

Employee Engagement - Delivering a Customer Service Revolution

The contact centre industry is at a crossroads.

Businesses in the retail sector need to realise that real, tangible and meaningful change is needed for the industry to deliver and profit from a 21st century service that customers enjoy using and staff feel proud to be a part of.

The benefits of transforming contact centre culture and translating the theory into reality, are significant, realisable and have the potential to impact the bottom line. They range from increased sales, higher customer retention levels, reduced staff turnover, more established career paths and enhanced brand loyalty.

As with any service-driven business sector, it is the people working in the contact centre industry who will be the agents for change and transformation.

With **3.5%** of the UK workforce employed in call centres - and staff turnover running at **18%** per year - the industry is facing a number of challenges as it competes to attract and retain talented contact centre staff.

Consumers' expectations around improved customer service levels from businesses and brands, and an increasing willingness to desert those that fail to meet their

expectations, means the performance and quality of service an organisation offers is key to its success. Perhaps surprisingly, customers are more loyal to an organisation they have had to complain to, providing their complaint was handled well, than to an organisation they have never had to complain about.

This white paper explores the importance of employee engagement - which until now has been the weak link in the contact centre model - to the contact centre environment and examines both the theory, as well as examples of how it can work in practice.

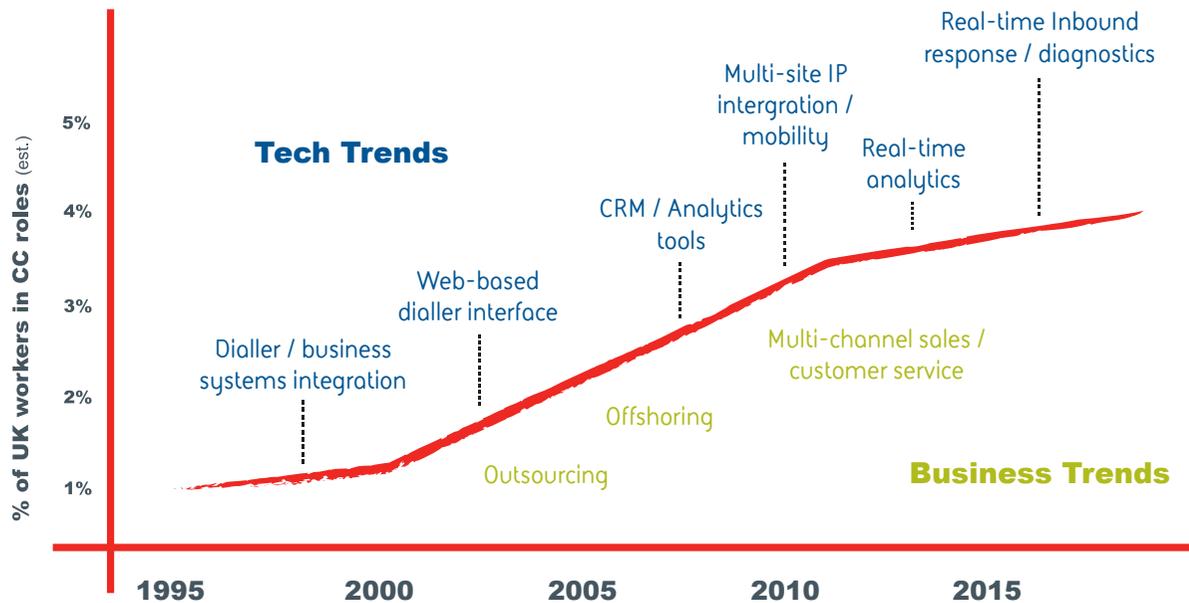


It draws upon ideas and methodologies around ownership, responsibility, performance and motivation developed by Jamil Qureshi, an acknowledged authority in the worlds of sport and business. It also draws on qualitative experiences and contributions from the contact centre professionals.

Together, these form a compelling case for the radical change that is needed as the contact centre industry embarks on the next phase of its growth, development and maturity.

Protecting Your Brand: understanding what makes contact centre staff tick

The introduction of increasingly sophisticated technology has automated the contact centre environment, boosting the personal productivity levels of the people employed in them. The chart below shows a snapshot of key IT and Business drivers shaping contact centre operations over time (Fig1).



The nature of these technologies has been to increase accountability levels, which has impacted not only productivity but also efficiency and raw output.

Coinciding with – and largely because of – this technological transformation, customer and client expectations are higher and higher. The deployment of sophisticated, smart technologies ('big data', CRM tools, analytics software) has led to a wealth of data being accumulated that is available instantaneously to contact centre advisors.

This is dramatically changing the position of the contact centre employee, adding new dimensions to their roles that require different, and often more demanding, skillsets. More and more is being asked of employees working in a contact centre environment as the emphasis shifts from achieving efficiencies to delivering a better quality of service, be it in-bound customer services or out-bound sales.

