



# Chapter 1

## Understanding Call Centers

### Learning Objectives

After successfully completing Chapter 1, you will be able to:

- Explain what a call center is and what it does.
- Describe the role and functions of the automatic call distributor and contact management software in a call center.
- Describe the growing role of the Internet in the call center.
- Discuss the nature of call monitoring and the ways in which a call center representative can benefit from it.
- Identify the three phases through which new call centers typically grow and describe why and how a call center grows in this way.
- Identify the ways in which the role of a call center representative has evolved.
- Explain the characteristics of a successful call center representative.

## On the Job

### A Career Move

When Felicia came for the interview, she was simply looking for a job. She didn't imagine herself making a career of working at a "call center." She didn't, in fact, know exactly what a call center was, but she presumed the position would mean sitting in a drab room all day, taking complaints from angry customers and passing information along to someone else who would actually deal with the customers' problems—a humdrum routine, she was sure.

She was surprised, therefore, to find that Ms. Chung, the supervisor, was a young, cheerful person who talked about making the company "a fun place for both the customers and the staff." And as they toured the office, Felicia saw that the representatives were anything but glum about their work. They were deeply involved in answering customers' questions and offering information about services and products. Several looked up from their equipment and smiled at her as she passed.

And that equipment—it wasn't just telephones and notepads. The call center representatives were using state-of-the-art computers that brought up colorful web pages and other displays of information. They were sending instantaneous messages to customers over the Internet, just as she did with her friends.

By the end of the interview, Felicia had begun to reconsider her notion of a call center position. And she did get the job, by the way. So far she has been with the company for six years. She has earned two promotions and has no intention of leaving.

## Call Centers

In simplest terms, a **call center** is the place a caller reaches when phoning an organization to obtain information, to get support, or to make a purchase. A **call center representative** (or *rep*, for short) is the primary contact person for customers who do business with the call center. For instance, if you call Land's End to check on the hiking boots you ordered from the catalog, you will reach a call center representative. This rep can look up your order, tell you when it will ship, advise you of any unforeseen delays, and so on.

Figure 1.1 outlines some of the primary duties of a call center representative. You will learn more about these duties as you read this book. First, however, let's look more closely at how to define a call center.

Figure 1.1

## Primary Duties of a Call Center Representative

All Call Center Representatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk with customers or clients on the telephone.</li> <li>• Answer customers' questions.</li> <li>• Resolve customers' problems whenever possible.</li> <li>• Build customer satisfaction with the company and its products or services.</li> <li>• Manage calls to provide high-quality service with maximum efficiency.</li> <li>• Work with other members of the call center team to achieve the call center's goals.</li> </ul>
Some Call Center Representatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take customers' orders for products or services.</li> <li>• Recommend other products or services in which the customer may be interested.</li> <li>• Initiate sales calls to existing or new customers.</li> <li>• Respond to customer inquiries by fax and e-mail and through web sites and traditional mail.</li> </ul>

## What Is a Call Center?

We will talk about call centers as if they are real places, and for the most part, they are. But call centers can be “virtual” places as well, existing in cyberspace.

In most cases, an incoming call doesn't go directly to a person. Instead, it goes to an automatic call distributor, a device that takes the call and passes it to the next available call center representative. This rep may be in the same building as the distributor; in another building, city, state, or country; or even in the rep's home. The call may not even reach a person at all, but a computer system that can provide certain regularly requested types of information (such as flight schedules and account balances).

In this sense, the call center may not be a single “place” at all. This has led call center consultant Rob Forneri to define a call center as “the mechanism through which an organization transacts business with an identified group of customers, or potential customers, using the telephone as the primary method of communication.” Typically, the “mechanism” of a call center involves a group of staff members who are responsible for those business transactions.

Many organizations have call centers that are not called call centers. They may have names like claims department, order desk, help desk, and customer assistance center. Sometimes managers are surprised to discover that their department has evolved into a call center. Departments that started out as mail-based often change as they use the telephone more and more.

As a term, in fact, *call center* will probably go the way of the outdated word *telemarketing*. Already, *call center* is losing ground to terms such as *customer contact center*, *customer care center*, and *business center*. Use of these terms indicates that the center has become the point of contact for the customer no matter what the mode of communication: telephone, letter, fax, web site, or e-mail. Currently, though, the term *call center* is very much alive, and it will be used throughout this text.

