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Feature ARTICLE

EquiServe: The Winning Ways of a High-Performance Contact Center

by Kathleen M. Peterson

Leadership intuition, communication and demonstrating passion are just a few lessons to be learned from this high-performance operation.



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There is a contact center in Canton, Mass., just outside of Boston, where quality has been on the rise and costs on the decline for the past few years. In this center, which manages up to 400 seats and oversees traffic across four sites, one might expect to find radical management and lots of whiz-bang technologies, or maybe just some fuzzy math contributing to these results. But that's not the case—rather, it's a story grounded in common sense, curiosity, practicality and a healthy dose of possibility.

The company is called EquiServe, a subsidiary of DST Systems. It is the stock-transfer agent for some of the best-known companies in the world, and serves many of the Fortune 500 companies that demand a very high level of service and competitive pricing.

Effective Change Aids Visibility

A few years ago, EquiServe's contact center faced some extreme conditions. High levels of agent turnover caused recruiting and training budgets to explode. There were many system challenges and the contact center suffered from enterprise visibility issues. In the spring of 2000, Mike Lapolla, an EquiServe senior managing director, was given full responsibility for the contact center. Although a predecessor had laid the groundwork for change, Lapolla and his team were tasked with delivering on and enhancing those changes.

The first job was to increase the visibility of the Contact Center and get the company to recognize its importance. To accomplish that, Lapolla says, "we started with data collection." The focus was (and still is) on the kinds of calls coming in, why they were coming in, and the cost of the process behind the call type. When the Contact Center demonstrated the bottom line impact of processes on call volume and customer satisfaction, the interest of account teams and senior management started to increase. As Lapolla puts it, "We tied actual results into financials." It's a focus that has remained a central theme in this contact center's success story.

Data collection led to process and workflow analysis as well as improved resource utilization and organizational design. While reviewing a particular call type that required fulfillment in an Operations group, the Contact Center team was able to loan resources to that group. This helped to eliminate a backlog and establish a more efficient process overall. As a result, the Operations group yielded significant improvements in turnaround (turnaround on this particular transaction is now 24 hours). The volume of calls coming in repeatedly to check status has been eliminated. In this scenario, the Contact Center and the Operations group had shared objectives: to improve the customer experience, reduce costs and improve staff's understanding of the big picture.

Identifying the origin of contacts is an ongoing management theme and visibility strategy at EquiServe. The weekly management staff meeting is focused on two agenda items: 1) what is the leading cause of multiple contacts and what are we doing about it; and 2) how have we pro-

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gressed since the last meeting? Progress is the name of the game—EquiServe's team is always looking for ways to improve by reducing the contacts that are reducible and by maximizing resources to be utilized on the highest value contact (i.e., the first time the customer connects). The team's willingness to work with other departments ensures that improvements do not occur in isolation; they are enjoyed across business units.

The Right Players—A Good Organizational Model

In an early observation of EquiServe's organizational model, it may appear similar to other contact centers. A closer scrutiny illuminates important differences. It all goes back to the initial successes—the quest for quality, root cause, cost reduction and efficiency.

DIRECTOR OF CAUSAL ANALYSIS

Early on, Lapolla and his team realized that they needed to market and raise the visibility of the Contact Center. The entire enterprise needed to see how the raw customer contact told the tale of the customer's value perception. One benefit of not having spent many years in contact center management is that Lapolla followed his instincts, rather than standard industry practices. His instincts led him to define a new role called "director of causal analysis" whose function would be to assist in highlighting the Contact Center's experience and focusing the continuous improvement process.

The position of causal analysis director was filled by Rita Bigot who, although new to EquiServe, had spent many years in contact centers. Bigot and her team "pull together the data," Lapolla explains. Previously, "we had managers, unit leaders, senior managing directors, and forecasters and schedulers who lived it day in and day out, but nobody was really charged with collecting the root-cause data from a 400-seat contact center into one place and then analyzing and reporting on patterns. We now have someone whose job it is, full time, to create this integration with the rest of the company."

Bigot initially had many obstacles to overcome: She was from outside the company, conditions in the center were difficult due to a heavy dependence on legacy system code, and she was joining a management team that was focused on stabilizing the center. And ultimately, Bigot and Lapolla were making recommendations for some radical changes.

ASSIST CENTER

Traditional contact centers typically have, at their core, teams of associates headed by a team leader and assisted by a senior agent or specialist. This was the case at EquiServe three years ago. The problem was that associates would often queue for help at the supervisors' cubes, leaving callers on hold, or promising to call them back. Meanwhile calls backed up and stress on both ends of the queue mounted.

