IMPROVING QUALITY AND AGENT'S PERFORMANCE IN BANGKOK CALL CENTRES

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ABSTRACT

Quality in the call center industry is one of the major objectives difficult to achieve when considering call center agents, with their need to find a balance between the number of calls received, average handling time of calls, or post wrap-up time in each call. The focal firm, AURSA Company, realizes the importance of helping agents to develop and deliver the right kind of quality to customers on call. From data analysis, the researcher found that the company's call center agents' performance throughout 2017 was lower than expected. Therefore, this paper proposes a set of best practices for the company, gained from a review of the relevant literature. Under the proposed strategy, the best practices which were found to help agents to improve and deliver better quality service on call included weekly call assessment, coach model, and a knowledge management model. In addition, the researcher also suggests solutions to improve agent's performance through ongoing support and communication, such as weekly one-on-one sessions, weekly team meetings, and training coaching sessions.

Keywords: Quality, performance, call centre

บทคัดย่อ

การบริการอย่างมีคุณภาพในธุรกิจศูนย์บริการข้อมูลลูกค้านั้น มักจะเป็นสิ่งหนึ่งที่ยากในการจะทำให้สำเร็จสำหรับเจ้าหน้าที่รับสาย เนื่องจากมีหลายๆ อย่างที่ต้องคิดคำนึงถึงทุกครั้งในการรับสาย ไม่ว่าจะเป็นจำนวนสายที่ต้องรับ เวลาที่จำกัดในการคุยกับลูกค้าต่อสาย หรือแม้กระทั่งเวลาในการจดบันทึกข้อมูลลงระบบหลังจากสนทนากับลูกค้าเสร็จ และอื่นๆอีกมากมาย เพื่อช่วยให้เจ้าหน้าที่รับสายพัฒนาและเรียนรู้การให้บริการที่ดีต่อลูกค้าอย่างมีคุณภาพ บริษัทจึงให้ความสำคัญกับการเปลี่ยนแปลง งาน วิจัยนี้ได้ทำการศึกษา บริษัท AURSA พบว่าในปี พ.ศ. 2560 เจ้าหน้าที่รับสายมีคะแนนทางคุณภาพสายที่ต่ำกว่าเป้าหมายตัวชี้วัดความสำเร็จในการทำงานทุกเดือน การเสนอให้บริษัทใช้วิธีจากการทบทวนวรรณกรรม เช่น วัดคุณภาพสายต่ออาทิตย์แทนต่อเดือน การใช้โค้ชโมเดล และโมเดลการจัดการความรู้ พบว่าสามารถช่วยให้เจ้าหน้าที่รับสายเพิ่มคุณภาพทางสายในการให้บริการลูกค้าได้มากขึ้น นอกจากนี้ยังมีการประชุมกับเจ้าหน้าที่รับสายเป็นรายบุคคล การประชุมเป็นทีมและการอบรมเจ้าหน้าที่รับสายเป็นระยะ ๆ ทุกอาทิตย์

คำสำคัญ: คุณภาพ ผลประกอบการ ศูนย์บริการข้อมูลลูกค้า

INTRODUCTION

The focus company in this case study is the leading strategic partner of automotive manufacturers in the provision of mobility services across Australia: its pseudonym in this paper, for confidentiality, is "AURSA Company". The company decided to outsource to

Bangkok its call center for the Roadside Assistance Department. Through call center services, the front office agents are the first contacts of the customers in recording details of what the vehicles' issues seem to be and where in Australia the issue is occurring. With this information, the Dispatch Control Center would look for providers around that area to attend in a timely manner and provide assistance to customers. Apart from recording details of breakdowns, these front office agents are also the ones who answer general enquiry from customers about breakdowns.

Statement of the Problems
From the analysis of as-is quality call monitoring and the call coaching process, the researcher found that there is a problem with call center agents' performance in quality call monitoring (QCM). The number of calls being selected for quality control monitoring is one call/agent per a call center agent during those months, and it is randomly selected by one senior agent (the person assigned to do the evaluation) followed with coaching provided for agents during the month following their Monthly Performance Review with their Team leader. This process resulted in call center agents not being able to understand or improve their call quality and services being delivered to customers.

