How to build an award winning contact centre

The People Perspective
Optimising staff performance in the contact centre
Insights from...

Stuart Dorman
Head of Consultancy, Sabio

“We need to make an emotional connection between our front line staff and customers – it’s all about delivering a memorable service engagement”

Lyn Etherington
Customer Services Expert,
Judge of ECCCSA and Top 50 awards

“For organisations, the number one priority is to provide agents with clarity about the kind of experience you actually want delivered”

John Connolly
Head of Innovation British Gas,
European Call Centre of the Year, 2010

“We reward our people for their customer advocacy, and that’s got our agents thinking like our customers”

Gary Fowler
Senior Operations Consultant, Sabio

“For organisations looking to build an award-winning customer service environment, reclaiming leadership is an essential step”

David Payne
Contact Centre & Customer Experience Expert,
Judge of ECCCSA

“Rather than place so much emphasis on the CV, why don’t contact centre recruiters simply start with a telephone interview?”

Matthew Kemp
Customer Services Director, Lebara,
Large Contact Centre of the Year, 2012

“Ideally we prefer candidates that have had no previous call centre experience”
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What would senior contact centre professionals reveal about their biggest challenges at work for the year ahead?

We surveyed delegates at the CCA Convention and have sifted through the data to help us all gain visibility of the trends and challenges shared within our industry.

The diagram shows the main challenge categories identified by the research, with:

- Change Management and Business Insight representing a combined 37% of the challenges revealed
- Technology and budget only accounting for a combined 13% of foreseen challenges

Background: Peer Research on the Real Challenges for 2013
Background: Target Operating Model

Applying Sabio’s Target Operating Model for contact centre performance reveals that staffing issues and agent optimisation remain key concerns, and a major issue for organisations looking to optimise their customer service.

The research shows a significant disconnect between the kind of service levels that customers increasingly demand and the reality being delivered in the contact centre.

Getting the right agents on board and empowering them to deliver remain the key priorities for contact centre management.
Introduction: The people perspective

In this third of four eBooks, Sabio is focusing on the people side of the business, examining the key staffing related issues that were highlighted by leading contact centre professionals at a recent CCA Convention.

Our response to these challenges incorporates feedback from award winning customer service organisations, Sabio consultants and acknowledged industry experts as presented at a recent Sabio event.
Staff engagement

ECCCSA Judge, David Payne believes that it’s really important for organisations to ‘nurture the new’.

Just take the induction process, for example. Too many induction training programmes for new staff spend most of the time focused on topics such as IT systems, health and safety and office admin, leaving very little space for essential factors such as soft skills and the techniques needed to talk with different types of customers.

David Payne, ECCCSA Judge

It’s of course important to get new staff up to speed, however contact centre management also needs to remember to develop their more experienced staff. If all the training emphasis is placed on induction, it’s hardly surprising if existing staff feel less valued and start to investigate other employment options. To address this, organisations need to think about retention programmes across the whole contact centre, as well as more active succession planning techniques.

David Payne feels that existing staff have an important role to play in mentoring and supporting new staff, and that they also can add value by serving as advocates in the community and beyond.

Given that staffing is clearly the largest element in any contact centre’s budget, it’s surprising how little emphasis many organisations place on improving staff engagement – whether that’s involving:

- Getting new staff up to speed
- Developing your experienced staff or
- Developing your team leaders

Team Leaders are the backbone of the contact centre. The fastest and most effective way to improve your contact centre agents is to improve the quality of your Team Leaders – and these coaching skills need to be taught.

David Payne, ECCCSA Judge

Staff engagement is critical for our business – with over three million inbound conversations a year, we see each of these as an opportunity to reinforce the Lebara brand. That’s why we look carefully at levels of agent engagement, and focus particularly on tracking engagement by supervisor or team leader.

Matt Kemp, Customer Services Director, Lebara
Empowering agents!

Empowering agents means developing staff so that they have the ability to deliver excellent customer experiences.

Whatever customer measure organisations use, it’s essential that the focus is on what’s driving those numbers – rather than concentrating on the numbers themselves. For organisations, the number one priority is to provide agents with clarity about the kind of experience you want delivered – and that needs to be reinforced by behavioural training and coaching.

Lebara also empowers its agents to move from basic service experience to the more rewarding delivery of positive customer experiences.

According to Lyn, agents not only need to get the basics right – being friendly, polite and efficient – they also need to deliver on the service differentiators that distinguish best practice contact centre performance, including:

- Empathy
- Proactivity
- Responsiveness

For British Gas, a key part of its Cardiff contact centre’s success was to help its agent team start thinking like customers.

Central to the success of this kind of approach are two key factors – trust and emotional intelligence. For organisations, the number one priority is to provide agents with clarity about the kind of experience you want delivered – and that needs to be reinforced by behavioural training and coaching.

At Lebara we call this ‘experience design’ approach SMILE, standing for the agent characteristics we’re looking to achieve: Supportive, Moment of Connection, Individual, Laugh and Empathy.

