

AN EVALUATION OF CONTACT CENTRE SYSTEM AND SERVICE AGENTS' COMPETENCY LEVELS AT ABC IN THE EASTERN CAPE, SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

South Africa depends on ABC for electricity supply and has a Contact Centre which acts as the face of the company. The Contact Centre provides customer service to the community and is expected to deliver consistent and excellent service to customers. The aim of the study was to evaluate the underlying factors for ABC Contact Centre customers' dissatisfaction in the Eastern Cape. From the population of 80 service agents, 60 were sampled for the survey and 56 responded to the questionnaire that was distributed. The study found that the Contact Centre's systems were operated in an isolated environment from related business units, which made it difficult for First Call Resolution (FCR) to be attained by agents and customers had to call several times for one query. The operational processes have not been standardised and executed according to customer expectations due to contradicting key performance indicators (KPIs). The well-being of the Contact Centre workforce has been compromised, which could lead to agents losing confidence, a lack of zeal to perform duties optimally, a tarnishing of the image of the Contact Centre and the organisation. Based on the findings, the study recommended that the Contact Centre management re-design operational strategies and processes to be on par with customer expectations and to avoid contradicting KPIs, Contact Centre systems should be integrated to other business units' systems and stress tolerance activities should be conducted for service agents.

Introduction

ABC is the largest electricity generation organisation in South Africa and the African continent at large. The organisation has the top seven utilities in the world in terms of capacity generation and is among the top nine in terms of electricity sales. The utility produces and supplies electricity to South Africa and neighbouring states. It also generates, transmits and distributes electricity to industrial, mining, commercial, agricultural, residential customers and redistributors. With its affirmative procurement strategy to distribute wealth and income to the nation, ABC drives transformation by supporting procurement with Bureau for Energy Efficiency (BEE) channelling a significant amount of money into the sector. With such responsibilities, it is important for the contact and frontline staff and services to be effective and efficient.

ABC Contact Centre has been recently upgraded to new world-class technology in order to provide customers with better customer services. Irrespective of the newly constructed technology to track

customer queries, the feedback required by customers is available, but service agents do not have access to it. Service agents log requests that are transmitted to other business section, however, when customers make follow-ups on previously logged requests, service agents typically log another request to the section as follow up. On the second call made to the Contact Centre, the customer would receive little feedback or solution to the query. Service agents do not have access to all the system applications used in processing customer queries. Currently, customers complain about agents' incompetence, resulting in customer dissatisfaction due to the way the Contact Centre processes are designed. Against this background there are concerns about the lack of First Call Resolution (FCR) as enshrined within organisational charter.

Objectives of the Study

- To assess the causes for ABC's Contact Centre agents' inability to resolve customer queries using the newly established system.
- To assess the skills or competencies appropriate for the Contact Centre agents that would enable successful delivery of customer satisfaction using the newly established system.
- To establish the measures for improving customer satisfaction at ABC Contact Centre in the Eastern Cape Province.

Significance of the Study

Since the establishment of the new Contact Centre systems at ABC, no study has been conducted evaluating the Contact Centre systems and service agents' competency levels in the Eastern Cape. The study would inform and assist ABC's management to develop improvement initiatives and to establish a baseline for future assessments. The study would generate measures to curb the inefficiency and inconsistency of services rendered by the Contact Centre. The organisation would benefit from improved operational processes, improved trust from customers, and positive word-of-mouth from the public, improved productivity, enhanced customer service and reduced costs to service customers.

Literature and theoretical foundation of the study

Organisations in the service sector are under increasing pressure to demonstrate that services are customer-focused and continuous performance improvement is being delivered. Given the resource constraints under which service organisations operates, it is essential that customer expectations are properly understood, measured and establish any gaps in service quality. Such information assists management to identify cost-effective ways of closing service quality gaps and prioritising which gaps to focus on and the critical decisions to make given scarce resources. The key strategy for the success and survival of any business institution is the delivery of quality services to customers (Zeithaml, et al, 2008). The quality of services offered determines customer satisfaction and attitudinal loyalty towards the organisation.

