



Performance Metrics and Conditioned Response: Improving Support Center Quality and Productivity

By Dave Brown, Support Center University

Staffing. Labor. Headcount. Whatever you call it, it is the largest expense for support centers and typically accounts for 60 to 70 percent (or more) of budgets. That's why headcount is typically targeted during belt-tightening and budget-cutting exercises. As painful as it may be, there's no "easier" way to cut five or 10 percent from the operating budget. As such, it is also your biggest opportunity for efficiency improvement and cost reduction.

And, think about it... isn't labor expense what we are really targeting when we attempt various support improvement projects? Take skills-based routing (SBR), for example (and I'm a huge fan of SBR, by the way). Whether you consider SBR a process improvement or a technology implementation, the goal of SBR is to get the caller to the best agent—thereby reducing call-handle time and increasing first-contact resolution rate. In other words, reducing the amount of labor per case. Most of the technology targeted at improving support centers is ultimately intending to improve the productivity of the staff or the quality of the work they produce.

Another consideration, even though I won't dwell on it here, is the expense related to staff turnover. In support centers, this cost can be exorbitant. Not only is there the "hard cost" of hiring replacement staff and training them—but think about how long it takes before new staff are fully up to speed. That's a huge hit to your department productivity—and turnover is closely linked to the satisfaction and motivation of the agents.

So, while cutting headcount reduces expense and adding tools often improves productivity—what about going straight to the source and motivating agents to improve their own performance? Research has shown that 20 percent productivity improvement and 50 percent reduction in turnover can be achieved by most support centers through effective performance management.

Traditional Role of Metrics

Coaching and motivation have always been two of the primary jobs of management—particularly at the front-line level where the staff traditionally "needs it," (*Note: There's generally an assumption within management that higher levels are "self-motivated," but lower levels need to be encouraged and enticed to perform.*) Historically, management has gathered performance data, interpreted the information, and then shared that information with the staffers, with the goal of improving their performance.

Support centers mostly adhere to this model. But, going back to the early tech support centers of the '70s and '80s, this was a real challenge for most managers. Data was hard to come by, and good reporting tools were scarce. Many organizations were forced to develop their own systems for collecting and analyzing data. Spreadsheets were commonplace, and performance data was usually limited to a very few key metrics.

As support center systems evolved, so did their performance data capabilities. In the 1990s, phone/ACDs, CRM, knowledge management, and workforce management systems all included "canned reports," and most provided the built-in capability to customize reports.

This was great progress, but there remained inherent problems with the approach. The information was still at the mercy of the subjective management "filter," prior to the message being delivered to the agent. Agents often don't trust that the performance coaching provided by their supervisor is unbiased and neutral. They, rightly so, believe that the message could be the supervisor's subjective interpretation. Whether the perception is accurate or not, it de-values the coaching.

Also, the feedback was always "after-the-fact" and typically infrequent. Monthly reviews with the agents were the norm, and weekly feedback was best case. Providing coaching sessions using this approach certainly provided some results. However, the benefit was marginal.

Enter the age of agent report cards. Over the past five to 10 years, business intelligence and data analytics tools have provided the capability to consolidate data from various support center systems. These reports often can be presented to agents on a more frequent basis—sometimes even "real time," although daily or weekly is more common. This addressed the frequency issue and, to a degree, the subjectivity issue. However, future developments will take this to an even higher level of effectiveness.

Motivation and Conditioned Response

I'm going to switch gears and talk about the science behind motivation and conditioning. Granted, the term "conditioned response" sounds "Orwellian" and probably elicits images of Pavlov's dog salivating at the sound of the bell. Is that what we want from our agents? Well, yes—to a degree—we do!

I'll use a better example to illustrate my point. Consider Olympic athletes such as divers, gymnasts, and figure skaters. When they perform their task, they receive immediate feedback in the form of the judges' score cards. When they complete their performance task, they immediately look over to the score table for feedback. They want performance feedback now, not tomorrow morning. And as a result of that immediate feedback, they begin analyzing their own performance and thinking about how they can raise their score on their next attempt. I guarantee that diver is planning what she will do better to improve her performance score as she climbs the ladder for the next dive.

Yes, this *is* what we want our agents to do! We want them to be anxious for feedback and determined to continually improve. Over time, their good performance becomes a conditioned response.

A conditioned response requires that we stimulate one of the five senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch. Then, an action (response) needs to follow the stimulus. With repetition, the brain associates the stimulus with the response. The point is, if we provide immediate feedback and reward good performance, we can create within the agents the drive for continuous improvement and maximum performance.