According to Lyn, agents not only need to get the basics right – being friendly, polite and efficient – they also need to deliver on the service differentiators that distinguish best practice contact centre performance, including:

- Empathy
- Proactivity
- Responsiveness

We reward our people for their customer advocacy, and that’s got our agents thinking like customers – so we’re completely aligned with our goal of being number one for customer service.

Lyn Etherington, ECCSA and Top 50 judge

Matt Kemp, Customer Services Director, Lebara

John Connolly, Head of Innovation British Gas
When considering broader contact centre performance, it’s really important for organisations to get the right people on board.

It’s surprising how many contact centre operators still begin the recruitment process with a traditional CV sift – without necessarily considering how effective this is as a tool for predictive performance.

David Payne cited research from Schmidt & Hunter, highlighting that the kind of information typically provided in CVs – job experience, biographical data, education details and personal interests – were actually the sort of data sets that were least likely to predict future successful contact centre performance.

Different organisations clearly have their own approaches that they feel delivers what works best for their business. For example, at Lebara Matthew Kemp believes that assessment centres have a key role to play.

Ideally we prefer candidates that have had no previous call centre experience – that way they can begin working in the Lebara way, and don’t have to unlearn habits gathered from previous roles. We also always ensure that our existing agent teams get the final say, as they have a great sense of who will really work well for us.

To get the right people on board, it’s worthwhile developing a comprehensive ‘attraction strategy’, that looks beyond factors such as salary, benefits and working environment to address key issues such as:

- The selection process
- On-boarding
- Induction
- Training
- Transition to the frontline
Leadership development

Research continually shows the importance of developing emotional intelligence within the contact centre, yet too many organisations persist in operating customer service environments where the dynamics are still largely process-focused.

Earlier we talked about how agents respond to positive leadership, yet it is still rare for contact centre staff to get the direction they deserve.

That’s why at Sabio we believe the line manager role is so important in the contact centre – and so difficult to get right.

Contact centres still tend to promote agents to the team leader position, and this role is usually their first management role, they’re inexperienced and they’re often short of role models.

And because management training is limited, new team leaders tend to simply follow what their predecessors or other team leaders tell them. Statistics are often the only thing they know how to interpret and control, so that’s what they focus on.

With this self-reinforcing cycle, it’s all too easy to see how poor contact centre cultures can develop. Gary Fowler from Sabio believes that organisations should start by giving their team leaders some proper training.

Leading vs Managing

There’s an important distinction between leadership and management:

- Leaders do the right things
- Managers just do things right

Leadership is all about motivation and inspiration, however managers just want to control processes – often unsubtly.

How do agents respond? You only have to listen:

- “Nothing’s ever good enough for my team leader”
- “I’m fed up with being monitored”
- “I’m job hunting!”

It’s all too easy to see how poor cultures can develop. Reclaiming the term leadership is an important start in getting a contact centre back on track. For organisations looking to build an award-winning customer service environment, it’s an essential step – particularly given the clear link between the customer experience offered and improving Net Promoter Scores.

Gary Fowler, Senior Operations Consultant, Sabio
Homeworking makes it easier for contact centres to use annualised hours and split shift techniques more easily – where employees need to work more in the busy periods but less in quieter times – and even in two hour blocks to address peaks.

Homeworking can also make it easier for agents to adhere to these split shift patterns, as they don’t have the time or costs associated with travelling to work.

The flexibility of homeworking and hours is appealing for many employees, and these staff are more likely to stay as an employee for longer periods – potentially extending the profit from the company’s original investment in each agent’s training.

Initially targeted as a contact centre productivity measure – with organisations targeting gains of between 10 and 20 percent through the use of flexible working and split shifts for example – homeworking can also play a key role in an organisation’s business continuity strategy. Traditional DR (disaster recovery) approaches are based on the presumption that if a contact centre can’t function, then its operations and agents need to move to alternative premises. In extreme weather, however, this won’t necessarily work, and homeworking can provide a useful back-up.

When Yahoo recently banned staff from working from home, the decision and reactions to it again placed homeworking at the top of the agenda. This ongoing debate has a continued impact on the contact centre, where home-based agents represent a significant element of the agent population, and can deliver major benefits in key areas such as:

- Flexibility
- Protecting investment in agents & training
- Business continuity

It’s important for customer service operations to take full advantage of the technologies and solutions that can help them alleviate pressure in their contact centres. With the thin-client distribution of existing contact centre applications running at less than £1,000 per agent, there’s really nothing to stop organisations getting involved with home working.
Staff retention

When ContactBabel asked contact centre managers what were the key issues concerning them, their top three turned out to be:

- Improving CSAT – 8.3%
- Decreasing costs – 7.3%
- Improving staff morale – 7.1%

What was interesting is that very few managers actually referenced staff attrition/retention as a key concern – despite it being a day-to-day reality for most contact centres, and a major contributing factor to the three issues cited above.