## Centralized Call Centers

By the turn of the twenty-first century, more than seven million people worldwide worked in the multibillion-dollar call center industry. And almost all of those employees worked in large rooms subdivided into individual workstations.

Why have call centers tended to become so large? With modern technology, a call center no longer needs to be near the customer. Call center services can be centralized at any location the company finds convenient. Centralization offers the advantage of economies of scale, a term basically meaning that the more of something you make, the less expensive each item is to produce.

In a large, centralized call center, the average cost per call is lower than in a smaller center. One major area of savings is in staffing—the biggest cost in a call center. For example, if you have ten locations with two reps each and each location receives enough calls for one and a half reps, you still need two people at each location; otherwise, a third of your customers won't get through and you'll lose business quickly. And if one of your two reps is off sick or on vacation, the other rep is overwhelmed with calls and the service level goes down. If you pull those centers together, you have enough calls for 15 people, and you can certainly make do with fewer than 20 on the payroll.

Overall, then, centralization allows for greater efficiency. In fact, once call centers are established and the organization sees how well they work, management tends to find other functions that could be handled through the center, and the growth continues.

## Smaller Call Centers

Not all call centers are huge. Some smaller companies have long-standing call centers with fewer than a dozen representatives. In large organizations, too, individual departments often have their own call centers that serve as resources for employees in other departments. For example, the department that manages employees' health insurance may set up a call center to handle the questions that arise about insurance benefits.

Because of recent technological advances, another trend has emerged: the development of satellite call centers and home-based agents. **Satellite call centers** are smaller centers that are networked—that is, electronically linked. The customer doesn't notice the different locations. Compared to a

centralized center, satellite call centers allow more employees to work closer to where they live, and they expand the geographical area from which a company can draw its staff. The rapid progress of networking technology has helped make up for the economies of scale that favor larger centers.

Home-based agents, also known as **virtual agents**, are call center representatives who work out of their homes, assisted by a sophisticated computer system linking them to their company. These agents allow a company even greater staffing flexibility than satellite centers. For instance, a peak period of calls may last for only a few hours a day, separated by slower periods. Imagine that the peak hours are 8 a.m. to 9 a.m., 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., and 4:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. The person at home may be willing to log on to the system and take calls at these times, whereas it would be difficult to find an employee willing to travel to an office and back for such disjointed shifts. The home-based arrangement also allows organizations to hire people who are physically challenged and cannot travel easily to and from the workplace. Obviously, however, there are extra costs involved in a home-based setting. The workstation equipment that might be shared by a number of reps working different shifts in an office is devoted to just one rep in his or her home.

## On the Job

### Call Centers in the Finance Industry

Capital One, the huge credit-card company, has more than thirty million customers around the world, and its five call centers employ about three thousand people. Phone lines at the main center in Virginia are always open—every hour of every day of the year. All told, Capital One's call center reps take more than four million calls per month!

But call centers are not just for corporate giants. EverTrust Financial Group, founded in 1916, is a much smaller company that traditionally relied on face-to-face customer service. With the turn of the new millennium, EverTrust executives realized that some customers were waiting too long at branch offices to have their questions answered. Moreover, banking and financial services had become such a highly competitive industry that customer satisfaction was increasingly vital. So EverTrust decided it was time to open a call center.

Soon EverTrust had several call center representatives serving customers throughout the company's base in the Seattle-Tacoma area of Washington. The reps also reach out to new customers beyond the region. And though the company took nearly a century before it opened its call center, EverTrust now uses the latest technology in its call center, including e-mail and live web-based chat.

## The Computer in the Call Center

The growth of call centers would have been impossible without the growth in computer technology. Typically, each workstation contains both a phone line and a computer. The computer stores and provides access to customer information, product information, **scripts** (answers to questions, ways to word messages to the customer), shipping information, and inventories—basically everything call center representatives need to do their jobs effectively.

The computer, then, is integral to performing the call center rep's duties. This technology also helps to make a call center position exciting. Working in a call center puts you on the leading edge of two high-tech fields: telecommunications and computers. Let's turn now to an overview of the technology that a call center rep typically uses.

## ■ Basic Call Center Technology

There are three basic technological elements in handling an inbound call (a call that comes in from a customer): the ACD, the contact management software, and the Internet.