The researcher studies best practices in a literature review which contained issues which were relevant to implementing changes, as expressed in the research question "How can the AURSA Company improve its service quality and agent's performance?".

Research Objectives
The objectives of this case study are as follows:
1. To examine the current quality call monitoring along with the training and coaching process used in call centers in the AURSA Company operating in Bangkok, Thailand.
2. To find an alternative which would improve the process in order to meet the set target for QCM in order to have better business opportunities with more clients in the future, and to ensure customer satisfaction in the service provided.
3. To propose proper Quality Call Monitoring along with the training and coaching process to ensure that call center agent's performance improvement meets the current KPI target and continues that improvement so as to exceed the expected target in the long run.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Frenkel and Donoghue (1996) found that even though there are certain quality checklists for performance measurements conducted to promote consistency in services being delivered by call center agents, the actual situation of working in a call center was more than just that as call center agents were tasked with the need to maintain productivity (stressed by management) and the need to deliver quality customer services to their customers.

Recent observation and experimental work indicate that close monitoring is an important step towards achieving successful performance (Koh et al., 2004). Call listening and observations are considered part of performance monitoring, which allows focusing on agents' work behavior (Thomas et al., 2008). As supported by Richardson and Belt (2001), monitoring is conducted to ensure that the pace of work is appropriate. In addition, Performance monitoring is considered as one of the main management competencies from the client's perspective (Saxena & Bharadwaj, 2009; Pedro et al., 2012).

Dean (2002) stated that it is crucial for call center managers and supervisors to measure all the elements of how call center agents interact with customers during the process of delivering services, in order to maintain and improve customer retention and loyalty. It is essential for call centers to engage in quality assurance and monitoring as a day to day and hour to hour procedure. There it is also a necessity for feedback from monitoring to be delivered to call center agents in an offline session (Charles, 2003).

Audrey (2001) concluded in his research that the call center management should adopt a more hands-on approach by working more closely with their call center agents. By doing so, this would allow managers or supervisors to know and identify the specific training and coaching required for individual agents, and allow assistance in developing their staff skills. Charles (2003) and Alison et al. (2009) supported this by stating in their studies that there is a necessity for training plans for each employee as this would ensure effectiveness of staff as well as a continuous development of strong supervisory and management skills.

As supported by Michita (2006), training & coaching is seen as a two way communication process. Michita (2006) mentioned that a coach model can be applied in call centers. There are four processes in this coach model: (1) Clarifying needs; (2) Objectives settings; (3) Action plan designing; and (4) Checking activities. This model can help the call center agents to focus on what specifically they need to learn. The supervisors can implement the model and provide feedback in order to follow up with the call center agents next time, or they can also let the call center agents evaluate themselves to know how much it has benefited them. Figure 1 demonstrates the coach model for a call center environment.

Figure 1: The Coach Model

Source: Michita (2006)

In addition, a knowledge management model can also be utilized in the call center environment (Koh et al., 2005). Because call center agents encounter new and different calls in their day-today job along with many changes from client's end such as policy and procedures, there is a need for the call center to find a way to store this knowledge in a place where it is accessible by call center agents whenever they require it during their interaction with the customers (Koh et al., 2005).

Figure 2 demonstrates the knowledge management model that can be utilized in the call center environment. There are five processes in the knowledge management model: (1) Knowledge Acquisition; (2) Knowledge Utilization; (3) Knowledge Adaption;

(4) Knowledge Distribution; and (5) Knowledge Generation. This model can help the call center managers to identify out the issues which the call center agent encounters when delivering services to customers, resolve those issues, and once an issue has been resolved and implemented successfully, it will be considered as new knowledge that can be made available organizationally by management (Koh et al., 2005).

