

WHITE PAPER | ANALYSIS AND CASE STUDIES

Making big gains with agent motivation



THE IMPORTANCE OF AGENT MOTIVATION

Employee motivation is one of the most important factors in your call center's success. It directly affects the productivity and creativity of your employees and, if neglected, can be detrimental to both your retention rate and your profitability as unmotivated employees seek work elsewhere and your organization is forced to spend significant resources finding and educating new ones.

The feelings symptomatic of a lack of professional motivation were extensively documented by Roger E. Herman in his 1999 book *Keeping Good People*. These feelings are:

It doesn't feel good around here.

They wouldn't miss me if I left.

I don't get the support I need to do my job.

There is no opportunity for advancement.

Each of these feelings indicates a workplace that has lost its "human touch" and is a red flag for employee unhappiness.

Maintaining high employee motivation is possible if you pay attention to the five main drivers of employee motivation:

I get relevant feedback on my work.

I work in a satisfying physical environment.

I am able to influence my own situation.

I am treated fairly.

I know and accept my work objectives.

If you ignore the warning signs of employee unhappiness and fail to pay attention to the five main drivers of employee motivation, you risk having an ineffective work environment hindered by high absence and attrition rates and, when your agents are at work, poor on-the-job performance. Job satisfaction across the world is declining, having, for example, dropped from 61% to 45% in the United States during the past two decades as the divide between manager and employee continues to widen.

One major cause of lack of motivation is ineffective resource planning, and it affects all five drivers of employee motivation.

INCONSISTENT OCCUPANCY CAN HURT MOTIVATION

Imagine a work day where your call center's staffing is accurate on a day level but less than optimal with respect to intraday resource planning.

There are 230 hours of incoming calls (you have calculated an average of about seven minutes per call) and just under 215 scheduled man-hours. Your service level, which is your organization's goal for how quickly the calls coming into your queues are answered, is answering 80% of all incoming calls within 20 seconds.

The day's staffing might look something like this:

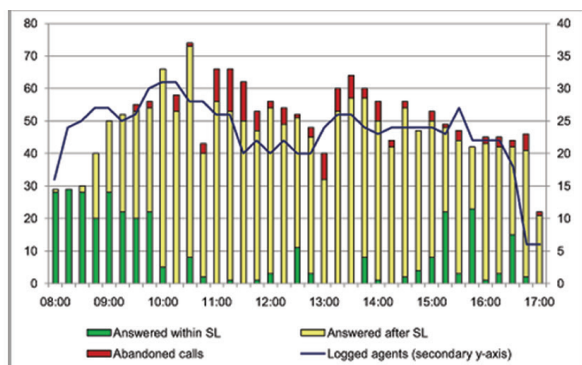


Figure 1: Intraday staffing for a call center, with significant variations in service level and occupancy. The call center has a service level, or call-answering target, of answering 80% of incoming calls within 20 seconds. In this figure, Answered within SL means calls answered within 20 seconds, Answered after SL means calls answered but not within the 20-second target, and Abandoned calls means calls that were abandoned by the caller before any agents was able to answer.

The day averages may look good, but there is another, equally important, dimension to consider: consistency.

A quick visual analysis of the intraday staffing shows us that, despite having accurately matched your overall resources to the overall incoming

call volume, on an intraday level your call center is overstaffed in the morning. The waste of resources early in the morning creates, from 9:00 on, an understaffed situation that persists for the rest of the day.

The consequence of uneven resource planning is an inconsistent occupancy, the measure of how much of an agent's scheduled telephone time is spent actively speaking on the phone. Too low of an occupancy means employee boredom, but too high of an occupancy can cause your agents to burn out from exhaustion.

Inconsistent occupancy can seriously damage your employees' level of motivation. Let's discuss how this might happen.

Unhappy customers make for unhappy agents

Any employees that begin work at 10:00 or later experience very little on-the-job satisfaction. They spend the entire day speaking with angry customers whose calls have been answered after service level and, in all likelihood, close to the point of abandonment. Because calls are coming in faster than they are being handled, the agents have high occupancies, spending all of their time on the phone without a minute to rest and regroup. To make matters worse, they are surrounded by other unhappy and exhausted agents who are also spending the entire day speaking with customers who have been waiting in long queues, contributing to a physical environment that is anything but satisfying.

Lack of control means lack of feedback

The fact that control is lost early in the day makes it hard for managers to give quick and relevant feedback. By 11:00, when nearly 30% of all calls are being abandoned and 0% are being handled within service level, it is clear that there is no time for a manager to give employees any feedback at all without occupying necessary resources

and causing the situation to spiral even farther out of control.

