

Hats off to call centre agents

By [Rita Kruger](#) 24 Nov 2016

I've often heard friends and family voicing their dislike for interacting with call centres, irrespective of the company that the call centre represents, or if they have the best practices and technology in place. However, I recently had a conversation with my local General Practitioner who had a completely different viewpoint.



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In her opinion, people working in call centres deserve medals for what they do. Can you imagine, she said, how it feels to have your every action monitored and scheduled? Reflecting on her words made me think about the rules and regulations that form part of the day-to-day operations in the call centre industry.

Even if as an employee you are desk-bound from 8am to 5pm, the one thing that you have is the freedom to plan your day. Not so in call centres where your work is scheduled through a workforce management system into 15 or 30 minute intervals and you are measured on your adherence to the plan. Call centre agents must stick to stringent times for their tea and lunch breaks or risk forfeiting them. A quick toilet break cannot be taken unless there are enough people to answer the calls in the queue. Is this something you've ever had to consider going about your daily office schedule?

Already a very controlled environment, the call centre is also heavily regulated by legislation, which agents need to bear in mind while on the job and something which they are constantly reminded about. The Telephone Consumer Protection Act that mostly regulates outbound call centres indicates who agents may call, and when. The rules include no calls to residential areas before 8am in the morning or after 9pm in the evening, and no calls to customers listed on the do-not-call registry. Any errors made in this regard could result in ruining a customer's day and potentially losing them as a customer forever.

As a call centre agent, you also need to be aware of the rules of the Direct Marketing Association of South Africa, the Protection of Personal Information Act and, in the financial services industry, the Financial Advisory and Intermediary Services Act that regulates the selling of and advice that can be given for financial and insurance products. There are a lot of rules to remember and minimal time to interact with the client to conclude a sale or make an impression, so these agents need to think on their feet.

There are also rules and regulations about debt collections, plus contractual requirements. For example, contracts might stipulate that calls be answered live instead of going through an automated system, or within a certain time frame. You must verify that you're speaking with the account holder, and a conversation with a business customer is guided by an entirely different set of rules which are more onerous than the ones for an average consumer.

Added to all this, there are the call centre's own in-house rules, such as no mobile devices at your desk, needing to be at your work station five minutes before your shift starts, adhering to the scripts, being aware of your talk time, being available to customers and treating customers fairly. Feeling the pressure yet?

Let's toss in the "big brother" element. Each keystroke made by the agent is captured on camera. Every call is recorded. There are quality monitors and target-driving supervisors. There is real-time monitoring of each call, and any call that goes over the average duration is flagged.



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Agents handle numerous calls a day. Even on a short call – the average is three-and-a-half-minutes – they need to build a relationship with the stranger on the other end of the line to resolve the query. Callers often complain that staff do not have the authority to resolve problems, but agents are limited in terms of the approvals they may give.

Then you get the difficult customer who will argue with or challenge you, ask for a recording or to be transferred to a manager, maybe even threaten to take the matter to the ombudsman or the media. Unfortunately, there is no response in the script for sarcasm. Language differences can also create a barrier. It's often difficult to explain English business-language terms and conditions so that a person who speaks a different dialect is able to understand.

It's actually a far tougher environment than we give it credit for with long hours, restrictive working practices, close scrutiny by management and high stress for a repetitive job. Do call centres get it wrong? Yes, but they also get it right. They handle thousands of calls each day to serve thousands of customers with the intention to resolve, up-sell, retain and offer.

Next time you're on a call with one of these agents, think about the position they're coming from and how it would feel to be in their seat. I say, hats off to all the call centre agents.

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