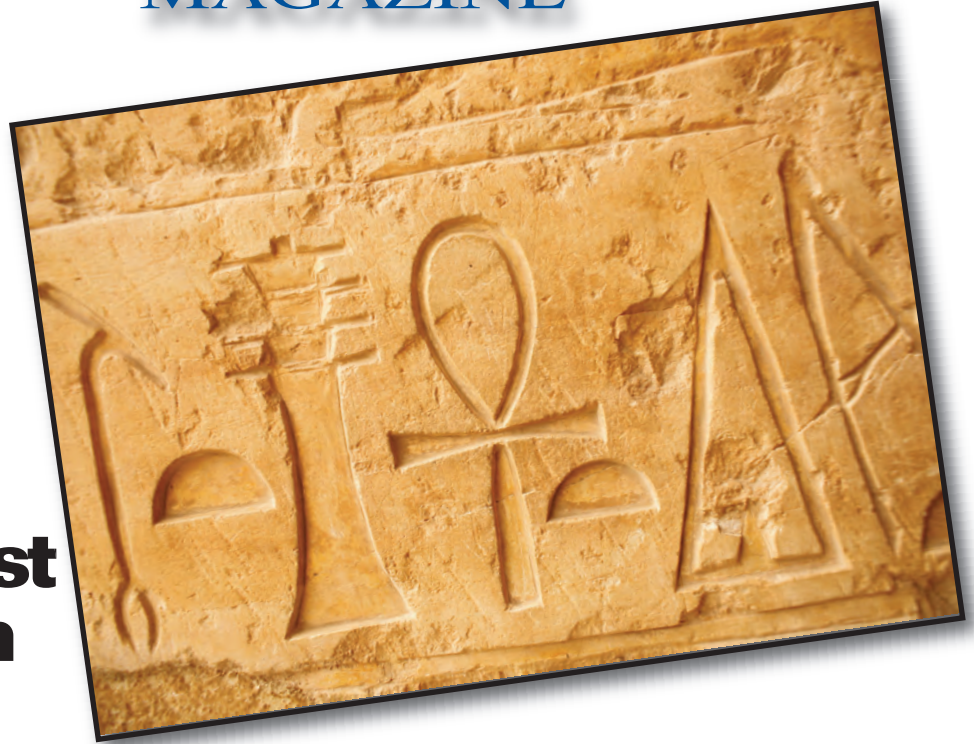


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Don't Get Lost in Translation

By Bryan DiGiorgio

Over the years I've consistently been asked, "What's the most important element for a successful call center operation?" To me, it's communication – crisp, clear communication between agents and customers, sites and vendors (or suppliers), and vendors and clients. You might have the latest technology, the sharpest agents, and the best product, but if communication fails, it can all collapse like a bus that's lost its wheels.

The problem becomes magnified in an environment with multiple sites and vendors, where each might use different terms and definitions, count different measures, or focus on different goals. Consequently, whether client or supplier, we find ourselves in multiple silos with no clear way to determine operational success. Does that sound familiar?

Fortunately, with some effort on both sides there are ways to bring together multiple vendors and sites in a cohesive way to meet business goals. This can be accomplished by focusing on five areas:

- Embrace and enforce consistency
- Set clear priorities and expectations
- Invest in a quality process
- Establish appropriate oversight and management
- Inspect what you expect

Embrace and enforce consistency:

A common issue in a multi-vendor environment is our tendency to use different calculations and definitions for the same term. For example, to me "average handle time" (AHT) means the total time the agent spends handling a customer interaction, including "talk time," "on-hold time," and "wrap time." However, for some AHT may not include "on-hold time," while others omit "wrap time." Therefore, determining a true AHT across multiple centers can quickly become difficult.

Avoid misunderstandings by following industry standards whenever possible. In cases where there is no industry standard, use what's most typical. Vendors and clients need to commit to using the same nomenclature.

Another potential pitfall lies in the difference in supplier systems. Be aware of and factor in any existing individual center system differences when combining and aggregating data. If you don't look at potential variations, you'll never have accurate results.

Finally, ensure that the terms, definitions, and accompanying measures are explicit in any contracts, and be diligent about updating the contracts as things change.

Set clear priorities and expectations:

When a center performs poorly, the tendency can be to blame only that call center. Clients should resist that temptation. In my experience, only about half of all problems are the fault of the call center. The other half are attributable to client-side issues. In nearly all cases, both sides were operating against different goals or measures.

Suppliers and clients must agree on and adhere to consistent priorities and measures, having a transparent, manageable way to measure individual and overall performance. A tool such as a “balanced scorecard” is a good start; however, it can have too many metrics, diluting the focus of suppliers. A better strategy is to choose a primary metric for each individual queue (sales, service, tech support, and so forth) that you assess first. A primary measurement focus for each queue helps sites and suppliers understand what matters most and improve overall results. As an example, measures for customer service may incorporate first call resolution (FCR), customer satisfaction, AHT, and service levels. While all are solid metrics, there is an order in which they should be achieved. Achieving a low AHT and a higher service level, yet not resolving customer’s issues within one call, is not an appropriate focus. To me, FCR is the “primary metric” in customer care and helps achieve the other company metrics. Vendors and clients must both be clear on the *primary* metric for each individual queue, and this should be spelled out in contracts.

Invest in a quality process:

A quality process or structure is an absolute requirement in a multicenter environment. Choose your method: International Organization for Standardization (ISO), Customer Operations Performance Center (COPC), or some other. They will give you a level of formality and consistency for stellar execution.

Two requirements for quality process implementation are *knowledge management* and *process change*. Knowledge management processes and standards are frequently driven by the need for speed, without due diligence given to how document changes are made. A quality document management process must have tight standards at every step – rewrites, approvals, versioning, accuracy checks, replacements, and training.

When you put a process change in place, be sure that you understand the customer or performance implications. Test the change on a representative sampling of customer interactions before rolling it out. This enables you to reset performance targets based upon the changes. The rigor of a quality structure may require a little extra in terms of up-front planning, but it will yield better performance, tighter management, and a deeper understanding of what’s really happening in your business.

Establish appropriate oversight and management:

Achieving best-in-class service requires a tightly run oversight body to view the operation holistically, establishing performance criteria, measuring for success, and providing course corrections. Unfortunately, many companies simply outsource their call center operations with little thought to the glue that holds it together. A strong central command can reduce costs, generate revenue, increase customer satisfaction, and improve overall effectiveness.

At my firm, CXO, we employ a model called the “hub and spoke.” Our team acts as the centralized “hub,” providing the people, processes, and technology to monitor a client’s multi-vendor or multicenter operation, forecast call volume, perform root cause analysis, and provide a central repository for knowledge management and training. Individual suppliers act as the “spokes,” each working independently yet connected to the hub where reporting and analysis takes place. Conversely, other companies choose to develop an in-house vendor management team to serve as the hub.

Regardless of the model, it’s important to understand the roles, responsibilities, and capabilities of each player. Suppliers should be following a prescribed process to interact with customers, measure performance using the previously agreed upon criteria, and provide site-specific data. The central oversight role should aggregate and analyze site information to meet a client’s specific needs. The outcome of this should be “the single version of the truth” by which all are measured and decisions made.

Finally inspecting what you expect.

Once vendors have been selected, expectations and priorities set, and quality and oversight processes established, you need to be diligent about reviewing your operations. Make frequent site visits, inspect the processes, listen to agent calls, ask the management team about the processes used to develop and train agents, and do not be afraid to make changes.

By focusing on these five areas, you can bring call center operations together for the success of all parties. ☛

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