

Ask the Expert:

Dave Brown on Customer Service



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Brad Chenoweth, vice president of client services for Ontario Systems (www.OntarioSystems.com), asks: Our company always has maintained a separate “front line” area where people are scheduled (on a rotation) for taking inbound calls from our customers. They physically move to that area for their shift. However, our customer support operation now has the technology to route calls, using skill-based routing, to specific agents, no matter where they are. Does it still make sense to have a “physical” call center area where people go to take inbound calls? Should we allow our technicians to stay at their desks and route calls to them there?

Dave’s answer: That’s a good question, and it highlights an important distinction between a traditional inbound customer service center (a call center) and the typical high-tech customer support operation (a support center). The key difference is the amount of follow-up work required to close the inbound call. In the nontech customer service center, most calls (close to 100 percent) are resolved during the telephone interaction. The agent is able to take the order, make the reservation, answer the billing question, etc. In that environment, people are doing essentially the same thing all day. Therefore, their work environment can remain constant. In fact, the typical call center operation is physically set up to accommodate what they do most of—talk to customers and process the requests. The call center is a sea of heads—rows of small cubicles, low walls, headsets, and terminals.

Let’s contrast that picture with the technology support center. Most technology support centers have a much lower initial resolve rate, typically 50 to 80 percent (with exceptions outside both ends of the range). What’s more, those unresolved issues usually require significant research or testing, which can be time-intensive. While 75 percent of the issues might be resolved on initial contact, the remaining 25 percent of issues that require follow-up could easily constitute 50 percent of your total workload (just as an example).

In that example, the support staff would spend approximately 50 percent of their time fielding inbound calls and resolving approximately 75 percent of them. Then they’d need to spend about 50 percent of their time doing the follow-up work—research and testing. Those are two distinctly different tasks and performing them in the same environment probably means a compromise, as opposed to the environment being optimal for either task.

There are several benefits of maintaining a separate physical front-line area. First, let me describe how that works. I’ll call it the “Support Center Model.” In this model, we have a separate area that is a miniversion of the call center environment (small cubes, low walls, etc.). This area is staffed throughout the day with a variety of skills and levels of expertise. The total staffing and the mix of skills is adjusted hour by hour, based on the expected volume and blend of inbound calls. The staffing levels are carefully planned and maintained to ensure that customers receive consistently good service levels. The customers are routed

to the best available agent, using skill-based routing technology. The agent is responsible for determining the nature of the issue and taking the best action based on predetermined guidelines. This often means that tough, complex issues (that will take a lot of time) will be escalated to someone else outside the support center. But any issue that can be resolved within a reasonable time will be handled right then and there.

The support center actually functions a lot like the hospital emergency room (ER). We have all the necessary skills present to handle just about any issue. That mix is important so that collaboration and impromptu consultation can take place. The group quickly can determine if the issue should be addressed on the spot or if it should be escalated to a specialist who can dedicate the necessary time. Just like a hospital ER, you don't want to staff it with all interns, which can result in reduced quality and longer handle times. Also, you can't have the staff getting bogged down with long procedures, which can make the hold time for incoming "patients" unbearable. So the support center staff should apply a "triage" approach—determine the nature and severity of the problem, and then take the appropriate action. The appropriate action could range from immediate handling to immediate escalation to scheduling a call back from a specialist. The benefit to the customer is obvious—immediate initial response by a qualified staff member and then appropriate handling based on need.

In this model, the agents might spend half of their time in the "ER." They would spend the other half back in their group or department, working on the follow-up cases. When they're away from the support center, they are untethered from their headsets and uninterrupted by incoming calls. They're able to concentrate independently or work with their team to resolve the more complex and time-consuming issues. Most agents find this separation of duties attractive. The physical separation (two separate work areas) helps provide mental separation from the pressure of taking inbound calls. That reduces stress and allows them to be more productive.

Putting a variety of skills and experience together in the ER has another benefit. People learn from each other. They collaborate on issues. It breaks down the barriers that often develop between different product groups and different levels or tiers. People are less likely to "throw it over the wall" when they work together as a team. Overall teamwork and morale are improved.

The physical support center model allows management to manage the activities associated with inbound calls in real time, not just review a report afterward. They can ensure that it is staffed properly throughout the day, and they can make adjustments if necessary. They can observe when someone is stuck and needs help. They can provide advice, assistance, and resources to help the staff. By focusing all of the inbound activity in one place, management can ensure that work keeps flowing. This type of hands-on management is hard to do in a virtual environment.

So where's the cut-off point? How much time does the support center staff need to spend in "ER mode" to justify the separate facility? My rule of thumb is 25 percent or greater. At that point, the productivity and other benefits outweigh the cost of maintaining the separate area. But a traditional call center can operate effectively with a single-facility model. So the flip side of the question is, "At what point do they spend so much time that we should

consider designing the overall facility as a call center?” The answer is 80 percent or greater. If most of your agents’ time is dedicated to handling inbound calls, with very little follow-up work, then you may want to consider designing your facility as an effective call center, and then provide a separate lab or research area that people can use as necessary. The key is in analyzing the workload, understanding the various tasks that your support staff must perform, and then optimizing each aspect.

Most of the tools that are marketed to support centers actually are designed for the call center environment. While many are excellent and appropriate for both, that’s certainly not true of all. I’m a strong advocate of skill-based routing, and the technology does allow us to operate a support center in the virtual mode. That potentially saves you the cost of the physical support center facility. It also can make life more comfortable for those support agents who could then stay in their comfort zone (their cube with the rest of their group). But at what cost? What is the impact on productivity and quality by trying to mix the tasks? Does that serve the customer best? These are the questions that must be considered. In most cases, a support center will operate much more efficiently, and the customer will be served better, if you maintain a well-designed “ER.”

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