

A hand holding a power cord with a three-pronged plug, set against a blue background with a person's face in the foreground. The text "Is empowerment impotent?" is overlaid on the image.

Is empowerment impotent?

A MANAGEMENT MANTRA OVER RECENT YEARS HAS BEEN “EMPOWERMENT”. BUT ROGER SINDEN SAYS THAT GIVING FRONT LINE AGENTS THE POWER TO MAKE DECISIONS HAS NOT LIVED UP TO ITS PROMISE - IN FACT IT COULD BE DOING REAL DAMAGE TO YOUR BUSINESS. HE BELIEVES THE ANSWER LIES IN INTERNET ENABLING



Empowerment of agents was once seen as the Nirvana - the answer to agent churn; the panacea for all the perceived ills of the call centre.

But empowering an agent to select customer communications, even when driven by business rules, can lead to your agents avoiding the more difficult enquiries. If customer X was known to be awkward, despite the fact that they are profitable, then an agent is more than likely not to respond to the communication. As an organisation you have set your business rules to focus on the value of the customer to the business. Not to be based on the personal whim of your agents. Empowerment allows the agents' personal views to drive the business - and that's why empowerment doesn't

work - not for the agent and not for the company.

It was initially thought that giving the agent the ability to respond to the enquiries in the way and order that they wanted, would keep them motivated and stimulated in the job. This is simply not true. Instead it adds an additional burden to the role by forcing agents to prioritise on a case-by-case basis the activities being offered to them. The real motivational challenge to the agent comes from handling the caller's enquiry, not from being forced to enact the company's business model. The goal of empowerment should be to have effective rule driven delivery of tasks to agents, and leaving agents to focus on the aspect of the job that they do best, handling the relationship. It should not be used as a tool to counteract deficiencies in your technology.

But how did we get into this position in the first place? In the early days of the call centre, it soon became apparent that call centres - particularly those focusing on an inbound operation - were a cost burden on the organisation. True - a lot of emphasis was placed on intangibles such as 'improving customer service' but all too often no metrics were in place to measure this 'improvement'.

The initial capital expenditure - often encumbered with poor or non-existent CTI (computer telephony integration) applications - did nothing to help the company's balance sheet. The on costs of labour and system maintenance further eroded the bottom line. CRM (customer relationship management) applications were available but rarely, if ever, effectively integrated into the call centre operation.

Optimum staffing levels were a continual problem. Did one maintain staffing levels to handle the peaks - only to have the staff sitting idle in the troughs? Or did one staff at a lower level and then suffer the ignominy of ever increasing call abandonment rates and a

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COSMOCOM

further deterioration in customer satisfaction? - the very metric that the call centre was set up to improve. With some forward planning, some semblance of optimum staffing levels could be achieved. Workforce management software vendors had a heyday. But call centre managers could never be really sure that they were running the call centre at its optimum.

Further measures were put in place to try and minimise the cost of the call centre, by setting strict time limits within which agents could handle a call and by setting minimal wrap-up times but all at the expense of decreased staff morale and increased staff turnover.

To try and improve this situation and also to lower the cost base of the call centre by introducing revenue-generating opportunities, call blending was introduced. The idea was to monitor the peaks and troughs on the inbound calling pattern and whenever a trough occurred to switch agents over to an outbound operation - usually some form of telemarketing. Agents hated this continual switching of their mindset.

For a start, the psychological and motivational characteristics of a good telemarketing agent are almost diametrically opposed to that of a good inbound agent. This fact also seems to have escaped the notice of many of the High Street banks. You know the scenario. You have gone into the bank to deposit some money only to be accosted on your way out by some poor bank employee, shuffling from one foot to the other, asking plaintively, and uncomfortably, whether you want to take out house contents insurance. This same forcing of a square peg into a round hole is exactly what most blending operations in a call centre are doing to the agents.

Little wonder that agent morale continued to plummet. Trade unions have started to focus on the issue and call centre jobs are reputed to be under threat from low cost base operations in India. So in a further attempt to alleviate these problems of low morale, the idea of empowerment was introduced. But as we have seen, this places a further load on the agent and takes away from them the very activity at which they excel and which they enjoy, namely managing the customer interaction.

