

Call Center Times

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HIGH VOLUME, HIGH STAKES

by Kate Donovan, Sr. VP of Fidelity
GlobalBusiness at Veritude

Use Assessment Tools to Improve Candidate Selection and Retention

If you hire people for call centers or other high-volume positions, you know the stakes are high. New hires typically require four to eight weeks of classroom training before they can take one call. If they quit or fail any necessary exams, that can represent a lost investment of \$25,000-40,000 per employee. And that doesn't include "soft costs," like lost opportunity, customer service, or morale issues that arise from employee churn.

While there are many components to attracting and retaining top-quality employees, selecting the right people in the first place is critical. The good

news is that assessment tools may help you dramatically improve your candidate selection process. In fact, when tools are used along with a structured interview process and comprehensive training programs, I've seen retention rates improve by up to 100% over a one-year period.

So why aren't all HR and call center managers already using assessment tools? There are several reasons, but the dizzying array of choices is one of the problems.

The "Inconsistency" Challenge

As you have probably experienced, turnover can be low some

months, and awful others. Hiring managers say candidate quality is great and shortly thereafter they say "quality is slipping." Yet your recruiting process was the same, so why the inconsistency?

If you are accountable for staffing call centers, you already know the cost of employee turnover drops directly to the bottom line. For many call centers, candidates need weeks of classroom training, and may need to pass licensing or product exams. In this environment, new employees who can't master the material often need to be terminated. Or, most

frustrating, they decide they won't like the job and quit.

Retaining call center employees takes a lot of focus and the right combination of compensation, flexibility, supervision, and a career path. Typically, an attrition rate of 20%-30% is considered good, but it's not unusual to see turnover running at 100% or more. All the effort spent creating a good work environment won't bear the desired results if you are not selecting the right employees in the first





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place.

So while there is no silver bullet that will ensure every call center candidate will be a perfect choice, 50 years of industrial/organizational science clearly demonstrates the relationship between objective candidate assessments and predicting actual job performance. What's more, assessments are even easier to administer these days now that they are available online.

Balancing the Hiring Process

When you look at the typical components of the evaluation process for call center reps, you generally find three primary options:

- Interviews
- Preemployment Assessments
- Reference Checking

The majority of hiring managers rely on interviews and reference checks to

make decisions. Far fewer use assessment tools. When asked to evaluate each of these methods in terms of its effectiveness at identifying high-quality candidates, Joseph P. Murphy, principal of Shaker Consulting Group, says: "We have to begin with the quality and reliability of each source. The simple answer is they are only as good as the objective data you can gather from them. Most organizations conduct interviews and don't use rating scales. As such, we know companies are not getting the quality of information they could from interviews. And when it comes to references, , the most likely result of a reference check is verification of dates of employment, which tells you very little about the candidate's actual job performance. Conversely, an objective assessment can be developed and validated to measure and predict the

candidate's capability and aptitude required for success on the job."

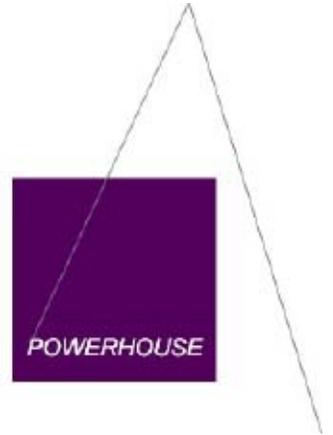
Choosing the Right Assessment Tool

As useful as they are, there's no denying that selecting the right assessment tool requires some careful thought and preparation. While there is a great deal of information available on the Web the most important sources of information are the users' guides and validation analysis technical reports from the assessment providers you will be using. It is important to study the published validity documentation carefully that relates to the specific skills and attributes required of your candidates. It is not enough for an assessment to have been used in a validation study. It is critical that the validation analysis is relevant to *your* hiring criteria. The best way to ensure an assessment

will add value to your hiring process is to conduct an in-house validation analysis. This approach documents both the fairness of the hiring process and the economic impact from more effective hiring.

The good news is that there are a number of excellent assessment tools to choose from—and used properly, they will help you improve the quality of your hiring decisions.

To select the right tool, your first task is to be clear about the job demands. A comprehensive job analysis is the foundation of choosing any assessment. According to Jim Irvine, manager of Organizational Learning for Nissan Motor Acceptance Corporation, "The job analysis process helped our people become aware of the unique differences and skill requirements of each position. For example,



RANTS & RAVES!

Randomly Timed Musings

Gemini - The Twins

By Kathleen M. Peterson
Chief Vision Officer, PowerHouse Consulting, Inc.