With technology forcing contact centre providers – and their clients – to raise their game, it's now time for employers and employees to catch up and make up the shortfall, concentrating on the human level rather than mechanical shifts in automation, analytics and systems integration.

Technology innovation and service improvement at an employee level are not always related. In fact, without strategic investment to align cultural change with 'systems' innovation, these two forces can be in conflict. The inescapable importance of call volume handling and 'resolution' at a quantitative level obscures

manifold qualities valued by employees and customers alike. This relationship impacts performance and creates an 'ownership gap' within the business (see Fig2.)

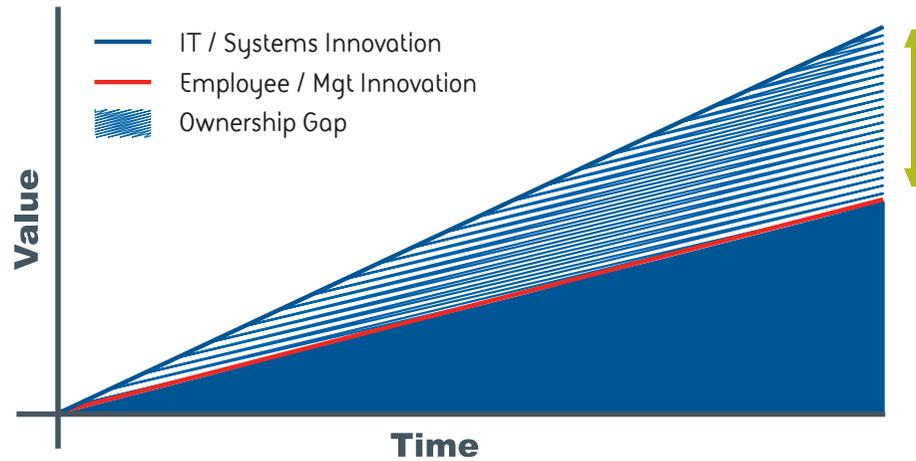


Fig 2: Employee Ownership Gap (™Loudhouse Research)

Genuine, lasting and fundamental change is needed, rather than a carousel of predictable tactics and ideas, largely based around gaining compliance and not commitment.

The hierarchical and process orientated nature of traditional contact centres has resulted in a mentality that is at odds with the customer service culture they are supposed to promote. "You'll need to speak to another department" and, "I can't help you with that" are all too familiar refrains.

This has to change: businesses and brands that tackle and transform this culture have the opportunity to lead the way, putting their advisors and customer service representatives at the heart of this revolution. Employee engagement sits at the heart of the customer-

centric organisation; what staff feel internally is what they reflect externally at the value point, where they interact with the public.

By empowering *all* contact centre staff to be responsible for their actions and the delivery of successful customer service, the value of what they provide will be enhanced. Customer service has to be an attitude, and not a process. This new model focuses on the benefits and positive contributions others derive from their interaction with contact centre staff, whose success and satisfaction is defined by what they do rather than what their job title, description or function is.

The 'Think, Feel, Act' methodology helps to shape this.

As human beings, all our actions and behaviours are based upon how we feel about something. The precursor to what we feel is what we think. So for us to feel different about anything, from fear of flying to delivering better customer service we need to change the words and pictures in our heads – our thoughts.

We often describe ourselves by our job title, job description, or role – none of these things are engaging, they only conspire to make us feel task orientated. When we

"People often want to perform well, but seem to neglect the idea that you have to think well to perform well. The precursor to all our actions and behaviours are our thoughts. The idea of think-act-feel is a sequence that I try to live by."

Adam Scott
World Top Ten Golfer and
2013 Masters Champion



change the words and pictures that we associate with our role to something which is representative of the value we create for others, we start to realise the worth in what we do. We must define ourselves by what the customer buys, not by what we sell.

When we start to realise our real contribution, our tasks don't change, but the way in which we approach them does.

Imagine we observed two NHS accountants who did the same role at the same level. The way in which their tasks were engaged with would be different if one perceived themselves to be 'in the business of numbers' and the other, 'in the business of saving lives'. Our 'self-positioning' does not change our tasks, but can dramatically change the outputs. What we do at work can arguably be defined as 'not important', what we can **be** through our work can be a substantially more interesting prospect. We must encourage staff to not define themselves by the product or service they sell, but by what the customer values.