### The ACD

When a customer calls in to the center, the call is usually answered by an **automatic call distributor**, or **ACD**. The ACD's most basic function is call routing; that is, it passes the call to the representative who has been without a call the longest, to the next rep to become available, or to the next rep who matches criteria based on information collected about the caller. Different ACDs have different features; today many are computer-based.

Here are some typical capabilities of the ACD:

- It can greet the caller, advise the caller if there will be a wait, and inform the caller on how long a wait to expect.
- It can collect caller identification information (such as an account number entered by the customer via the telephone keypad), crosscheck the number with the customer database, and bring that information to the rep's computer screen when the call is connected. The appearance of such information on the screen is called a **screen pop**. This is a form of **computer-telephone integration (CTI)** in which information from the telephone is matched to information from the company's internal computer system.
- CTI can also provide **automatic number identification (ANI)**, which matches the customer's telephone number to the company's database and produces the customer's account as a screen pop. If the system is so programmed, the rep can review the account file briefly before the call is put through.

- ANI may also allow the system to review the customer file and route the call to the appropriate rep, such as the rep responsible for that customer, for a particular region, or for a particular function (such as collections).
- The ACD may use **interactive voice response (IVR)** to query customers and direct their calls by asking them to press certain telephone keypad numbers. You've heard such a system on the phone when you've been asked to "Press 1 for a new account inquiry or press 2 for your account balance." IVR can even answer many customer questions without the rep's help.
- The ACD can provide the supervisor with real-time (as it is happening, not after the fact) information about what is happening in the call **queue**, the "line" of callers who are waiting to have their calls taken. The ACD can indicate how many calls are waiting, how long they have been on hold, and the number of representatives available to take calls. The supervisor can then use this information to make decisions and respond to problems immediately.
- The ACD can also feed information about the call queue to each rep's telephone, computer screen, or **display board** (an electronic sign linked to the ACD). This information helps the rep make decisions about when to take a break or do after-call work.
- The ACD can be programmed to allow the reps a period of time after each call to complete work related to that call before the next call is passed through.
- The ACD can supply the supervisor with many different kinds of performance reports.

Not every call center ACD has every one of these features, but they are all fairly common.

Smaller call centers may have an older technology known as a **PBX**, or **private branch exchange**. The PBX has been around quite a while. It was originally designed to replace the in-house switchboard operator, a person whose job was to answer incoming calls, distribute them to the appropriate employees, and connect internal staff callers to one another. Some of the more sophisticated PBXs today can perform the basic ACD functions, such as simple call routing. However, the PBX is more commonly associated with smaller centers since it has fewer capabilities and tends to be lower in cost.

## Contact Management Software

Call centers need a shared system of access to customer information. With queuing, it is typically not known which representative will receive a customer's call, so all reps must have access to the same information. This shared information is provided by **contact management software**, which can be designed internally or adapted from one of the software packages available on the market.

In the software design, certain types of information, or *fields*, are established to support the rep in handling the customer. This information may include address and telephone/fax/e-mail numbers, records of previous contacts with the call center and previous orders, and an indication of the customer's status with the company (for example, a preferred customer or one who is behind in payments). Some contact management systems also do the following:

- Work with other software systems to give the reps quick access to inventory levels, the status of shipments, and other information that can help the reps better serve customers.
- Organize customer documentation (agreements, prices, typical orders, and so on) for easy access and reference during a call.
- Print reports or letters by merging the appropriate customer information fields with standard letter or report templates.
- Produce statistics or lists of certain types of customers for analysis.
- Schedule follow-up calls and present the file for calling the customer at the appropriate time. Contact management software can even dial the customer's phone number for the rep.
- Forward files to appropriate people in the organization and bring the files to their attention.
- Provide a reference system of scripted call introduction statements, responses to customer objections, answers to common questions, or resource information so reps don't have to remember all of this or use potentially outdated hard-copy references.
- Fax or e-mail information directly to the customer from the workstation computer.



## Technology Connection

Recent varieties of contact management systems include *customer relationship management* (CRM) software, which aims to track each customer's entire experience with the company and provide that information to the call center rep. Even before you answer an incoming call, you may know all of the following:

- The customer's name
- All the purchases the customer has made from your company, including the most recent
- Any earlier issues the customer has called about
- Whether the customer's warranty is about to expire
- What the topic of the customer's call is likely to be
- Which new products the customer might be interested in



## The Internet

During the 1990s, the explosion of *e-commerce*—typically, the purchase of products and services via the Internet—caught many people by surprise. But in many ways, it was a natural extension of telephone commerce. And since call centers are becoming the all-purpose point of contact for customers, they often assume the responsibility for Internet support as well.

