

# Changing strategies



By Sangeeta Bhatnagar

**C**ustomer needs, technology and the evolving marketplace are changing contact centre recruitment and retention strategies for companies globally.

With a strong economy and a demand for top-tiered employees to train and deliver the best customer experience, companies are expanding the pool of talent from which they draw from in order to create a fully diversified and flexible workforce.

Consequently, the contact centre of today has increased diversity across age, culture, gender, learning style and location (onsite or at-home). Many new hires are now either second career or mature workers over 40 years of age. This is excellent as it provides a balance to the Gen Y (Millennials) and the Gen Z employees (those born after 1996). Some companies use a cost-per-call method with the at-home agents in order to increase efficiencies and to tap the part of the workforce who is looking for increased flexibility.

## Working with technology

With the breakthroughs in artificial intelligence (AI) it is important to acknowledge the positive impact to the customer and contact centre agent experience. AI and chatbots are commonly used for various simpler, repetitive functions in many companies, like account balance and reporting payments, thereby allowing the agents to focus on the more complex tasks delivering better customer experiences.

In order to maximize the benefits of AI, agents need the tools and the desire to learn how to utilize technology to enhance the customer experience and solve customer issues on the first call. When searching for top talent, that desire to learn, being coachable and willingness to solve problems must be identified.

Industry leader Nygel Weishar, who is director, NLP (natural language processing) & Social Media Strategy, Contact Centre Transformation, CIBC felt “there will be some subtle changes in what we look for and train to with the introduction of AI/chatbots”.

“At the core, the role is relatively the same: using your available systems to gather the right information in order to provide awesome client experiences,” he told me. “What changes is the higher degree of technology interaction [and] the pace of change increases. Overall [agents] need to feel comfortable working in the AI space. Ultimately, they [AI tools] are meant to make the roles easier [and] more efficient, but the biggest consideration point for agents is the

amount of learning they need to do”.

In terms of recruitment and identifying the right fit, “If an agent is very stuck in their ways, not open to working with technology and/or are not comfortable with the concept of AI would all be red flags for me,” said Weishar. “Otherwise, keep that north star of ‘motivation, intelligence and integrity’ in what you’re looking for and it shouldn’t be an issue.”

## Recruitment/training impacts

Contact centres no longer need to look for skills such as “listen, talk, type”. Instead, they need to also look for “listen, empathize, problem solve, type, communicate”, along with the desire to learn and willingness to adapt to work with technology. That includes being able to be trained on how to educate customers to work with the new technology in place, i.e. completing address changes or reporting a bill payment online or on automated systems.

Training for our diverse workforce must also be diverse. The training must be less theoretical, and more application-based to ensure that all new hires can learn all that is required. Trainers must be cognizant that different generations learn at different paces.

Here are several other key points to keep in mind.

1. **Talk times will be longer** as complex inquiries take longer. Agents are now handling more complex tasks.
2. **Frontline agents are expected to have great skills and knowledge.** Since consumers are being empowered to utilize technology and self-serve options more, they are also more educated on products and services. Consequently, they

have higher expectations prior to their interaction with an agent.

3. **Different skills for different channels.** Since customers have the ability to communicate across multiple channels in the contact centre, companies need to hire agents that are adaptable enough to communicate well across any channel. The best hire would be someone that can adapt to the needs of the customer and work with technology to deliver the best service.
4. **Ensuring that mature workers are accepted.** When training and onboarding mature workers, it is important to make them feel like they belong and that being an agent is not just for the young. The role of an agent is so critical that a company is lucky to have a professional, articulate mature individual representing them. It is important to also be aware of the mature workers learning style may be very different from a Gen Y or Gen Z as those generations grasp technology very quickly as the bulk of them are digital natives.

Done right the introduction of AI and the benefits of a diverse workforce can lead to a dynamic contact centre providing great employee and customer experiences. Your organization will profit as a result. ✓

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