Closing the Revolving Door – Part1

By: Colin Taylor

Staff and Agent retention was a ‘hot’ button topic in the call center industry 20 years ago and still is one now. So how is it that the same issue that ‘dogged’ call centers two decades ago is still a ‘front burner’ issue today? I think there are a number of factors that contribute to this:

- The nature of turnover and staff attrition is such that you are never done this process,
- Successive regimes have built up and eroded successful programs that addressed this topic,
- Regular and expected fluctuations in employment levels and labour availability ‘hid’ the problem for periods of time.

Addressing turnover and attrition is a never ending process. With labour costs representing approximately two-thirds of your center operating costs, it is a battle you need to wage and a battle you really want to win.

In this article we will look at what you can do, today, in your center to reduce attrition. There are many ideas, methods, tools and tactics that you can employ to reduce attrition that require time to implement, develop the business case, ROI calculations and secure funding and management approval.

But what can you do today, right now, at little or no cost that will actually improve retention in your center immediately? Specifically we will look at rewards and recognition, ways you can involve, engage and motivate your agents, today.

Proven techniques

A number of proven techniques that can improve staff retention and we will address these under the headings I have named:

- Understanding Rewards and Recognition
- It’s not just the Money
- Recognition is over rated
- Motivating without money
- Building Community
- Challenges equal Opportunities

Before we examine how to improve retention it is critical we have a good understanding of what our current situation is. Do you know what your turnover rate is? Do you know why people are leaving your center?

We have worked with many managers that have answered yes to these questions only to later ask to revise their answers. It is critical that you know or at least believe you know the answers to these questions as we begin drill down through the challenges of retention management.

All centers today employ rewards and recognition within their centers, some with robust unified programs and others moving through a series of one-off tactics. However many of the centers in both of these camps do not have a good grasp of human nature or what truly motivates people.

The recent recession has caused many call centers to scale back, they have thinned the ranks of management, fewer VP's per square inch, and have reduced or frozen headcount and budgets. So doing more with less; really has become doing more with none.

A changing staff

On top of the budgetary and economic issues we have seen a change in the agents we have working in our centers. Gen X and Gen Y employees are different. They have different expectations, motivations and a different view of what is important. They represent new challenges in engagement and motivation. You need to approach Gen Y employees differently in order to engage with them.

Finally we must remember that tactics are short term. One off campaigns, contests and incentives will be quickly forgotten.

Wherever possible you want to develop Reward and Recognition programs and incentives that are strategic, that is to say support and align with the goals of the center and those of business. Strategic and structural programs endure and become a part of the fabric of the center.

Having said this, don't discount the value of using money as an incentive...It is still the right size, shape and color, but it should not be the only tool in your rewards and recognition arsenal.

One fact that many centers have reported to me is that their staff has become more transient. Staff is not career focused…some just want a job and not a career. Some may be working in the center until they find a job...what does that say about their perception of the call center and the company?

Turnover is a fact of life and will always be a concern to call center operators. And like it or not our Supervisors are likely not as well selected or trained as we would like them to be. All of these factors were true in call centers 20 years ago, so has anything really changed?

Recognition is not enough

Time and time again you will hear experts and pundits espouse that recognition is all you require to have a happy and engaged workforce. Unfortunately that isn't correct. Recognition is wonderful and makes those being recognized feel special and valued, but alone it is not enough to solve retention issues.

By themselves recognition programs have a number of shortcomings: Event and time based programs end, ‘First past the post’ generally results in the same cadre of agent winning all of the time- remember our Mastery agents...they should be winning all the time! If you can not win, you will quickly give up trying. In this situation the reward program that was implemented to motivate and incent agents is actually a disincentive.

The key to long term success and ease of management is to implement programs that are aligned with the objectives of the center. They support the attainment of the objectives and goals established for the center.