Here are some advantages the Internet provides:

- Customers can not only place orders through a web site but also obtain guidance or information by interacting with a rep by e-mail. For example, a customer can have technical problems resolved by an Internet-enabled “help desk” rep.
- Some systems allow instant messaging: By clicking on a link on the web site, the customer brings up a special window that allows keyed messages to go instantaneously from the customer to a “live” service rep, and vice versa.
- With **Internet telephony**, customers who have the appropriate systems and sound equipment can click an icon on the company’s web site and speak directly—by voice—to a rep who is looking at the same screen the customer is viewing.
- A restricted-access web site—one available only to company staff—allows reps to keep up to date on matters such as inventory levels and prices. It can also allow reps to place real-time orders that go directly to the fulfillment department or warehouse rather than to an order desk for processing.



## Making Contact

The Internet offers an exciting new means of communication with customers. Like every advance, though, it brings new problems. Think about how you might deal with the following situations:

- A customer who phoned previously has been advised that the company’s web site is the best place to find certain important information. But he is not very adept at navigating the site, and now he calls you in frustration.
- A customer phones to complain that sales tax was added to her online order even though it wasn’t shown on the web site. (Because sales tax varies by customer location, web sites do not always display it; a later e-mail will typically confirm the order and indicate the tax.)
- A customer says that a friend received a certain discount price over the Internet, and he wants the same price for his phone order. Company policy, however, states that the discount is available only online.

Later chapters of this book will help you develop the people skills you need for handling these and many other situations.

## ■ Call Monitoring

In most jobs in which staff members communicate with customers, the supervisor or coach cannot observe the staff without being noticed. In this situation, the staff members usually become nervous and do not perform in their normal fashion. As a result, the supervisor doesn't get a true representation of their performance, and many opportunities for improvement are missed. The supervisor's coaching loses effectiveness because it is not based on true performance.

Call centers present a wonderful opportunity for more effective coaching because technology allows any or all calls to be monitored by the coach. Typically, in a call center, **call monitoring** takes several formats. These include the following:

- *Drive-bys*, in which the coach or supervisor overhears a rep's response to a customer while passing by and stops either to reinforce or redirect the rep's performance. This is beneficial because it is timely and it provides the rep with clear direction. The rep knows which behaviors are good and should be continued and which need to change. However, because this coaching happens by chance, it's inefficient. The rep may handle calls less than effectively many times before the problem comes to the coach's attention.
- *Side-by-side coaching*, in which the coach or supervisor sits beside the rep, usually listening in on a headset to both sides of the call. The supervisor can give feedback to the rep right after a call or, if necessary, during the call. In some cases, the coach may become involved in the call and speak directly to the customer. This type of coaching is most effective with new reps who find the coach's presence reassuring. That same presence can, however, bias the rep's performance, so the feedback may be less useful.
- *Remote monitoring*, in which the supervisor or coach listens to calls through a monitoring line. Usually, the supervisor doesn't tell reps when their calls will be monitored, only that they may be monitored at any time. The supervisor may provide feedback to the rep immediately after a call (usually the best form of coaching) or later, in the form of a report. This system helps make coaching efficient and beneficial because the rep's performance has not been biased by the supervisor's physical presence.

All of these monitoring systems have one key deficiency: When reps are involved in a call, they focus on responding to the customer, and they find it difficult to pay close attention to the style or behavioral aspects of the interaction. A rep may not be aware, for example, that her or his tone of voice is less than effective, and a supervisor's comments on that matter may be hard to absorb. Luckily, one significant benefit of using telephones is that calls can be recorded. This allows reps to listen to and assess their own performance.

Recording can take place at the rep's workstation by splicing a phone jack into the rep's line and connecting it to a tape recorder. (A voice-activated tape recorder is best since it is less distracting than one that must be turned on and off.) Alternatively, calls can be recorded remotely so the rep is unaware of the taping. Again, this can be done by connecting a jack to the supervisor's monitoring line. More sophisticated recording systems can collect all calls of all reps, to be listened to later by the supervisor. (Sometimes, in fact, the nature of a business requires that it have a record of what the company and the customer have verbally agreed to.) Or the system may selectively record calls from different reps at different times and days so the supervisor can analyze a random sample.

