

Breaking the expensive call centre cycle of recruiting, training and churning

 [Blyanna Granelli](#)

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There are few business operations that are more challenging from a human resources perspective than running a call centre. Here, at the front lines of customer service, businesses face a tension between the need to keep operational costs down and the requirement to deliver the best customer experience.

Call centre staff need to be professional, well informed, coolheaded, and equipped with excellent interpersonal skills. Yet the drudgery of the job, paired with typically low remuneration, means that most people who take this demanding role are young and inexperienced.

The result is high churn as poor performers drop out because they can't take the pressure and good performers move onto better paid positions with better working conditions.

This cycle of recruiting, training and churning staff is expensive because of the direct costs involved in training new call centre agents. But the indirect costs of less than optimal customer service and low workforce morale can also damage the business.

To end this vicious cycle organisations need to think about training and performance support in the call centre in a new way. Rather than regarding call centre training as a tactical and operational expense, they must think about it as a strategic investment in the health of their businesses.

Here are some implications of doing so:

1. Remember that a call centre is not a military operation

The biggest mistake that companies make in their call centres is to handle their agents in the way they might run an army. In other words, put them on boot camp training, drill the basic processes and procedures into them, and send them into the trenches as soon as possible.

Is it any wonder that call centre operators burn out so quickly when they're treated in this manner? They have no time to integrate into company culture, to learn their jobs organically, or absorb the knowledge being thrown at them.

Rather create a culture of learning, underpinned by processes and systems to plan and track skills development and education. It is far better to make the time investment upfront and reap the rewards later than it is to rush the training. Make

sure that you have a strong focus on on-the-job training and invest in performance support tools to enable this.

Employees learn better through practice and application than they do from having too much theoretical information thrown at them in a few classroom sessions.

2. Create a culture of mutual learning

To drive a culture of learning in the organisation takes more than learning tools - it also demands instilling a desire to learn among employees. A learning culture will help create a safe and trusted work environment - which is so important for staff who are dealing with angry and disgruntled customers all day.

A good way to drive learning throughout the call centre is to encourage employees to share their experiences with each other. This is a form of real-time learning that is relevant, focused and performance-driven. People are not machines; they need the enriching and motivating experience of learning from others who share their problems.

3. Analyse your learning needs

All too often call centres invest in the wrong sort of training programmes and technologies for their staff because they do not start out by analysing where they have skills and customer satisfaction gaps.

A good place to start is by asking operators which training content they feel helps them to do their jobs better and which they regard as a waste of time. Find out where agents feel they are lacking skills and support to do their jobs properly. It also helps to analyse customer complaints as well as call recordings.

4. Don't be seduced by high tech promises

Even now, when the e-learning honeymoon is over, too many organisations are throwing technology at training and education problems when what they actually need to do is look at people and process issues. In our experience, most companies use less than 50% of the functionality of a learning management system because they don't have the data and discipline to make full use of it and because they don't need much of the functionality.

There are no quick fixes for talent management - companies must invest time in mapping out the skills they have and those they need; designing strategies to address the weaknesses; and then measuring performance and outcomes.

Focus on the fundamentals first before making expensive tech investments.

5. Don't reinvent the wheel

It's not unusual for companies to go out and buy new learning systems, content or courses when they actually already have what they need in their businesses. One should first see if there are materials that can be repurposed before developing or buying new ones at great expense. It's important to know what one has and lacks to avoid wasteful spending.

6. Be agile

The world today is dynamic - technologies, customers, the competition and the economy are in flux. That means organisations need to take a fluid approach to solving training problems in the call centre. They must build capabilities to create and distribute quickly to the right people at the right time.

Smart businesses are always looking for opportunities where they can make a big difference quickly. Tackle the 20% of the problems that have a major impact on the business, and the rest will follow.

ABOUT IVANNA GRANELLI

Ivanna Granelli - a teacher by training - moved into the corporate world as an IT trainer at SAPPI and First Paper House between 1991 and 1993. She decided in 1994 to create a business that combined her twin passions for education and technology and established Can!Do with the vision of helping companies to unlock the business value of their ERP systems through end-user training.
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