

Closing the Call Centre Quality Gap – Part Three: Where quality gaps occur and how to close them

by Jeff Austin

A call centre that delivers poor quality customer service can cause irreparable damage to a business and yet many call centres do not fully deliver quality interactions to their customers. In this article, the third in a three part series looking at how to close the call centre quality gap, Jeff Austin, Managing Director of Siyandza Skills Development Training, looks at where quality gaps commonly occur and how best to address them if they do.

In the previous two articles in this series, we defined what "quality" is within the call centre context – a gauge of both the customer's experience and the call centre's effectiveness – and the importance of regarding it as an integrated business process and not a benchmarked "target number" that the business needs to attain. We also looked at how an organisation can start adopting a "quality approach" and the pivotal role training plays in that process.

In this article, we will use the generic lifecycle of a call centre agent to illustrate the areas where potential 'quality gaps' – the discrepancy between the "quality" the customer expects to experience and the reality of what is experienced – can occur and how best to address them if they do.

During induction

The first potential 'quality gap' occurs when a new hire joins the business. It is quite a common place for quality to start breaking down unless the business has successfully defined its expectations of quality and converted these into precise, measurable criteria that have been integrated into the induction process (for more information on this part of the process, refer to last month's article: [Closing the Call Centre Quality Gap – Part Two: How does training integrate into a quality approach?](#)).

To prevent this gap from occurring, the business needs to have translated its criteria into a recruitment profile– covering temperament and aspirations, as well as educational and experience requirements – and fed this back to the recruiters. Otherwise, the quality chain can end up being broken right at the outset.

Setting the right tone

New hire training is another critical area from a quality perspective because it is often the first interaction new staff have with the organisation and so "sets the tone" and expectations of both employer and employee.

Aside of ensuring that the training material is correct, up to date and aligned to the organisation's vision of quality, it is important to make sure that there are no disconnects between the business' needs and the training provider's understanding of those needs – it must closely match the environment the new hires will be working in.

In other words, if the training is lots of fun, but the working environment is pressured and serious, learners will be inadequately prepared for the transition and the business is likely to experience higher drop off rates as

well as a longer transition into full productivity.

While in production

Once the new hire is operational or 'in production', the best way of preventing the common 'quality gaps' that occur is through consistent communication. In effect, it is the *people within a call centre that create the organisation's quality* and have the biggest impact on **the customer's experience. So it is vital that all agent assessments are performed within the context of the organisation's overall quality goals and that the agent receives consistent communication regarding quality assessments, changes in the organisation and updates to processes and procedures.**

Given the importance of an employee's role, preventing a quality gap from occurring requires more than setting appropriate KPIs. It requires ensuring that the wellness of the employee is also actively managed and developing the employee so that they can grow within the organisation.

The role of workforce management

Workforce management also has an important role to play from an operational perspective since it has to orchestrate and coordinate the new hire, as well as the various ancillary resources within the organisation that underpin its ability to deliver quality.

If, for instance, the new staff are not brought into production soon enough, service levels in the business may not be attained and a quality gap will occur as the business may not be able to answer customer calls within levels that allow the desired quality to be attained. Moreover, if the department does not know well in advance that new hires are needed to accommodate growth or attrition backfill, recruitment and training may not be able to effectively execute their responsibilities. It might not appear obvious, *but the*

people responsible for planning the resources in the organisation are, ultimately, the people that enable quality to exist in the organisation.

The conflict between efficiency and quality

Another common operational 'quality gap' occurs as a result of the inherent conflict between efficiency or service levels and quality. For example, when calls start backing up, queue agents and team leaders often feel pressured to speed up calls and sacrifice defined levels of quality to reduce the queue.

While this may reap short-term rewards, it may prove a false economy in the long run, when repeat calls and long-term workload inconsistencies begin to occur. To prevent such quality gaps occurring when calls are backing up, the focus should continue to be on delivering the same quality interaction as when calls are **slow – following the established guidelines and procedures and answering the call correctly every time.**

After the employee has left

The final "quality gap" that happens during the typical lifecycle of a call centre agent occurs after they have left the organisation. The business needs to take the time *to understand why the employee left – typically, using exit interviews and questionnaires – and use the feedback to inform and improve the entire new hire lifecycle, from recruitment and induction onwards.*

Know the end state from the outset. The typical lifecycle of a call centre agent shows that the various departments within the organisation need to work together to close the "quality gaps" that commonly occur and deliver a great customer experience.

Central to this notion is the fact that "quality" in a call centre is not just about having a department that monitors customer interactions with the agents and

produces a score of X% to show whether or not the organisation is delivering quality. Many call centres seem to believe that, provided they hit their 90% QA assessment mark, they are running a high quality organisation, when this clearly may not be the case.

Within a call centre, quality and its measurement must form an integral part of the organisation. If the business is compartmentalised or operates in silos, the overall goal of quality will never be achieved. The key is to ensure that each department, within the business, understands the **key to a successful Call Centre – a positive customer experience**.

The customer is still king

In the end, adopting a quality approach and closing the quality gaps within your organisation should be an ongoing priority. Aside of the many examples of organisations that have successfully used quality as a stepping stone to positive branding and increased **profitability, failing to deliver against your customers' expectations of quality will negatively impact your organisation's bottom line in the long-term**.

Any organisation that is focused on long-term sustainability needs to look at the various components of customer satisfaction in the delivery chain of their product and identify gaps that could risk that sustainability. If the call centre is the primary touch point for customers during and after the sale, it is as critical that the outputs of the call centre meet or exceed customer expectation as it is for your actual product or service to do so.