New technologies impact people, processes at a call center

5/28/2001

By William Hill and Donna Turnpenny

Technology changes faster than almost anyone can keep up with; and the call center is one place where it seems that all the technological advances are converging.

Companies must let customers contact them when and how they want and still expect the best possible response to their needs. A customer-centric management approach along with offering customers the multimedia options of self-help, interactive voice response, or IVR, Web chat, e-mail and voice have transformed the customer interaction center into a corporate powerhouse for information exchange.

The impact of these technologies is expected to improve customer relationships and employee satisfaction and increase corporate revenue.

Customer interaction centers, or call centers, are spending large amounts on sophisticated quality-monitoring systems that capture telephone conversations, desktop computer activity and Web activity, and sophisticated work force administration systems that ensure the right agents are in the right place at the right time to respond to the customer.

All these systems are integrated using computer telephony integration, or CTI, and customer relationship management, or CRM, systems that provide more and more data to improve agent efficiency and provide management with reports that help them make better decisions.

All this sophistication should result in an overall improvement in customer service. However, studies have shown that the exact opposite is true. Although there are many companies that have implemented these solutions and totally delighted their customers, most companies are not realizing the results they expected when they decided to invest.

Why the failure?

The primary reason for this problem is that while planning the technological solutions, many companies fail to truly plan to handle the people and processes portion of the equation. Agents who usually only provided telephone answering services are now expected to also handle Web chat, e-mail and fax. It takes significantly different skills to type a response than to answer verbally.

Some experts in the field suggest that "blended" queues do not work successfully. The skills and attributes required for successful agents manning e-mail, chat and fax present new skill requirements and cannot be found in the same person. Knowledge and skills differ for one medium versus another. The personality profile is quite different for speaking and writing skills. For example, an extrovert typically excels at handling customers verbally while an introvert is better suited at written responses. This view suggests that only 5 percent to10 percent of a staff can achieve both e-agent and voice skills and attributes.

The other problem is how to evaluate the efficiency of processes that have so many different forms. Old measurements like average hold time, average speed of answer and total talk time may not apply if the agent is also responding to e-mail, faxes and Web chat. However, there is a good side to this because most organizations are realizing the need to focus their efficiency metrics on true customer-centric results. In other words, meeting the customer's needs is more important than the speed of the agent.

Despite all of the sophistication, most call centers are still experiencing the same problems they have always had. The average turnover rate among customer service representatives in the United States is still 35 percent per year. Call centers are still having problems with attendance and adherence to schedules as well as defining forecasts and matching required staff to it. With multiple contact methods it has even become more difficult to forecast contacts since they come from so many different sources.

So, how can call center managers truly realize the advantages that available technology can provide? There are some important considerations that can help with this issue:

1. Don't just concentrate on the technology during planning. Ensure that the impact of the changes on the staff is addressed throughout the planning, development and implementation of the technology.

2. When building a new facility, ensure that staff skills, attributes and knowledge are well-defined and considered when determining where to locate the facility.

3. Invest in training. Cutting cost in the training area can completely sabotage results. Training should not only address the technology, but also soft skills like writing and customer relationship skills.

4. Change evaluation criteria and don't try to use old efficiency metrics to measure the effect of the new technological systems and processes.

5. Get help. Often the managers, supervisors and trainers are not experienced with blending multimedia contact systems. Therefore, they are not equipped or do not have the time to define and implement solutions that will work.

There is little sense incorporating new customer options if processes and metrics are not defined well. It is, therefore, wise to look to an outside adviser who will perform gap analysis, or operation reviews, complete customer satisfaction studies, define hiring and training requirements and put the "change" management steps in place so an organization can meet these challenges.

The right outside help will ensure that the technical products selected truly meet corporate business needs and fit the overall technological architecture of the enterprise with a focus on total customer satisfaction and motivated and efficient staff.

The most important asset in a call center is its people. Therefore, outside advisers must be equipped with more than just technical product knowledge. They must also understand the impact of changes on the staff. With this advice and a customer-centric attitude from everyone, call centers can provide excellent customer service and easily transform from a cost center to a revenue center that is highly valued within the company.

William 'Bill' Hill is director of the Customer Interaction Center Practice at LTC International Inc. in Richardson. Donna Turnpenny is senior operations architect. Their e-mail addresses are bhill@ltcinternational.com and dturnpenny@ltcinternational.com.