



SEVEN TECHNIQUES FOR HIGHLY EFFECTIVE CALL CENTER SELECTION

Call centers are all about people. Advances in technology, new CRM systems and contact channels can improve the efficiency of your center, but people ultimately make the difference between its potential success or failure.

In today's climate of outsourcing and offshoring, the focus for U.S. call centers is on delivering quality of service. The way in which your people interact with your customers is now the most important competitive advantage.

Based on this scenario, identifying the best people for your call center is critical. We look at the seven steps you can take to build a world-class selection process that will not only help you find the best people, but also give you the means to develop them to their full potential.

1. DEFINE YOUR OBJECTIVES

Before you even start to look at the different assessments that are available, you need to think carefully about why you want to implement a new selection process and what you want to achieve.

You may seek to improve the performance of your operators. By selecting better candidates, you can improve the overall level of competence within your center.

You may want to reduce your people costs. Staff turnover is costly and once you take into account factors such as training and management time, it can easily cost close to \$10,000 to recruit each operator, not including hidden costs. By selecting candidates with the right skills and attitudes for your organization, you can significantly reduce your attrition rates. You may want to make your recruitment process faster and more

efficient. Many call centers operate in a competitive recruitment market and compete with each other for candidates. If your selection process is too slow or too complicated, then you will probably lose candidates to your competitors. An efficient selection process will not only identify the best people more quickly, it can help promote your company as a preferred employer.

Whatever your objectives, it is a good practice to build monitoring procedures into your plan so that you can measure the effectiveness of the process. This gives you the data needed to determine a return on investment (ROI) calculation so that you can demonstrate how successful you have been.

2. JOB ANALYSIS: WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

Different positions require different people. It sounds simple, but it means that there is no such thing as a 'good' candidate. Instead, you need to find candidates who suit your particular position and your organization.

The first stage in designing an effective selection process is to get a thorough understanding of the sort of people you are looking for. You may have an up-to-date competency framework or job description for your call center positions. If you don't, or if you are recruiting for a new position, then you need to carry out some sort of job analysis.

Job analysis is the foundation for the entire selection process. The more work you do at this early stage, the better the results are likely to be. Don't be tempted to try to save time by skipping this stage. If you do, you risk wasting much more time by recruiting unsuitable candidates.

There are many job analysis techniques that you can use, from interviews with current employees and team leaders to discussions with strategic managers. The end result is a job profile that sets out the skills, abilities and personal characteristics that a candidate needs to succeed in the position. These are covered in more detail below.

3. THE ROLE PROFILE: THE THREE COMPONENTS OF PERFORMANCE

Successful job performance is made up of three components. To do a job well, a candidate needs to have all three. If any component is missing, then the candidate is unlikely to be as effective as he or she might be.

Skills and Abilities

The technical skills and knowledge required to do the job. This may include the ability to use computer packages or CRM software. It may include mental abilities such as understanding written information. It may also include job-relevant knowledge of the organization's policies and procedures.

Behaviors

These are the behaviors that are required for effective performance. They are usually included as part of a competency framework and include such things as communicating, dealing with customers and teamwork.

Personality

This is the candidate's preferred style of working including his/her attitudes, motivations and values. For instance, some people prefer to work in a busy environment, others prefer a calmer approach. Some people enjoy influencing and persuading, others are less confident. Understanding a candidate's preferred style is vital when deciding if he/she will fit your position.

Once you have identified your ideal candidate's main characteristics, you can start to look at the different selection methods that are available to you.

4. CHOOSE YOUR SELECTION TOOLS

The most commonly used selection method is the simple face-to-face interview. Unfortunately, it is also one of the least effective ways of identifying suitable candidates. The typical interview is very subjective and suffers from conscious and unconscious biases, such as making decisions on first impressions. It does not measure the important components of performance and it relies too much on the skill of the interviewer.

A better approach is to use a combination of more objective assessments, as these provide a much more accurate picture of a candidate's true abilities.

There are a number of selection methods that you can use when recruiting call center staff, ranging from simple exercises to sophisticated psychometric tests. It is easy to get confused, but the key thing to remember is that the assessments you use should measure the characteristics listed in your job profile for each of three components of performance. Some examples of objective assessments for each component are as follows:

Skills and Abilities

- Aptitude Tests for abilities, such as verbal and numerical reasoning, can be very effective, providing they are relevant to your position. If they are not relevant, don't use them.
- Software Skills Tests are an excellent way of highlighting a candidate's ability to use computer packages, such as Outlook or Excel. The best ones are fully-simulated tests that replicate the functions of the software.
- Computerized Simulation Tests provide the candidate with a realistic preview of the job of a call center operator. The candidate hears a simulated call through the computer and has to navigate around a CRM system to enter the caller's details.

