FUTURE-IZE YOUR KPIs… AND YOUR FRONTLINE EXPERIENCE!

Contact centers have changed dramatically over the years. Why are frontline KPIs stuck in the past?

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Frontline focused! To make it in the future, contact center leadership needs to get down to the business of being "frontline-focused." The competition for contact center resources has never been greater; this puts contemporary frontline-focused organizations as the most likely to succeed in recruiting and retaining staff. You want to make sure that it is not YOUR staff being poached.

The cost of turnover is astronomical and the impact disastrous. We must calculate all factors of turnover… time, money and loss of asset use. Recruiting for high-performers is reaching competitive levels. We all went through a spell where the disruption blew up many contact centers. Luckily, the dust has settled, and the landscape is calling for major changes. Frontline-focused must be the order of the day in order to compete for 21st century talent.

What Is Frontline-Focused?

Frontline-focused is a foundational model that dedicates all organizational and operational activities to meeting the needs of CSRs on the front line. For many, this is a massive shift. But it is absolutely necessary for long-term success, particularly for those organizations that are formalizing work-from-home, hybrid or premise-based operations as they hopefully emerge from the past year's pandemic disruption.

Consumer behavior is also changing; we now have more self-service options, leaving the more complex contacts for humans to handle. Customer experience is at the forefront of executive strategy, and contact centers provide many touch points in the customer experience journey. Forrester just published a report titled, "The New Contact Center Empowers Its People with Customer Intelligence," stating that "65% of decision-makers have increased their focus on improving the CSR experience." Forrester goes on to find that "as customers self-serve simple requests, phone has become the new *empathy channel*… leaving customer service representatives (CSRs) to deal with more complex and emotionally charged customers than ever before."

The Cost of Turnover

The customer experience is dependent on the frontline's experience; CSRs must have their needs met. I recently was part of a discussion on retention and one leader stated emphatically, "Cannot understand CSRs' dissatisfaction since we give them everything they need!" Hmm, I thought, maybe you are giving what you think they need. But what if that isn't meeting the need? Out of curiosity, I looked up the definition of "give" and "meet." *Give* is defined as "to convey or reveal information," whereas *meet* is defined as "to satisfy or fulfill." *Which would you choose?* 21st century organizational and operational leaders would do well to future-IZE and focus on meeting frontline needs by digging into what those needs really are. CSRs will be happy to let you know… all you

have to do is ask.

While this same retention/turnover discussion was taking place, an odd defense was mounted. One senior leader asked if a 25% to 30% turnover rate was "normal." Another leader responded with great emphasis on his professional background that "Yes, it's normal in the contact center industry." YIKES! I wanted to howl back, "So what if it is normal or common? That doesn't make it OK!" When someone suggests that a turnover rate of 25% to 30% is "normal," others may swiftly assume that this is acceptable. IT IS NOT.

If we accept that our centers are handling more complex interactions, we must also accept that the cost of turnover is in recruiting, hiring, training, etc. It is a cost that can reach upward of $10K to as high as $30K, which can be avoided by tending to the needs of the front line. It has been well established that people quit managers, not companies. We must take a long and hard look at how we manage.



The Power of Training

Training is a key success factor in staff development and retention, as are quality and workforce management. All must work together to be successful. *Is your front line dealing with more emotionally demanding interactions? Are they prepared to handle the intensity of these demands?*

For many organizations, empathy, de-escalation and strategic communication training is woefully undervalued; subsequently, it is often given short shrift in new-hire and ongoing training programs. De-escalation and rapport-building skills are necessary for what Forrester calls "empathy agents." Organizations may be coming up short on the very skills the front line needs most; they may be the ones for which there is the least training. This is particularly damaging, given the fact that many contact center workers are now remote. A day full of emotionally charged interactions can cause what some call "compassion fatigue." Fatigue manifests as indifference in a situation where empathy is needed; this is not good or satisfying for either party in the interaction.

When it comes to frontline-focused organizations, training is high on the list of requirements. It is both an art and a science, and contact centers must future-IZE their training approach to be learner-based. This means that all efforts in development and delivery put the learner (not the trainer) at the center. *Specifically, what are the objectives for skills, knowledge/information and human qualities?* Training frequency, offerings and tools must be learner-focused and contemporarily designed for today's contact center and particularly for a remote workforce.



