

FEATURE

Surefire Hires

Organizations jeopardize their ability to best serve customers if they don't have selection, retention, and development strategies for contact center agents. Here, industry insiders offer nine tips to help minimize risk.

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It's not easy being a contact center agent. This is reflected in the industry's high agent churn rate. In the article "A Recipe for Reduced Turnover: Find the Right Mix" (CRM magazine, August 2005), Saddletree Research Chief Analyst Paul Stockford put yearly, industry-wide agent turnover at about 40 percent. And it's no wonder why. Customer service representatives (CSRs) are required to juggle multiple tasks: properly handle customer inquiries, cross- and upsell products and services, hit various performance targets, and calm fuming customers, just to name a few, all while under the sometimes overbearing eye of managers and supervisors.

Former CSR Karalee Taylor experienced these pressures firsthand as a CSR for a major communications company, where on-the-job stress ultimately resulted in high blood pressure for the 23-year-old student. While Taylor's case lies closer to the extreme end of the spectrum, stress remains a chief motivator for agents to jump ship. Factors including weaker compensation packages in comparison with other organizations add to the challenges associated with hiring and keeping stellar agents.

That's why hiring, retention, and motivation initiatives are essential to service success. What follows are some process-oriented pointers to keep attrition rates in check, while motivating agents to the peak of their potential.

Getting Over the Hiring Hill

Identify Desirable Traits

Expecting to hire the best-suited agents for a specific job without pinpointing the required skills and attributes will surely complicate your hiring strategy. But an equal hindrance is attempting to hire service stars without understanding how customers perceive your current level of service delivery. That's "putting the cart before the horse," according to Jodie Monger, Ph.D., president of Customer Relationship Metrics. "You truly have to understand perception of service that's being delivered, so that you can hire [people] that can in fact deliver in that [desired] manner."

Ensure the right agents are selected to meet and surpass customer demands by thoroughly analyzing what skills classify as must-haves, nice-to-haves, and red-flag characteristics. Communicating these desired qualities to HR will help staffing personnel pluck candidates that are best aligned with the center's objectives and goals.

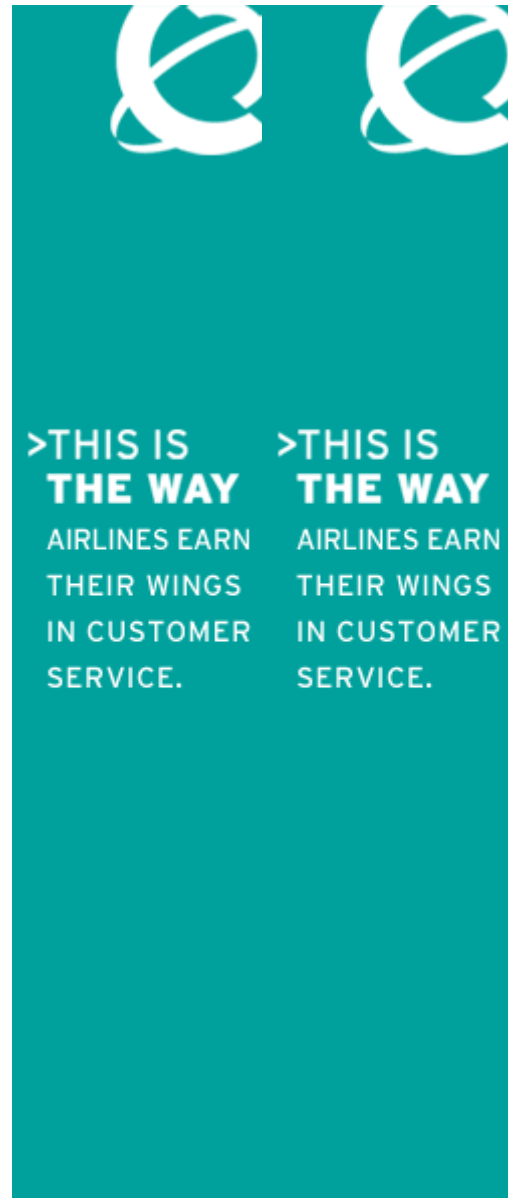
Profile Current Stars and Prospects

As consumers' service-level expectations rise, contact centers are feeling the heat to hire carbon copies of their highest-performing reps. Bundling in profiling and selection tools with the rest of your technology stack will make that easier. "The number one thing that we've seen in all of our clients is if they use some profiling tools of their existing top performers and then they do situational interviewing they are much more likely to get the people that can replicate their top performers," says Louise Anderson, president of Anderson Performance Improvement Company and author of *Cream of the Corp.*