I don't know much about astrology, but I do know that in late May and throughout most of June the sun is in the sign GEMINI. I have great affinity for this sign - both my sons are Gemini's. My sister and some of my very best friends are also born under this sign. Space programs, astronomical endeavors, and I suspect even projects have operated under the name "Gemini." The sign is ruled by Mercury and characterized by the words "twins" and "duality." According to web sources, "Gemini governs communications, intellectual matters, and gossip." Quite a trifecta!

"So what?" you say. I bring this up because I believe there is a driving force of duality that Contact Center leaders must acknowledge and act upon: *Vision* and *Visibility*. Twin forces that influence decision, action, and perception.

Vision often emerges as part of the C-Level's strategic plan. Visibility emerges as how you choose to report on and influence the perception of others in and regarding the Contact Center. These dual forces, when combined, create a solid foundation for managing your identity and your operation.

Vision is the *north* on our business compass. Without clarity of Vision we move blindly to our destination. But even when Vision is dispatched from the Executive Suite, leaders must adopt some "Vision Clarity," that is a deliberate effort to *operationalize* the Vision itself. They must identify specifically what the Contact

Center does to contribute to the strategic initiatives of an organization. For instance, organize cross-sell and up-sell initiatives around contributing to top line growth and align all efficiency improvement efforts (process analysis) around contributing to bottom line goals. This involves the Contact Center in shaping and intellectually aligning with the Vision.

This approach inevitably impacts your reporting strategy, the single most influential factor in Contact Center Visibility. If you believe that your operation is all about quality, but report only on productivity, your Visibility will be that of a factory - a cost center - overhead. You will sit among those that fight very hard for budget dollars and may feel more on the defensive end of things than on the offensive.

Once Vision Clarity is adopted, reporting on performance will be more robust and aligned to strategy. Service level will not be presented as simply the achievement of X% of calls being answered in Y seconds. There will be excellence in planning, cross-functional collaboration, effective use of technology, commitment to quality, and a more defined role in shaping the customer experience. And honestly, there will be more fun and creativity.

Bring the dual forces of Vision and Visibility together and you will be aligning with those Gemini forces - communication (what you tell people about yourself), intellectual matters (taking the routine and redefining it), and gossip (what others are saying about you)!

All the best - enjoy the summer.

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many people assumed that the most important skill for supervising collectors was a collections background—and they would hire accordingly. The job analysis process helped hiring managers see that while collections skills were very important, so were skills in budgeting, coaching, and providing feedback.”

Continually Improve Your Recruiting Process

One of the key benefits of using assessments is that you now have a solid platform from which you can improve your company’s recruiting efforts. With an objective assessment, you will begin to gather hard data that you can analyze and use to refine your process, thereby continually improving your accuracy in determining quality candidates.

When asked about the impact of implementing an assessment tool at Nissan’s call center, Irvine recalls: “The key outcome was changing the habits our managers used to hire and promote people. Historically, we had been promoting based on tenure and experience. Suddenly, with the implementation of assessments for promotional decisions, an employee’s current performance became critical—and we started seeing promotions being given to “new” people. As far as reducing turnover, once we started using the assessment as part of the hiring process, our turnover leveled out at 10%.”

Recommendations

Most companies already put tremendous effort into the workforce planning process for call centers. These plans are based on carefully refined and analyzed historical data,

which allows call center managers to predict volume and establish performance metrics. Now it’s time to bring this same discipline into the selection process. There’s hard science that consistently demonstrates preemployment assessments can help achieve a higher yield of more qualified candidates. And without job analysis there is no consistent way of understanding the skills and attributes required by a position—particularly the skills and attributes demonstrated by high-quality employees who choose to stay with your organization.

While recruiting high volumes of employees is always a challenge, with the right assessment process, you can dramatically improve the quality of your candidates and

reduce the tremendous waste associated with poor performance and high turnover. And, when management asks you hard questions, you’ll be in a position to show a pattern of consistent improvement—and back it up with hard data. That’s a good position to be in when the stakes are high.

Author: Kate Donovan, senior vice president of Fidelity Global Business, Veritude
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White Paper: **Brand You— The Personalized Call Center**

by Juli Ann Reynolds,
President & CEO
tompeters! Company

*Through interviews and research, we at the **tompeters!** company have identified many pain points in Customer Service Centers, with the primary culprits being lack of engagement and high turnover rates. In our efforts to aid clients, we have found that our Brand You solution not only increases morale (and therefore reduces attrition), but also*

inspires that “personal touch” that so many call center directors lament not having.

Do you want a transformation experience in your call center? This is not for everyone.

Only companies who want to build strong bases of loyal, profitable customers who are also advocates for the company should consider **BRAND YOU**, the development process that integrates new hires into your brand where they are passionate about engaging the customer. In order to

drive sustainable, profitable organic growth and competitive differentiation, organizations must better align the way they treat customers with their service strategy at each touch point of the relationship, especially those that occur within the call center. Customers’ expectations continue to rise—largely through their experiences with a vast commercial world—but also through unrepentant brand messaging. The key challenge is to engage the call center agent so that he or she is able to WOW the customer—offering the right

experiences at the right time.