Some sophisticated systems record the supervisor's feedback comments, splice these comments into the original call for the rep to review later, and provide reports that track rep performance on various criteria over time. Some systems can even capture the computer screens the rep used during a call so the supervisor and the rep can determine if the entries were made accurately and efficiently.

## ■ Evolution of the Call Center

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Sometimes a call center happens before it is planned. Staff in some departments (such as order-taking, sales support, or customer service) use the telephone more and more because it is faster and more efficient than mail. The jobs gradually change from being paper-based to being mostly computer- and telephone-based. When this happens, management must begin adjusting systems and job descriptions to fit the new reality.

As a call center evolves, it typically experiences a series of growth steps or developmental phases. These steps are distinct from, yet influenced by, the evolution of the call center team members (discussed in Chapter 2). The steps include the quality phase, the quantity or efficiency phase, and the balance or performance phase.

### Quality Phase

In its first phase, the quality phase, a new call center tries to get customers to use its services. It also aims to establish credibility with the rest of the organization. Quality of service drives this phase. Every attempt is made to ensure that each customer is satisfied.

The calls during this phase are often longer than in later phases, partly because quality of service is the main consideration and partly because the number of calls is relatively small. Reps are encouraged to make a good impression, so they may adopt a call-handling style that is not very time-efficient. In the quality phase, call statistics are not usually kept. Instead, management's aim is to develop a base upon which to establish standards of performance.

As the call center evolves through its developmental phases, so too do the members of the call center team. The team goes through its forming phase—a kind of courting process, discussed in Chapter 2. This stage of team growth is followed by one that involves conflict and resistance to leadership. If the call center team shifts into the conflict phase before the call center has moved on to its next stage, staff members will feel repressed and be very resistant and uncooperative. This is often a problem in call center development: The team's phase of conflict coincides with management's attempt to move the call center toward greater efficiency; a decline in quality of service results.

## Quantity or Efficiency Phase

The quantity phase results from call center management's feeling pressured to account for the center's performance. At this stage, management introduces processes to measure staff performance. Typically, because ACD statistics are so readily available, they are the basis for performance measurement. Here are some of the statistics that are typically analyzed:

- **Average talk time (ATT):** The average length of time the rep spends talking to the customer in each call.
- **Average work time (AWT):** The average length of time the rep spends out of queue doing wrap-up work on a call after the call has been completed.
- **Average handling time (AHT):** The average length of time it takes the rep to handle each call, including talk time and after-call work time.
- **Average speed of answer (ASA):** The average time a caller is on hold before the call is answered by a rep.
- **Average hold time:** The average amount of time a customer is placed on hold per call, both before a rep answers and during the conversation with the rep.

When statistical measures of efficiency are used inappropriately, staff members may react negatively. For example, reps can reduce the ASA by lowering their ATT, but without guidance on how to do so effectively, the reps usually lower average talk time by speaking more quickly, cutting customers off, or not asking the probing questions that should be asked. If such quantitative ACD data are the only measures used to judge call center performance, reps may feel pressured to produce quantity at the expense of quality. When the company's mandate for top-quality customer service continues, it can seem as if management is paying lip service to quality but actually wants quantity, making the reps resentful.

This phase can go on indefinitely, creating a very poor call center climate. Staff and management become frustrated as customer satisfaction decreases, and management may become more controlling and autocratic. The only way to solve this problem is for call center management to create the basis for movement into the next stage, the balance or performance phase.



## Have You Ever?

When you call a familiar company for service—say, your local electric company, your bank, or a department store—do you ever have to hold for a long time (listening to music you don't like) before a representative is available to help you? How does that make you feel? Most likely you get mad at the company even if its service has been excellent in every other respect.

Obviously, the average hold time affects customer satisfaction. Now think about how it affects the call center representative who finally takes the call. If the customer is already irritated, the rep's job becomes harder. If management is pressuring reps to handle more calls and reduce the hold time, the rep is under greater stress. If customers sense this atmosphere and feel they are being hurried along, they become more dissatisfied, and the problems escalate. You can see why it is important for the call center to move on to the next phase, when quality and quantity are put into balance.

