BPA Quality White Paper – Best Practices in the Utility Industry

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White Paper

"An Overview of Contact Center Agent Performance Best Practices in the Utility Industry"

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In the past decade, service in the Utility Industry has undergone a significant transition. The industry has faced regulatory challenges, competitive factors and increased pressure from the general public to provide improved service. What was once a monopolistic transaction oriented experience is now one that is centered on the overall customer experience.

Whilst most Utility Organizations are cognizant of the need for this transition, some are significantly ahead of the industry. Others have found it harder to meet this need. The industry itself is a well-networked group of professionals, therefore information and best practice sharing is commonplace. However, there is still a difference between the best and the rest.

At BPA Quality, we provide Contact Center Monitoring and Quality services to several Utility industries nationwide. In addition to that, over the last few years we have conducted several iterations of independent research to identify the best performing Utility Companies and the drivers for their performance. In the end, we have consolidated this research in an effort to identify the Contact Center Agent Performance Best Practices in the Utility Industry.

The Evaluation – Utility Performance Variable

We began this study by evaluating calls across multiple Utility Companies and measuring them against over 140 different performance variables. Once we collected all the data, we processed the results and segregated the performance of the agents into three groups: high, medium and low performing agents. High performers were defined as those who consistently scored in the top 25% of all agents; Low scoring agents were the bottom 50% and medium were the agents who filled that gap.

Overall Issue Resolution – As stated in the results of this research, problem resolution is one of the most highly correlated things to the overall success of an agent. What gets missed more often than not is the secondary variable here, the resolution of issues outside of the customer's initial inquiry. In both accords, three key behaviors that support an environment of both primary and secondary issue resolution are:

Active Listening – Successful agents talk less and listen more. These agents are attentive and are trained to pick up on verbal words and cues, especially in an emotional context. The ability to take an angry or scared client and then direct their energy to solving the problem maximizes that agent's ability to solve the problems. Additionally, the simple act of listening allows the caller to reveal secondary issues.

Probing Questions – Too often we hear agents take off on a troubleshooting path that is written in stone based on the hundred's of calls before the one they are on. The best agents do not take any situation for granted and develop a conversation with the client, asking them pertinent questions to solve the problem. Events that preceded the issue, the current situation, the location, or the state of emergency are all applicable questions.

Knowledge – We often hear agents who "sound" good, but get by only on their soft skills. The best agents either know their trade well, or are well versed in the use of the resources needed to solve the problems. Investment in one or the other, or both, is key to success.

Refined Call Handling Skills – The remaining three categories fall within the call handling skills of the agent. All things being equal, an agent who solves the problem and provides an excellent experience performs better than one that just solves the problem. This doesn't mean that the customer who only gets their problem solves is not happy, this just means that those customers who get both are relatively happier in general. Below are three key areas that drove this statistic:

Empathy – Empathy is one of the most widely misunderstood and underperformed criteria used in most contact centers that we monitor. In short, customers want to feel like they are talking to the right person that can solve their problem and that they care about it being resolved. Proper empathy is NOT sympathy. Saying sorry does not create an environment of empathy. Using words that place importance on the customer's situation and then piggy backing that with words that address the situation is the best way to demonstrate empathy. Consider the two examples:

"Mrs Smith, I am sorry that your bill seems high this month.   Let me pull up your record."

<div align="center">vs.</div>

"Mrs Smith, I understand that a large bill can come as a surprise on a limited budget. Let's see if we can find out why it is that way and find out what we can do."

The first statement is simply an apology. The second statement dives into the emotions of the customer and gets right to solving the problem.

Language Skills – General courtesies and the use of positive language rule the metrics that drive the higher performing agents. These agents have mastered the gift of gab and the ability to use words to engage the customer in a positive and helpful manner. These agents use positive words and phrases and avoid negative and irritating commentary. For example:

"Mrs. Smith, we can't get out there today, there is a backlog of technicians. Looks like we can't get there until next Tuesday."

vs.

"Mrs. Smith, I am looking at the schedule and it looks like we can get out there as soon as Tuesday, does the morning or afternoon work for you?"

