



CHAPTER 6

First, Get the Right People

Hiring Frontline Staff for Your Contact Center

THE IMPORTANCE OF HIRING WELL

It's no secret that one of the most difficult aspects of contact center management is finding and keeping the right people for the job. The contact center industry experiences one of the highest turnover rates anywhere—by some estimates, upward of 50 percent. Additional factors such as a tight labor pool of quality candidates and a limited career path compound the already challenging process of hiring. Furthermore, many contact centers are adding multiple contact channels such as e-mail and chat, which only adds to the need for a more skilled workforce.

Regardless of how difficult it is to attract and retain quality agents, however, it's crucial that you take great care in hiring for your center. Hiring agents isn't something that should be done in a rushed or desperate manner.

Hiring well can save you considerable pain down the road. Not only is it expensive to replace employees who have been miscast for a job, but it's also inconvenient and unpleasant to lose agents (whether the termination is your idea or theirs).

Even if you're not the person primarily responsible for recruiting and hiring agents, you are the person primarily responsible for managing those who get hired. For this reason, your knowledge of and participation in the hiring process are indispensable. At the very least,

“If a person is not performing, it is probably because he or she has been miscast for the job.”


—W. Edwards Deming



you should help define the skills and behaviors that drive job performance and participate in the selection process by speaking to pre-screened candidates over the phone or in person and by participating in the final hiring decision.



TIP!

Don't be biased against applicants looking for a second job. They're often highly motivated: after all, who seeks out a second job unless they have a strong need to do so? 

PREPARING TO HIRE

What do you need to do before candidates walk through the door? Lots! In order to make your hiring process effective, efficient, and fair, it's important for you to put some time and energy into planning a successful strategy. Once you've hit upon a successful formula, however, you can use it again and again for future hiring needs.

Following are seven key questions to ask yourself before you begin talking to candidates for the job. Your answers to these questions will help you to develop a winning hiring strategy.

Seven Key Questions to Ask Yourself Before Hiring



1. Why am I hiring?
2. What positions need to be filled, and what are the skills and characteristics of the ideal candidate?
3. How will I market and network to identify suitable job candidates?
4. How will I screen candidates to identify potential high performers?
5. What assessments will I use to determine high performers?
6. How will I extend offers to top candidates, and what will I say to those candidates I must reject?
7. How will I welcome new employees to the organization and help them to be integrated into the environment?



Attracting Candidates

High-performance staffing is about more than just getting the best people for the job: it's also about providing a great job for those people. It's first and foremost about being a great place to work. Here's why: studies by Manpower indicate that 60 percent of people are attracted to a particular company by word of mouth. Of all the measures you can take to attract quality contact center employees, providing a positive work setting ranks highest.

Smart contact center managers realize that the hiring process involves creating a win-win situation for the potential employee and for the company. Look at the hiring process from the candidates' point of view. They want to know:

- What is special about your company?
- What does your company offer that others do not?
- Why do people like working at your contact center?

Remember that the best candidates will be screening you and your company, just as you're screening them. As such, it's important to understand and to sell the benefits that your company has to offer. Later in this chapter, you'll learn several ways to do this.

The Job Analysis

Once you've defined some of the benefits that your company has to offer, it's time to define what the job is all about so you can find the right person to fill it. Contact center jobs are not all the same. For that reason, a person who might excel as a customer service rep might perform miserably in collections or sales. Since contact center jobs are as different as the people who fill them, it's important to understand the skills and behaviors that are necessary for success in each specific job function. Preparing a job analysis in advance is key to understanding what specific skills and characteristics are important for each job. Without a job analysis, you won't know what you are looking for in an ideal candidate.

Here's an example of how an inbound/outbound contact center corrected productivity and turnover issues by changing its hiring criteria. (Source: FurstPerson, Inc.)

An inbound/outbound contact center was experiencing increased productivity and turnover issues. Despite the use of prescreening



tools, phone interviews, job simulations, and a lengthy interview process, candidate quality results were less than expected.

Discouraged by these results, the company conducted an audit of its current selection process and contracted a hiring expert to conduct a job analysis. The job analysis revealed a disconnect between the interview questions asked and the true job competencies and particular behaviors sought.

