

WHITE PAPER | MAKE TRAINING PAY

Pinpoint and replicate skills and knowledge to drive the best business outcomes



Executive summary

One of the biggest customer management challenges is equipping frontline staff to deal with the changing nature of customer interactions. Through social media, review sites, online communities and price comparisons, customers are more informed than ever before. In fact, they are often more informed than the staff that are serving them – yet quite rightly still expect consistent and high levels of service and responsiveness.

For frontline staff, whether in the high street or the contact center, it's a difficult and often dispiriting experience. *How do they deal with these complex, challenging, often emotionally charged and technical encounters? How do they access the support, training and knowledge that they really need to be able to cope, let alone shine?*

For the organizations they work for it is a massive challenge. *How do you give your staff the tools and knowledge to respond effectively and maintain or enhance the customer experience, without compromising productivity or burdening the organization with massive cost?*

This is not a problem that can be solved by the traditional methods of people development and training support. The volume and depth of information available is too great to be covered practically in the classroom; and the speed of change is too fast. Instead, this paper argues for a different approach which enables employees to take greater responsibility for building their skills – a “pull” model where they can access the information and learning opportunities they need in a timely way.

To achieve this, the paper proposes the adoption of an integrated skills optimization platform that not only gives organizations and individuals a new understanding of what skills they have and what skills they need, but also supports them to acquire those skills at speed.

The customer is (actually) right

Today's customers generally know more about your products than you do.

After extensive price comparison, studying previews and reviews and scanning the feedback of social media commentators, customers in every sector arrive at the point of purchase better equipped than ever before to ask pertinent questions and make informed demands. *'This is the deal I want', 'When is the fix due for this technical issue? 'Why is that product cheaper elsewhere – and what do I get for the extra money if I buy here?'*

The old mantra that the customer is always right has suddenly become a daunting challenge. They are now right... to the power of ten. From the high street to the contact center to the back-office, sales staff can no longer get by using pre-scripted answers or blinding customers with spin. Instead, this generation of consumers expects staff to know about an ever-greater range of products, issues, applications and services and to engage in increasingly complex interactions. Your employees have nowhere to hide. And critically, where do they go for the support?

Induction training simply didn't prepare them for this.

THE IMPORTANCE OF KNOWLEDGE

When one UK high street retailer analysed customer complaints, it discovered some 44% were caused by poor or inaccurate advice from staff.

Nor is this problem exclusive to the sales environment: it's equally true of service departments, stores, branches and anywhere you engage with customers. When a customer calls to complain, they already know – thanks to a multitude of discussion forums – that they're not the only one that's experienced a certain issue. They may have tried a few solutions already, so won't be satisfied with a suggestion to try online help. And even if they're willing to wait several minutes in a telephone queue, they certainly don't expect to be greeted by an agent who isn't familiar with their product or the issue.

Problem solver, project manager, psychologist: the evolving role of frontline staff

Ultimately, this means that the role of frontline staff is evolving – fast. In any given day, they may need to be a consultative problem-solver one minute and a market analyst the next. In the same interaction, they need to deploy psychology skills to understand and empathize with a customer’s issues, and project management skills to negotiate and then drive through a solution with the wider business.

This isn’t something that can be overcome by traditional training methods. The knowledge required for one interaction – detailed understanding of a particular short-term offer or specialized product – may not be relevant the next day. Customers might be willing to wait a couple of hours for a call-back, allowing an agent time to research the issue and come back with a suitable answer, but they can’t wait until the agent has booked a day off to attend a course.

Evolving learning for these evolving roles

Instead, what today’s staff need are the tools and resources to build their knowledge at their own speed and in response to their immediate needs: online information, eLearning materials, access to in-company experts who can provide a response. They can then check the truth of what a customer is claiming, compare prices and deals, understand differences and technical features – all of which makes for more effective service and more satisfied customers.

Of course, alongside this, there needs to be a cultural change which encourages those same staff to take the time to upskill and find answers. Granted, it might take them away from the frontline for a few minutes,

but if that leads to a purchase being completed, or a customer being retained, that’s money well spent for the business. Alternatively, where staff realize they have a significant knowledge gap, they can then seek in-depth training at a more convenient time.

From the individual staff member’s perspective, this is also more rewarding work: solving a problem is far more satisfying than listening gloomily (and helplessly) to another complaint. Staff typically welcome the opportunity to manage an issue through to resolution, to complete a sale, to build their own knowledge and to interact with other parts of the organization. As a result, the consequences in terms of increased retention are obvious, which also means that the business investment in learning and development is working harder: you keep the skills the company has acquired, rather than seeing them walk out the door.