These applications are also useful technologies for spotting potential talent. Connexions, an outsource contact center company that calls solely on stateside agents, fused a computer-based profiling app from Prove It!, a division of human capital management provider Kenexa, into its multiple-layer recruiting and hiring process about 13 months ago. The company does much of its recruiting at technical schools and job fairs, and via postings on employment Web sites and in local employment magazines. When candidates arrive at Connexions' career center, they take a skills assessment test. Rob Panepinto, president of Connexions, estimates that with Prove It! about 50 percent of applicants do not move on to the next level in the hiring process, allowing the company to narrow down the field. "Someone might not [have] the right skill set for the specific client," he says. Assess skills prior to handing out W-2 forms, and you'll have better insight into potential agent performance.

Give Them a Taste

It's one thing to hear a job description and another thing to see or hear the job in action.



Allow prospective candidates to listen in on a few calls during the recruiting and hiring process as a way to give them a feel for what the position entails. The try-before-you-sign approach may help reduce the number of new hires who don't report for their first day on the floor.

This approach works well for Connexions. "We wanted to build in a place where the employee could decide that it's not right for them," says Jason Grooms, training and quality manager at Connexions. "For quite a few of our accounts, they'll sit down and actually listen in for some calls. [They are] able to say, 'That's not really what I want to do.' We want to find the person that fits right with the account and if they say, 'I don't like that,' or 'I don't think I would be a good fit for that,' then we don't want to put them there."

Winning the Retention Battle

Identify Internal Bad Seeds

Reps have enough pressures to contend with, but an underlying cause of turnover may be brewing from within. Ask agents why they've resigned and chances are you will uncover supervisory glitches. When many agents give their two-week notice, they see it as an escape from their supervisors, not their employer organizations. "If you're seeing a lot of exits for Suzie and not very many for Joe, you've got a problem with Suzie you need to address," says Maggie Klenke, cofounding partner of The Call Center School. But talking to CSRs shouldn't be merely an exit-interview formality. Tap your workforce occasionally to truly understand what aspects of the job keep them on board. Knowing what prompts employees to stay will encourage the organization to do more of it.

Steer Clear of One-Size-Fits-All Career Paths

Individualizing career paths has also proven to be an effective retention method. Not all agents are suited for, or even want, to hold upper-management positions. Some CSRs may choose more technical routes, while others may be attracted to specific branches within the contact center, such as workforce management. "All of those should be encouraged and developed," Klenke says, "but they need to be done on an individual basis so that we're maximizing the opportunity for each person."

Promoting upward mobility is also an option for organizations, including Burlington Northern Santa Fe Corporation's subsidiary, BNSF Railway Company. "One thing we have to offer in the hiring process, especially in customer support, is the opportunity to grow with BNSF," says Art Hernandez, director of customer support at BNSF. The operator of one of the largest railroad networks in North America gives its support team a chance to learn about other opportunities in the railway through its mentoring initiative, in which executives in the company from different areas will mentor the staff. "This just gives them another perspective of how the railroad runs and opens the door for future, potential career opportunities," Hernandez says.

Keep the Classroom Doors Open

While training and coaching serve as a way to boost agent productivity, they also serve as retention methods. Extending employees' skill set may open up chances to diversify their often-repetitive daily routine and help boost their value to the company. Consider asking agents what areas they would like training in when crafting e-learning or other coaching strategies. "We're constantly assessing their needs and communicating with them," Hernandez says. "Our employees know that their voices are heard."

As part of Connexions University, an initiative that incorporates the company's development and training efforts, Connexions provides a curriculum that enables agents to become certified supervisors. The company also provides training for agents to become licensed insurance agents. "We try to create an environment where they see it as a place that they can actually make a career out of and really advance in their skills and their ability," Grooms says. "That does quite a bit to retain the high performers." Anderson adds: "If you motivate them that is the best retention tool."

Motivation On the Frontline

Sing Their Praises

Praise and recognition is a guaranteed recipe for motivating agents to their maximum potential, but how that appreciation is shown varies from center to center. Widely deployed tactics include a simple pat on the back, cash bonuses, gift certificates, parties, and public acknowledgment, but regardless of your method inform agents of a job well done, as well as other employees. Update agents on their development and tie rewards and incentives to those accomplishments. "The number one form of reward is the recognition," Anderson says.