Fortunately the solution is already at hand in the shape of CRM and the new generation of all-IP based call centres. This new breed of 'super' call centre - or more realistically - contact centre allows many different types of inbound call to be handled by an agent. Not only can voice calls be handled with consummate ease but also calls originated by email, web chat, VoIP (voice over IP), wireless and even interactive digital television (iDTV). All of these calls are fed into a universal queue. Each type of call has its own priority or service level assigned to it by the call centre supervisor. Each type of call gets processed at the right time and by the right agent with the skills to handle that call so reducing yet one more cause of agent frustration.

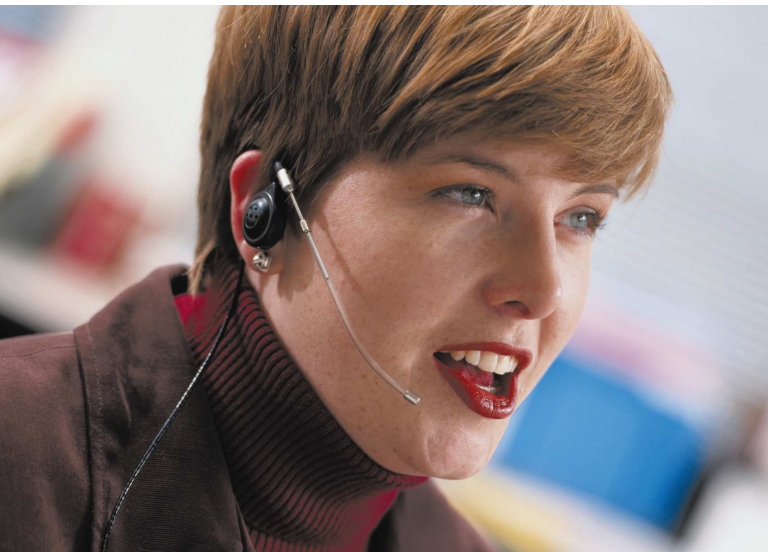
The business rules might state that voice calls get dealt with as priority. When voice call volumes start to fall, those troughs that used to cause so much angst can now be filled by other types of calls, such as emails, that do not have to be dealt with in real-time. Managing those inbound peaks and troughs is now handled automatically by the contact centre software freeing up the team leaders and call centre managers to focus on more profitable activities. Service level software automatically applies 'weight' to e-mails so that they too ultimately 'pop'



out to be handled by an agent, even ahead of a voice call, ensuring that emails are not left languishing in a black-hole somewhere - creating yet another statistic in the annals of poor customer service. Instead of switching their thought processes as they move from inbound to outbound, agents can focus on what they are good at - handling inbound calls, of whatever type, and managing that crucial customer relationship. The inbound agent is fed a steady stream of inbound calls of varying type, which minimises the boredom

and is 100% ready to help that customer reach the right decision. In fact, the agent can be prompted by the CRM/ecommerce system to suggest to the customer any special offers of the week and to encourage the customer to spend even more. It is so much more a softly-softly approach with the new generation contact centre. The agent is happier and the customer feels good about the whole experience and is encouraged to spend more - the proverbial 'win-win' scenario.

And it is here where the real



factor and improves agent morale. The outbound agents can then focus on what they are good at.

So where does CRM fit into the picture? CRM is the final piece of the jigsaw. With legacy systems and circuit switched call centres, CTI and integration of CRM has been more of a black art than a science. But now with the new all IP-based contact centre software, there is no voice circuit to muddy the waters. Any voice call has already been digitised and the entire contact centre is all computer based meaning that integration with CRM or any other legacy systems is much more easier and quicker to implement. So now when the inbound call reaches the agent they have all the customers' information at their fingertips. If the call has originated from an ecommerce website, the agent knows what is already inside the customers basket. The agent knows what web page the customer is looking at

empowerment lies in today's IP-based contact centre. The contact centre software takes away the monotony and stress of routing the right call to the right agent at the right time. It takes away the stress of the agent having to make the decision as to which call to handle next and it takes away the stress of trying to manage the impossible task of having the minimum number of agents at the right time to handle the inbound call volume peaks and troughs. Today's empowerment is about empowering the agent to help the customer with their problem, to help the customer make the right purchase and to encourage the customer to spend even more. Suddenly that cost base called a call centre has become a profit based contact centre of the twenty-first century.



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