



Becoming the Best: Assessing your Support Functions

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This article series has already defined a strategic context for a contact center assessment and how to become the best in the most important part of your center – the front line. We now shift our focus to the support functions that enable the front line to achieve its goals. Whether its supervisors wearing multiple hats in a small center, dedicated analysts in a support group, a smattering of IT and business liaisons, or some combination, these support functions can make or break the efficiency of a center and its ability to continuously improve.

Defining the Scope of the Assessment

We define seven key areas when considering support functions. While the nature of these functions can vary greatly based on factors such as size, number of sites, type of business and business goals, culture, and other organizational roles and responsibilities, we believe any center should be able to point to these functions and know how they are supporting the center's operation. The functions are:

- Workforce Planning – forecasting, budgeting, and scheduling
- Command Center – real-time management
- Quality – quality monitoring and reporting, as well as customer satisfaction/voice of the customer
- Training – development and delivery of business and technical training, as well as soft skills training
- Process Optimization – analysts and designers to define and optimize processes (within the center and in their interactions with other areas)
- Reporting and Analytics – analysts for both business and operational reporting
- Technology Tools and Workflows – addressing routing, prompting, IVR self service, web integration, contact handling workflows, application of core tools (e.g., CRM, KM), and end-to-end workflows

In addition to these critical functions, the hiring of appropriate front-line staff is another support area which we highlighted in a previous article in this series.

As we consider these support functions, the critical questions in an assessment surround whether they are well defined, adequately staffed, coordinated, and consistently and effectively executed. The lack of any of these functions can sub-optimize a center. Even when present, to be truly effective, they must be choreographed into a dance that ensures the application of technology, use of valuable human resources, and execution of processes all work together to achieve the target outcomes.

Support Function Issues and Opportunities

In reviewing many centers over the years, some common themes emerge as deficiencies in support functions – or more positively spun, opportunities to improve. The first is the plain and simple lack of one or more of these critical functions. Even the smallest center needs some level of each of these functions to operate efficiently and effectively. We often see centers with little or no workforce planning or command center functions, haphazard quality assessments that occur “whenever we have time,” and non-existent process reviews or improvements. So a key starting point is an inventory, and then definition of who is going to do what to provide the necessary functions to fill any gaps.

The training and technology tools roles are the most likely functions to reside outside the center, and that can be effective with the right collaboration, communication, and coordination between HR, IT, and the



center. However, too often these groups are not well connected and the HR and IT functions have no accountability to the center or defined role in helping them achieve their goals. To be effective, the support functions must have accountability that aligns with the center, regardless of where they sit organizationally.

Most contact centers struggle to define exciting career path opportunities for staff, and support functions can be a ready target. However, these are not roles that any good CSR can grow into. These roles require an analytical mindset and proper training in the tools and processes they will use every day. Too often new staff are thrown into these “exciting new roles” and must find their own way through on the job training that is more often on the job learning. These roles are too important to leave to chance that the assigned staff member will figure it all out. Centers need to invest in careful placement (whether hiring outside resources or screening inside staff for promotions), formal training, and good mentoring to ensure the staff in these roles can truly succeed and add value.

A final opportunity to improve these support functions is to place the right tools in their hands – something we’ll address in the next assessment series article when we talk about technology.

Apply Best Practices to your Support Functions

Best practices bring focus to an assessment and the action plan for improvement. When looking at support processes, the goal is that *processes are properly focused and designed, consistent with strategy*. Here are some of the hallmarks of a best-in-class center that reflect the important role support functions play in optimizing operations:

- Processes for support functions are well defined, reinforced, and consistently executed –
- Center access (hours, numbering plan), contact routing (including menus/prompts), and skills use consider customers first, while balancing the needs of the business and the center
- Processes are designed to ensure customer expectations are met and operations are efficient and effective; the end-to-end experience is considered, even when other departments play a role in addressing customer needs
- Continuous process improvement initiatives are in place to ensure ongoing optimization

Similarly, the goal with the support function organization is that *the organizational structure provides the appropriate numbers and types of resources to achieve goals*. So best-in-class centers have these characteristics in their support function organizational structures:

- Roles, responsibilities, and accountabilities for all support functions are clearly defined
- The organizational design enables strategic planning and execution while also addressing the day-to-day demands of the operation
- Sourcing and hiring approaches are effective and aligned with business goals
- Strategy, goals, and outcomes are clearly communicated across all levels of the organization