Essentially, this is the application of agility – something businesses are striving for across the board – to the learning environment. Here, as elsewhere, competitive advantage is gained by being more dynamic and responsive than your peers.

This may seem like a radical vision – a high-risk departure from a tried and tested approach to L&D (Learning & Development.) But take a closer look at the L&D models in operation in most organizations and an uncomfortable truth emerges: most training isn’t working. It’s costly – and all too often it isn’t clear what you get back for your money. It’s generally slow and lags the needs of the staff – when it happens at all. What’s more, throwing more money at the problem (while maintaining the same approach) actually won’t help.

TIME TO EVEN UP THE ODDS

In many contact centers, agents are restricted in their use of the internet. In some cases, they have no access at all. Yet their customers are able to cite information found online – from price comparison sites, say – which the agents then cannot verify or adequately respond to. So why not let your staff take advantage of the wealth of resources online in the same way that your customers can?

An honest appraisal of L&D today

Firstly, high levels of staff turnover make training an incredibly expensive process. This isn't just a call center problem: recent studies show that 1 in 4 workers across all roles have been in their current organization for less than a year. That means a massive chunk of the training budget is spent on basic induction programmes, even where there's no guarantee of the learners staying in post.

Meanwhile, those in the business for longer aren't receiving any training of worth either, so are becoming increasingly demotivated at the lack of progression and investment in them.

Of course, it's not just the workforce that is shifting rapidly: so are the training requirements. New products are constantly being launched, portfolios grow and offers change. Few organizations can develop training materials and courses at sufficient speed; fewer still can afford to train all their frontline staff. This means knowledge is already piecemeal, so it becomes pot-luck whether customers encounter a member of staff who actually does know about the issue.

COUNT THE COSTS OF TRAINING

A retail organization with several thousand employees in branches and contact centers calculated that they only break-even on the costs of adding a new member of staff – in terms of the recruitment process, induction training and the time it takes for them to become 'effective' – once the person has been working for four months.

If organizations were able to keep track of who has received what training and what skills they now have, then route enquiries accordingly, this could be managed. But in reality, the only way most businesses know who has been trained in a specific area is if they have provided blanket training for all staff – training that, for good reason, is often dubbed 'sheep-dipping'.

Underlying these practical challenges is a further nagging issue: the effectiveness of traditional training – or rather, the lack of it. Trainees are enrolled on

courses they can't see the value of, particularly when there is little apparent link to their everyday work. As a result, their engagement is low, they don't have the opportunity to put what they've learned into practice and any knowledge gleaned gradually fades away – meaning all the investment is wasted.

Does departing from such a model of L&D really seem such a risk?

Introducing Competence Manager

What if you instead could gain an unparalleled insight into what skills everyone within an organization really has? Instead of either assuming everyone at a certain level has certain skills, or that skill levels equate simply to what training has been completed, organizations can develop a true picture of each individual's skills level. This is based not only on training courses attended but also includes performance data, manager feedback, results of online tests and crucially self-assessment.

On an individual level, this then forms the basis for staff to take control of their development. They can see what skills they have but also what they might need – either within their current role or to further their career. They can investigate ways to build their skills, from finding and using online assets such as eLearning materials to registering an interest in classroom training relevant and specific to them. They can ask for colleague support, contact trainers, alert their managers to learning opportunities they want to take and continue to measure progress.

Above all, in a 'live' context, where they need information to help them respond effectively to customer queries or complaints, they are able to visit relevant websites, view company 'crib sheets' or product FAQ, and pull the information they need to manage the interaction successfully. They can then build on that with more detailed learning afterwards, while the initial learning experience is added to their skills.

Alternatively, they can look at the skills database and find a colleague who is an expert in the issue – then either hand the customer on to them, or seek their input before answering.

Suddenly, instead of frontline staff feeling underappreciated and under-invested in, they are being trusted and empowered. What's more, they are better able to serve customers and meet their expectations.

CHANGE THE FOCUS OF INDUCTION TRAINING

By providing staff with information on an ongoing basis, that they can pull as requirements dictate, you also reduce the need for sprawling induction training. Instead, it can be much more focused on the absolute essentials – and on showing staff how they can acquire more knowledge and skills as they need them. You can even get new recruits started at home, offering online learning of the basics so that they come to work on day one ready for the detail they need to get up to speed quicker.