Customer perceptions and expectations of service quality is a complex process that entails multiple dimensions. One dimension used in service marketing is the SERVQUAL, a model developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988). SERVQUAL is based on the perceived gaps between received service quality and the expected service quality and has been widely adopted for explaining consumer perception of service quality. The model is based on five dimensions that include reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance and tangibility. If expectations are greater than performance, then perceived quality is less than satisfactory resulting in customer dissatisfaction (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Lewis and Mitchell, 1990). The SERVQUAL approach is the most common method for measuring service quality.

Gap 1: Consumer expectation - management perception gap

Service firms may not always understand what features a service must have in order to meet consumer needs and what levels of performance those features are necessary for delivering high quality service. These results affect the way consumers evaluate service quality.

Gap 2: Management perception - service quality specification gap

This gap arises when a company identifies what consumers' want, but the means to deliver to expectation does not exist. Some factors that affect this gap could be resource constraints, market conditions and management indifferences. These could affect service quality perceptions of consumers.

Gap 3: Service quality specifications – service delivery gap

Companies could have guidelines for performing services well and treating consumers correctly, but these do not mean high service quality performance is assured. Employees play an important role in assuring good service quality perceptions and their performance cannot be standardised. This affects the delivery of services, which has an impact on the way consumers perceive service quality.

Gap 4: Service delivery – external communications gap

External communications can affect not only consumer expectations of service but also consumer perceptions of the delivered service. Companies can neglect to inform consumers of special efforts to assure quality that are not visible to them and this could influence service quality perceptions by consumers.

Gap 5: Expected Service – perceived service gap

The key to ensuring good service quality is meeting or exceeding what consumers expect from the service and that judgment of high and low service quality depend on how consumers perceive the actual performance in the context of what is expected.

Causes for Agents' inefficiency to resolve customer queries

A Contact Centre is an environment in which the main business is mediated by computer and telephone-based technologies that enable the efficient distribution of incoming calls (or allocation of outgoing calls) to available staff and permit customer-employee interactions to occur simultaneously with use of display screen equipment and instant access to, and inputting of, information (Holman, 2003). Dawson (2004) defines Contact Centres as generally a set-up of large rooms with workstations that include a computer, a telephone set (headset) hooked into a large switch and one or more supervisor stations. The personnel that manage the workstations are referred to as service agents or Customer Service Representatives (CSR). A Call Centre is traditionally defined as a physical (virtual) location where calls are placed or received for the purpose of a business function or activity (Dawson, 2004). At its core, a Call Centre constitutes a set of resources – typically personnel, computers and telecommunications equipment – which enable the delivery of services via the telephone (Gans et al., 2003).

Charter Continuum (2012) states that there is a disconnection between corporate and Contact Centre operational goals. At a corporate level, Contact Centres are often measured against customer satisfaction and customer retention rates. However, Contact Centres are constantly under pressure to improve customer service quality while minimizing costs. For a service agent, such cases mean that even simple business processes require manual and repetitive workflow processes that slow average handling times and impact the ability to resolve customer issues in an effective and efficient manner. Customers do not like waiting on hold, being asked to repeat information already

given, being bounced around the business because agents do not have the information or authority needed to resolve the issue identified (Charter Continuum, 2012). Unfortunately, this is precisely why many Contact Centres find it difficult to deliver the outstanding customer experience desired. Contact Centre systems and service agents' processes cannot easily conform to the way in which callers want to interact with the business. At times service agents are faced with the need to learn and interact with several different programs at the same time, but certain applications often operate as unconnected silos that are unable to communicate with one another. Complicated business systems also take service agents' attention, concentrate on the system and processes and are unable to focus attention on listening to customers' needs.

Contact Centres fall in the trap of providing an operational focus service than a strategic focus service (Charter Continuum, 2012). To attest to this, one may hear an agent saying "your call is important to us". And one may wonder what is more important to Contact Centres, the call or the customer. In most Contact Centres, customers would wait for few minutes at the end of the telephone line for an answer from an agent who is governed by a set of Key Performance Indicators (KPI) that has more to do with efficiency of the Contact Centre than satisfying the needs of the customer. Agents also feel obliged to meet an average call handling time that has been set as a target, which is the reason for repeated calls. Isolated desktops of companies play a big role on agents' inefficiency to resolve customer queries. Agents have to navigate different isolated business systems with no success at the end of the day.

