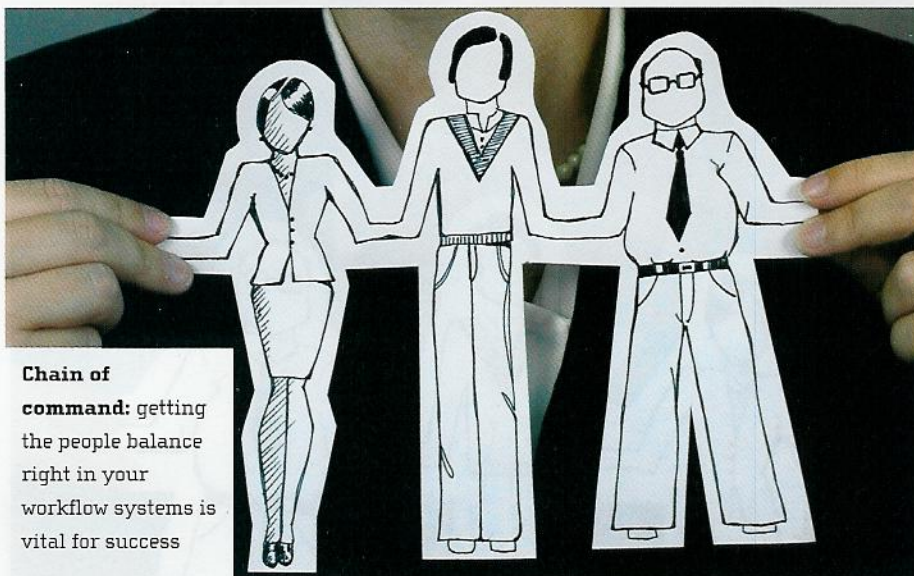


A cut out and keep guide to resource planning

Resource management is not only crucial when running a successful contact centre, but it's also difficult to get right. **Alex Blyth** investigates

never has resource management been so important to contact centre managers. For Adrian Garton, HR manager at Merchants contact centre, it is about delivering a better service. He says: "Customers are becoming more demanding and expect service at evenings and weekends, as well as during the normal working day. It costs more to run contact centres outside of normal working hours so, now more than ever, a contact centre manager needs to make sure he or she has the right people working in the right place at the right time."

For Claire Richardson, performance optimisation specialist at Aspect Software, it is also about reducing costs. She says: "72 per cent of contact centre costs are staff-related, so it is vitally important to manage this resource effectively. Through better call planning and real-time management, for example, one of our clients, a UK financial services company, achieved an additional



Chain of command: getting the people balance right in your workflow systems is vital for success

hour's worth of productivity per agent per day. The company has more than 600 agents, so this made a substantial difference to its bottom line."

Resource management is not only important, it's also difficult. Steve Woosey, membership director of the Professional

Planning Forum (PPF), a training company set up in 2000 to help contact centres with this aspect of their operations, says: "Getting resource management right is a key building block in running a successful contact centre. It affects agent productivity, customer satisfaction, and the bottom line. Yet, it is very complex and few manage to achieve the apparently simple goal of balancing customer waiting time and agent inactivity time."

KEY QUESTIONS FOR YOUR VENDOR

Tracey Hawkins, general manager of workforce management (WFM) software provider GMT, says contact centre managers should always ask several questions before buying any resource management software:

1. Do you need a workforce management solution? If you have fewer than thirty agents you will not get full benefit.
2. How accurately can it forecast demand?
3. How easy is it to implement and use?
4. How much will it actually cost, once you start adding on extra functionality?

However, as with any significant investment, it's always worth finding out

more before signing on the dotted line. Ian Ashby, ceo of WFM software provider, Exony, recommends asking the following:

5. Will it empower users in their roles or just complicate their jobs?
6. Is it safe for users? It should be fully audited and entirely secure, so that users only have access to appropriate resources.
7. Will it make your business quicker to respond to customer enquiries?
8. Is it fully integrated with a comprehensive reporting and analytics application to enable you to measure and manage?
9. Will it integrate with personnel systems to allow you to manage schedules around it?

RESOURCING KNOW-HOW

There are several ways to approach the staffing challenge. Brian Cormican, human capital management director at Oracle, explains a resource management challenge that his company faced: "We have an internal helpdesk in India, which takes calls from our 55,000 employees worldwide, and it's very difficult to predict how many calls the desk will receive at any one time. It can re-route them to another centre, but only to a limited extent. If a server somewhere falls over, this centre gets deluged, finds it hard to cope, ▶



Hold on to your best people: managers need to cut away the chaff to find the best resource planners

► and ultimately this can affect our ability to deliver to clients.”