Instead of trying to make the traditional structure work, a new concept was put in place—the Assist Center. With the new process, associates dial an extension and go into an assist queue to have their questions answered. Nothing new here—plenty of organizations do that. Well, yes and no… One of the major differences is that, at EquiServe, staffing at the Assist Center is at the highest possible service level to ensure speedy response. Another distinction is that EquiServe's Assist Center associates keep a record of each and every call.

Assist Center associates are not there to take over calls, rather to work through the processes and create support tools to help the associate handle the call. Transaction analysis is conducted to uncover the root cause of the call to identify training, process or technology issues that can be resolved to improve the contact for the customer.

Any call that an Assist Center associate takes over is categorized as an escalation. A cradle-to-grave analysis is conducted on selected escalated calls. EquiServe has a call logging and recording system (Witness Systems' Eyretel Replay) that records every call. The causal analysis team reviews escalated contacts, identifies the root-cause issue and takes steps to correct it.

As in any major visible change, initially there were skeptics—those who felt that the Assist Center would not work or that it was some quirky concept being "put upon them" by a newcomer. Mini turf battles emerged. But the team, in their focused way, pushed forward, confident of the concept. Today, there is not a manager, team leader or associate who can recall not thinking that the Assist Center was a good idea.

RAPID RESPONSE TEAMS

In conjunction with the Assist Center, the company established companywide "rapid response" teams—specific "go to" sources comprised of subject-matter experts in each business unit. This laid the groundwork for previously unheard of levels of corporate integration and communication.

Under the new management of Eileen Hiffa, director of the Shareholder Services Rapid Response Center, and driven by Maureen Leary-Jago, Operations senior managing director, associates who actually execute the operational transactions have been added to the Contact Center floor. Resolution of escalated research issues has decreased from 10-plus days for complicated cases to no more than 48 hours. The team continues to work toward a goal of 24 hours, and is getting closer every month.

QUALITY TEAM

Quality is an important factor in EquiServe's Contact Center—it counts for up to 70 percent of an associate's overall performance. The center currently uses an advanced automated quality monitoring system. Associates are observed a *minimum* of four times per month—twice by the quality team and twice by their team leader. However,

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the majority of associates actually have a higher number of calls scored as a result of demographic targeting of calls. For example, the automated system is designed to routinely pull calls longer than five minutes, shorter than 30 seconds or handled by newer associates. Quality coaches are in place for both calls and correspondence (emails and letters). Feedback on calls and correspondence is given within 24 hours, either personally, for sensitive feedback, or by email, if self-explanatory.

The monitoring score sheet is embedded within the actual recorded call, allowing for electronic storage and analysis of trends. Trends are identified at the individual, team, center and enterprise level. (EquiServe has three major contact centers and three smaller boutique-style centers.) This yields maximum benefit because problems can be identified and resolved at many levels and across multiple channels.

The quality team also runs special programs to keep associates excited about monitoring. For instance, the WOW program allows them to submit their own calls to the quality team when they feel they have "wowed" the customer. The components of a WOW contact are outlined on posters that are hung in conference rooms, from the Contact Center ceiling and on associates' desks. The criteria includes: taking responsibility, being thorough, following through and offering assistance. Associates' submissions are reviewed and additional points are applied to overall monthly quality scores. Participating associates are also entered into a drawing for a special prize.

FINANCIAL ANALYST

Another unique position in the Contact Center organizational model is Financial Manager of Planning and Analysis, filled by Stefanie Chung. She describes her role as "acting as a liaison with finance and incorporating the company's finance methodologies for use in the Contact Center." With such a resource, the center can report effectively on ongoing activities and recommend organizational changes that return real dollars to the bottom line.

Guiding Principles Support Company Vision

There has been much written about the positive impact that establishing clear expectations, vision and goals can have on organizations. There is also a lot of cynicism around these topics because, frequently, organizations' actions do not match the rhetoric—and people end up feeling cheated.

EquiServe's vision is represented by a set of four guiding principles established by CEO Don Kenney: flawless processing, leveraging technology, global presence, and being an industry leader. These are not platitudes. The principles are the basis for action by management and staff alike—they know them and they know how their work contributes to them. In the Contact Center, flawless processing and leveraging technology are considered the cornerstones for high performance.

CLEAR EXPECTATIONS AND GOALS

To maintain high levels of performance in the contact center, expectations are abundantly clear, fairly measured and supported by effective tools and training. Denise Kalef, a three-year veteran of the EquiServe Contact Center team puts it this way, "We are held accountable… the people who produce, the people who consistently have higher scores, and the people who have trained to take on more responsibilities are going to be recognized with opportunities, salaries and incentives."

Similarly, all goals are clearly established and attainable. There are goals for the center, for the managers and for the individual associates. They are not easy goals, but they are achievable given the level of integrated enterprisewide teamwork at EquiServe.