According to Amdocs (2011) calls at Contact Centres take too long to be answered and often customer service representatives seem unable to resolve issues because they do not have access to the right information or are not trained to use certain systems. One of the contributing factors to a poor customer experience is the inexperienced or poorly trained service agent (Amdocs, 2011). As new products are introduced, the systems that service agents need to master and utilise grow at a rapid pace. Service agents struggle to navigate the maze of applications and screens, the impact to customers translate into longer interaction times and customers are repeatedly asked to provide the same information at the risk of not having the issue resolved (Amdocs, 2011).

Improving Service Agents' Efficiency

A Strategic Consultant-EMEA for interactive intelligence stated that Contact Centre agents need access to systems and processes that enable them to easily access information and handle unforeseen circumstances (Scheepers, 2013). Contact Centres find themselves under increasing pressure from business to drive revenue and customers requiring an excellent service and are being forced to identify an appropriate balance between cost saving and improved efficiency. Sometimes Contact Centres compromise on certain elements such as staffing or technological processes (Scheepers, 2013). In order for the Contact Centre agents' to deliver efficiently and increase productivity, it is vital that Contact Centres never compromise the following factors (Scheepers, 2013):

- **Staff training**

FCR is the primary principle underpinning all Contact Centres and requires reinforcement. FCR rate is the ultimate dictator of Contact Centres and is a benchmark by which efficiency is best assessed. Agent training is the most myriad factor a high FCR rate depends on. The onus is on Contact Centre management to train agents in order to deliver resolution to customers. No corner should be cut when it comes to agent training for better customer service. Agents need access to systems and processes to enable them to easily access information and handle any unforeseen circumstances during the time of conversation with the customer.

- **Single view of the customer**

According to Scheepers (2013), it is imperative that Contact Centres employ unified systems in order to effectively integrate all channels and establish a more holistic view of the customer. These systems allow all contact points to be traced, analysed and reported on. Agents better manage customers across an array of channels through unified systems. Multiple databases and systems would inevitably compromise Contact Centre agents and the ability to access relevant information when dealing with the customer queries slows the process and reduces the possibility of FCR. Agents should have access to records of all past interactions with customers and be able to access these from a central integrated database.

- **Measurement tool**

The ability of a Contact Centre to improve rests in its capacity to measure itself. As such, it is vital that Contact Centres employ appropriate measurement and quality measurement tools in order to be able to effectively assess strengths and weaknesses. Live agent monitoring tools enable management staff to keep tabs on conversations, while recording systems represent an effective tool with which to reflect on past interactions and identify areas in which improvement could be made.

- **Making every customer contact count**

The first way for Contact Centres to improve efficiency is to consider the reasons why customers are contacting them. Most Contact Centres, however, do not provide agents with enough customer information. Agents do not have access to all relevant customer information when needed. To a customer, this could appear inattentive and unprofessional. Customers may have to wait while agents navigate from one system to another or re-enter the same data over and over in systems that do not communicate to each other. This can give the customer the impression that the agents' are not properly trained. Such inefficient processes reduce companies' performance metrics and create a poor Contact Centre customer experiences.

- **Ensuring that Contact Centre is truly customer-centric**

Charter Continuum (2012) states that when Contact Centre agents' focus is shifted to the customer, rather than a complex desktop environment, it improves the ability to build customer rapport and drive additional value from every customer interaction. In solving customer queries, agents should be given all the help possible. Call Centre automation software to automate repetitive, time-consuming manual tasks, improve the user interface and add procedural guidance to call Centre workflows. The solution sits across the entire business at all customer touch points, giving the agents a single view of every interaction that customers have ever had with the business, which is critical to making customers feel heard on every single call.