He goes on to describe how Oracle tackled this problem: “We put a lot of effort into working out what skills and knowledge we

to an XP expert. This means that problems are solved more rapidly and the contact centre in India doesn't get overloaded.”

Of course, doing this requires skilled planners. One solution is to hire them and

Getting resource management right is a key building block in running a successful call centre. It affects agent productivity, customer satisfaction and profits

have elsewhere in the organisation, and then devised a system which will route calls to the person in the organisation who is best equipped to address the issue. So, if I have a problem with Windows XP, I can go straight

send them on training courses, such as those run by the PPF. It offers a foundation in contact centre planning, which costs £1,950 plus VAT, and involves a three day initial course, a four month mentoring programme,

and a final completion day, before the award of a certificate. An advanced course costs £2,900 plus VAT, and takes two years to complete, with four two-day courses and monthly telephone coaching. However, Woosey stresses that effective planning requires a rare combination of technical and interpersonal skills.

Some contact centres prefer to hire experts to do it for them. Rupert Fairclough, md of the Resource Planning Company, a firm that offers such services, says: “It can be hard for contact centres to find people who have a head for the numbers and can also understand how these relate to the business, so it often makes sense to bring in external experts. We charge between £50 and £100 per seat, plus a results-based payment.”

He goes on to describe how it works: “We visit the contact centre, gathering all the data we can, then go away and analyse it, and come back with recommendations. Very often the contact centre manager finds it hard to see the wood for the trees and we can immediately spot a way to improve resource management that will improve service levels or cut costs by at least ten per cent.”

TECHNOLOGY CAN HELP

Nowadays, there is a wide range of software designed specifically to help contact centres manage their resources more effectively. These tend to comprise one or more of the following elements: performance management software, which monitors agent performance over time; competency management, which monitors key strokes and mouse movements to identify high performing agents and training needs; quality management software, which records calls; and call volume management, which schedules customer service agents' availability at certain times.

Paul Scott, head of customer interactive solutions at Dimension Data, says: “Any centre with fifty or more seats should invest in a call centre optimisation system, as it can generate a ten to 15 per cent cost reduction. There are several options available to the IT director who is choosing a technology solution. You can buy a package off the shelf, buy components on a per-seat or per-agent basis, or you can rent. Renting technology is becoming increasingly popular for mid-sized contact centres, as it allows them to easily upgrade when new versions come out.”

CASE STUDY: THE AA

The AA's road division has two contact centres in Oldbury and Cheadle, as well as around 240 teleworkers, meaning it employs a total of more than 750 agents. When the company was bought by private equity firm CVC in early 2005, around 75 per cent of these agents were responsible for answering breakdown calls, with the rest fulfilling the company's customer service and sales functions.

As national planning manager Dave Vernon explains, this was not working very well: "We get major peaks in the summer and winter. For instance, when we had the day of snow in early February 2007 we received 25,000 calls, compared to a norm for a Wednesday in February of around 15,000 calls. We also get significant fluctuations within a day, usually around rush hours. We were struggling to cope with these peaks, and too often we were forced to respond to breakdown calls and leave customer service contacts and sales queries unanswered."

He continues: "Furthermore, we were always recruiting temporary workers and, not only is this very expensive, but it's also highly detrimental to quality. It was proving especially difficult for our Cheadle centre, as

there is nearly full employment in South Manchester and we were struggling to get anyone in through the door."

The takeover by CVC proved a catalyst for change and the AA brought in consultancy OC+C, which worked with them to train all of their agents so that they can answer every call that comes in. The company also began to use ScheduleFit, a part of the company's workforce management tool from Aspect Software. This has helped the company predict the number of calls that will arrive in half hour slots during the day and so ensure the AA has the right staffing levels to cope with the demand. The software also has the capability to predict even further ahead, but Vernon has not begun to use that functionality yet.

Finally, the AA increased its number of teleworkers from 100 to the present 240. This gives it much greater resource flexibility and Vernon points out that because these workers tend to do shifts of only around four hours at a time, they can handle a greater number of calls per hour.

The effect on the business has been dramatic, says Vernon: "These resource measures have cut our costs by £12 million, and we now have the lowest call abandon rates we've seen for a very long time."

While software can help, it is important to remember that ultimately it is only a tool to help resource managers do their jobs more effectively. As Tony Hayward, ceo of AIM Technology (a provider of contact centre performance management software), concludes: "Technology has to assist and not be dictatorial. If it's simply used at a tactical level or if people don't understand it, it can be

de-motivating and end up reducing the quality of service you offer.

"However, if you use it to provide information that enables managers to make good resource decisions or that helps agents to monitor their own performance, it will motivate people to do a better job. This then makes management a lot easier, helps to cut costs and improves service. ■



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