"[Don't] just give them the feedback, but make sure that there's a tangible consequence and that's using reward and recognition systems."

Bill Rose, founder and executive director of the Service and Support Professionals Association (SSPA), suggests incorporating top brass into your recognition blueprint. "When customer service is acknowledged at the very highest level of the company, the people that work in customer service become highly motivated to do an even better job," he says. A good forum for employee praise, he adds, is company meetings where various departments are represented.

On-the-spot recognition is also a way to go. It's a method of choice for Mike Arita, BNSF's assistant vice president of customer support. "If customer feedback from our transactional survey is extremely good, Mike will celebrate customer support's success by doing something as simple as treating the entire staff to ice cream that day," Hernandez says.

Tailor Rewards and Incentives--Don't Just Rely on Cash

Just as praising and rewarding agents should be cornerstones of your motivational strategy, so should tailoring that recognition. Trying to motivate all agents with the same rewards simply won't work. And although the obvious choice is money, it isn't always the best reward. Agents want more than just a paycheck; they are attracted to perks like tuition payment programs and flexible hours. Some would "take time off without pay just to get some time off," Klenke notes. "Others would kill for overtime--they're desperate for the money."

"There's always someone out there who could give them more money. Everybody wants more money of course, but the reality with tech support in general and especially with top talent is that they're much more interested in interesting and challenging work," Rose says. "Providing things that are above and beyond compensation are great motivators, including things like high-tech tools--better computers, faster access to the Internet, better database tools--they're great motivators for tech support [personnel]."

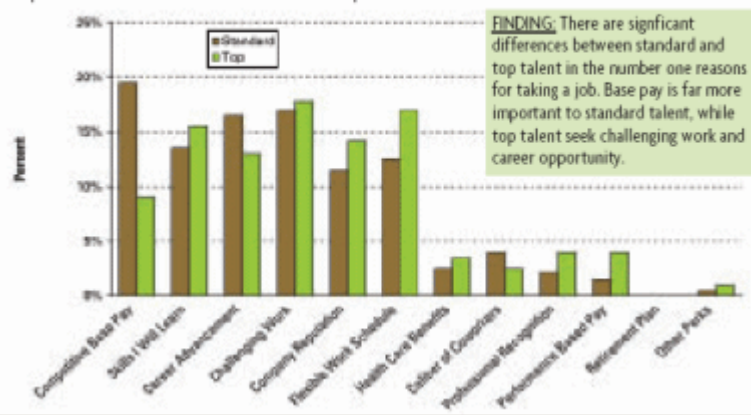
There are times when a monetary reward is appropriate, especially if agents are performing sales functions, but it is not recommended when trying to change behavior. "To change behavior it's best to not use cash because once you get the behavior change you want to take [the reward] away," Anderson says. Her suggestion? "Give them noncash [rewards] or a token economy that they can accumulate points to get something that they want."

Keep Communication Lines Open From All Angles

To help prevent agents from feeling undervalued, which can directly impact morale, give them a forum. "Another aspect that helps with motivation and retention is the common vision shared by the customer support team," says Carole Ishii, assistant vice president of customer relationship marketing at BNSF: "Involving the entire team in a common vision creates alignment, teamwork, and a sense of belonging."

Also, present agents with feedback not solely from managers, but from customers as well. "Adding an effective measurement strategy of how the customers feel about service," Customer Relationship Metrics' Monger says, "is where you get the positive kinds of feedback that help you to continue to motivate your agents throughout the continuous improvement process." It will also help offset those rare negative comments.

The #1 Reason Both Top and Standard Talent Were Attracted to Their Jobs
 Top Talent Versus Standard Talent Respondents



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Service and Support: How Top Talent Stacks Up

Hiring, motivating, and retaining top-tier agents can be overwhelming, but for organizations that incorporate tech support into their service efforts, those undertakings may seem increasingly difficult. The following stats and figures from SSPA's 2004 "Top Talent for

Service and Support Industry Study," based on responses of 500 employees at 300 SSPA member companies, illustrate how top talent tech-support staff stack up against standard-performing counterparts:

The Top 3 Most Important Factors in Overall Motivation to Succeed at Work
 Top Talent Versus Standard Talent Respondents