For example if one of the centers objectives in 2010 is to improve First Call Resolution by 5%, then an incentive or recognition program tied to FCR or reducing repeat callers or increasing the percentage of customers who identify “fully resolved” on the post call survey are all examples of aligned programs. Programs that recognize those who achieved a 10 second reduction in AHT is not aligned with the objective unless its’ scope is expanded to include a while improving FCR. In fact in the AHT example it is quite likely that this program would actually reduce FCR at least in the near term as agents rush callers off the phone and struggle to find faster ways of doing things.

Similarly programs that incent sales can be great, but if that is not a center objective it is not aligned.

Lots of achievements that can be seen as positive improvement in a call center, but not all of them will be aligned with the stated and published business objectives of the center; reduce AHT, reduce costs, increase sales, improve center profitability, reduce calls, reduce cost per contact, increase FCR, increase CSAT, improve ESAT etc. All of these can be identified as call center business goals. But none of these operates in a truly independent manner. We know that a call center is an interconnected web of processes, people, technology and methodologies and many of these elements are connected...some in obvious and others in far more subtle ways.

Cases of non-aligned incentives

The following are a couple of real world example of non-aligned incentives.

One services company set the center objective to reduce costs...this is likely one goal we are all familiar with. So the center management decided to offer and incentive for agents who attained an AHT of under 200 seconds. For each call they handled under 200 seconds they had their name entered into a draw for prizes. At first the results appeared stunning almost every agent reduced their AHT from 220 - 230 seconds to sub 200. It was on the third day however that the center manager noticed that the call volume was rising significantly above the generally accurate forecast. They were at a loss to explain why.

On day four it twigged. They found through monitoring that they were getting lots of complaints from customers reporting that when they called in the agent would hang up on them before they were finished. Closer scrutiny found that yes; in fact the agents were hanging up on customers. In fact some even told the customers that they would have to call back because the agent had used up all of their time for the call – Ouch

In a real outbound example, one company had an inside sales team that sold new business to a large prospect database. Now the database had been cobbled together from multiple sources and had a lot of holes in the information, missing addresses, postal codes etc. The manager determined, reasonably, that if they had better information in the database then they would have fewer orders with incorrect and/or inaccurate information which required rework.

So the Manager implemented an incentive program that paid the rep $.50/ updated record. This worked, in fact it worked so well that once the agents realized that they could make as much if not more incentive dollars by simply updating records versus selling the service, they stopped selling. Now I ask you what should be the primary role of an inside sales team?

We know that other companies and organizations struggle with the exact same issues as we do. How do these firms motivate their staff?

Existing Recognition/reward programs

Before we dive any deeper on what programs could be deployed, let's look at some of the recognition and reward programs that other organizations are employing.

- Rotating Trophies for Top Performers each month.
- Decorating agents' workstations whenever they meet their daily and/or monthly goals.
- Managers calls: where the center Supervisor and Managers take the reps calls for an hour while the Rep coaches the manager.- The Scooter Store
- Reps pick songs and select management staff who must perform them.- Freedom Communications
- Call swapping- If an agent gets 100% QA score on 3 calls, The manager takes 3 calls for the rep.- Galileo Processing
- Top performers each month have their Manager pick them up every day for a week and drive them to work
- Earn a chocolate for a perfect call or a call resolved in X minutes. Each resolution (or perfect call) gets a round of applause from the whole center.- Wipro BPO
- 80/20 Elite Team, the Pareto principal rewards the top 20% of agents. They get a separate lounge, flex shifts, first choice of time off and are groomed for management roles. This is run and reviewed each quarter. – Wipro BPO
- Placing a rose on the seat of an agent who has gone above and beyond.
- Campaign pins, like military ribbons or scout badges placed on the agents nameplate on their workstation.- Embarq
- Producing 'Baseball' cards of your star performers- Embarq,
- We rely on Dr. Bob Nelson book "1001 Ways to Reward Employees", it has been invaluable.- The McNaughton Group,
- Earning points for every call with FCR over 90, points redeemed out of a catalogue

- Call center radio, top performers get to pick the songs that will play in the lunch and break rooms

There are lots of good ideas here, but most are tactical, one-offs and some you can see that are a part of larger, over arching program. Many of these tactics could however be integrated into a strategic program.