Despite recognised research from PwC into the cost of attrition suggesting that replacing a lost employee can cost up to 100% of their annual salary, it seems that contact centre decision-makers are still choosing to ignore what is realistically the largest potential target for improving their cost positions.

One factor that could explain this oversight is the relative drop in attrition rates during the current economic downturn. While rates might have fallen from the 35% heights of 2008, today’s 20% attrition rate should still be a serious concern.

In addition to the cost of replacing lost employees, attrition can also have a significant negative impact on overall contact centre performance. Factors to consider here include:

- Increased recruitment and training costs
- Increased time to competence – leading to increased transfer rates, queue times and call lengths
- Increased pressure on the remaining team members

This of course leads to decreased staff morale, lower average competency levels and a poorer quality of customer experience.

We all need to do lots more to create the right environment for our contact centre staff to develop. A major focus at British Gas is on encouraging our team members to develop and find a role they love – so we provide a clear progression from Advisor to Advocate to Expert to Trainer Expert to Team Manager. Giving our people a reason to remain engaged has helped lead to a significant reduction in staff attrition.

John Connolly, Head of Innovation, British Gas

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Training quality

A contact centre’s people are its most important asset. Organisations spend significant resources on recruiting staff, empowering agents with the right techniques and developing approaches to help improve staff engagement.

Given this commitment, it’s also critical that customer service organisations protect this asset by investing in the right levels and the right quality to ensure continuous improvement.

Developing your team is one of the key functions of an effective contact centre manager, and that means creating the right training programmes for both agents and their team leaders.

Gary Fowler, Senior Operations Consultant, Sabio

However, it’s no longer enough just to train staff to answer calls and deliver enough service to keep customers satisfied. “We need to make an emotional connection between our front line staff and customers – it’s all about delivering a memorable service engagement that will help shift customers towards more lasting loyalty.”

Stuart Dorman, Head of Consultancy, Sabio

So how do we do this? Start by equipping front line staff with all the information and tools they need to serve customers, and also trust them to make the right decisions.

When you’re looking into the characteristics of top performing customer service organisations, it’s increasingly clear that the best have agents that are able to deliver personalised experiences for customers.

Lyn Etherington, ECCCSA and Top 50 Contact Centres judge

“We’ve been able to establish a clear link between engaging our people with improved customer measures – specifically in terms of our NPS performance, reduced customer complaints and a fall in customer churn”

John Connolly, Head of Innovation and Best Practice, British Gas
Helping you to improve your processes through innovation and technology

With the skills, knowledge, experience and creative thinking of our people, we can help you to exploit technology to improve your customer service.

... brings technology alive for our customers using best in class solutions from organisations such as Avaya, Verint and Nuance.

... has a track record of successfully delivering technology solutions.

... has a unique intelligent approach to supporting your communication technology environment—leaving you to manage your business.

... provides a variety of seminars throughout the year to support the sharing of best practice.

... has one of the strongest and most experienced teams of specialist voice self-service designers and developers in the UK.

... has a team of cutting edge consultants that can help you get more out of your technology, refine your processes, engage your employees and delight your customers!
Develop your employees

To address some of your people challenges Sabio offers a range of role specific, flexible training.

Sabio Training provides a consistent, high standard of on-going education targeted at the use of technology solutions we implement, best practice operational process and professional contact centre training including team management and customer services skills.

Sabio recognises the importance of education throughout all roles in the business. An investment in education:

- Improves Retention
- Aids succession planning
- Increases staff engagement
- Delivers increased performance

Sabio Training has been designed from the ground up with quality at its core. We offer an extensive role-specific portfolio of courses covering the complete range of Avaya, Verint and Sabio solutions.

Each course has been designed to enable learning in the most effective and convenient method for you.

- On site at your location
- At Sabio Training Centres based in London and Glasgow
- Online at the Sabio Virtual Campus

Sabio offers a wide variety of instructor led courses tailored to our customer needs, ranging from:

- Reporting across IQ/CMS/AACC
- Applications to end user
- Train the trainer
- Voicemail courses
- Advanced System Administration
- ACD and Vectoring courses
- Avaya Workforce Management
- Intraday Management
- Customer Management
- Customer service skills
- Team leadership
- Best practice operations
**Summary:** Become an award winning contact centre

By grasping the insight gained in Sabio’s recent survey of contact centre executives and focusing change initiatives on elevating current performance on the specific topics identified around customer related challenges, you can both effectively and efficiently achieve... higher performance

**Increasing customer engagement**
- Improving multi-channel service
- Increasing CSAT scores
- Become easier to do business with
- Focus the Board on NPS
- Gathering more feedback
- Self-service uptake

Then... combine your progress with new focus on the other areas of Sabio’s target operating model and you can achieve... award winning performance
Contact us

Register to receive invites to Sabio Events

www.sabio.co.uk/register-interest

Download more Sabio eBooks and other special reports

www.sabio.co.uk/knowledge-bank/reports.html

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