Figure 2: The Knowledge Management Model
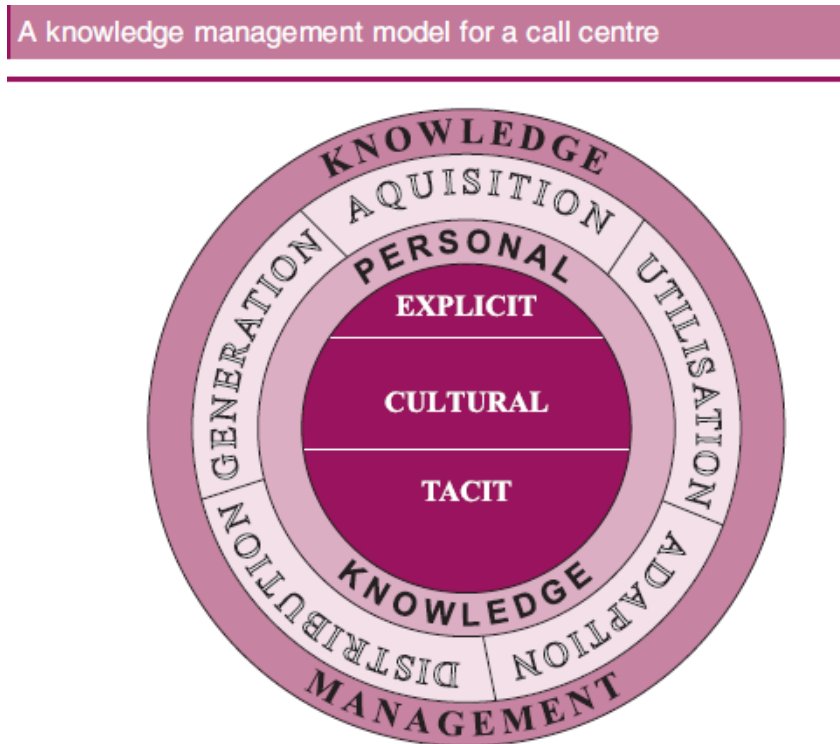
Source: Koh et al., 2005

New knowledge can therefore be stored in certain place where it is accessible by the call center agents, and this practice will enable a continuous shift in culture within the organization (Koh et al., 2005).

METHODOLOGY

The researcher collected the data during the period from August to September 2018 by conducting focus group interviews with call center agents and in-depth interviews with call center managers. For interviews, questions were prepared based on the insights obtained from the review of literature on service quality and performance monitoring in call centers.

Apart from the Focus group and In-depth interview, observations were used to look deeper into the details of what managers and call center agents would say in their interviews. Observations were made by listening to the call center agents while they were on call with customers, which helped them gain insight on the way they delivered service to the customers and the struggles they were going through during their interaction with the customers. In addition, observing the managers gave the researcher the chance to see how they conduct monthly meeting with call center agents for the monthly performance review, and what managers focus on in their day-to-day job, to confirm their answers during the interview.

Focus group results with call center agents

Six major themes were identified in the interviews with ten call center agents in two separate focus groups. The three themes that helped the agents to deliver high quality service in their current role were Product Knowledge, Quality Call Monitoring Form and their Work Environment. Another three themes that hindered the agents from delivering high quality service in their current role were Quantitative Measurement Focus, Quality Call Monitoring Process and Information & Updates Delivery.

In-depth interview results with call center managers

From the interview with call center managers it was found that, although managers still focus on the importance of quantitative measurements KPIs in their current role, qualitative measurements are also considered as their top listed KPIs if they were to write their own. In addition to that, there were many different ways manager thought employees could develop their skills in their role: the methods include more catching up with managers, closer monitoring, and more training provided to employees in and outside the company.

Observation results

From the observation of all ten call center agents, it was found that nine out of ten agents struggled during their interaction with customers on call. Agents were unsure whether the information they delivered to customer was correct or not. It was clear to notice when agents were unsure on certain details, their tone would be lower and they would speak to customer in a mumbling way, which caused customers to have a hard time in believing the information they were given.

From the observation conducted with all four managers, it was found that managers spent more than 80% of their day analyzing statistical reports and reporting to their senior managers on their call center agent's performance. It appeared that managers only focused mainly on the grades of service (GOS), the number of calls received by an agent and the duration of those calls handled. No managers considered agent's quality call monitoring (QCM) as part of their reporting to the senior managers.

