

REDUCING STRESS IN THE CONTACT CENTER

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5 actions to cut stress and retain agents.

BY Dick Bucci, Pelorus Associates

Annette has worked as a customer service representative for Safe and Sound Auto Insurance for five years. Safe and Sound is a web-based insurer. With no local offices, the role of the CSR is multifaceted. She processes applications, handles claims, answers myriad calls and messages, follows up on late payments, and uses her sales skills to encourage renewals. Her quality scores are consistently good and her renewal rate is among the highest on the team. On Monday, she stops by the director's office to explain that she is leaving and Friday will be her last day. Her director asks why she is leaving and she simply replies that, "I found a better job." The director is disappointed, but not surprised. After all, this is the call center business.

For years, experts in the contact world have predicted that contact center agents would decline in numbers similar to bank tellers as their work is replaced by technology. In fact, employment of CSRs continues to grow. Progressive businesses understand that highly skilled customer service representatives solve customer problems and also serve as valuable brand ambassadors.

Causes of Stress

When Annette told her director she was leaving for a better opportunity elsewhere, her supervisor never bothered to ask why she was looking for a new job in the first place. If she had, she might have been surprised with the answer. It is rarely about more money. That ranks well down the list of reasons for quitting call center work. Actually, call center positions pay relatively well compared to other jobs that do not require a college degree or extensive prior experience. Call center work, particularly with the work-at-home option, often provides more flexibility than other positions.

In fact, Annette's problem was that she was just exhausted hearing other people's complaints and feeling constantly under the gun to handle more calls and improve performance. Research conducted by ICMI in 2012 uncovered many factors that make the role of customer service representative highly stressful. (See the Table.)

In fast-paced industries, agents are overwhelmed with rapid changes in products, prices and policies. Responsibilities have grown much faster than paychecks. The easy questions and problems are handled by

self-service, leaving agents to wrestle with the tough ones.

Reducing Stress in the Center

While some stress is inherent in contact center work, there are measures that management can take to reduce stress and make the agent's job more pleasant.

1 TAKE A FRESH LOOK AT QUALITY MANAGEMENT

A typical call center supervisor or quality specialist may review five calls per agent per month. That same agent may very well have handled more than 1,000 interactions during that same period. The specific calls selected may be aberrational or mundane. Agents know this and may feel the process is inherently unfair. Other stressors associated with quality management are inconsistencies in ratings of soft skills and even perceived bias on the part of some supervisors.

Positive steps that can be taken are:

- ▶ Soliciting input from agents on how the quality form should be constructed.
- ▶ Select calls for review based on clear and pertinent criteria.

- ▶ Using speech analytics to monitor calls in real time to check for compliance and courtesy.
- ▶ Adjust the frequency of evaluations based on tenure and past performance.
- ▶ Conduct calibration sessions to help reduce soft-skill rating inconsistencies.
- ▶ Experiment with self-evaluations and peer evaluations.

2 EMPOWER AGENTS

Agents become frustrated when they have to tell callers that supervisor approval is required to make even a modest concession. This inability to solve a problem on the spot negatively impacts first-call resolution. Extending more authority may lead to some mistakes, but the larger benefit is that problems get solved faster and agents are more satisfied with their jobs and therefore less inclined to look for new opportunities. Additionally, concessions can be an important marketing tool. Some high-end hotels empower agents to grant up to \$1,000 of perks and benefits to highly valued customers to maintain the customer satisfaction and loyalty.

3 MEASURE METRICS THAT MATTER

There are in excess of 100 metrics used to evaluate the performance of contact centers and its employees. Only two have been demonstrated to have a direct relationship to customer satisfaction: first-call resolution and agent satisfaction. Contact centers need to periodically evaluate the metrics they use for evaluating individual and overall performance. A good way to approach this is to ask if the metric satisfies three simple criteria:

- ▶ Does it measure something that directly impacts achievement of the enterprise objectives?
- ▶ Does it measure something the individual can reasonably control?
- ▶ Are we confident that the metric is accurate and objective?

4 GET CREATIVE

Creative managers will find opportunities for their teams to relax and perhaps blow off some steam. Examples are casual Fridays, performance awards, and celebrations of important events. Gamification

STRESS—A COMMON CAUSE OF AGENT TURNOVER

	VERY FREQUENT	SOMETIMES	TOTAL
Pace of work too fast	9.7%	38.9%	48.6%
Complaints and problems	7.0%	37.4%	44.4%
Sense of powerlessness	5.8%	34.0%	39.8%
Complexity	4.9%	34.6%	39.5%
Rigid rules	5.4%	28.1%	33.5%
Scrutiny/micromanagement	8.4%	23.2%	31.6%
Personality conflicts	3.5%	19.5%	23.0%

Source: "Contact Center Agent Salary, Retention & Productivity Report," ICMI, 2012

software, where individuals earn awards for accomplishments and learning new skills, is becoming more widely deployed within contact centers.

5 JOB ROTATION

In addition to fun and games, a useful approach is to provide more variety in the agent's work. Why not rotate

agents in and out of other jobs, particularly back-office operations? In a growing number of businesses and organizations, certain back-office functions are viewed as extensions of the contact center. Rotating people through these jobs adds variety to their daily routines and equips them with skills that can help them transition to other positions within the organization.

An Attrition Factor That Can Be Managed

More than perhaps any other class of employees within the enterprise, agents are subjected to almost continuous stress. Punctuality, break times and lunch breaks are tightly monitored. Productivity and performance is constantly compared to others. Dealing with unhappy and sometimes abusive callers is a daily occurrence.

Reducing agent attrition is an important goal of virtually every contact center. Stress on the job is by no means the only reason for high attrition rates, but unlike raising pay scales or improving advancement opportunities, it is one causal factor that contact center management can deal with. ☎



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