System integration also plays an important role in assisting agents to resolve customer queries efficiently and effectively (Bakar, 2003). Garner (2013) describes system integration as a process of creating complex information systems that include designing or building a customised architecture or application, integrating it with new or existing hardware, packaged and custom software and communication. Houser (2011) asserts that system integration is the assembling the constituent parts of a system in a logical, cost-effective way, comprehensively checking system execution and including a full function check-out. Houser (2011) further states that system integration verifies that the system meets its requirements and meant for validating that the system performs in accordance with customer or user expectations.

Creating a successful environment for service agents starts with simple things, the service agents' desktop itself. A smart desktop is optimised to handle service agents' needs with intuitive user interface and controls that provide easy access to customer information (Amdocs, 2009). This

desktop seamlessly integrates all the disparate applications that service agents might need, eliminating the need to toggle across multiple screens. Amdocs (2009) also suggests that process-based support is key feature of the desktop to help service agents with most common tasks they perform during a service interaction.

Service Agents' Competency Levels

The Hong Kong Call Centre Association (2002) defines Call Centre competencies as any skills, abilities, or behaviours that add to the success of Call Centre agents' performance. Garavan and McGuire (2001) define competency by stating three distinct perspectives: competencies as individual characteristics, competencies as characteristics of the bigger organisation or Call Centre and competencies that are used to arrange and assist communication. In the National Qualifications Framework (NQF; 1998), competence is described as the application of knowledge, skills and attitudes in a specific context. Competence is the delivery of work at the required standard. Competent performance requires the right level of skills, knowledge and attitudes, and is determined by talent, experience and the application of certain personal qualities (NQF, 1998). A competent Contact Centre agent must possess the required knowledge, skills, attitude, experience and talent to deliver the required standard of work in Contact Centres. JGN Consulting (2002) asserts that competency refers to an individual's demonstrated knowledge, skills or abilities performed to a specific standard. Based on systems theory, these observable, behavioural acts are demonstrated in a job context and are influenced by an organisation's culture and work environment.

Competent Service Agent

For an agent to be regarded as competent in his or her job, the agent must be able to handle customer calls as efficiently as possible and be able to navigate around the system. It is imperative to be able to handle calls effectively by providing good customer service and fulfilling expectations so that customers do not call back again to repeat the request.

Identifying Service Agents' Competencies

The following are core competencies of a Contact Centre Agent as identified by White & Roos (2005) and White (2003):

- Listening
- Communication
- Attentiveness
- Understanding
- Attitude
- Consistency
- Confidence
- Knowledgeable
- Speed
- Unpredictability as a challenge
- Flexibility
- Language
- Stress tolerance
- Goal orientation
- Proactive problem solving
- Team work
- Basic telephone and technology skills.

Customer Expectations

Customer expectations are beliefs about service delivery that serve as standards or reference points against which performance is judged (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2008). The level of expectation can vary widely depending on the reference points the customer holds. Jones and Jaebeom (1997) state that customers expect prompt and efficient call answering and high quality calls. In an inbound Call Centre, customers expect a fast and effective interview of high quality (White, 2003).

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction has become an essential component for providing excellent service to customers. With the growing popularity of customer relationship management, many organisations are placing more emphasis on customer satisfaction and managing customer relationships. One way of measuring customer satisfaction is by inviting customers to take part in a short survey at the end of the call, where customers are required to respond to pre-recorded questions by pressing the number on their telephone keypad or by speaking.

Meeting Customer Needs and Expectations

Raghavan, on his appraisal on Customer Expectations Management (CEM), states that meeting customer expectations without exception impacts the business by expanding the customer base, reduce customer attrition and increase organisational profit. A process-centric organisation that focuses on CEM creates processes that go beyond the efficiency gains of process improvement. Raghavan highlighted the following imperatives in meeting customer expectations:

- Responsiveness
- Collision
- Dexterity
- Transparency
- Dependability
- Preventability
- Accountability
- Empowerment

The White Paper (2005) highlights five best practices for exceeding customer expectations and these include the following:

- Listen to your customer through customer surveys and focus groups;
- Set aggressive, but realistic goals and metrics to push people to stretch;
- Use customer relationship marketing (CRM) technology to innovate how to best serve your customers;
- Transform business processes; and
- Capture and apply lessons learned.

