



Now is the time for process optimization

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In the December 5, 2008 issue of In-Queue, one of the “60 Ideas in 60 Minutes” came from a long-time friend and colleague, Bill Durr. Bill talked about the people, process, and technology triumvirate and one of its shortfalls, stating, “I have never run into anybody who is in charge of process. Are you?” Well, I *have* run into such people and seen the value they bring. But I agree that it is all too rare. A dedicated process optimization role can have a tremendous impact on both the customer experience and call center performance. There has never been a better time to put such a role in place.

Several clients with whom I’ve worked had this position, and we have helped clients put this role in place. It is part of our “best practices” design. These people work closely with reporting and analytics, quality monitoring and assurance, training, and technology specialists, as well as with front-line call center management. They analyze process results, using performance outcomes, focus groups with agents, input from trainers, and observations and time and motion studies to identify areas for improvement. They redesign and optimize existing processes and play a critical role in defining and developing new processes. They are part of a continuous feedback loop with the other support roles to use technology effectively and help individuals and teams achieve performance goals. They work with training and coaching resources to provide the guidance staff need to execute processes effectively and consistently.

Today’s economic conditions intensify the need for and value of this role. “Do more with less” and “control spending” are themes of the day. Process optimization delivers both. Improving processes leads to greater efficiency on every contact, lowering costs or enabling a center to handle more contacts with the same resources. Those of you who can’t run out and buy new technology to increase efficiency or improve the customer experience can likely find significant improvements by modifying processes and applying the technology you already have more effectively. As your processes improve, you may find that you not only control costs, but drive more revenue through the improved customer experience it creates.

Ideally, such efforts look at end-to-end processes. Contact centers sit in the middle of these processes, impacted by front-end functions (e.g., creating and mailing bills, sending marketing materials) as well as the back-end (e.g., dispatching field support, shipping the package, fulfilling the request). Unfortunately, the end-to-end view requires a cross-functional process team and can feel like “boiling the ocean.” So, even if you can’t achieve the ideal, tackle a manageable scope – the process elements you fully control within the center.

Don’t let a hiring freeze stop you from creating this position. Think about where the process optimization role might fit within your organization. Then figure out where you can repurpose positions, shuffling headcount if you must. Perhaps the trainers aren’t training as many new hires, or lower turnover can enable you to increase your span of control for each supervisor. Find a way to do it *now* to create benefits that will pay off short term and long term.