## Balance or Performance Phase

In this final phase, the call center accomplishes a real sense of balance between the seemingly conflicting objectives of quality and quantity. This phase is most easily achieved when:

- Call center management introduces measurement standards that assess call quality. Ideally, such standards are based on behaviors that make call handling both efficient (timely and productive) and effective (providing appropriate problem resolution and customer satisfaction). Skills of this type include listening, questioning, and call-control skills, as well as the skill with which a difficult caller is handled. However the individual skills are defined, the standards should measure core competencies—those observable behaviors that result in the rep's meeting the job objectives and achieving the quantitative performance standards.
- Call center management makes the reps accountable only for those factors they can control individually. For example, an individual rep cannot control the call center's average speed of answer. But an individual rep can control the amount of time he or she spends doing wrap-up work after each phone call.
- Call center management does not use the measures of performance as a tool to punish reps, but rather as a basis for coaching to improve performance.

Telling the reps they can achieve qualitative as well as quantitative goals is not as effective as showing them how. By implementing standards and showing reps how to achieve them, managers can establish a balance and set the call center on the road to high performance.

## ■ Evolution of the Call Center Representative

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The role of the call center representative has changed greatly over the years. In the early days of call centers, many low-knowledge (and often low-skill) reps provided or collected simple bits of information. In some cases, call centers were “boiler rooms” in which row upon row of unskilled reps cold-called large numbers of prospects to recite a tightly scripted sales pitch. (Cold calls are calls made to people who don’t currently do business with the company.) While those roles certainly still exist, the majority of call center positions are now high-skill and high-knowledge roles.

More and more, call center reps have college or university degrees. They want more than just a job—they want a career, they want fun, and they want to believe they are making a contribution and that their contribution is recognized. Call centers are working to meet these challenges, creating opportunities for employees in a number of ways. The following sections explore some of these developments.

### Job Tiering

Greater numbers of call centers are moving from a flat organizational structure that doesn’t allow for much career development to a structure with job levels and job progression. Such a structure increases the high-end growth potential within the call center; it also allows for entry-level reps to develop skills rather than having to enter the center with the required skills and knowledge. Such job tiering also provides the organization with a broader range of hiring possibilities because it is usually easier to find new lower-skilled employees and develop them in-house than to find high-skilled people.

Often the tiered call center structure involves horizontal career moves, a number of which are required before the rep can move up in position. This provides the organization with cross-trained reps who are proficient in various specialties and can be reassigned to areas that are short-handed.

### Call Center Coach/Supervisor/Specialist

In many call centers with tiered career paths, the reps progress through a variety of internal positions until they come to the point of choosing between the coaching and specialist streams. The coaching stream typically leads to supervisory positions, while the specialist stream does not.

In the past, the only opportunity for career advancement was in coaching and supervising. Usually, the more effective reps were offered the opportunity to move into coaching or directly into supervising, with the only consideration being their effectiveness as reps. Unfortunately, many people who moved into these roles were poor coaches and supervisors. Essentially,

companies rewarded good “doers” by promoting them to be poor supervisors, leading to career frustration and lower effectiveness of the team.

Several variables affect a person’s effectiveness as a supervisor. Some of these skills and traits can be taught, others come with maturity (which doesn’t necessarily mean age), and others are part of a person’s personality. Rather than set up a good employee for failure, effective call centers recognize that some people are more suited to one role than they are to another. These organizations establish a career stream that allows reps to progress as specialists without having to supervise others. The specialist role typically involves advancing job knowledge in a specific area, assuming responsibility for high-value accounts, or taking on project management responsibilities.

## Blended/Sales Reps

As call centers establish themselves in organizations, elements of the sales role often migrate to the center. Reps have the opportunity to develop their sales skills and take on either a telephone sales function (see the wide range of sales functions described in Chapter 10) or a blended role in which reps make outbound calls (often sales calls) until the inbound call volume requires them to begin answering calls. Both roles give reps the opportunity to expand on their skills, increasing their interest in and rewards from the job and their chances for career growth.

## Fun

Call center management is also adjusting to a younger workforce. Senior managers are coming to understand that the younger workforce generally views work differently than the older generation. As a result, while work is still important and productivity is key, call centers today are typically fun, high-energy environments with a high degree of camaraderie and a steady stream of campaigns, contests, and parties designed to keep the environment and the work stimulating and to create an “extended family” feeling. Organizations that encourage such an environment are rewarded by higher productivity and lower employee turnover.