An examination of literature has shown that customer satisfaction is critical to the retention of customers, which result in higher levels of profitability (Johnson and Gustafson, 2001).

Methodology

The research design was a quantitative research design, using a cross-sectional survey. The quantitative research methodological approach was chosen in order to minimise time for respondents to answer the questionnaire based on the limited time service agents had to fulfill personal and non-work related duties. The target population for this study was ABC Contact Centre service agents in the Eastern Cape Province comprising of 80 inbound service agents and using quota sampling method a 93% response rate was achieved. A structured questionnaire consisting of

four sections was used to collect data on a Likert scale score. The first section tested the respondents' demographics; the second assessed the causes of agents' inefficiency to solve customer queries, the third section evaluated agents' competencies while the last section focused on the measures for improving customer satisfaction. The pilot study was conducted to test the time taken to answer the questionnaire; the ambiguity of the questionnaire; the logic of the questions and to remove elements of any bias.

The data was analysed as follows: the first step was to tabulate the results for different variables in the data set. This provided a comprehensive picture of what the data looked like and assisted in identifying patterns. This was done through frequency and percentage distributions. With frequency distributions, the number of scores was allocated to each category on a Microsoft Word table. Proportions of participants' responses within each category were displayed using the percent distribution. Results were populated to a Microsoft Word document. The analysis was derived from a spread sheet and final conclusions and recommendations were incorporated into the literature review. Consequently, displays such as tables were used to describe parameters, making the data readable and understandable.

Research Results

Descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies and percentages were computed using the Microsoft excel. The percentages were graphically presented.

- **Gender of the respondents**

The following table illustrates the gender of respondents.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by gender.

Male	34%
Female	66%

Table1 indicates that 66% of the respondents were female and according to Bonds (2004), this figure could be traced to the emergence of telephone switchboard operators, often referred to as "hello girl". Because of the alleged natural patience of women and their ability to communicate, they possess the necessary skills for switchboard operation like the Contact Centre.

- **Age of respondents**

Table 2: Distribution of respondents by age

< than 20 years	21 – 29 years	30 – 39 years	40 -49 years	50+ years
2%	27%	46%	16%	9%

The dominating age group at the Contact Centre ranged between 30-39 years with 46%, followed by 27% aged 21 to 29 years with 2% being the least age group at the Contact Centre as indicated in table 2.

- **Level of education**

Table 3: Distribution of respondents by the level of education

Matric	Post Matric	Degree & Above
32%	21%	47%

The respondents with a degree and above constituted 47% of the sampled population, 32% had matric qualification while 21% possessed post-matric qualifications (table 3).

- **Work experience**

Table 4: Distribution of respondents by work experience

1 – 10 years	10 – 20 years	20 – 30 years	30+ years
64%	20%	12%	4%

The agents with 1-10 years working experience were 64% of the entire sample followed by 20% who had 10-20 years of experience while the least working experience was 4% with 20-30 years with the organisation (table 4).

- **The causes of agents’ inefficiency by agents to resolve customer queries**

Table 5: Training of service agents

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
Contact Centre Agents were not trained to handle customer queries using the new system.	30%	18%	20%	18%	14%

There was a disagreement that agents were not trained in using the new system handling the customer query (48%) while 32% agreed with the statement. Although a large number of respondents disagreed with the statement, there is an equally large number (20%) of unsure respondents. This suggests employee training as important as it would enhance employee performance and works as an intrinsic motivator. Training provides an organisation with multi-skilled employees (Muhammad, 2009).

- **The efficiency of the system**

Table 6: Testing system efficiency

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
Contact Centre systems give agents right information at the right time during customer interaction	20%	14%	11%	41%	14%

When asked about the new system and whether it gives the agents the right information at the right time during every interaction, 54% of the respondents agreed, 34% disagreed while 11% of the respondents were unsure (table 6). This was good for the Centre as system efficiency optimises agents as a resource, helping agents to make better use of time for customers through whichever channel used.