By modifying the current assessment tools to better match the new job analysis, the company increased productivity by 25 percent, reduced turnover by 69 percent, and reduced training time by 50 percent.

A job analysis includes four key steps:

1. Gather information about the job from current agents, supervisors, and managers.
2. Define an initial list of skills and behaviors that drive job performance.
3. Rate the importance of the skills and behaviors.
4. Select and validate a final list of key skills and behaviors.

A good job analysis should also include a statement of how to effectively identify and assess the desired skills and behaviors in a potential candidate—or a current employee, for that matter. With a good job analysis in hand, you'll find it much easier to identify suitable candidates. Preparing a job analysis can be a lengthy process, but it only needs to be done once and then revised as necessary whenever the job changes. Following is a sample job analysis.



XYZ COMPANY

Sample Contact Center Job Analysis: Customer Service Representative

Purpose and Importance

The purpose of this job analysis is to document the tasks and duties assigned to the position of customer service representative (CSR) and to determine the knowledge, abilities, and skills necessary for successful job performance. This job analysis serves as a guide to help in the employee hiring process and provides criteria for selecting employees who can successfully perform the work described in this analysis.

Step 1: Gather Information from Job Content Experts

Directions: Begin by selecting a team of job content experts who can effectively evaluate the key competencies and tasks of the CSR position. Through a series of questions, interview each job content expert to identify and validate competencies associated with successful job performance. Document the process for future use.

Job content experts included for this analysis:

- Customer service representatives: B. Daly, A. Fitzpatrick
- Floor supervisors: D. Stanton, P. Gupta, S. Palmer
- Quality assurance representative: M. Dewar
- Operations manager: B. Jackson
- HR generalist: C. Cheung

Detail: On January 7, 2002, a meeting was held with the preceding job content experts. The meeting was facilitated by James Hedges, using a prepared list of questions that encouraged thorough and complete discussion of the competencies associated with successful job performance. Mr. Hedges reviewed a detailed list of information about the position and the following list of questions with the job content experts:

Information reviewed:

- Job descriptions
- Sample interviews and surveys
- Customer satisfaction evaluation sheets
- Company and job expectations and guideline sheets
- Policy forms



- Monitoring report criteria forms
- Employee information sheets (used during current selection process)
- Interview summary forms (used during current selection process)

Job Description

Customer service representatives at XYZ Company are responsible for handling customer inquiries and processing sales orders through telephone, fax, and e-mail correspondences in a timely, efficient, and professional manner. To succeed in this position, representatives will be able to demonstrate and practice:

- A customer-focused attitude and willingness to serve customers
- Excellent verbal and vocal skills
- Exceptional listening, questioning, and call control techniques
- Ability to accurately and efficiently process information and tasks
- An understanding of customer needs, company products and services, and general knowledge
- Aptitude to handle challenging telephone call situations
- Ability to recommend and persuade
- Computer and telephone system application skills

List of Job Analysis Questions

- What are the core job duties of the CSR position?
- What percentage of time is spent performing each duty?
- What was the most difficult aspect of learning the job? (Incumbents)
- What do you like most about the job? (Incumbents)
- What do you like least about the job? (Incumbents)
- What technical skill or special knowledge was needed when you first started the position? (Incumbents)
- What technical knowledge or special skills could be learned on the job in a reasonable time? (Incumbents)
- What are some examples of exceptionally good performance in this position? (Supervisors, QA, Ops manager)
- What are some examples of exceptionally bad performance? (Supervisors, QA, Ops manager)
- What are some examples of why people fail or are terminated in this job? (Supervisors, QA, Ops manager)
- What are the specific job activities of the CSR position?
- What are examples of each activity?



- How often are these activities performed?
- How difficult are these activities to perform?
- How important are the representative job activities?
- Was there any information that we missed with regard to the job activities?
- How much of the job was covered by the previously discussed job activities?

Step 2: Identify Key Competencies and Identify Tasks

Directions: Begin by compiling a list of competencies developed by the job content experts in Step 1. Make sure the competencies listed in the position description are current and fully describe the duties of the CSR position. Once the competencies have been verified, identify the associated tasks.

List of Competencies and Tasks

Competency: primary job motivators (most important)

Definition: The attitudes, interests, and motivations correlated with job performance. Includes willingness to perform job tasks as well as all likes and dislikes associated with high job performance.