### Learning Application Exercise

1. Which aspects of a call center appeal to you the most? Which do you think will give you the greatest satisfaction as a call center rep?
2. How do you feel about the monitoring process described earlier? How can you best approach the process so the feedback you receive helps you learn and advance your career?



## Diversity Connection

One crucial aspect of customer service is recognizing—and appreciating—the great diversity in U.S. culture. Within a few decades, experts say, there will be no such thing as a majority ethnic group in the United States. Everyone will belong to a minority; that is, no one group will make up more than half of American citizens.

Today everyone gives lip service to the value of diversity, but in a people-oriented industry, you need to think seriously about your own unconscious biases. Being “tolerant” of others is not really enough because tolerance implies that they are somehow annoying or troublesome. Ask yourself these questions: Do you fully believe that someone who speaks with a different accent, espouses a different religion, or has a different skin color is your equal? Are you interested in learning about other cultures and different ways of thinking? Reflect on these matters as you read the next section about the characteristics of a successful call center representative.

## ■ Characteristics of a Successful Call Center Representative

The days when call center managers were happy just to fill call center positions with unscreened, off-the-street applicants are gone. Too many of these hires did not work out, and the result was high employee turnover or performance problems. The hiring process has a much higher profile in call centers today. Call center managers look for the characteristics described in the following list. By developing your abilities in these areas, you can increase your chances of being hired and of being successful on the job.

- *Ability to learn.* To be successful today, a call center rep must be able to learn and must enjoy learning. The call center environment is one of ongoing change, so reps must be able to learn quickly to keep up with new information, responsibilities, policies, procedures, and technology. Call centers typically grow into one-stop shopping centers or a single point of contact in an organization, and reps must handle more and more information and types of customer issues.
- *Ability to multitask.* Today’s call center typically does not allow a person to stick with one task until it is done. Call center reps must be able to multitask—keep track of a number of projects, ongoing cases, or calls to be followed up.



- *Stress resistance.* Today's call centers operate at a hectic pace. Customers can be demanding and the call volume high. For the successful call center rep, this environment is energizing and exciting; for the less successful rep, the pace can be overwhelming and lead to frustration, anxiety, and stress.
- *Flexibility.* No matter how much training new reps receive or how prepared they are, it is likely that on their first day on the job, they will encounter something that wasn't covered in the training. Even experienced reps do not always know how to handle every situation. The effective rep overcomes the initial confusion this can cause and applies her or his skills to new sets of circumstances.
- *Ability to get along with people.* For someone who does not genuinely like people but instead distrusts them, considers them lower in status, or fears them, working in a call center is not appropriate. The call center rep must interact constantly with a variety of people. A rep may be able to fake an interest in people for a while, but the daily demands of the job will make this impossible—and frustrating—to keep up for a long time.
- *Computer/keyboard skills.* Keyboarding skills are a must in most call centers. The task of managing a call is simply too consuming for the rep to concentrate on finding the right key. The keyboard should be like an extension of the rep; he or she needs to be able to use it without consciously thinking about it. Each call center uses a different contact management system, but reps who are comfortable with computers and with one of the major word-processing packages can usually learn how to use a new system.
- *Positive attitude.* Effective call centers seek reps who are positive about the job. If a person does not display a positive attitude at the outset, odds are that the situation will only go downhill from there.
- *Interpersonal skills.* A person can genuinely like people but be ineffective in communicating with them and in managing calls. For that reason, hiring managers try to select applicants who exhibit good interpersonal skills.

The remainder of this book will go into more detail about the characteristics that can help a call center rep be successful.

## Learning Application Exercise

1. Which characteristics of an effective call center rep do you already possess? In which areas do you most need to develop or improve?
2. Develop a plan with clear goals and dates for achieving the needed characteristics you identified in question 1.

## Summary

A call center can be defined as “the mechanism through which an organization transacts business with an identified group of customers or potential customers, using the telephone as the primary method of communication.” Because of economies of scale, call center business tends to be conducted at large, centralized locations.

The automatic call distributor (ACD) collects calls as they come in and passes each call to the next available or most appropriate representative. Computer-telephone integration (CTI) has greatly enhanced the services available through the ACD. Many systems now use automatic number identification (ANI), by which the computer uses the customer’s telephone number to bring up information about that customer. Contact management software allows all call center reps to access customer data and other types of useful information.

