesn't necessarily need to be full automation, but it needs to remove as much subjectivity from the recruiting process as possible, and it has to enable the recruiting organization to scale its function while controlling costs. Automation at this point may not be a big concern for small organizations, but it is essential for organizations that have hundreds of employees, and critical for large organizations or business process outsourcers that employ thousands. Further, since requirements vary from business process to business process, organizations need flexibility to develop custom assessments that address the specific organizational requirements.

ONBOARDING AND INITIAL TRAINING

The ultimate benefit of an effective recruiting process is that it produces candidates that are better aligned with the training organization's and operation's requirements. Additionally, there is a skills profile available for each candidate as they enter the initial training phase(s), preprocess/onboarding and process training. Otherwise, a poor process results in every group working in independent silos, information is not shared, and overall contact center performance suffers as a result.

An assessment-produced skill profile for each new recruit is invaluable for the training department. From a quality perspective, skill profiles reveal how each candidate meets organizational requirements, gives confidence to the

training department that a quality standard was followed, and helps the training organization tailor individual learning plans where required. Not all candidates have the same strengths or weaknesses, but onboarding programs typically use a "one-plan-fits-all" approach, which does not maximize the benefits of the initial training. If done properly, the operational benefits of standardizing recruiting quality metrics and providing the proper visibility to the training department, results in quicker trainee training times, increased trainee performance, and increased trainee throughput (meaning more trainees move to operations). When trainees are better prepared, they have an immediate, positive, operational impact, and an additional benefit is that early attrition (measured by turnover in the first 90 days in operations) is reduced.

ONGOING TRAINING

Many training organizations place a relatively significant emphasis on upfront/initial training as they are pressured by business realities to move as many candidates as quickly as possible to Operations, but once an agent is on the production floor, training significantly tapers off. Good centers provide some level of ongoing training for their agents, but great centers have figured out ways to harness the results of their QA processes and integrate them within their professional development programs.

For the most part, the tools needed to capture the information and data exist. As part of the QA process, organizations gather overall customer service inputs and individual agent performance data, as well as monitoring calls. Usually, the extreme cases are flagged and the respective agent receives one-on-one instruction. However, not every organization uses this data in any meaningful way and if problems or exceptional situations ("Golden Nuggets" as many people refer to them) are identified, not all agents benefit from the learning experience. The reality is that there are often not enough trainers on the operational floor to provide ongoing mentorship for everyone. Although problem cases are addressed, trainers do not have the cycles to improve the organization as a whole.

Elevating Operational Performance

One way to move operational performance to the next level is to take the QA results and assemble a team of representatives from operations, training and subject-matter experts to develop focused training lessons that can be distributed to all agents in a scalable way.

Using authentic customer-agent interactions to create training scenarios, augmenting that material by highlighting the positive and/or negative aspects of the interaction, along with providing appropriate feedback (i.e., relating to soft skills, product, or process), not only enhances the relevance of training for the agents, but allows you to improve multiple skills at once such as: comprehension, soft skills, product and process knowledge. These training scenarios will help to significantly improve customer service or NPS scores and also serve as an internal knowledge base. Furthermore, these scenarios can help trainees during the initial training phase to ramp-up faster, resulting in additional operational improvements.

We all inherently know that it is the customer's experience that really matters. As such, all aspects of the organization—recruiting, training, and operations—must be linked together through a holistic QA process. The QA process needs to constantly monitor areas for improvement and where possible, flag excellent learning moments. Emphasis needs to be placed on the most significant resource that can positively impact the customer's experience, the agent, and recruiting and training must be integral to this process. The organizations that have an undying commitment to customer service excellence have embraced this philosophy at all levels and are able to grow their businesses in good and in bad times. 🌟



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