- Tasks:
- Willing to perform tasks
 - Communicates with coworkers in a positive manner
 - Shows persistence in face of rejection by customers
 - Likes to talk with people over the phone and via e-mail
 - Motivated to work toward production rate goals
 - Accepts sitting and remaining at desk for several hours
 - Willing to follow policies and procedures
 - Enjoys work, wants to be on time, and wants to show up for work
 - Displays integrity
 - Copes with difficult or irate callers
 - Deals with repetitiveness
-

Competency: oral communication

Definition: Ability to orally communicate effectively. Includes proper grammar, tone, volume, rate, sentence structure, use of positive language and transitions.

- Tasks:
- Speech is clear and understandable
 - Uses proper enunciation
 - Tone conveys a positive and helpful attitude
 - Able to speak articulately
 - Avoids jargon
-



Competency: problem solving/decision making

Definition: Cognitive ability that involves making decisions or solving problems.

- Tasks:
- Accurately determine type of customer inquiry
 - Determine customer's key issue or problem
 - Use criteria to determine correct response
 - Apply new product call scripts for new product launches
 - Apply appropriate status codes for accurate documentation
 - Determine correct cross-selling technique based on customer needs
 - Determine when call should be escalated to a supervisor
 - Determine when to offer customer a credit when resolving issues
 - Evaluate fallback options in order to save customers from canceling orders
-

Competency: learning

Definition: Cognitive ability that involves learning the job, then continuously learning new information and effectively applying that information on the job.

- Tasks:
- Learn to use computer, associated CRM applications, and phone system applications
 - Learn industry and company knowledge, product specifications, and services
 - Learn how to efficiently process customer orders
 - Learn scripts for effective cross-selling
 - Learn customer service skills model
 - Learn to accurately pronounce difficult words correctly in order to make quality calls
 - Learn quality criteria to perform better calls
 - Learn status codes to accurately document calls
 - Learn sales enhancement skill models
-

Competency: persuasion

Definition: Interpersonal ability to influence other people to action or a new line of thinking.

- Tasks:
- Question effectively to determine additional opportunities
 - Listen carefully and confirm needs
 - Influence customers to consider new opportunity
 - Maintain control of the call
 - Respond effectively to overcome objections
 - Ask for the sale
 - Close call effectively
-

Competency: planning and organizing work (least important)

Definition: Planning and organizing ability that involves sequencing data and developing step-by-step plans to carry out activities.



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- Tasks:
- Prepare daily callback lists
 - Accurately enter customer codes into computer
 - Accurately enter customer information
 - Monitor call handle times
-

Step 3: Identify Selection Methods

Directions: Identify the selection methods to be used when evaluating a candidate’s skill and ability level against those identified in Step 2. Use multiple selection methods in order to increase overall selection quality. Six selection methods have been chosen for the CSR position based on the job analysis. Each competency can be measured at least twice with all tools.

Competency	Measurement method					
	Computerized screening	Phone assessment	Behavioral interview	Job preview	Job tryout simulation	Face-to-face interview
	Automated prescreening for being legally able to work and having a positive attitude toward work	Personal interview used to probe for previous examples of job competencies	Survey of job attitudes, interests, and motivations and learning ability	An opportunity for the applicant to determine whether or not he or she would like the job	“Live” opportunity for the applicant to demonstrate the necessary interpersonal skills	A final opportunity to probe in depth areas important to job performance
Primary job motivators	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Oral communication		✓			✓	✓
Problem-solving skills		✓	✓			✓
Learning		✓				✓
Persuasion		✓			✓	✓
Planning and organization		✓				✓

IDENTIFYING SUITABLE CANDIDATES

After going through the job analysis process, you’ll be keenly aware of the factors that contribute to an employee’s success or failure in your contact center. In general, you’ll want to screen for candidates who can plan and execute their work, make decisions and solve problems, exercise good judgment, connect with other people, and project a good attitude. Selecting candidates who have the right skills (or the ability to learn them) and the right attitude will help you to greatly



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increase the profitability of your contact center. You'll also develop a team of talented agents who enjoy coming to work!

It would be great to have unlimited time to personally interview every candidate who applied for a job. But, as anyone who has pondered over hundreds of resumes can tell you, identifying suitable candidates to interview can be an arduous and time-consuming process. Conducting the actual interviews takes even longer.