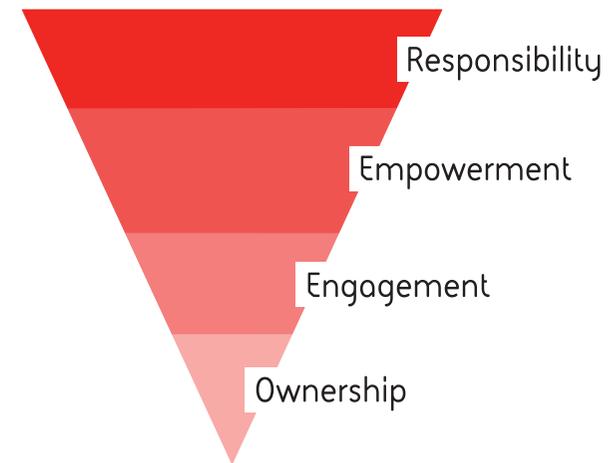
We can tell people to act differently all the time, but lasting and meaningful change of actions will only come from enabling people to think differently, which ultimately drives self-determined behaviours aligned with what the customer values.

Staff do not serve well if they see service as being servile, staff do not serve well if they see customers as 'target fodder'; there to build our business or gain us commission. By changing the viewpoint on the world inhabited by our teams; the perspective they have of themselves, the brand, customer, and their colleagues, they can engage with all stakeholders, both internally and externally, differently.

The ownership approach

The notion of **ownership** is often confused with responsibility, resulting in a misunderstanding of what ownership means and how it differs from responsibility.

The difference between these two approaches and cultures is significant, and is at the heart of driving a business agenda that has employee engagement at its heart.



Beyond the world of business, commerce and contact centres, it's easy to appreciate the fundamental distinction between ownership and responsibility. A teacher, for example, is considered to be responsible for a child in their care but they don't have full ownership for that child. That is the role of the child's parents, whose influence extends beyond mere responsibility to embrace every aspect of the child's wellbeing and development.

Ownership implies autonomy, as the case study in the next section of this paper demonstrates. Here, the contact centre team leader talks about running his sales team and working with colleagues "as though it was our own business".

By encouraging and empowering all contact centre staff to take full ownership of their actions, a culture will be created where they are valued for who they are rather than what they do.

The notion of value is an important one in the context of an employee engagement and ownership model. There is the literal, financial value of employees who are motivated, fully engaged and generate sales and revenues for the business; and there is the more emotional aspect, where staff feel that their work and service is valued by their employer, its customers and their consumers.

What is less understood is that this value is enhanced when self realised. Environment and specialist coaching can allow staff to **uncover** their value.



In the contact centre environment, there needs to be a closer emotional connection between a customer and the value point they experience when dealing with an advisor, salesperson or customer service representative.

Whilst the tasks that the majority of contact centre staff perform on a daily basis don't change much, the perspective they have of those tasks, the pride they take in completing them and the value they deliver in doing so can change dramatically.

Adopting and implementing the tenets of 'Think, Feel, Act', encouraging contact centre staff to think differently about who they are and what they can be, will result in them doing things differently – and better. One way to achieve this is to break people's routines, finding different ways to perform the same tasks and varying specific aspects of their workload so the way they feel about their work changes and has more meaning.

Allied to this is the need to create a sense of purpose amongst contact centre staff; if something is meaningful to someone, it is more likely to be fulfilled and fulfilling.

Changing your organisation to adopt and implement an engagement approach will not happen without positive intervention and sustained dialogue. Returning to the initial theme at the start of this section of the paper, this requires commitment (or ownership), rather than mere compliance (or responsibility).

"We are a product of our habits, for us to change our outputs - we have to change our inputs."

Graham Swann
England Cricketer and
World Top Ten Bowler

The journey to ownership

THE PROFESSIONAL VIEW

Serco has started taking contact centre staff on what Serco's Transition & Transformation Programme Manager Jan Lewis describes as a 'journey' towards an employee engagement model that is fit for the industry of the future.

Lewis and her team are using a range of tools and approaches to embed this culture of ownership, spurred on by customer requirements and an increasingly competitive business landscape.

The tactics are diverse, driven by the fact that in Lewis' opinion between 80% and 90% of her call contact centre advisors want the opportunity to take greater ownership of the service they deliver to customers.

In addition to mentoring, guidance, regular team meetings and effective internal communications programmes, a key component of Lewis' approach is a drive to ensure staff are multi-skilled, capable of handling all a customer's needs rather than a certain aspect.

This is very much a shared journey; not just between Serco and its contact centre employees, but with its customers as well. This provider/customer combination is vital if full ownership and engagement is to be achieved and people are put ahead of processes (in many contact centres, it's the processes that dictate the service delivery).

“We run our team as if it was our own business. The advisors in my sales team are responsible for setting their own effort levels, based on the targets they're expected to achieve.

The results are exceptional. Productivity and commitment levels are high and sickness and absenteeism are well below average. Because everyone is working towards a common goal, they don't want to let the other team members down.

Teams have names and elect their own leaders. Responsibility for meeting targets is shared, so it's in the interest of stronger members to help others.

