

Developing Call Center Agents

Info-line is ASTD's how-to reference for training and performance professionals, with practical, concise information in an easy-to-read format that gets readers up-to-speed on training topics in a matter of minutes.

The following excerpt has been adapted from "Call Center Training," by Nancy M. Giere, Info-line No. 0005.

Would you like to set your organization apart from its competitors? Investing in a call center might be your answer. Possessing a well-run call center with the capacity to handle a large volume of customer transactions while maintaining a high level of service quality can give you a competitive edge. Because our everyday context for doing business has changed from over-the-counter, in-person transactions to phone or Internet transactions, call centers have metamorphosed from a business cost to a competitive advantage. New and existing customers contact call centers worldwide to request service on business or personal equipment and to purchase new products and services for their homes or businesses.

The telephone, as a tool that both enhances and minimizes communication, allows us to reach people anywhere in the world. Yet, this technology is not enough. Because call center employees are unable to see the person with whom they are talking,

they require highly developed communication skills. These skills are mandatory if agents are to provide a positive experience for the customer. A properly run call center, staffed with well-trained agents who are knowledgeable and effective communicators, builds customer loyalty and, ultimately, increases profitability and market share.

When customers call your organization to do business, they have already decided that they want your product or service. But to build loyalty and keep



them as customers, you need to meet their expectations for customer service. These expectations move beyond the product or service you sell to the quality of the interaction they have with your call center agents.

If your customers do not experience a level of service that is in line with their expectations, they will find alternatives for your products or services. While the call center is only one part of your organization, to the customer it is the organization. Every contact with a customer is an opportunity for you to either increase or decrease customer loyalty.

Overall, your customers expect your agents to act in the following manner:

- Be polite and courteous.
- Be friendly and professional.
- Listen and respond to their needs.
- Be interested and willing to help.
- Avoid jargon, and use language they understand.
- Be accessible, provide prompt service.
- Be honest, and present themselves as believable and trustworthy.
- Set realistic expectations, and deliver what they promise.
- Have the knowledge and skills needed to complete the transaction.

To meet those expectations, you need to hire people to work in your call center who

- possess a service attitude
- learn quickly and have a commitment to life-long learning
- can adapt to a rapidly changing environment
- have outstanding verbal and written communication skills
- pay attention to detail and quality
- can conduct business and be cordial
- appear genuine and interested during phone conversations
- listen and capture essential customer information
- have keyboarding skills
- enjoy working with people.

Once you hire people with those call center characteristics, you can train them in your products, services, and software applications. You can further develop and refine their interpersonal communication and call management skills through training and coaching.

Your agents' confidence in their ability to do the job will improve the quality of their communication with customers. While you can't teach confidence, you can help employees gain it through product and systems training.

Clip & Save is compiled by Sabrina Hicks, managing editor; Info-line, published by ASTD; shicks@astd.org.

How to Order

This issue of *Info-line* provides instructions on how to develop measurement criteria for call center agent performance that coincides with the goals and objectives of your organization. You will learn how to hire for attitude and train for skill by finding service-minded people with the ability to learn your products, services, and systems. In addition, this issue provides guidance on how to retain your call center agents through ongoing learning opportunities, regular coaching, and clearly defined career opportunities. The job aid helps you ensure that your call center agent development plan is well rounded.

You can purchase a copy of *Info-line* No. 0005, "Call Center Training" by calling the ASTD Customer Care Center at 703.683.8100. Use priority code: ILDTD.

Checklist for Call Center Agent Development

Use this checklist to ensure that you have a well-rounded agent development plan. If you answer "no" to any of the following questions, you need to create a plan to address those areas.

Agent Development Requirements	Yes	No
1. Have you defined the tasks your agents need to perform?		
2. Have you documented how these tasks are carried out?		
3. Have you established measurement criteria?		
4. Is your measurement criteria linked to your organization's business measures?		
Hiring New Agents		
1. Have you identified your star performers and determined what makes them successful?		
2. Is your hiring criteria based on the attitudes and characteristics of star performers?		
3. Does your hiring process capture the information needed to make the best decisions about job candidates?		
4. Would the use of simulations or performance-based tests improve your selection process?		
New Hire Training		
1. Is the program based on your agent development requirements?		
2. Have you addressed all the required tasks in the most efficient and effective way (for example, formal training, scripting, online help, documentation, and so forth)?		
3. Do delivery methods support your material and development timeframe (for example, classroom training, multimedia, online learning, and so forth)?		
4. Do you provide realistic simulations?		
5. Does the interpersonal communication skills component of your program support customer satisfaction requirements?		
6. Does the program address your business processes and applications?		
7. Do you provide agents with sufficient training in your products and services?		
8. Do you provide agents with information about your customers' needs?		
Transition Plan		
1. Do you have a successful bridge training program that supports an agent's transition from training room to call center floor?		
2. Do you use mentors to support an agent's transition to the job?		
Employee Retention		
1. Are agents involved in special projects such as the development of the following:		
● training programs		
● call monitoring criteria		
● script development		
● business application upgrades		
● online help systems		
2. Do you provide continuous learning opportunities for agents to further develop their knowledge and skills?		
3. Do call center managers provide adequate agent coaching?		
4. Do you use call monitoring data to identify areas for additional training or coaching?		
5. Do you have a formal plan for career development?		