To save you time and significantly enhance your chances of finding great job candidates, a variety of tools are available to help screen and select potential contact center agents.



Contact center staffing specialists from FurstPerson, a Chicago-based staffing company, recommend using a "multiple-hurdle" approach to effectively screen and select candidates. By using multiple tests to screen and select candidates, they say, you can greatly increase your chances of hiring a top-performing agent for your contact center.

Some employee selection and testing tools that are currently in use are:

- Telephone screening
- Web-based screening
- Behavioral event interviews (which aim to judge how someone will act in a certain situation)
- Ability-to-learn tests (often standardized tests)
- Realistic job previews (such as sitting next to one of your current agents for awhile)
- Job simulations
- Role plays
- Psychometric tests
- Presentations
- Online chat or e-mail testing
- Data entry speed and accuracy assessments



Here's an example of how a financial services contact center significantly increased the quality of its hiring program while reducing cost per hire.*

A financial services contact center had difficulties recruiting qualified candidates to serve a growing customer account base. Their legacy recruiting system was ineffective and needed to be improved. Using a mix of internal and external resources, the company implemented a full-scale screening and selection system and focused on employment branding, which is based upon making candidates feel like the company is a great place to work.

The new hiring system proved itself immediately with exceptional results:

- Cost per hire decreased by 32 percent.
- Time to fill positions decreased by 37 percent.
- Candidates hired increased by 71 percent.
- Employee turnover decreased by 75 percent.

If you do not have the resources to perform some of these selection processes internally, consider outsourcing the screening and selection process to a qualified outsourced provider.

GETTING READY

Once you've eliminated applicants who are clearly not suitable for the job, you're ready to move on to the more personal aspects of hiring. Before going through the interviewing process, be sure you're prepared to discuss the following:

- The functions of the job
- What experience or knowledge is required
- Benefits of the job (such as a great atmosphere, team experience, enhancement of skills and knowledge, etc.)
- Details of salary, hours, flexibility, and so on
- Incentive programs
- What training will be given

*Source: Corporate Executive Board—Best Class Recruiting, 2001.



You should also be prepared to handle any questions that come your way from the candidates, and you should know how you're going to respond if a candidate wants to negotiate pay, hours, and the like.

Of course the first step in planning your interviews is to make sure that you meet all legal and ethical guidelines as well as any specific policies established by your organization. After that, hiring in a contact center should involve at least three steps:

Step 1: Telephone prescreening

Step 2: In-person interview

Step 3: Skills assessment

If the job is exclusively or predominantly electronic (meaning that the agent communicates with customers via e-mail or chat rather than the telephone), you might opt to replace Step 1 with an e-mail screening to see how candidates communicate via this medium. It's also possible in some environments that it makes sense to have the skills assessment take place before the in-person interview.



Step 1: Telephone Prescreening

A lot can be accomplished in just a few minutes over the phone. After all, in most contact centers agents spend nearly all their time on the phone with customers. By screening applicants over the phone, you'll be hearing pretty much exactly what your organization's customers would. This allows you to instantly gauge certain important criteria.

One way to save interviewing time and significantly increase the odds of getting qualified candidates is to outsource the telephone screening function. According to Jeff Furst, president of Furst-Person, "When we roll up our sleeves and begin the recruiting and selection process for our clients, we'll typically have to make contact with 2000 to 2500 people for every 100 people we hire."

Telephone interviews should be relatively short and simple. The primary objective is to screen out anyone who clearly would not be suitable for the job. What would make someone not suitable? Things like very poor verbal and vocal skills, inability to work the necessary hours, or a truly bad attitude. Keep in mind that applicants are bound to be a little nervous, however, so don't hold this against them.

At the end of the telephone interview, you should have made a decision as to whether or not to invite the candidate in for a personal interview. If you want to continue interviewing the candidate, schedule the interview appointment before getting off the phone. If you've



decided not to go forward with an additional interview, let the candidate know. It's unfair and unprofessional to create a false sense of hope for someone who's seeking a job. Take extra care to be kind and honest when ending a conversation with an unsuccessful applicant, but keep in mind that no law requires you to tell applicants anything when you reject them. In fact, most legal experts advise employers to provide them as little information as possible. In most cases, you can just thank the applicant for his or her interest and time and let him or her know that you won't be extending a job offer. Following are a few suggestions for letting the candidate down:

"Shelley, thanks for taking the time to talk to me about the job. Because I'm looking for someone with a little more experience in telephone customer service than you currently have, I'm not able to offer you a job at this point."