Both stater
statement a

Percentage coached
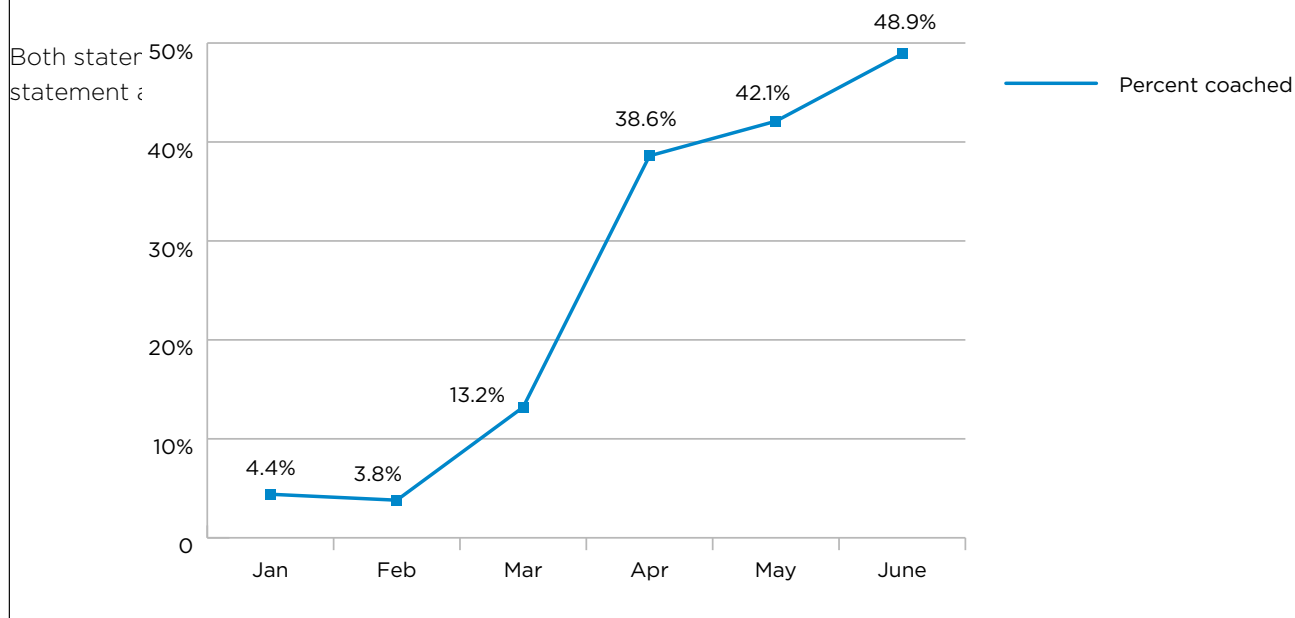
The next chart demonstrates the overall and site quality score performance for the same time period. Note that the two trends are virtually identical. As the coaching activity increased, quality scores also showed similar improvements.

Quality scores by site

The assertion here is that there is a direct relation with our customer's coaching activity and their ability to perform. This assertion is absolutely true, not only because coaching activity is occurring, but also because this particular customer is extremely progressive in their coaching activities, aligning their coaching philosophies with the previously mentioned effective coaching suggestions. They use clear, concise measures and conduct their coaching activity in a very proactive and positive manner. If this customer only conducted coaching, and did so in a counterproductive manner, these results may have not manifested itself to this degree. These positive results can be attributed not only to the fact that coaching was conducted, but in the manner in which it was conducted as well.

Summary of coaching

In the end, I went to the local gym and hired a trainer. She pointed out a few things I was doing incorrectly with my running form, as well as provided me with specific advice and training on how to work through the cardiovascular plateau I had hit. While I'm still a bit behind my daughter's best time, I'm creeping closer, and that skinny little kid better watch out behind her!

In the same fashion I was able to improve my performance, your call center agents and the entire delivery of customer service in your organization can benefit from a well structured and integrated coaching environment. Had my trainer simply told me that I was old, slow and needed to run faster, she would have only stated the obvious and would have given me nothing useful to improve upon. Her specific goals, advice and changes to my behaviors allowed me to improve. The same applies to your agent; clear concise coaching, based on objective criteria and targeted at performance variables that effect the entire system of customer service excellence will produce results that will greatly outweigh the investment in time and money.

About BPA

With over 20 years experience, over 100 different clients, and millions of observations made worldwide, BPA International has the experience, knowledge and ingenuity to help you achieve the highest possible Call Center Quality Customer Experience. BPA is the most experienced and qualified provider of Contact Center Quality Services worldwide.

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