

Vetting Call Center People

Before you hand off employees to these faceless service providers, consider the vendors' response to the following questions. Remember, inability to produce the answers usually indicates potential problems. **By Paul Davies**

The ubiquitous call center is probably the linchpin of most HRO delivery models. Technology plays its own special, all-encompassing part, but at the end of the day, when the subject can't be dealt with any other way, hope for a successful, feel-good transaction lies with the human being at the other end of the phone.

And those hard-working individuals have come in for some pretty harsh treatment. Employee representative groups question their professionalism, and those they serve swap email cartoons lambasting their inflexibility, accent, or general all-around daftness. Even the mainstream media jumps on the bandwagon—spectacularly uninformed—to add to the xenophobic, small-minded myth of offshore, low-wage incompetence.

But, there's never smoke without fire, right? We've all had experiences of an eternity of voice-message menus and call queues passing us off to a person who can't spell our name and is interested only in closing the call-ticket double quick. It's got to be a high priority concern of any right-minded buyer considering HRO.

However, root out the racist, protectionist rubbish first. For good or ill, Hungarians, Thais, Jamaicans, Punjabis, Mexicans and, yes, even non-unionized folks from the south of the U.S., are just as motivated and competent as anyone else. So what should a buyer be worried about?

The greatest difference between the call-center human being and the one down the corridor that used to handle HR matters is not the location; it's the fact that Joe from payroll worked in the same department for 30 years and the new kid on the block has not had that many birthdays. How a HRO provider closes this gap is essential to the success of the center.

Crucially, it has nothing to do with the competence or motivation of any particular nationality. It's about the experience of those that the provider recruits, the quality of their training, and the success of employee retention. It's also about the center's tools and management of knowledge (more about this next time).

The raw material is the people, which, unfortunately, is so "motherhood and apple pie" to HR folk that it gets overlooked. Of course, the right questions are asked during the sourcing phase, but they often lack

penetration and persistence.

A useful yardstick is IT. Most due diligence or even competitive sourcing processes include several specialist sessions to deep dive in technology. If transfer of people is involved, there might be similar sessions on "HR Issues." However, the call center usually gets covered with a visit and inquiries such as "What kind of people do you recruit?" Honestly, what do you expect a provider to say?

Subject to laws and good practice surrounding personal privacy, a provider that takes their call centers seriously will know, in detail, precisely what qualifications and prior experience their employees have. They will also know age and service profiles and exactly what their turnover or retention rates are because this is the backbone of the center.

Employee training, especially for new employees, is the lifeblood. So, you can expect it to be formalized, substantial, and planned. A question like "When's the next new employee (or ongoing) training session that I can attend?" should be answerable with something other than, "Oh, we do it on the job" or "We arrange them on an as-required basis." Call centers have significant turnover to require regular retraining.

Where retention is concerned, get the actual weekly figures by employee group over a trend period. The answer, "On average it's about 20 percent per year" isn't good enough, and if trend detail isn't provided, assume it's bad. Also, take an interest in actual salary scales, median point of employees in the ranges, and policies regarding movement through the range. Past annual pay increases, retention-oriented benefits, and notice periods should also be of interest to help build up a picture of the knowledge level of the retained call-center personnel.

Some providers may object to such an invasion into their business or claim that it's the result that matters and not how they achieve it. Hogwash! A manager of a transaction or customer-handling service that believes inspection of output excludes control of process didn't plug in that morning. Besides, after you've got the information, get the provider unequivocally to back it in a way that can be referred to later as a representation or warranty. If coughing up the data got them nervous, standing by it will reveal even more about their experience with training and turnover. **HRO**



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