The Internet is having a profound effect on call centers. With e-mail and interactive web sites, call center reps have the opportunity to connect with customers through yet another cutting-edge medium.

Call monitoring allows coaches to improve the team’s performance by identifying and reinforcing areas of effectiveness. Effective coaching helps the rep to improve more quickly and to achieve greater job success and satisfaction.

Call centers typically evolve through three phases:

1. The quality phase, in which a new call center establishes itself with the customer.
2. The quantity phase, in which the call center becomes more efficient in providing service.
3. The balance phase, in which the call center balances quality and efficiency and moves to optimal performance.

Call centers have evolved into more rep-friendly environments by providing career growth through job tiering, blended customer service and sales roles, and career streams as specialists or supervisors. Today’s call centers also offer a more fun environment than in the past.

The characteristics that make a rep successful include the following:

- Ability to learn
- Ability to multitask
- Stress resistance
- Flexibility
- Ability to get along with people
- Computer/keyboarding skills
- Positive attitude
- Interpersonal skills

## Key Terms

On a separate sheet of paper, describe the importance of each of the following to your career:

- call center
- call center representative
- satellite call center
- virtual agent
- script
- automatic call distributor (ACD)
- screen pop
- computer-telephone integration (CTI)
- automatic number identification (ANI)
- interactive voice response (IVR)
- queue
- display board
- private branch exchange (PBX)
- contact management software
- Internet telephony
- call monitoring
- average talk time (ATT)
- average work time (AWT)
- average handling time (AHT)
- average speed of answer (ASA)
- average hold time

## Critical Thinking Questions

Answer the following questions in the space provided.

1. Why is the term call center a bit misleading? That is, how do most call centers go beyond what the term implies?
2. Why are most call centers large and centralized?
3. How has technology created the opportunity for representatives to work from their own homes?

4. What does an ACD do?

5. How can ANI make service more convenient for the customer?

6. What are six functions of contact management software?

7. How does a restricted-access web site differ from a web site that customers use?

8. As a call center rep, how can you benefit from having your calls monitored by a supervisor?

9. What are the three typical phases of a call center's development? Describe each one.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
10. Why are flexibility and multitasking important characteristics of a successful call center representative?

## Skills Applications

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1. With a small group of coworkers or fellow students, share anecdotes about your own contact with call centers as a customer. Draw up a list of the group's five most satisfying and five least satisfying experiences. For each item, include a phrase describing the key element in the call center's success or failure.
2. Explore the web site of a company whose products you like. (It could be one that sells clothes, music, books, housewares, or another product.) Answer the following questions:
  - a. Is there a separate section of the site devoted to customer service? (The section may be called "Help" or something similar.) How easy is this part of the site to find?
  - b. Does the web site offer a phone number that customers can call for help? If so, how easy is that number to locate?
  - c. Is there an option for "live" help—immediate contact with a customer service rep?
  - d. In your opinion, how effective is this site in serving the needs of a typical customer? If you had a problem or question, would you prefer to use the web site or would you rather talk to a representative on the phone?



E-mail your answers to question 2 to your instructor.

## Case Studies

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1. Simon Magee, a call center rep, has heard that his center will soon be upgrading its technology, installing a state-of-the-art computer system. Simon is extremely knowledgeable about the company's products and proficient in dealing with customers, but he does not consider himself a high-tech person. "At home, my computer is always crashing," he complains to fellow workers, "and I don't understand it at all. If our workplace goes high-tech, I may have to look for another job."
  - a. If you were Simon's coworker, how would you reassure him about his ability to cope with the new system?
  - b. What advantages of new technology could you list for Simon (for instance, ways in which technology can make the rep's job easier and more enjoyable)?
2. Nella Baraka's supervisor uses a form of drive-by monitoring. He occasionally pauses, seemingly at random, to look over a rep's shoulder and listen to a call. This upsets Nella.

Whenever she senses the supervisor's presence, she becomes flustered and confused and handles a call poorly. Though his critiques have been mild, she believes that he's accumulating reasons to have her fired. Naturally, this feeling has undermined her morale and made it difficult for her to concentrate on her work.

- a. What could you say to Nella to help her take a more positive view of monitoring?
- b. What other monitoring techniques might you suggest to the supervisor to help ease Nella's self-consciousness?