



BPA Quality White Paper – Best Practices in the Utility Industry

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BPA Quality Monitoring 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.



We defined any standard that was measured where the high performing group scored 50% percentage points or greater than the bottom group, and/or 25% greater than the middle group as significant. Any standard that did both was viewed as a very significant difference between the best and the rest. The result of study identified **5 key areas** that the best performing agents significantly excelled at when compared to those who did not. A breakdown of these areas and the details surrounding the drivers are below:

1 Used positive words and phrases that show eagerness to help/go the extra mile going the extra mile -This variable demonstrated a 74% difference from the top performers when compared to the bottom. Agents who excelled in this category avoided irritator words such as “can’t,” “won’t,” “don’t,” and “but.” They replaced these words with affirmative responses, outlining what can be done, what will be done and never diminishing any information provided with the use of “but” or “however.”

2 Was Courteous and Respectful - As one of the most common metrics that differentiates all Contact Centers (not just utilities), this metric showed a 51% difference from the top and bottom performers. Top performers in this category were the best listeners, allowing the customer to feel as if their opinions and needs mattered and were heard. They displayed empathy and did so in a manner by using the basics in polite communication.

3 Resolved additional issues outside Customer inquiry - The best performers scored an average of 65% higher in this category. There are often multiple layers of the customer’s inquiry. The agents who earn the mark of excellence in this category are also most often the ones that ask probing questions and demonstrate a level of empathy and rapport that other agents do not. These sub-behaviors create an environment that allows agents to uncover secondary needs, address them and resolve them.

4 Resolved the issue or offered alternative action - As with any contact center, problem resolution is the #1 driver of customer satisfaction. Solve the problem and the customer tends to be happier, but don’t solve it and they aren’t. The top performers scored 64% higher than the bottom group and 40% higher than the middle, the largest difference between average performers and top performers.

5 Summarized the Call - Customers like to understand what happened and what is going to happen. The best in class agents take a very efficient and effective approach to providing a recap to the customer at the end of each transaction. Not only does this lead to a more satisfied caller, it also reduces the odds of post call errors, repeat calls and wasted efforts. Out of the five, this had the smallest difference, 43%, but still a very significant difference between the top and bottom performers.



Actionable Areas

After review of the research, the **five** categories can be broken into **two actionable areas** for Utility Contact Centers. These two areas can be used to develop Quality and Feedback programs that are designed to address the most impactful behaviors. A summary of each and examples are provided below:

1 **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.

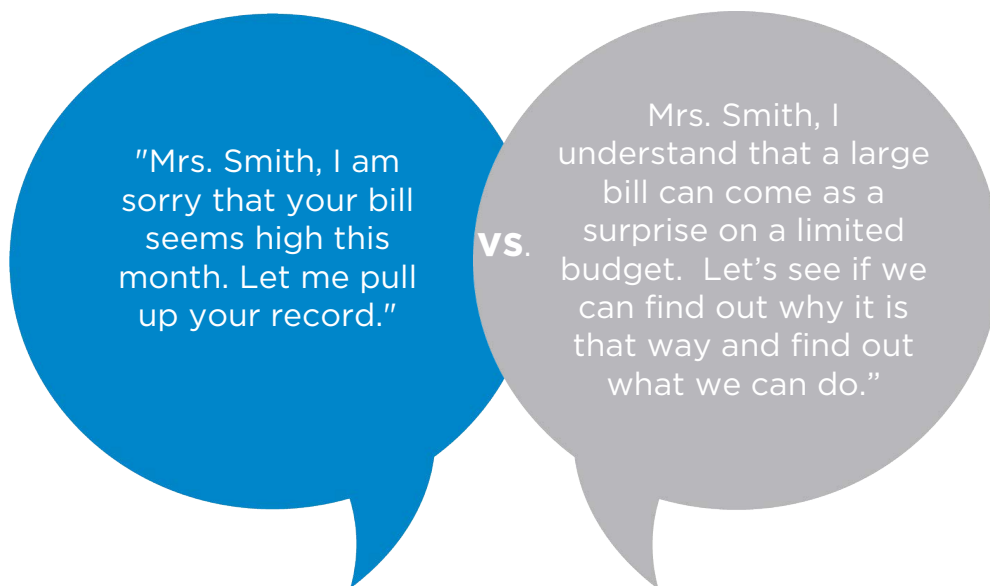
Probing Questions - Too often we hear agents take off on a troubleshooting path that is written in stone based on the hundred's of calls before the one they are on. The best agents do not take any situation for granted and develop a conversation with the client, asking them pertinent questions to solve 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.



2 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 solved 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:

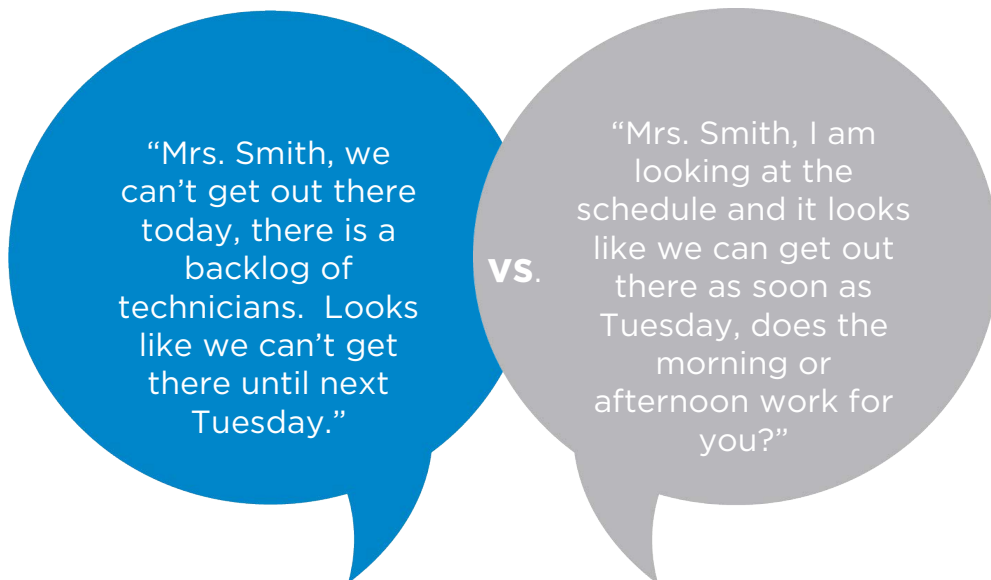
- **Empathy** – Empathy is one of the most widely misunderstood and underperformed criteria used in most contact centers that we monitor. In short, customers want to feel like they are talking to the right person that can solve their problem and that they care about it being resolved. Proper empathy 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:



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:



Both statements sent the message that a Technician wasn’t available until Tuesday; however, the second statement approached the same issue with a positive tone and manner.

- **Call Handling** – All of the basic call handling skills are important: Use of hold and dead air, avoidance of verbal collisions, transfer protocol. However one call handling skill showed to be more important than all, the call summary. Of all the call handling skills measured, those agents who successfully summarized the call and gained understanding and acceptance from the customer, performed the best. These agents tended to have higher resolution rates and lower repeat calls for the same issue, because their customers understood what was supposed to happen next.

If you would like to learn more about this study, or any of the work that BPA Quality does in the utility industry, feel free to contact us via the information below.



About BPA

With over 28 years experience, over 100 different clients, and millions of observations made worldwide, BPA Quality 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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