One other thing you will notice is that almost all of these reward on the ‘best’, we know from experience that these types of programs do little to motivate or engage the ‘rest’.

Tactical versus strategic

How can we move beyond the individual recognition event?

The answer is to move beyond the tactical and develop an aligned culture and community that delivers superior service? This requires structure and design, both of the real world examples I cited earlier shared the design flaw that the managers didn’t think through the process. They also didn’t appreciate that agents are smart. If there is a way to ‘game’ or cheat a system, they will find it and exploit it.

The second part of this article will explore the creation of an enduring structure in the call center that will foster employee engagement and motivation and permit the deployment of aligned reward/recognition programs that meet the objectives of the center and the business.

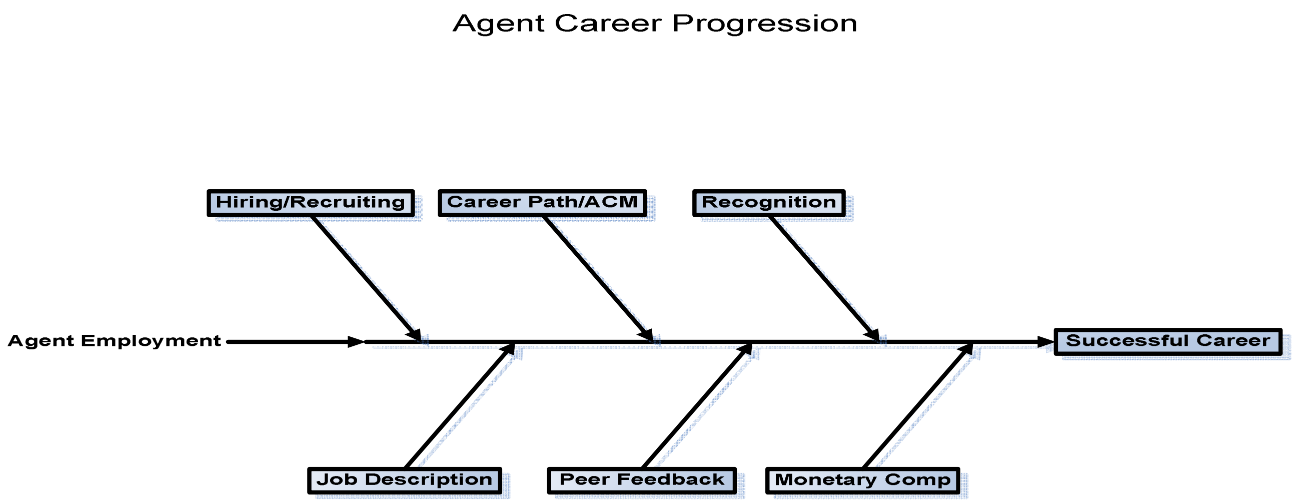
Closing the Revolving Door – Part2

By: Colin Taylor

So how do we build an enduring structure in our call center that will support engagement, motivation and allow us to deploy aligned reward/recognition programs that succeed in meeting the objectives of the center and the business? But what happens if we can design an environment where the agents push us? What happens when the agent is proactive, rather than reactive? But what happens if we can design an environment where the agents push us? What happens when the agent is proactive, rather than reactive?

Structural design focus creates a push model where staff are motivated to succeed and grow. Structure must be designed and aligned with the objectives we wish to obtain. It is a lot of work to keep staff motivated and engaged. It seems that we are always introducing new programs, pushing the agents to perform, pushing our goals.

So where do we begin our structural design? At the beginnings, by looking at how the agent perceives their role and the progress they make over their career.



This simplified fish diagram above shows and agent career progression with a call center. At the left they go through the hiring and recruiting process, they start and become familiar with the details of their job and role. They are introduced to the ACM (Adequacy, Competency, Mastery) or other career path and understand where they can progress to. They receive and provide peer feedback helping them improve. Their improved results are recognized. They move up a level and receive increased compensation. Hopefully they continue on to have a successful career with the call center. To understand how this framework can be the underpinning of a successful structure let's examine each of the elements in the career progression.