"Joel, I've enjoyed talking with you today and I can tell you've got a lot of energy and enthusiasm—great skills for customer service. Unfortunately, I don't think we're a good fit for you as it sounds like you need more flexibility than our company can give."

If you choose to give more information, make sure to protect your company against discrimination claims by being factual, truthful, and to-the-point. Explain the legitimate, business-related reasons for the applicant's rejection but don't divulge any additional information. If the candidate pushes for more reasons or makes threats of legal action, end the conversation and thank the candidate for his or her time.



Step 2: In-Person Interview

Once you've prescreened a candidate over the telephone or through an e-mail correspondence, it's time for the all-important personal interview. At this stage you'll get a solid impression of the candidate's personality, attitude, intelligence, and communication skills. But once again, keep in mind that customers won't be interacting with the agent in person; it's how well the agent can convey these things over the phone (or through e-mail) that will count for the customer.

In Table 6-1 we've outlined some interview questions that can help you assess the candidate's suitability for the job. Following are some additional tips to help you lead a successful interview:



- Greet the candidate warmly and thank him or her for taking the time to come in. Do your best to build rapport and reduce the candidate's nervousness.
- Let the candidate know what to expect. At the beginning of the interview, tell the candidate approximately how long you expect the interview to last and what he or she can anticipate. Following are a few examples of this:

"Julie, let's sit down and talk for 10 or 15 minutes and then we'll move on to the skills assessment."

"Justin, thanks for coming in. I thought we'd spend a few minutes talking about the job and our organization and then I'd like to chat with you about your goals and experience. In about 30 minutes, we need to go down the hall to human resources where we'll do some call simulations."

- Once you've asked a question, listen attentively to the answer and let the candidate finish speaking before you ask something else.
- Take notes during the interview to show that you're paying attention and that the candidate's answers to your questions are being recorded.
- Be sure to ask the candidate what questions he or she has for you.

Keep Your Mission in Mind

When hiring agents for your team, keep your own professional goals in mind. You'll only be able to accomplish your own mission and objectives as a manager if you've got the right people working to make that happen.



TIP!

When interviewing applicants, be sure to ask open questions (ones that get the person to speak freely rather than just give a short, specific answer). You'll learn a lot more about the candidate if you can get him or her to open up while you do the listening. Use sentences that start with *how*, *why*, *what*, and *tell me to get* the applicant talking.



TABLE 6-1 Twelve Great Interview Questions

THIS QUESTION:	GIVES YOU INSIGHT INTO:
Tell me what your ideal life would be like. How much would you work? What type of work would you do? How much would you get paid? (Note: Ask this at the very beginning of the interview, before the candidate knows enough about the position to skew his or her answers toward what he or she thinks you want to hear.)	The candidate's goals, values, and personality
What motivated you to apply for this job?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The candidate's level of interest in the job• What's driving the candidate to apply
How do you deal with difficult customers?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The candidate's definition of difficult• The candidate's readiness to handle difficult customer situations• The candidate's attitude toward difficult customers
What was one of the biggest challenges you faced in a previous job and how did you handle it?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The candidate's ability to identify challenges as such and to work through them• The candidate's maturity and ability to deal with stressful situations
In what ways do you hope to grow and learn in this job?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Whether or not the candidate is thinking about the future• Whether or not the candidate is looking for a long-term job• Ways in which the candidate wants to improve
What are some qualities or characteristics that you feel customers would use to describe you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How the candidate thinks customers view him or her• The candidate's self-assessment of his or her strengths
Can you give me one or two examples of how you react to your own mistakes and failures?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The candidate's willingness to be open about his or her own mistakes/failures• The candidate's maturity and professionalism in dealing with mistakes/failures• The candidate's ability to learn from past mistakes
What are the most important aspects of customer service/sales/technical support?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The candidate's knowledge of what is required to do a good job• How the candidate prioritizes aspects of the job
How do you keep yourself motivated when your job is highly repetitive?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The candidate's ability to be self-motivating• The candidate's understanding of the job
Think of a situation in which you had to deliver bad news to a customer. What did you say?	The candidate's ability to be honest, direct, diplomatic, and positive
Describe the best manager you ever had and what made that person so effective.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How the candidate likes to be managed• What qualities and characteristics the candidate believes are important for a manager to possess
Do you have reliable transportation to the job?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The candidate's ability to get to the right place at the right time• The candidate's practicality and readiness to accept a position at your location