Maintaining managerial control

But crucially, it's not just frontline staff that are empowered here: managers are too. In fact, managers retain overall control, even as staff can make more choices. That's vital in environments like the contact centre or retail operations, where the operating paradigm for so long has been top-down and target-driven. While forward-thinking contact centers are increasingly moving away from counter-productive performance measures – the classic example being agents rushing customers off the phone simply to handle more calls – towards more relevant outcomes, managers still want to keep a tight rein on activities.

Competence Manager is designed to support that managerial role – and give managers new tools to improve performance based on analytics and insight. For example, it enables managers to identify exactly what skills gaps exist in their team and push relevant learning opportunities to team members. They

can see requests for learning and factor that in to scheduling, perhaps identifying a suitable timeslot outside of peak demand, or where there is sufficient cover. Managers can correlate their L&D and staff skills with business success – quite simply doing more of the stuff that works and helping their people succeed.

Where there is a need for several members of the team to complete the same learning programme, managers can even schedule a course, right down to selecting the trainer and booking a room. And importantly, they can make sure that those who don't need the training – because it's not relevant to their work or more importantly because they already have the skill – aren't wasting time in learning which is of no value to them.

Harnessing your organization's skills

Once you have an understanding of the skill levels of each individual, of course, it is a straightforward step to understanding those of the entire organization. That in turn lends itself to rich analysis of the link between skills and performance.

For example, it makes it possible to determine whether there are common threads in the skills profiles of high performers. That not only means you can get a better insight into what skills actually drive performance, but also see what training methods or materials have worked best. In other words, L&D becomes measurable.

Organizations can also look at the skill profile of a particular team and see if there are gaps, which might influence recruitment. Best of all, the understanding of organizational skills is linked into the operational Workforce Management, where shift scheduling can make sure there is always an expert in a certain product available – and call or task routing, so that interactions are handled by those with the right skills. That in turn means increased customer satisfaction and increased productivity, because tasks are completed faster.

GAIN A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE ON PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT AND INCENTIVES

In addition to improving performance and training ROI, comparing each person's skills against their performance can also confirm the effectiveness of your performance management scheme. If you're not seeing a correlation between your performance management scheme scores, actual sales or service performance and skills, it could be time to re-evaluate the effectiveness of it. In our experience, sometimes what does correlate to actual performance is a surprise – while the factors you thought affected performance are actually of little consequence.

FOCUS ON THE SKILLS THAT MATTER MOST TO IMPROVE PERFORMANCE AND TRAINING ROI

Correlation analysis can identify the skills most affecting performance by identifying the skills profile of your top performing staff (i.e. what makes them special?). The results can be used to build an ideal skills 'blueprint' which other staff can be compared against. This in turn can be used to build highly effective, targeted training plans that focus on skills more likely to have a quicker and better impact on performance.

Training to service savvy customers

As this paper has shown, the changing landscape of customer interaction is changing the demands on frontline staff. Faced with an army of savvy consumers, the frontline has to be increasingly savvy itself – responding dynamically to shifts in the wider landscape (competitors' deals, emerging product issues, negative feedback on review sites) and acquiring knowledge at speed to maintain customer trust and satisfaction.

In this evolving landscape, successful organizations will be the ones that best empower their people to gather that knowledge and build their skills. It is clear that traditional methods of learning cannot cope, which is why Teleopti provides a compelling alternative.

Not only does it give individuals the tools they need to develop skills and learn new information fast, it also gives organizations the control and insight they need to nurture the right talent, focus on the right skills and streamline learning.

What's more, because it provides a direct link between a person's (or a team's) skills and their performance, Teleopti's solutions offer those organizations a new ability to measure the impact of learning on business performance.



Teleopti, a top, global provider of workforce management software, offers a world-class WFM solution that is sophisticated, localized and easy to use. As the largest "best-of-breed" vendor, Teleopti focuses on helping contact centers, back offices and retail stores improve customer service, employee satisfaction and profitability – through optimized, automated forecasting and scheduling.

Founded in 1992, Swedish-established Teleopti has customers in over 75 countries, numerous offices around the world – from Beijing to São Paulo – and a comprehensive global network of partners. With a record of continuous net profitability for over 20 years and with high customer satisfaction ratings, Teleopti serves as a reliable partner. Find out more: www.teleopti.com