We do it because we want to, not because the company tells us to. We're encouraged to take whatever steps we like that will help us achieve our goals (so long as they're compliant); things like charts, visuals, games and competitions.

This willingness to try new or different things encourages a culture of ownership, rather than a 'this is how we do it here' mentality. We try and make the work environment and the achievement of goals as interesting and engaging as possible.”

Luke Thomas, Team Manager, Serco



VALUE-CENTRIC CULTURE

The key to effective people management remains the deployment of a values-centric culture.

This requires the definition of a core set of behaviours that are easy to interpret and easily identifiable in everything the organisation does (particularly in how the organisational leaders conduct themselves).

How do value centric cultures create a motivated and people-owned operation?

“Being true to a simple set of behavioural values demonstrates to others the way in which an individual should operate. The deployment of a consistent set of behavioural values acts in itself as a motivating factor to others, as it is likely that any set of effective values would include traits such as integrity, openness, fun, trustworthiness and empowerment.

These behaviours will set strong foundations within large people orientated environments. They will encourage the appropriate activities to take place, and the activities (effective regular performance review processes, appropriate reward and recognition schemes, coaching for results sessions, considered development and succession planning models, people engagement forums) will then be the vehicle to increase motivation, engagement and ultimately the level of personal ownership individuals take.

All these activities only add value in an environment that is truly values led.”

Mark Guest, Customer Service Director, Serco

BREAKING ROUTINES

“We have all sorts of incentives, games and competitions and fun stuff and we're always being told what's going on. That's really important to keep us motivated and maintain productivity; it makes the job enjoyable.

No-one likes to think they're just paying the bills.

We treat our team as a business. We're responsible for achieving our targets and deciding what resources we need to do that. We all have an opportunity to show what we're capable of. There's no 'us and them'; it's just 'us'.

There's a People Forum where we discuss issues, areas of concern. There are people from all levels on the forum, so there's always someone at your level arguing your case from your perspective.

The proof is when you go into work and see the same faces every day. That's unusual in a call/contact centre.”

Alun Blackwell, Customer Service Advisor, Serco





Conclusion and Recommendations

There is a compelling opportunity for retail businesses and brands to cement loyalty and enhance the consumer experience by moving to a customer service model that has real, meaningful employee ownership at its heart.

Sustainable ownership as an essential part of the customer service value chain is a business imperative and has the potential to impact the bottom line.

A new breed of contact centre advisors and customer service representatives needs to be recruited, trained and retained. This will address the industry's reputation for high churn and turnover and offer rewarding careers for those whose attitude and aptitude see ownership as an opportunity, not a threat.

The dreaded "it's not my job" mindset needs to be laid to rest. By helping contact centre employees think differently, they will in turn, do differently.



"The difference between winners and losers is always what goes on behind the eyes, we can always think ourselves better."

Eddie Irvine
Formula One Racing Driver

Five Next Steps

1

Treat your contact centre provider as a partner, not a supplier. Ownership needs to be shared – it's a two-way relationship.

2

Empower call centre employees to be responsible for their actions and for the delivery of successful customer service; the value of what they provide will be enhanced.

3

Approach ownership and responsibility with the same value as Average Handling Times (AHT), Net Promoter Scores (NPS) and other organisational performance measurements.

4

Do not recruit candidate skillsets to job role, match your internal brand opportunity to candidates' aspirations.

5

Concentrate on what your staff can be, as opposed to what they do. Review the language you use to engage with your contact centre employees to identify and create a sense of value. Instil a culture where understanding is realised, rather than tasks provided.





About Serco

Serco's BPO business offers transformational customer management solutions to meet the requirements of today's multi-channel service environments.

Over 60,000 employees are engaged with its customers' customers, holding over 90 million interactions in 40 languages every year around the globe. Serco's international delivery platform is based in 13 countries and 100 locations across the world and enables it to offer total flexibility in location, delivery and technology.

As a dynamic global service organisation, our people have the expertise and intimate knowledge of our customers' markets as well as best practice processes and technologies to exceed expectations. We have the vision, agility and determination to deliver cutting-edge business process solutions and set ever-higher standards in the markets we serve.

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About Loudhouse

Loudhouse provides consultancy services that combine research, performance coaching and internal communications to create greater levels of employee ownership to increase competitive edge.

Loudhouse believes that creating employee belief and ownership of company brand values is the foundation of sustainable performance improvements for businesses. Influencing internal behaviour and external perceptions of an organisation then builds the momentum to deliver change. As part of Octopus Group, Loudhouse is one of the UK's leading performance and influencer marketing agencies, working with blue chip clients in technology, business services, finance and retail.

Performance Director, Jamil Qureshi is one of today's foremost practitioners of performance enhancing psychology. He has developed and delivered management and leadership programmes for many of the world's leading organisations.

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