> "The future depends on what you do today."
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> —MAHATMA GANDHI

Many technologies are available to assist CSRs. Artificial intelligence (AI) engines have moved beyond chatbots to agent-assist tools. They present just the right nugget of information to handle the interaction in real time. 21st century leaders need to familiarize themselves with these knowledge options. This ensures that contact center needs are met, and you are not just "given" something IT thinks will work.

When thinking about training and the front line, it is time for organizations to invest in real training development for their supervisors, as well. These folks have been left out of receiving contact center management and coaching training for decades. This must change! People are not born coaches, and in today's complex business environments, the primary role of supervisors must be to coach and develop staff. This investment is central when you future-IZE your contact center.



Future-IZE Your KPIs!

For those familiar with my writing, I have been ranting about KPI (key performance indicator) conflicts for decades. Lately, I have been talking with industry colleagues about this very topic. We all seem to agree that the contact center has changed dramatically over the years; yet for some, KPIs seem "stuck" in the past. Many contact centers remain wed to standard production measures where targets are still being set for CSR call volume and duration.

Future-IZE your KPIs by taking a new look at your entire program. *What are you really looking for? What does Quality look for? How does Workforce Management fit in? What context is provided for KPIs?* Too often, CSRs view production metrics as conflicting with customer experience objectives. A CSR I once sat with commented to me, "It's conflicting because Workforce wants me to complete the call in 180 seconds and Quality demands that I ask if there is anything else I can help you with." Emphasis on production metrics is reflective of an old-school model that does not apply to today's complex contact centers.

How we contextualize contact center KPIs is critical. Far too many centers have a KPI list or scorecard that has just about ZERO context. It is more like a list of isolated data points often focused on optimizing CSR productivity. Some actually believe that this produces the desired customer experience outcomes, without actually measuring those outcomes. For example, take the Healthcare Access Center manager who wants a five-minute handle time as it better fits the center's staffing model. *What will that five-minute call yield?* Most Healthcare Contact Centers book provider appointments. My question is, "What call duration produces the best appointment? That is all that matters.

Of course, I am not suggesting that duration doesn't matter; however, we must first and foremost determine measures based on meeting the needs of the business. The job of Workforce Management is to forecast based on reality and accuracy. If we start manipulating handle time (talk and after-call work) to meet a target, we

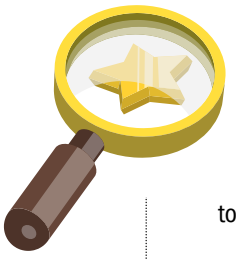
jeopardize meeting service level and/or customer experience objectives.

Assessing Your Quality Program

Finally, frontline-focused organizations must do a total checkup on the contact center's quality program. In my experience, these programs fall into two categories: The 21st century version—*Discovery and Development*—or the 20th century model—*Investigation and Prosecution*. Ask you CSRs which category your program falls into.

Future-IZE your quality program by going totally frontline-focused. This translates to a coaching-based program in which supervisors spend up to 40% of their time coaching and working with CSRs. Agent-to-supervisor ratio hovers between 10-to-1 and 15-to-1 in operations dedicated to coaching and staff development.

What about the model of the remote evaluator, or my least favorite... robot or automated feedback? Imagine this conflict: A 21st century CSR who engages in complex problem-resolution and empathy-based engagement is "coached" by a bot. Please spare me the 21st century babble that defends this model!



Keep Your Focus on the Front Line

The Forrester report suggests that the customer experience "is the north star for CSR improvement efforts." What fits as CSR improvement becomes the big question. You must challenge everything. Look at your current environment. If your KPIs feel old and run-down, throw a new light on them.

Read up on using "Contribution to Capacity" to measure agent utilization via "time in state" reports and upper and lower control limits. Assure that Workforce Management is analytics-based and work with Quality and Training to identify ways to optimize processes. Make sure that coaching and training sessions are on the schedule and not canceled. Invest in knowledge management designed to keep contact center agents well-informed.

Most importantly, keep your focus on the front line and continue to future-IZE!



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