After the data gathered was analyzed, the results from interview and observation were presented to the head of AURSA Company supported by company data on agents' quality performance in order to discuss the existing problem in AURSA Company and suggest the implementation of methods gained from the literature review.

OPPORTUNITY

The researcher saw that there was opportunity to help improve quality and agent's performance in AURSA. Thus, the objective of this research was to analyze agent's current quality call monitoring performance and the process for monitoring and coaching agents in order to determine a suitable technique to help improve their performances. The researcher looked for an opportunity to improve call center agents' performance by close monitoring and provision of the right training and coaching as the review literature suggested. Then, the researcher studied the relevant literature to find techniques and best practices that could be used to solve the existing problems. The best practices chosen were as shown below:

1. Weekly assessment for quality call monitoring

The process changed from monthly to weekly for call evaluation. Agents' calls were picked to evaluate once every week, for four weeks in total. The calls picked were to be any calls

that took place within 24 hours only,in order for agents to still remember what took place on that call. After each call had been evaluated, the agents were asked to have a 20-minute catch up talk with the evaluator to discuss the feedback after each assessment.

2. Applying the coach model for agent individual improvement plans
The team member development action planwas developed in order to apply the coach model to communicate certain expected outcomes with each agent.The action plan was used to discuss with each agent what they can do differently to develop their performance under Quality Call Monitoring evaluations, in order for everyone to understand and be in agreement.

3. Applying the knowledge management model to manage daily information and the updates that took place in the call center environment.
Different folders were created for ease of access, and to make them user friendly for the team. The folders were used to store important emails, updates, communication, and a Q&A folder (Question and Answer) which had Excel files for the team to fill in their questions whenever they had one,then a team leader/senior or any other team member who knew the answer would go in to reply to the team. This allowed the team members to share knowledge with each other and for everyone to be up to date with all necessary information in one place.

The significant result of implementing changes sparked by the literature review was to achieve 90.00% of QCM performance level in KPI. It was found that by the last week of implementation, agents were able to reach 95.20% and the average results throughout the implementation that took place were at the 90.30% level. Moreover, it helped build client satisfaction, excellent customer service delivered to customers, and increased awareness of quality and agent's performance improvement focus. Finally, the current quality call monitoring process has been improved and there is now a specific department dedicated to quality assurance throughout all departments in the AURSA Company.

CONCLUSION

The researcher had collected the relevant data for the analysis step and the results found indicate that call center agents were dropping below the KPI target for their quality call monitoring performance throughout 2017. The researcher then analyzed the existing process of AURSA Company by looking at current quality call monitoring and the coaching process, through interviewing call center agents and call center managers to gather detailed information and identify the root cause. Through this, the researcher found that call center agents were struggling to achieve a balance between their quantitative and qualitative targets. Call center agents needed more guidance on ways to improve their call quality; they needed more training on soft skills and product knowledge in order to be able to deliver excellence in services to their customers. It was also found that managers were currently more focused on quantitative measurements; however, they do realize the need to shift their focus and to put more importance on agent's quality and to provide them with the necessary coaching and training to support their performance improvement.

The focus on quality call monitoring has helped in the understanding of what procedure was lacking to help agents improve and develop in their day- to- day role. It has helped the company to achieve KPI of QCM percentage from the call center agents and allowed the agents to deliver excellent customer service confidently. Applying the best practices gained from the literature review, such as QCM weekly assessment, training & coaching along with

knowledge management, has helped to bring awareness on the importance of quality to the AURSA Company.

In addition, this has helped the call center agents to improve their performances when handling their calls with customers and clearly understand what is expected from them. Moreover, the implementation has helped the team to be more engaged, and it has created an environment full of support and continuous communication through weekly individual and team meetings. Finally, continuous improvement and monitoring of agent's call would help seniors and team leaders to understand and identify training need analyses, on a regular basis, to ensure that the agent's quality and performance are improved and developed in the longer term.

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