Differences in level of activity during shifts are seen as unfair

If we consider two agents that each work a 4-hour shift during the day displayed in Figure 1, one that begins working at 8:00 and one that begins at 11:00, it is easy to understand that there will be strong perceptions of scheduling unfairness from both of the agents. The agent scheduled to start at 11:00 will undoubtedly complain that she has to work during severe understaffing for her entire shift, causing an unhealthy amount of stress on her, while some other agents get to enjoy shifts that are much less stressful. She feels the negative effects of an occupancy that is too high.

But the second agent, scheduled to start at 8:00, might also complain. He will have a harder time meeting his personal targets, since he works a shift during a period that is overstaffed and will spend most of his time sitting and waiting for calls instead of spending it on the phone, talking. This second agent is experiencing the downsides of an occupancy that is too low.

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Critical understaffing means no flexibility

Finally, the constant and often critical understaffing between 10:00 and 15:00 means that agents working during that time will have very high occupancies and, through spending nearly

every second on the job actively speaking on the phone, very little control over their personal space and work conditions. It is also probable that any agent who wishes to leave the office early or take the day off would not be granted that right due to the detrimental effect it would have on queue lengths for the rest of the day, further denying agents the ability to influence their own work conditions.

FLEXIBLE SCHEDULING CAN IMPROVE OCCUPANCY AND YIELD OTHER BENEFITS

More consistent occupancy values

Flexible scheduling is a great way to increase the consistency of your agents' occupancies. Accurately staffing the peaks and valleys of your call center's incoming volume will lead to more consistent occupancies, but to do this you need to be able to vary the number of agents actively taking calls throughout the week and day. This includes but is not limited to variation of start and end times, variation of shift lengths, and optimization of breaks and other non-telephony activities. Coupled with an accurate forecast of incoming volume, flexible scheduling will alleviate the problems discussed in the previous section, "Inconsistent occupancy can hurt agent motivation."

This may at first seem like something that would hurt your agents' motivation by taking away a degree of their freedom. They might be, for example, used to all going on break at the same time. The truth is that flexible scheduling introduces a lot more freedom for your agents by allowing you to honor requests for vacation, customized work times, shift swaps, and intraday activity. If done correctly, it can be a catalyst for increases in agent motivation.

Vacation planning

Your agents have private lives outside of work and receiving a customized personal vacation

day schedule that allows them to attend a family reunion, child's piano recital, or whatever the case may be makes a strong statement that you care about their health and happiness. Granting these day-off requests without sacrificing call center performance is no easy task and requires the coordination of all of your agents' schedules.

Work time preferences

Call center managers have traditionally scheduled shifts and rotations without listening to their agents' preferences. Shift rotations have been adjusted to incoming volume but inequitably distributed amongst agents or fairly distributed but poorly matched to volume fluctuations. Trying to accommodate as many time preferences as possible for every agent and every day while controlling for shift allocation fairness means dealing with an extremely large amount of data. Fortunately, this can be done easily and effectively with cutting edge WFM technology like Teleopti WFM.

Shift swapping

The dialogue with your agents should not end when their schedules are published. Their needs are constantly changing and an ideal call center will consider these needs, allowing agents to swap shifts with their coworkers in order to adapt their schedules without sacrificing your carefully calculated and scheduled staffing levels.

Intraday management

More accurate, up-to-the-minute information on incoming call volumes, queues, and handling statistics allows you to make better intraday management decisions, giving your agents the flexibility to leave early, take a break, or earn overtime as the situation permits. The options possible for responding to real-time information depend on the flexibility of your workplace. The more flexible it is the more responsive and effective your call center will be.

IMPROVING AGENT MOTIVATION WILL IMPROVE PROFITABILITY: TWO CASE STUDIES

Case 1: Webhelp UK

Webhelp UK is a large outsourcer with more than 3000 agents across multiple locations. The Webhelp UK management team wanted to create a great customer experience and recognized that outstanding employees were the key to achieving this.

Unfortunately for Webhelp UK, their agents were not as motivated as they would have liked. Absence and attrition rates were running above target, and call quality scores were also lower than required.

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After some internal analysis, it became clear that a key reason for agent dissatisfaction was that they felt unappreciated and, in some cases, even completely ignored by their team managers. According to one agent, “My coaching sessions often seemed to be organized at short notice and sometimes cancelled if it was too busy on the phones.” Another agent “wanted to do my job better but there seemed to never be enough

time for my manager to help me improve.”

The real problem was not that team managers did not care about their agents or ignored them; it was that they did not have access to the accurate forecast data necessary to be able to effectively schedule meetings.

The Webhelp UK management team decided to implement Teleopti WFM to plan its team managers’ days. Team managers now knew far in advance what times they could set aside for coaching meetings without having an adverse effect on call handling. Managers then planned coaching days for their agents, seamlessly synchronizing entire teams’ schedules in order to make sure that each employee got the time he or she needed.