- **Level of Follow-ups**

Table 7: Level of follow-ups

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
Customer phones the Contact Centre and speaks to several agents regarding a single enquiry	9%	11%	7%	34%	39%

The level of query follow-ups by customers is high with 73% of respondents who agreed that customers phone the Centre on several times and speak to several agents on a single enquiry while 7% were unsure of the statement (table 7). It was found that service agents log customer queries which would be transferred to the responsible personnel for resolutions. However, by the time

customers phone the Centre for feedback, agents would not be able to retrieve any feedback from the system about the query. The agent would have to log follow-up requests and inform customers to phone again which leaves customers dissatisfied with the Centre.

- **The need for system integration**

Table 8: Assessing the need for system integration

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
There is a need for Contact Centre systems to be interlinked to other business units	4%	11%	14%	23%	48%

The study found that there is need for interlinking the Contact Centre’s systems to other business units. This was confirmed by 71% of the respondents who agreed with the statement while 15% disagreed (table 8). It was hoped that after upgrades interlinking the system, customer call backs would be reduced, as the information was readily available to agents to give feedback to customers. However, the result of this study proves otherwise. For agents to efficiently deliver and increase productivity in an organisation, it is imperative that the Contact Centre unify systems in order to effectively integrate all channels and establish a more holistic operation.

- **Benefits for system upgrades**

Table 9: Benefits for system upgrades

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
System upgrades resulted in few customer call backs	18%	25%	29%	21%	7%

When asked whether the system upgrades had resulted in few customer call backs, 43% of the respondents disagreed while 29% were unsure indicating the ineffectiveness of the system. There were a high percentage of responses disagreeing with the statement. This could be attributed to lack of training of service agents. A large number of respondents were not sure whether they were appropriately trained to operate the new system. This result could be attributed the integration of the Contact Centre systems to other business units’ systems.

- **Customer feedback**

Table 10: Availability of customer feedback

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
Customer feedback is readily available when customer does a follow up on the query previously logged	23%	38%	9%	25%	5%

Respondents were asked about the availability of customer feedback on a previously logged query, 61% confirmed that customer feedback was not readily available while 30% agreed with the statement and this suggests there is lack of customer feedback within the Contact Centre.

- **Assessing processes and systems**

Table 11: Assessing processes vs. systems

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
Contact Centre system speed processes by automating navigation to the appropriate screen or field during a call.	21%	21%	21%	29%	7%

In Table 11, 42% of the respondents disagreed that Contact Centre systems speed the process by automating navigation to the appropriate screen. As the larger percentage of respondents disagreed this result may also point towards the level of training among service agents.

- Agents' Competency**

Table 12: Testing agents' computer skills

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
Contact Centre Agents do have computer skills to enable them operate the new system.	39%	29%	13%	14%	5%

The competency level of the service agents was tested and 68% of the respondents confirmed that service agents lacked computer skills while 19% agreed that service agents had computer skills that enabled them to operate the new system. This result suggests service agents have limitations to enter and retrieve information on different systems; as well as using computer and typing information while talking to customers. Based on this result, there is a gap in equipping service agents with the necessary computer skills.

- Technical knowledge**

Table 13: Technical knowledge versus necessary skills for agents

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
Service agents have technical knowledge but lack necessary skills / information to efficiently perform duties.	13%	34%	21%	23%	7%

The study found that 47% of the respondents were of the opinion that service agents do not have technical knowledge and lacked necessary skills / information to enable efficient duty performance. This suggests that service agents are not knowledgeable about the product and the technicalities of the system. However, service agents who are knowledgeable about a Centre's product are able to provide customers with valuable service information and answer any service related questions without having to transfer customers to other service agents.

- Systems Efficiency**

Table 14: Agents' efficiency with systems

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
Agents find it difficult to tackle the maze of different systems which has detrimental effects on their work.	7%	18%	32%	32%	11%

The result in table 14 indicates that agents find it challenging to tackle the maze of different systems, which has the detrimental effects of their work with 43% of the respondents confirming

the statement. This suggests that service agents are not appropriately trained to use all the systems required for assisting customers.

