

# Call Center Management Review®

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## Call Center Leaders Share Input on Talent Troubles in the Call Center

by Kim Shepherd, Harold Stolovitch and Beverly Kaye

**Feedback and findings on agent recruiting, development and retention from a recent managers' forum.**

Every call center leader knows how critical agents are to keeping productivity and customer satisfaction levels high. This isn't just any job – it requires special attention, patience, smarts and social skills that aren't easy to come by and often even harder to keep.

Consider the 140,000 call centers in the United States and Canada that presently employ roughly 4 percent of the working population, or nearly 6 million workers. When you apply the average turnover rate of 30 percent to these numbers, call centers are losing 1.8 million employees each year, representing a conservative turnover cost of over \$36 billion (assuming a \$20,000 replacement cost). It's no secret that talent needs are increasing – all reports indicate that demand will rise to more than 13 million seats by 2006. Turnover, at today's rate, will be a staggering hit to the bottom line.

Despite the talent smokescreen created by an unsettling economy, call center leaders must address the challenges that future demand will bring. What will happen as the economy strengthens and choices become available to agents

again? Will they remain loyal and committed? Will they have the proper skills to survive? Will today's managers be able to effectively recruit, develop, retain and engage tomorrow's agents?

Fifteen call center leaders, recognizing the critical need to attract and retain call center talent, recently participated in a "Think Tank" of peers and experts to share the trends, pitfalls and best-practices in call centers. The Think Tank is a productive, hands-on forum in which managers whose organizations might otherwise be competitors dedicate a day to working *on the business* rather than *in the business*. United by the common goal of improving their operations, participants represented both large and small organizations from a mix of industries and geographic locations, including Automobile Club of America (AAA), American Express, America Online/Time Warner (AOL), City National Bank, JPMorganChase, Performance Products, Wellpoint and Wells Fargo Bank.

### Managers' Worries; Agents' Grumbles

During the Think Tank, call center managers identified their top talent concerns, which included the following:

- Turnover, productivity and performance issues
- Quick quits (less than six-month tenure for new-hires), which costs

organizations millions of dollars in recruiting, hiring, training, expenses with little return on investment

- Lack of career development opportunities
- Multiple generations of workers in the call center
- Constant change
- Bad hires
- Supply vs. demand

Call center managers weren't the only ones to bring their concerns to the Think Tank discussion table. The Call Center Consortium shared the results of its "Agent Grumbles" survey, an ongoing online survey designed to give participants insight into who their agents are and, more importantly, what motivates them. Following are key findings from the Agent Grumbles survey:

- There are no real career development possibilities for me
- Job requirements and expectations continually change
- There is lots of pressure, but few rewards
- My efforts aren't recognized
- I'm just a cog in a big machine – they don't care about me
- Supervisors have favorites
- Goals and measurements keep changing
- The environment is rigid

- The push toward sales makes service-oriented agents uncomfortable
- There is a disconnect between training and job reality

The findings support the results of a study by The Radclyffe Group that found a direct correlation between lack of advancement and high turnover. In fact, 90 percent of agents who said they were bored with their jobs indicated a lack of opportunities to grow their careers. In addition, a survey by CallCenterCareers.com revealed that 26.4 percent of agents cited lack of promotional opportunities as the primary source of dissatisfaction, while 24.2 percent believed they were unfairly paid.

### 'Out-of-the-Box' Recruiting Solutions

Turning the discussion from challenges and concerns to solutions, Decision Toolbox's Kim Shepherd shared her findings that call center recruitment typically occurs as a "just-in-time" process. She points out that this approach is an inefficient use of resources, and can actually extend the length of time it takes to fill openings. Additionally, poor recruitment methodologies have a trickle-down effect on retention.

To rethink this just-in-time approach, she challenged participants to "design what you want rather than deal with what you get" – a structured methodology commonly known as "recruitment engineering." Making the switch from reactive to proactive recruitment requires call centers to:

- Build a structured approach to recruiting needs by determining how many hires are needed each month and building a pipeline of candidates to meet these needs.
- Use feedback from top agents to write fresh and original job postings for online job boards, such as Monster.com or Callcenterjobs.com.
- Standardize the applicant screening and interview process to allow hiring managers to zero-in on the best applicants quickly, and conduct high-quality interviews.
- Use technology to track applicants and

metrics to increase the speed and efficiency of the hiring process.