Behaviors

- Competency-Based Interviews are more effective for selection than unstructured interviews. Candidate are asked structured questions on examples of their past behavior. This makes the interview more consistent and accurate. Competency-based interviews can also be done over the telephone as part of a screening process.
- Telephone Simulation Exercises are role-plays carried out on the telephone. A candidate is given instructions on answering calls, and the assessor plays the role of a customer. The candidate is then rated on a series of competencies. This sort of exercise is an excellent way of assessing behaviors in a highly realistic setting.
- Call Center Scenario Tests are computerized versions of telephone simulations. They are administered and scored by computer, making them simple and inexpensive.
- Assessment Center Exercises are a very good method of selection, but can be time-consuming. Typical assessments include group exercises, role-plays and problem solving exercises.

Personality

- Personality Questionnaires are the most accurate and objective way of identifying a candidate's preferred work style. They produce a profile for the candidate that highlights strengths and weaknesses, and the results can then be used to support an interview. There are personality questionnaires available that have been specifically designed for call center positions that focus on key aspects of personality, such as customer focus and following procedures.

The assessments you use should fit the purpose, have high quality and be fair to all candidates. Try to choose assessments from reputable suppliers and ask for supporting evidence and documentation whenever possible.

A further factor to consider is the cost of using a particular method of assessment, in terms of money, time and resources required. For instance, assessment centers are very effective, but take up a lot of time and can require a lot of people to act as assessors. Always try to balance the benefits of a selection method with the costs involved.

5. CREATE A STANDARDIZED PROCESS

Once you have selected the best assessments for your job profile, you should aim to create a selection process that is consistent and standardized across the whole organization. This allows you to evaluate candidates not just against each other, but also against the requirements of your position and your organization.

The best way to achieve this is to create a clear structure for selection. This does not need to be extremely rigid, but rather a set of guidelines and procedures for all recruiters to follow.

The structure gives you confidence that all new recruits will meet your standards. It should not matter who has recruited them, or in which call center they are located. Everyone should be capable of succeeding in their position.

6. AFTER THE ASSESSMENT: FEEDBACK FOR CANDIDATES

Your process shouldn't stop as soon as you've selected successful candidates. You will have gained a lot of information about each candidate and this can be very useful for both parties.

The first thing you should do is offer feedback to all candidates, whether they have been successful or not. For unsuccessful candidates, the feedback can help them understand where their strengths lie and also whether they have any areas that they need to work on in the future. Providing feedback also helps to position you as an employer of choice, and this can be a great benefit when you are in a competitive recruitment environment.

For successful candidates, the feedback is even more useful. What your assessment process will give you is a detailed breakdown of each candidate's strengths and development needs. This can be the first stage in a training or personal development plan for each new recruit. For instance, if you

had a candidate that passed your selection process, but performed poorly on a software skills test, you would be able to organize a training plan that included training in computer applications. A good selection process can save you time and money by targeting training only where it is needed.

7. MONITORING AND ANALYSIS FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Unfortunately the work doesn't stop once you have implemented your selection process. It is best to monitor the success of your process, so it can be refined and improved, and so any issues can be identified quickly for appropriate actions to be taken. The types of analysis that you should consider include the following:

- Validation includes benchmarking the results of your selection process against your candidates' subsequent job performance. This confirms that your assessments are effective, and can suggest further refinements.
- Equal Opportunities Monitoring is a good practice to ensure that your selection process is demonstrably fair to all candidates.
- Return on Investment Analysis allows you to monitor factors like training costs, staff turnover and job performance, so that you can measure the success of your selection process against costs and create a powerful business case for the benefits of your strategy. Think back to the objectives you defined at the start of the process and add measurements to show how successfully you have achieved them.

COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Building a world-class selection process can give a call center a significant competitive advantage. Identifying the qualities you need in your candidates, putting in place objective assessments and standardizing your approach help you to accurately and consistently select the most suitable people to work for your organization. ■

www.kenexa.com
contactus@kenexa.com