Hiring & Recruiting

Good bye mirror test. Previous experience is not a reason to hire anyone. Bernie Madoff has 30+ years as a successful money manager. Anybody want to hire him? Hire people who are best equipped to succeed. Doing so reduces turnover, especially in the early stages. The best way to achieve this is to employ skills and competencies: map your best agents...don't hire others cast offs....there is generally a reason why they aren't working there anymore. Don't take someone's word that they have attention to detail or can type...test them. Where you can't test them, taking pride in a job well done, establish specific interview questions that will be used by all interviewers...such as tell me about something you did really well and are proud of...who did you tell, how did you explain it to them, why did do this, how did you do this differently than others might have. Of course interview questions are subjective and present more risk than an objective test, but if we ask enough questions related to a topic area and approach the questions from a few different angles you tend to be able to weed out those who are making it up on the fly.

Job Descriptions

Almost every center I have been in and I have been in thousands have job descriptions. But fewer than 10% actually have accurate job descriptions that reflect what is done in the role.

Your job description must detail specifically what the position entails, state what the performance metrics will be employed to measure agent performance, tell them what performance they will need to attain and maintain, tell them who they report to, any dotted line relationships and cite the roles and positions that this job is a prerequisite for. If you are employing ACM share with them the matrix showing what they need to attain to move up the food chain.

When agents know what is expected, how it will be measured and where they can move to if they succeed most will work towards this goal. Their motivation comes from within and not from the outside.

Do not fall into the habit of creating new job descriptions for all special projects or short term assignments. Each job description should include a reference to special projects and of course the "other duties as management may assign" clause. A special project or new responsibilities do not necessarily require a new job description. These are just changes in job tasks not changes in the job.

Career path/ ACM

A McJob- can be defined as one that doesn't lead anywhere. Is this what your staff believes? You need to show them where they can go, within the center and beyond. You must Define, document and publish the career path. When you have a map, it is easy to work towards a goal. Share your ACM model, or other defined career path. Share the career flow options with the agents. Let them know that your role as their manager is to help them succeed, because the more they succeed the more you as the manager will succeed.

Peer Feedback

People can become jaded just listening to their supervisor telling them what they need to do and how to improve. The context changes instantly when the guidance is coming from a peer or a mentor. A peer feedback program empowers staff to share their knowledge. The agents and mentors will also learn through coaching. Coaching and mentoring benefits both the giver and the receiver.

If you employ a Voice of The Customer (VOC) program or call logging or recording in your call center it is quite easy to leverage this facilitate Peer feedback.

In short a Voice of the Customer or VOC program employs call recordings either random or based upon specific themes to provide senior management with insight into the types of calls and details of the calls being received in the center. These calls maybe scored by your QA group or not.

To leverage your VOC or base call recordings segment calls by agent and provide these to all members of a Peer group. Your peer group could be all agents in the center if it is small, or a specific existing team or you might wish to create a new peer group specifically for this purpose so that you can mix supervisors teams and/or include SME's in the group. Regardless of the peer group constitution, once you have distributed the calls to the peer group you meet once a week to provide feedback to one agent. If you have 6 people in the peer group and review 3-5 calls per week this will represent approximately 1 hour of 'off-phone' activity that needs to be included and planned for in their schedule. The objective of each meeting is to review the agent calls. Now since all agents will be likewise assessed on a rotation basis, people tend not to be overly critical, rather they focus on constructive suggestions…how else could you have answered that question…when I had that question, I replied with…, have you tried… all of these informal coaching sessions can be very productive. In fact often these are seen by the agents as more beneficial than their traditional coaching sessions with their Supervisor or the QA team as they know that their peers are also 'do-ers'. You know what they say….”those who can't do teach”

This peer feedback should not replace your existing quality program. Rather should augment it. Organizations that have implemented Peer Feedback in addition to their existing quality programs have seen much faster improvement in agent skills.