Individual performance is recognized as essential to the success of the Contact Center, and establishing clear expectations contributes to that success. Performance is routinely measured and published quarterly. As mentioned earlier, 70 percent of associates' performance is based on quality scores, and 30 percent is based on adherence. The time spent on calls is never limited, and management doesn't discuss the number of calls any individual handles. Managers want associates to focus, instead, on quality.

Associates are ranked and the rankings are posted on bulletin boards in the center. The rankings are color-coded; the top 25 percent are green (representing the highest achievement), then yellow, then red. Red scores are not posted, but associates in this category receive direct attention from their supervisors.

Prizes are awarded for achieving green in consecutive quarters. The consistently rising scores keep pushing up the bar for ranking in the top 25 percent. This is a testimony to the effectiveness of training, improved retention (now at approximately 90 percent), and the extraordinary motivation of the associates to perform.

TRAINING

At EquiServe, training is considered an investment and is described as time well-spent. Human resources provides corporate overview training to new associates, who then enter a contact center training program that combines classroom with online modules, as well as time spent in "the Academy." In the Academy, new associates spend four weeks listening to calls, asking questions, and taking calls while experienced associates listen and coach.

Associates are offered a broad range of courses online and at their desktops. EquiServe also provides a generous tuition reimbursement plan for courses at local colleges. Associates and their managers work together on an annual basis to build a training plan (which is renewed monthly).

EquiServe's investment in training pays off. Associates have the training needed to do the job, managers have a knowledgeable staff, clients have high-performing teams and callers receive swift resolutions to their problems.

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Real-Time Management and Forecasting

Effective planning is crucial for any contact center. EquiServe's Phone Operations is an efficient unit within the Contact Center that manages its operations and associated technologies. Managing Director Jim McPartlin, a 10-year veteran, and his team plan the distribution of calls and allocate resources where needed.

REAL-TIME MANAGEMENT

All EquiServe's Contact Center sites are managed from the "in-charge station," informally known as "the bridge" in Canton, Mass. The bridge manager tracks service levels, volume levels, associate availability, events and activities on an intraday basis. A strong partnership with other managers in the center helps to manage the real-time staff activities. The bridge manager maintains a "global view" of the center's overall performance on a real-time basis and addresses any issues that arise. Because real-time management plays such a major role in EquiServe's Contact Center, the approach taken is collaborative and holistic.

FORECASTING

High-level attention throughout the organization is focused on forecasting, as well. EquiServe's forecasting team consistently produces forecasts within a 5 percent accuracy rate, using Aspect eWorkforce Management as its forecasting and scheduling tool. The team gets the best information possible in a proactive process that has heightened sensitivity across the enterprise, to the point that, even if McPartlin is not present in a business unit's planning session, others ask, "Have you checked with the Contact Center?" This is the ultimate testimony to an effective forecasting process.

Executive Support

Proving your operation's value financially makes it easy for executives to see how the contact center contributes to the company overall. Over the past few years, EquiServe's Contact Center has emerged as a powerful contributor to the company's success. Division President Charlie Rossi and Chief Investment Services Officer Deborah Culhane recognize the changes that have brought about such success.

"If you can identify some generic root causes and fix them, over time your costs are going to go down," comments Rossi. "You are making an investment—but over time your quality will improve, your reputation will improve, and you will be more profitable."

EquiServe has adopted a strong leadership style that is shared by all. The result is an organization of players. High expectations have driven achievement to higher and higher levels. The workforce has stabilized, and maturity and sophistication have emerged. Appropriate focus on identifying origination points of contacts and eliminating unnecessary contacts have driven down costs, while the focus on quality and training has driven up quality and associate job satisfaction.

There is an atmosphere of professionalism and "fun" that is tangible and a credit to all the members of the leadership team. As one associate comments, "I feel privileged to work at EquiServe."

A Lesson Learned

Can your contact center mirror the success that EquiServe has achieved? Take a fresh look at your operation and ask, "Are we doing the best we can with what we have?" "Are there creative ways to stretch our budget dollars?" "How will improving quality cut our overall costs?" "What other business units can we partner with to improve across the enterprise?"

Asking new questions is one of the keys to identifying opportunities. New questions set Mike Lapolla and his team on a quest. A strong sense of possibility was the chariot the team rode. Quality and cost reductions are just some of the wins along the way.

Today's contact center leader must constantly be on the look out for wins—opportunities to increase visibility, gain executive support, instill quality, enhance the customer's experience, improve training and the work environment for staff, and improve what is communicated. Clear communication of expectations, consistent coaching, great rewards, and low tolerance for poor performance are just some of the winning concepts EquiServe has put in place. Perhaps there is a lesson or two here as you aspire toward more wins in your pursuit of contact center excellence. ■

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