

A wind of change for quality assurance

Pierre Marc Jasmin

President - Triad Services Inc.- Montreal, Canada

pmjasmin@servicetriad.com

From necessary burden to key activity, quality assurance (QA) programs have evolved dramatically in the past ten years. While most customer contact centres (CCC) have adopted such a strategy, QA processes and tools are still very often used at a basic level. Many centres have not yet explored the full potential of their QA program, depriving themselves of its full value.

Gone are the days when conversation monitoring meant checking if the agent was complying with the script, saying “please” and “thank you”. Today’s QA programs are part of a 360-degree satisfaction cycle including the client, the agent and the manager. Beyond the evaluation and coaching of agents, the QA program, linked with interactive analysis solutions, promotes a more effective decision-making process, leading to optimization of customer loyalty, sales growth, product and services delivery systems, and agent engagement. All this becomes possible with cost reduction as a target.

From internal focus to external vision

The first QA programs were only designed for the customer contact centre’s internal activities. Following a technical training session given by the supplier when implementing the monitoring (and sometimes screen capture) tools, a CCC analyst then designed a monitoring grid, including evaluation criteria and certain operational procedures. The result was approved by a few managers and validated with a control group of agents. The primary objective was to ensure agent compliance with call handling procedures and conversation quality, a strategy which sometimes interfered with customer satisfaction. While compliance with scripts and processes is important in service delivery, too much emphasis placed on it and on internal measures surrounding it can inversely lead to lower satisfaction levels felt by customers during their experience with the agent.

Today, enterprises seek a competitive advantage in the quality of their customer service. They want to know what aspects of service delivery make customers go “wow!” In the CCC industry, for example, an indicator like the first contact resolution rate has acquired more and more importance in the past few years, leading to the optimization of request resolution speed and, often, to the reduction of request handling costs (fewer calls). However, it is now necessary to target the best method of effectively measuring that indicator. The underlying processes, training, coaching and tools must also be

constantly tested and reassessed, on both the internal (calibration) and external levels (customer surveys).

A solid quality assurance program will enable not only the assessment of the expected results, but also the evaluation of key factors that help reach quality objectives. In a first contact resolution context, such aspects as precision in the handling of a request and the way of working with customer expectations become key factors of success. This positioning must be adopted at the agent level, with support from such resources as evaluators, managers and the CCC's training and coaching personnel.

In order to broaden the vision of the QA program and turn its internal perspective into an external one, it is best to include customer feedback in the evaluation process. This can be achieved in wrap-up mode, with surveys using interactive voice response (IVR) systems or a third party. The customer's answers to a maximum of 5 questions and the data captured in real-time are linked to the conversation's evaluation form. The quality evaluator and the agent have access to the customer's comments at all times. The CCCs that have implemented this additional process have added great value to their QA program by matching managerial expectations, on the inside, with customer expectations, on the outside.

Agent development through quality assurance

Generally, following the evaluation of an activity, certain changes are recommended in order to reach performance objectives. These changes can only be achieved through coaching and additional training activities, the importance of which is sometimes underestimated in QA programs. Lack of time or tools is often at the root of this deficiency. Coaching sessions are sometimes ill prepared and often rushed. Human nature being as it is, with all its subjectivity, change management may lack definition or may suffer from inadequate communication from one person to the other. This situation does nothing to promote receptivity in the agent that receives coaching in view of behavioural changes.

Some CCCs have found a solution in the implementation of « E-coaching », an efficient addition to face-to-face coaching efforts which enables agents to become more engaged in their personal development. In an E-coaching situation, the agent receives a voice file along with the call, to be used for self-evaluation purposes. Following the call, the agent receives the quality monitor's evaluation, along with an example of the type of call handling expected, as well as advice and simulation exercises to promote the desired change. The coach remains available to support the agent in this self-directed development process. Coaches will be careful to target the type of calls to monitor, and

their informal evaluations will be aimed at supporting the agents' efforts toward change. Needless to say this type of activity must be provided for within at the workforce planning level.

This method of assisted coaching offers a wide range of advantages:

- Improved agent receptivity to constructive criticism
- Less pressure put on agents who can manage their own development
- Accelerated assimilation of concepts leading to changes
- Improved sense of responsibility felt by the agent toward change management
- Heightened critical sense of agents in self-evaluation situations
- Improved agent engagement toward the QA program

Return on investment (ROI) of such an approach will be calculated regarding the optimization of coaching efforts, the speed at which behavioural changes occur and the persistence of changes over time. This can lead to more efficient coaching, which ultimately leads to added value for the CCC (revenues and/or loyalty).

The QA program is one of the aspects of the agent's training, and data acquired using that approach should be integrated to the other indicators of professional development. Agents should thus have access to their own personal portal, including, for example, monitoring activities reports, development objectives, monthly performance evaluations, career development plans, work schedules, memos and all the additional training tools needed to support their progress. This personalized portal, when adapted to the objectives and results of both the CCC and the enterprise, can enhance the sense of responsibility and belonging that agents feel towards the organization.

Enterprise development through quality assurance

While agent performance is at the core of the efficiency of CCC activities, several other operational elements also have an impact on customer satisfaction with the enterprise. The success of these elements is very often beyond the agent's control. Leading-edge enterprises have chosen to expand their quality assurance programs to all production and support services divisions using a quality partnership model. The use of speech analysis tools allows enterprises to share and prioritize a wide range of improvement opportunities among all their services.

This quality approach puts the enterprise in a powerful position to make beneficial changes:

- Operational efficiency of production lines of products or services, delivery logistics, invoicing, claims, and support services;

- Marketing intelligence in link with competition, promotional impact, sales triggers, irritants regarding pricing and distribution;
- Awareness of the customers' opinion of a product or a service, their needs and expectations, their comments and suggestions.

When adopted by senior management and developed to its full potential, the QA program can provide the enterprise with data mining solutions that enable progress from the tactical stage to strategic planning, with more competent resources. Such an initiative can have a significant impact on customer satisfaction and the enterprise's revenues.

The CCC manager can become the initiator of such a project, and eventually improve the strategic positioning of his or her unit's activities. The key is, of course, realistic step-by-step planning, rational change management and complete engagement of all parties involved.

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