- **Agents flexibility**

Table 15: Assessing agents' flexibility

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
Agents understand how to cope and thrive in a changing environment.	13%	11%	27%	38%	4%

Respondents were asked whether they understood how to cope and thrive in a changing environment. The result confirmed the statement at 42% while 24% disagreed with the statement. This suggests positive efforts are made by the organisation to equip service agents on how to cope with changes and work in a changing environment.

- **Customer Expectations**

Tables 16: Agents' awareness of customer expectations

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
Agents are aware of customer expectations	11%	7%	5%	57%	20%

There was a positive confirmation indicating service agents are aware of customer expectations (77%) and only 5% of the respondents were unsure. The awareness could be a result of employment experience, employee induction and interactions with customers.

- **Understanding customer needs**

Table 17: Agents' understanding of the customer

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
Service agents are able to detect and understand the concerns, feelings and motives of customers	7%	9%	11%	63%	11%

There is a positive affirmation (74%) of the respondents who are able to detect and understand customer concerns, feelings and motives while 11% were not aware of customer needs. The level of understanding customer needs was high suggesting employee interest in knowing and understanding customer needs.

- **Agents' well being**

Table 18: Assessing agents' well-being

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
Stress tolerance activities are performed by the Contact Centre management for agents.	38%	25%	20%	14%	4%

The result in table 18 indicates that management is not providing stress tolerance activities to service agents. This was confirmed by 73% of the respondents while 18% agreed with the

statement. The result indicates a gap regarding stress tolerance activities and the existence of high stress levels among the service agents.

- **Benefits of system integration**

Table 19: Evaluating benefits of system integration

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
Linking business units would improve customer service within the call Centres.	2%	5%	13%	39%	41%

Interlinking business units would improve customer service within the Contact Centre. This was confirmed by 80% of the respondents while 7% disagreed. This suggests that system integration plays an important role in assisting agents to resolve customer queries efficiently and effectively.

- **Contact Centre processes**

Table 20: Standardisation of Contact Centre processes

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
Contact Centre processes are standardised and executed according to customer expectations.	21%	25%	16%	27%	11%

When asked about the standardisation of processes, 46% of the respondents confirmed negatively while 16% remained not sure about the statement. This shows that the processes are not standardised to meet customer expectations; there is a lack of dependability, which is one of imperatives in meeting customer expectations. Without dependability, customers do not get consistent service delivery.

- **Employee satisfaction**

Table 21: Assessing employee satisfaction

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
Employee satisfaction is regularly monitored	21%	29%	14%	27%	9%

The result in table 21 shows that employee satisfaction was not regularly monitored. This was confirmed by 50% of the respondents while 36% felt otherwise. Employee satisfaction is vital to the success of delivering services and the organisation should take this into cognizance. Service agents would treat customers in exactly the way they are treated (Kjellerup, 2001).

- **Interdepartmental handshake**

Table 22: Interdepartmental handshake

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
Inter-departmental handshakes are established and contradicting Key performance indicators (KPI) identified	21%	29%	14%	32%	4%

There are no interdepartmental handshakes established and KPIs have not been established as yet. This result was confirmed by 50% of the respondents while 36% agreed with the statement (table 22).

- **Flexibility of the Contact Centre**

Table 23: Flexibility of Contact Centre processes

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
Contact Centre processes are agile and flexible to respond to customer needs based on their requirements	20%	30%	16%	32%	2%

Relative to whether the Contact Centre processes are flexible to respond to customer needs 50% of the respondents disagreed while 34% agreed with the statement. This suggests that Contact Centre processes are not aligned to customer needs. Without flexible processes, the Contact Centre would not be able to attain customer satisfaction (Tambelline et al., 2005).

- **Customer expectations**

Table 24: Knowledge about customer expectations

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
Service agents are aware of customer expectations from the Contact Centre	2%	14%	18%	52%	14%

The result in table 24 demonstrates that service agents are aware of customer expectations and this was confirmed by 66% of the respondents while 16% disagreed. Zeithaml et al. (2008) states that customer expectations are beliefs about service delivery that serve as standards or reference points against which performance is judged.