The "New" Workforce: Gen X and Gen Y

Now I need to complicate things a bit. Our workforce is evolving. Sure, there are some "baby boomers" (between the ages of mid-'40s to early '60s) working in the support center. But they are outnumbered by the "Gen X'ers" ('30s to early '40s) and "Gen Y'ers" (under 30). Why does this matter? Because these younger generations are motivated differently. Yes, they still care about money, and financial rewards can be used to motivate them. But other factors come into play, and traditional approaches are less effective.

For the Gen X or Gen Y employee, their career is not necessarily their number one priority. Their outside interests often take precedence. They've grown up with video games, and for many, this is still a favorite pastime. Then there's the whole social network phenomenon. Most Gen-X'ers and Gen-Y'ers are active on one or more of the social networks, and this is often combined with their video gaming interest.

These folks are used to the unstructured, spontaneous, and interactive format of the Web and social networks. They are most comfortable in this environment and shy away from the structure that has historically ruled the business world. If we truly want to get their attention, we need to adapt our approach to their preferences. We need to present information to them in the format they are comfortable with. We need to tie their performance at work to their interest in social networks and gaming. Yes, we still need to reward them financially, but we also need to offer rewards that mean more to them—ones that translate to personal status in the virtual worlds of gaming and social networks.

What Happens When We Ask Agents What They Want?

I had an interesting experience recently while working on a project for a major technology company. As part of the project, which was primarily a reengineering of their process model, I led a team effort to redesign their performance reporting system. There were two phases. The first was to determine the key performance metrics (for agents), including the formulas for calculating the measurement and the target for each metric. I did this with a team of agents—those to be measured. After all, who knows the job better than those that do it every day? That first team also defined some of the delivery framework. For example, they wanted the system to be some sort of pop-up window that they could view at any time (or all day long). They wanted the data to be real-time, and they wanted it boiled down to one overall score or rating based on some sort of "weighting" of the various metrics. A simple dashboard.

In the second phase, I refined those results with a team of supervisors. They defined a few additional metrics, but most importantly they wanted the system to incorporate a "feedback and acknowledgement" function. In other words, if the supervisor noted that someone was doing great or had recently made improvement or possibly needed improvement, the supervisor wanted to be able to send that note to the agent—through the system—and then have the agent acknowledge that they had received the "coaching note." This approach is very consistent with the Gen X and Gen Y preference.

These teams defined the requirements before they looked at any products. I wanted to be sure that their needs were not influenced by the latest bells and whistles (and slick marketing pitches) of the existing products. The team did a great job and defined a very nice system. What was most interesting to me was how their definition mapped very closely to the next generation of products.

The "Next Gen" of Products

Over the past five years or so, many products have been introduced that gather and consolidate data and then present it in simple, graphical views. From very powerful business intelligence products to simple report consolidation tools. Management dashboards are one of the most popular applications of this technology. These have more recently evolved into agent dashboards.

The next generation of product—targeted specifically at improving agent performance—incorporates many of the points I've discussed here. To be most effective, they must be real-time and constant—available to the agent throughout their shift and updated continually. The agent should be able to know how their performance compares to the target and/or to other agents. They should know when they have achieved the target and are earning rewards or have qualified for a bonus. Some of these new products have taken on the look and feel of a video game—including “high score” of the day.

Taking this a step further, the new generation of products is delivered using a software-as-a-service (SaaS) model. This means quick implementations, low cost of entry, minimal maintenance effort, and pay as you go (and only for what you need/use). Together, these developments have transformed staff motivation from art to science—meaning anyone can benefit if they apply the techniques and use the available tools.

Proving the Theory

Recently a company shared their pilot program results with me. Frankly, I was surprised because there was no denying the benefits achieved. At three separate companies, in three different industries, each achieved substantial benefits. Each improved productivity by 20 to 40 percent, and attrition was down by 50 to 75 percent in the same period. Other measures such as employee satisfaction and customer satisfaction also improved. There was no doubt that the pilot programs were a success.

Conclusion

The fact is, the techniques I've discussed here can be applied by any support center—even the smaller ones. A lot can be done by changing your approach and using these techniques, but the right tools make it all easier. The tools are available, and the cost is surprisingly low. Because of the low cost and huge payoff, the ROI is months or even weeks—not years.

I didn't want this article to sound like a commercial, so I haven't mentioned any products by name. You can do some research, and I'm sure you will find that there are a variety of products on the market. However, if you send me an e-mail, I can provide a list of products to consider (and I'll even tell you my favorites!).

About the Author...

Dave Brown is a management consultant, teacher, and author. He is considered an expert in the areas of process improvement, staffing models, and change management. He teaches management training programs for Support Center University (www.SupportCenterU.com) and also consults with technology companies to establish world-class service operations. See Dave speak at the upcoming [Technology Services World](#) conference in Las Vegas on October 21. He may be reached at dave.brown@SupportCenterU.com.