The touch point. Call it whatever—the call center, interaction center, the 800 number, the service function—this is a critical touch point where the customer’s experience and attitude towards the company are developed. Historically limited to agents and phones, the modern call center manages a wide array of critical customer interactions including voice, e-mail, online interaction, self-service assistance, and collaboration. The modern call center also serves ‘customers’



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other than consumers, including business partners, employees, and field agents. We know that the call center truly is the place where the rubber meets the road, where companies make or break their customer loyalty in real time.

The modern call center plays a strategic role in managing the customer, one that directly and indirectly affects lifetime value, retention rates, and advocacy through a *Brand You* promise. A personal *Brand You* promise is an agent's individual customer commitment, which should go beyond cosmetic employee slogans and be based on meaningful motivation within the employees' job. To do this, companies must provide each customer-facing employee with a personal motivation to sustain a customer focus.

Gaining a personal customer commitment promise among legions of call center staff is not accomplished by 'force

feeding' them mantras and directives. At the **competers!** company, we have seen that such initiatives rarely succeed. The efforts are often unheeded, and staff turnover rates result in generic, low-impact offerings. A *Brand You* program is required to reinforce the commitment to serve the customer so that they understand the impact of their brand: revenue, company health, and for the agent, a smoother, more effective, and more satisfying workday.

Is there an opportunity for customer experience transformation in the Call Center?

Companies' brand promises often describe the treatment that customers can expect via the call center: happy, helpful, empathetic agents; a caring ear; a concerned partner; a multi-channel interaction with little hassle and a lot of smiles. These images and messages have become commonplace

in brand marketing. Since such basic service options as accessing account balances over the phone or receiving e-mail updates are now expected, companies introduce new services constantly, and customers get used to them quickly.

Additionally, customers' interactions within one industry drive change in others. If a cable company offers help on the phone, why shouldn't the power company? Customers develop their expectations from their general commercial experience and often expect all service providers to rise to the same baseline. Their experience and familiarity with multiple channels and methods of communication is rapidly increasing. Within the past decade, e-channels went from nerd-niche to general usage. Mobile phones went from a business luxury to a must-have.

Executives know that their companies today

are meeting their customers in a lot of different places under a lot of different rules—online, over their devices, through channel partners and, of course, in all the old favorites places, such as over the phone. Many of these interactions are managed by their call center—the primary touch point. So how do you engage agents to greater customer service heights? Create a *Brand You* with every agent so that the call center is not just the default mouthpiece and ear for the company, but a chance for those agents to promote their brand and shine in the process.

Accountability and proof of return on investment will always affect the decisions of call center leadership. In many ways, the call center has always been scrutinized for performance and ROI. Executive mandates to reduce costs and improve efficiency are routine as agents are seen as an expense.



There are calculable formulas for number of seats, calls, and resources, all of which are the focus of reduction, streamlining, or automating. Call Center strategists know that customers know their value to companies, and hold their providers to the standards they proclaim. They want accessibility, features, and flexibility, but they are sensitive to change. This is also true for Call Center agents. They want to know their value to the

company and to the customer. This is the meaning and purpose of *Brand You*. It increases employee value and retention by getting the agent *excited* about being the touch point—the primary interface to the customer.

Brand You is all about changing customer experiences, their interactions, and their attitudes. The transformation starts with changing the agents first. *Brand You* is about emotive

performance; e.g., how friendly agents are, how empathetic they are, how considerate they act, how well they express concern for customers. The brand message that companies blasted through the airwaves may have told of “caring service,” but its execution is built on *Brand You* training. This enhances the traditional tools and approaches to emotive performance—offering greater sophistication to understand the most important emotive events, and then to find

techniques that explicitly and formally address these important interactions. *Brand You* training allows companies to take charge of the emotive equation and not delegate it to the chance behaviors of individual agents.

Brand You is a prioritization that provides companies with a recipe for success: commitment to keeping the *Brand You* promise to delight customers, understanding how an

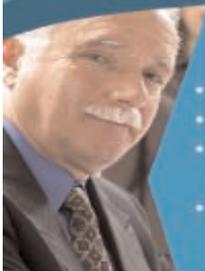
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experience is built, and applying the *Brand You* concepts to improving the customer experience in a realistic operational model. The emotional success of the *Brand You* process is key to leading agents to understand the customers' needs and expectations. *Brand You* is about creating motivations and incentives for customer-facing employees' performances to align to customer strategies. It is about the corporate alignment of the personal interests of employees to job roles and the use of customer-focused metrics to measure success. This leads to customer focused behavior, compensatory consideration, incentives, career path, perks, and recognition. *Brand You* for companies identifies and addresses the personal interests of agents as another path toward sustaining agent growth and commitment to customer causes. *Brand You* training won't benefit all types

of agents, it will benefit the best kind—those who exhibit a passionate interest in their own careers as well as the needs of their customer. For the company, it increases retention among the best and most valuable agents, improving overall call center effectiveness while mitigating the costs of replacing quality employees.
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MAXIMIZE YOUR TIME TO ACHIEVE RESULTS