Recognition

The first step in building a structure is recognizing what is important to the center. In most centers what is important includes: Performance, Improvement, Leadership and Coaching/mentoring. Performance is likely the single point on this list that your senior management will discuss with you, but the fact of the matter is that without the other three points in place it is much harder to achieve improvements in performance.

So you will need to provide recognition in all of these areas. Before deploying any recognition or reward programs in any of these areas identify the metrics to employ and be sure that they will give you the information required. If you cannot identify specific metrics that are objective, I would suggest you pass on the program. Any program that is based on a subjective assessment will be tainted. Next you must look at other unplanned for outcomes that could occur and if there are any ways for the agents to 'game' the system.

Don't just recognise the best...the losers can get bored and stop trying

So recognise the top performing team in FCR, CSAT, Quality, Sales, Tickets closed etc, as well as the most improved Team in these areas, Ask the teams perhaps to nominate one member of their team for a leadership award based on predefined criteria (could be a weighted combination of their teams FCR, CSAT and Sales Revenue). Recognize peer contributions; who provided the most coaching who is not in the QA team? How many sessions did they participate in? What was the average or aggregate improvement of the agents coached etc.

There are so many ways to recognise the winners which are cheap and easy...preferred parking, pick your shift, wall of fame, lunch with the CC Manager or CEO, ride along with sales or service for a day, certificates, posted in reception, identified on the reader-boards (LCD's), billboards, newspaper, on the website, on the intranet site, the company Facebook page, a Twitter to all.

If we look beyond no cost low cost incentives and rewards there are a huge number of options available to you.

Trips, hotel stays visits to other offices, cash, dinners, conferences etc. These rewards will tend to fall into two categories: Work related and non work related. Both of these can have value- the work related ones (trips to other offices, conferences, seminars, dinner with the CEO) all allow the recipient to learn. This learning will help them to improve their understanding of the company or of the call center industry. Both of which can pay dividends in their positions, equipping them better to win future rewards. The non work related rewards (trips, hotel stays, dinners, cash etc.) both improve the recipients' quality of life, albeit briefly, but also allow them to share their reward with their significant other. This is also a chance to show off. This improves the recipients desire to win again. Thereby increasing their motivation to win future rewards. Both of these approaches can work well, I prefer business related rewards as they not only reward the individual but also benefit the call center and the business. This provides a better match to the career path of an individual than a dinner out possibly can.

One of the more interesting rewards we were involved with was a quality award at an outsourcer/BPO who was working with Ford. The reward for the highest quality score average at the end of each year was the use of a Ford vehicle for the next year- at no cost.

A caution however on ‘big ticket’ rewards, obviously ‘big ticket’ incentives can cost a lot, and can represent a significant portion of your incentive budget. Personally I would prefer to run a number of smaller incentives rather than 1 big one. Big rewards tend to be won by the top agents…really as it should be, but very quickly less skilled agents will give up trying and pretty soon you can find yourself having just two or three motivated agents chasing this prize and 40 who have given up and are not motivated.

When giving monetary rewards, be sure that these are structured as re-earnable rather than a permanent reward. In some centers they pay a bonus of $.50 or a $1 per hour to all monthly reward winners or those who exceed threshold levels the next month. This however is re-earnable, which is to say that if I win 3 months in a row I will get the bonus, but if I fail to do win or achieve the threshold the next month, I don’t get the bonus and my compensation drops down to my base level.

Of course despite all of the discussion around strategic structures and rewards there is a place for tactical rewards. That is to achieve tactical objective. An example of this would be to increase staffed hours during a known volume peak period, where a bonus maybe paid to all agents who pick up 10 extra shifts in a month. Tactical goals will by definition be short term and allow you to realize the goal in this period.

So as you finish this article what I would hope you take away from this recognition review are that there are numerous inexpensive ways to motivate your staff, that retention and motivation isn’t just about money, that you need to structure your retention, rewards and recognition program to recognize what is important and lastly that structure, transparency, alignment and engagement can help you to reduce attrition in your center.