The qualitative effects on Webhelp UK’s performance were profound. The better management of team leaders’ time allowed them to provide their team members with more effective, more frequent coaching. The more meaningful and more frequent coaching meetings provided team leaders and the rest of the management team with more accurate and up-to-date information than they had ever had access to in the past. This led to the ability to make better real-time decisions, including better time management for team leaders. The positive feedback loop, enabled by Teleopti WFM, continued.

The quantitative results are no less impressive. Coaching time exceeded expectations, jumping from 1% to 3% of agents’ total work time with no adverse effect on service levels whatsoever. Call quality actually increased, by 9%. With agents feeling more appreciated and receiving better feedback from their managers, motivation increased with absence rates dropping 14% and retention rates jumping 16%.

Webhelp UK calculated its annualized cost benefit for a subgroup of 150 agents to be a very significant \$280,000.

Case 2: CallUs

The second case this paper examines deals with an outsourcing company called CallUs, with 600 seats in two locations. CallUs management had two goals, the first being to increase service levels to 90% within 20 seconds in order to comply

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with customer contracts and the second being to improve both performance and efficiency in order to increase overall profitability. One factor notably missing from CallUs’s goals was employee satisfaction.

CallUs implemented Teleopti WFM in order to increase efficiency and profitability. Teleopti allowed CallUs to schedule faster and more accurately. Intraday management became more responsive. Monitoring and reporting also improved, led by increases in both involvement and transparency.

The effects Teleopti WFM had on the agents and the organization as a whole were unexpectedly ubiquitous and exclusively positive.

The more fair and balanced schedules led to increased agent satisfaction. Schedule adherence was now more up-to-date than it had ever been and for the first time became a relevant perfor-

mance index. Finally, the improved performance management transparency increased self confidence, involvement, and healthy competition within the organization. Quantitatively, yearly attrition rates plummeted from 27% to 7%. Absenteeism was cut in half, dropping from 12% to 6%.

But the most impressive statistics were the unintended consequences related to upper management’s two main goals. Productivity increased drastically from 69% to 85%, and service levels finally exceeded 90%, climbing from 74% to 91%.

CONCLUSION

Agent motivation is one of the most important factors in determining your call center’s success, and high motivation is the key to running your call center with a human touch.

Ineffective staffing can have unintended negative consequences on your agents’ motivation levels, but accurate scheduling, maximization of preference handling, and improved performance management will undoubtedly have the opposite.

We examined two case companies that implemented Teleopti WFM for different reasons.

- At Webhelp UK, the goal was to improve the customer experience by increasing agent motivation. Augmenting agent motivation did improve the customer experience, increasing call quality by 9%. Profitability also increased, with Webhelp UK realizing an annualized cost benefit of \$280,000.
- CallUs’s goals were to increase profitability and performance, not necessarily through agent motivation. They implemented Teleopti WFM and, through increased agent motivation, what they got was an unexpected route to the fulfillment of their corporate goals. Productivity and service levels increased by 16% and 15%, respectively.

Agent motivation is an essential yet often overlooked factor to call center success.

ABOUT MAUREEN LUNDGREN GOMES

Title

Teleopti Service Desk Manager and Senior Business Consultant (BA in Business Economics, Sociology, Statistics and Human Relations).

Assignments

Works with Teleopti products and services for strategic workforce planning within the field of change management. The work covers change processes, organizational issues, leadership, customer service recruitment and much more.

Experience

Project manager, sales manager and product manager at My Travel, Sweden. Together with the management team of My Travel, a British package holiday vendor with a worldwide presence, she was responsible for the implementation of Teleopti WFM to balance My Travel's staffing costs against required service levels, customer demands and employee satisfaction. Since starting at Teleopti in 2001, her specialty is to create transparency in the client's organization and thereby get management and employees to understand the need for change in order to reach

strategic goals. She was the Service Desk Manager responsible for successfully achieving SDI certification for Teleopti, where having highly motivated agents is a great part of the certification.

ABOUT MARITA BILDT

Title

Organizational Consultant (BA in Pedagogy, Psychology and Sociology).

Assignments

Works with management issues at Teleopti. Is an organizational and leadership consultant for Teleopti's clients. Conducts teambuilding activities and gives seminars about personal development, achieving goals and motivation.

Experience

Worked as a teacher at the Pedagogy Institute at Uppsala University (1981-83). Personnel and leadership development for the Defense Forces and Gällöfsta education centre (1984-86). Leadership development and change processes at Digital Equipment (1986-91). Founded Teleopti together with husband Nils in 1992.



Teleopti is one of the world's leading providers of solutions for Workforce Management (WFM) in contact centres, back office and retail stores.

Enterprises across the globe use solutions from Teleopti to improve operating efficiency and service levels. The company is known for developing products with superior technology, based on customer needs.

Teleopti, established in Stockholm, Sweden in 1992, has several local offices around the world and operates through a comprehensive network of partners.

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