By Kimberly King
President, InterWeave

ACHIEVE RESULTS BY MAKING TIME TO COACH

Have you ever said to yourself, *"If only I had just one more hour in my day"*? Are you and other leaders in your

center exasperated because your days seem to control you? Do you hear Supervisors say, "I don't have enough time to coach." At the end of the day, do you feel as if you "checked-off" tasks but didn't really make an impact? Effective time management is especially critical to contact center leaders to ensure that enough

time is spent driving change by coaching employees. Here are InterWeave's top strategies for maximizing your time and achieving results.

ENSURE THAT YOUR PERCEPTION ABOUT YOUR DAY IS ALWAYS FOCUSED TO PERFORMANCE

Because of the various activities that make up a contact center leaders day (emails,

staff meetings, team meetings, administration, viewing reports, coaching, etc.), you may often begin your day thinking about the overwhelming number of tasks and activities that must be completed. Take a step back and reflect upon WHY you are doing all of these activities and the true nature of your job. To be truly successful at



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your job, your focus must be on driving improved performance. Continue to ask yourself this question as you go through your day, *“Is this a purposeful task that is helping me to drive change in my organization?”*

PLAN YOUR DAY BEFORE YOUR DAY PLANS YOU

Before immersing yourself in your day, develop your calendar for the day. I do not recommend just making a “to-do” list

because it is easy to have 57 items on your list that you won’t feasibly have time to complete. Go right to your online calendar program and start blocking out your day. Put EVERYTHING on your calendar — especially your coaching time. It is imperative to invest most of your time in your coaching because that is where you have the greatest ability to affect change. Your calendar should include all the details of what you have to accomplish, including

your interviews, projects, calls to customers and especially your off the floor and on the floor coaching.

RECOGNIZE THAT YOU WILL DO WHAT YOU LIKE TO DO AND YOU WILL DO WHAT YOU ARE GOOD AT

True coaching (not just “checking off a box” that you met with your employees) is challenging and takes a great deal of creativity and strategic thinking. Because it is not always easy, the activity of coaching

tends to fall to the bottom of our list of priorities and often gets pushed to the end of the week or the month. On your calendar, make sure you spread coaching time throughout the day based on your Representatives’ schedules and fit it in between your other tasks. Practice will make your coaching more effective and efficient and then seeing results will drive you to want to coach more.

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YOUR CALENDAR

Keep a print out of your calendar with you at all times. You will have a tendency to let other things slide into your coaching time. It's definitely more fun to extend your meeting with other Supervisors or spend extra time reviewing your emails. Be disciplined and keep to your calendar so that you can reach the end of your day having achieved all of your desired results.

IDENTIFY ACTIVITIES THAT ARE TAKING TOO MUCH TIME

Are you "fighting fires" all day by taking escalated calls and resolving Customer problems? Work with your colleagues to identify the root cause of those escalations and problems. You may find that most of the escalated calls are repeatedly coming from specific Representatives or teams. Observe their calls and reflect on the escalations for the behavior(s) that created or elevated the problem. Once you have

targeted what is causing the escalations, you can then coach to the behaviors and decrease the number of dissatisfied Customers. This then adds to the amount of time that you have to coach and drive improved performance.

MAXIMIZE EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO IMPACT PERFORMANCE

Be creative and strategic in determining how you will drive improved performance. Leverage the talents and expertise of others to assist you in mentoring your Representatives to be successful. Use peer mentoring, team meetings, and self-monitoring as methods for highlighting and discussing desired performance. These methods not only focus on desired performance, but they also enable your Representatives to learn from each other and be much more engaged in the process of performing to higher levels. Also, take advantage of opportunities to reinforce desired performance. For

example, if you are walking by a Representative who just WOWed you with their word choice they used on the phone, a simple pat-on-the-back or "thumbs-up" for that word choice goes a long way. These brief "behavior reinforcements" make your more formal coaching easier, more effective and more efficient – giving you more time to then drive improved performance with other Representatives.

SEEK OUT FEEDBACK AND BEST PRACTICES

Just as you are a resource to your Representatives, ensure that you are seeking out mentoring resources that are available to you. In addition to discussing your performance with your Managers, ask peers to observe and provide feedback on your coaching. Allocate a portion of your staff meetings to exploring coaching techniques, success stories and best practices so that everyone becomes more efficient and effective.

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