According to Shepherd, recruitment engineering not only controls costs by creating efficiencies, it can also reduce the time it takes to fill an agent position and help the organization to make higher-quality hires. This proactive methodology produces a positive impact on both the bottom line and retention numbers, she says.

### Fix the Environment, Not the Individual

What affects performance in the workplace? This was a key concern among the Think Tank participants. The answer? It isn't always what it seems. To prove this point, Harold Stolovitch of HSA Learning & Performance Solutions led the group in an interactive exercise to help them identify their *own* greatest performance blocks. He points out that data from the group exercise is consistent with thousands who have participated in this exercise over the years. It found the following factors affecting performance:

- **Environmental:** information (35%), resources (26%) and incentives (14%)
- **Individual:** knowledge/skills (11%), capacity (8%) and motivation (6%)

According to Stolovitch, the key message is that lack of performance in the workplace is far more frequently caused by environmental (75 percent) rather than individual (25 percent) factors. Nevertheless, managers continue to try and fix the *individual* rather than the *environment* – even though it is easier and cheaper to fix the environment.

If the performers knew what the exact expectations of the job were, had more specific job feedback and better access to information, they would be able to perform better, Stolovitch says. Addressing this issue alone would likely have a positive impact on 35 percent of the performance problems in the workplace. And, this is a relatively inexpensive intervention to implement. People want to do well in their jobs; they come motivated to succeed, he says, adding that "stuff" then happens in the work environment which affects their motivation to perform and their actual performance.

To change the environment, man-

## What Is the Call Center Consortium?

The Call Center Consortium ([www.CallCenterConsortium.com](http://www.CallCenterConsortium.com)) is an alliance of three professional organizations with unique solution sets working as an integrated team, addressing the complex challenges call centers face in the areas of:

- Recruitment – bringing aboard the best, long-term talent.
- Performance – getting call center talent trained, up to optimal performance in minimal time and continuously improving performance.
- Retention – engaging, developing and retaining agents, team leaders and managers from the beginning of the employment cycle.

Its members are Kim Shepherd, president of Decision Toolbox; Dr. Harold D. Stolovitch, principal of HSA Learning & Performance Solutions; and Dr. Beverly Kaye, founder and chief executive officer of Career Systems International.

agers need to focus on learning as a continuous process. Stolovitch says that training is much more effective if it is learner-centered and performance-based, not trainer-focused and content-based. Training should produce the competencies required to perform on the job, and employee confidence is built with successive rounds of practice and feedback... until new skills are almost automatic.

### 'Roles of Engagement': A to Z

Call center managers agree that the immediate supervisor has more influence and power than anyone else in the retention game. Beverly Kaye of Career Systems International revealed that employees, too, have a role to play in their own satisfaction and engagement.

Kaye shared responses to a survey question on a Career Systems' agent retention survey: "What kept you?" Although money continues to be among the top reasons for call center employee dissatisfaction, 54.5 percent of call center survey respondents chose career growth and learning and development


among their top three “retention drivers,” as compared to 49.5 percent who chose fair pay.

All too often, Kaye says, call center agents want a career path spelled out for them. To address career growth and find ways to keep agents engaged, she shares what she calls “five conversations that managers oughta really wanna have.” Since it is impossible to give everyone who wants a promotion they deserve (or think they deserve), managers need to explain the concept of career-leveraging. There are five other options that exist in most organizations. The more specifically managers outline these options, the less their talented employees will feel that the grass is greener elsewhere, she says. They are:

- **Lateral movement:** moving across or horizontally
- **Realignment:** moving downward to open new opportunities
- **Exploration:** temporary moves intended for researching other options
- **Enrichment:** growing in place
- **Relocation:** moving to another organization

## A Few Action Steps

What can managers put in place to ease their worries and lessen agents’ grumbles? Think Tank participants offered the following action steps to take at the workplace.

- Structure a process for stay (not exit) interviews.
- Schedule, structure and hold six conversations with key “million-dollar,” high-performance agents and discover what makes them stay. Use the information to revamp the recruiting process.
- Ask agents: “What am I doing right as a manager, what can I do more of, and what should I do less of?”
- Have agents participate in creating real job descriptions.
- Capture “alas” stories (about the great agents who left) and, as a team, find out why.
- Hold six conversations in six months with six new agents. 



**Kim Shepherd, Harold Stolovitch and Beverly Kaye**

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