Step 3: Skills Assessment

Depending on the needs and operations of your specific center, the third step of the interview process may involve any number of the tools we mentioned earlier:

- Behavioral event interviews
- Ability-to-learn tests
- Realistic job previews
- Job simulations
- Role plays
- Psychometric tests
- Presentations
- Online chat or e-mail testing
- Data entry speed and accuracy assessments

Step 3 is crucial because it's where candidates prove that they can do what's required of them on the job. Personality and attitude count for a lot in the first two phases of hiring, but they can't outweigh a candidate's inability to carry out the job. In order to be sure you're hiring the right candidates, it's important to carry out all three phases of the process.


What's more, some candidates may surprise—or even shock—you with how they perform during the skills assessment phase of hiring. For example, we've seen a number of job applicants whose tone of voice and attitude at the beginning of the interview process didn't give recruiters much confidence that they could do a good job. Once they got on the phone to do a role play, however, these same candidates performed beautifully! It pays to remember that how someone sounds or acts off the phones may be important for a number of reasons, but it's secondary to how that person sounds on the phone with customers.

We all have different skill sets, and while being able to interview well and test well may be an indicator of performance, it is not a guarantee. Emphasizing the practical assessment aspects of performance is the best indicator of actual performance.

When talking to candidates about this phase of the interviewing process, be careful not to refer to it as testing. That will only make candidates nervous and apprehensive. Instead, use terms like *assessment* and *measurement*. Better yet, tell candidates this is where they get to show off their skills.



TIP!

Schedule hiring interviews before or after the typical 8-to-5 workday. Candidates who are looking for a second job, and those planning to leave their current job, will appreciate the fact that they don't have to take time off to come to the interview. 

Should You Include Other Employees in the Interview Process?

In some centers this is a good idea. In others it won't work, either because it's too unwieldy or because it may convolute rather than assist the decision-making process. Including other employees does have at least two advantages: it can help reduce turnover by helping you be extra certain the candidate is a good match for the center, and it may be because people tend to approve candidates who are like themselves. So, if your good employees give the thumbs-up to a candidate, it may mean the addition of another good employee to the team.

What About Interviewing Former Employees?

Many contact centers experience the trend of employees leaving and then coming back months later to apply for a job. These employees may do better than before—and be more motivated to stay—now that they know the grass isn't always greener anywhere else.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE SERVICE-ORIENTED CANDIDATES



It's hard to generalize about what makes a candidate a perfect fit—or even a good one—for your job openings. A lot depends on the specifics of your environment and of the job itself. But it does seem safe to say that one of the most important things to look for in a candidate is a strong customer service orientation.

Following are some key skills and characteristics exhibited by agents who are star performers in service. Keep these in mind as you interview potential new agents for your center.


- Friendly
- Quick



- Efficient
- Eager to please
- Able to understand customers' requests
- Optimistic
- Diligent
- Creatively helpful
- Empathetic
- Poised
- Honest and fair
- Proactive
- Solution-oriented
- Emotionally stable

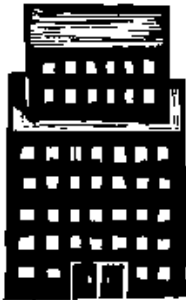


TIP!

Before you recruit new agents, study and interview your best performers to determine which characteristics make them successful employees. Then look for these same characteristics in candidates applying for open positions. 

Waiting on Waiters

We know of at least one contact center manager who seeks out service industry veterans (particularly waiters and waitresses) to fill openings on his technical support help desk. His thinking goes as follows: the technical aspects of the job can be taught to any reasonably intelligent person in a matter of weeks or months, but the willingness to serve and the drive to satisfy customers are much more difficult to impart to new hires—or anyone else, for that matter.