Discussion

There are two dominating age groups working at the Contact Centre, 20-30 and 30-39 years. These age groups were perceived as being more adaptable to change, possessed greater flexibility and ability to work peak periods, have advanced technological skills and could work minimal rate (Norman 2005). However, the attrition rate of these age groups is high, have a tendency of being absent from work and which could be a disadvantage to a Contact Centre. The level of education seemed not to be a problem, with consistent training and integrated systems the Contact Centre could deliver the required standard of work and meet customers' needs. According to NQF (1998), competent performance requires the right level of skills, knowledge and attitude and all are determined by talent, experience and the application of certain personal qualifications.

Based on the results of the study, the following gaps were identified:

Gap 1: Consumer expectation - management perception gap

The study has found that most service agents have not received training in the use of the new system and this suggest source of customer dissatisfaction. In a Contact Centre environment, customers' need could not be met in the plight of this gap and the quality of the services rendered could not be improved unless the gap is bridged.

Gap 2: Management perception

The Contact Centre systems appear to operate in isolation from other business units, resulting in lack of information among service agents to provide feedback to customers when required. There was the visibility of contradicting KPIs, where service agents tell customers that queries would be resolved within a certain period yet the field services section would have different turnaround time.

There was a gap that the Contact Centre's processes appear rigid and unable to respond to customer needs when required which affects the quality of service of the Centre.

Gap 3: Service quality specifications – service delivery gap

There is a gap relating to employee satisfaction. Employees play an important role in assuring good service quality. The study found that employee satisfaction is not regularly monitored and this could have negative consequences on employee attitude and performance. Stress tolerance activities are not conducted by the Contact Centre management for service agents and this has negative effect on the quality of service provided to customers resulting in customer dissatisfaction.

Gap 4: Service delivery – external communications gap

The results on external communication suggest that management is not entirely transparent to its employee. Consequently, the Contact Centre is not flexible to respond to customer needs.

Gap 5: Expected Service – perceived service gap

The study found that customers often call the Contact Centre more than once for a single enquiry due to a lack of feedback from service agents. This suggests service agents do not have access to other business units' systems to enable them access information as required by customers. Customers are given different turnaround times due to contradicting KPIs. This further indicates that the Contact Centre does not meet customer needs resulting in customer's dissatisfaction.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the study, the following recommendations were made:

- The service agents must be equipped with skills and appropriate competences that are in compatible with the new system. As such, introduction of train-the-trainer is recommended, as it is an excellent way to ensure relevant skills are filtered through the entire Contact Centre. This would include live call handling in a classroom environment and supported by supervisors.
- Management need to work and improve staff retention in order for the Contact Centre to retain more experienced service agents.
- Contact Centre system must be interlinked to other business units to ease access to customer feedback. This would reduce long wait periods for customers and avoiding holding on and end up being bounced around the business.
- A Contact Centre is a stressful environment to work under; agents have to deal with rude, demanding or distraught customers, face crises, master new and complicated technology and constantly monitor incoming calls. As such, it is important for the Contact Centre management to conduct stress tolerance activities for the agents.
- Communication and strong relationships must be built within the organisation to enable agents see themselves as part of the bigger picture. It is critical for agents to feel valued and management could achieve this by assessing employee motivates and taking necessary steps to build an environment of recognition.

Conclusion

The study has investigated the possible factors contributing to the criticism towards customer service provided by ABC Contact Centre. The main aim was to evaluate the service processes at the Contact Centre with respect to customer satisfaction and assess agents' competency levels in order to have a global picture of the Contact Centre as part of this study. The following are the main conclusions made from the study:

- The Contact Centre's systems operate in isolation from other business units which have an effect in assisting solving customer queries,
- Service agents have difficulties to access customer feedback resulting in customers calling ABC Contact Centre several times for a single enquiry,
- There is insufficient service agent training that is compatible to the new system,
- Contradicting operational processes hamper the service agents' delivery of quality services to customers and
- The well-being of agents was not clearly addressed by the Contact Centre management.

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