WHAT TO TELL CANDIDATES ABOUT YOUR WORKPLACE

A job interview is a two-way street: you're interviewing the applicant and the applicant is interviewing you and your organization. If you want to attract the best candidates, it's not enough to simply ask them a bunch of questions. You also have to inspire them to want to work at your organization.



Following are some important things to keep in mind when talking to candidates about your organization.

- *Accentuate the positive.* Highlight the positive aspects of working in your center. Let applicants know what they can expect (beyond the obvious issues such as salary and working hours) if they accept the job: perks, incentives, opportunities for growth and advancement, and so on.
- *Be honest and accurate.* If you describe too rosy an image, it will soon become apparent to the new employee that you were dishonest during the hiring process—not a good way to start a new working relationship. Let candidates know the main points of what they can expect if they are hired.
- *Be different.* Almost everyone is drawn to environments and situations that are fun, fresh, and different from everything else out there. When talking about your workplace, highlight some of the unique or even quirky characteristics—the haunted vending machine, the quarterly “Sweats and Pizza Day,” the humorous monthly e-mail newsletter. Candidates will be intrigued by the colorful mental picture that develops as you talk about your workplace, and will hopefully visualize themselves as part of it.
- *Give the big-picture perspective.* In order for contact center agents to feel good about the work they do, it’s always helpful to remind them that they are part of a large and successful system, organization, or campaign. Let candidates know where your company stands in its industry, the community, or even the world. Are you the number one provider of health care services? The biggest online retailer of rock-climbing gear? The telecommunications organization with the highest customer satisfaction scores in the industry?
- *Be an attentive and upbeat interviewer.* Whether you spend a few minutes or a few hours with candidates, it’s important to remember that you’re making a first impression on someone with whom you may be working closely in the future. Don’t jump for the phone, allow interruptions, or try to handle other matters during the interview; it will only make you look unprepared and/or inattentive to the candidate. It’s also important that you convey to the applicant a positive, upbeat attitude toward your job.
- *Involve current employees.* Once you’re fairly certain that you want to hire an applicant, bring in one or two current employees to roll out the welcome mat (and possibly to reel in a can-



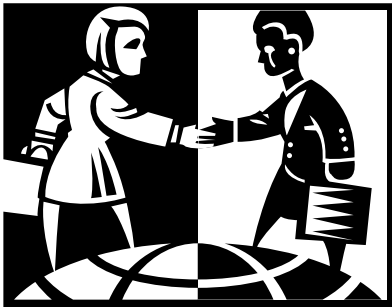
didate who's not sure about accepting a position). Obviously, you should select employees who exhibit a positive, upbeat attitude toward the job and the organization and who will be friendly to the applicant.

HOW TO TURN DOWN APPLICANTS

Nobody likes to be the one to tell people they're not right for the job, but as a manager you need to be able to do just that. And it is possible to do it skillfully and compassionately. If you're honest and conscientious, there's every chance that unsuccessful candidates will leave with a favorable impression of you and your organization. This can make them good "ambassadors" for your center.

Following are a few guidelines to help you turn down unsuccessful candidates:

- Tell applicants why they're not being offered the job. This will help them to understand where they fell short and will give them a starting point for improvement.
- Let applicants know where their strengths are. Give them feedback on at least one or two things they did well during the interview process.
- Thank applicants for taking their time to talk to you and for showing an interest in your organization.



MAKING THE OFFER

Once you've decided to hire a candidate, it's important to offer the job in a polite, professional manner. Even if you suspect (or know) that the candidate definitely wants the job, you should position the offer as an invitation that you're hopeful will be accepted. Let the candidate feel successful and desirable. Following are a few suggestions:

- Tell the candidate you want him or her to work for you and explain why. This will allow the candidate to know what you think his or her strengths are.
- Disclose any important information that has not already been discussed. If you haven't already discussed issues such as salary,



work hours, starting dates, and so on, now is the time to make sure the candidate knows and accepts all aspects of the job.

- Ask the candidate to accept your offer. It's always a good idea to get the candidate to say in his or her own words that he or she wants the job. The best way to do this is to invite the candidate to say, "Yes, I'll take the job."
- Let the candidate know what the next step is: report to human resources to sign papers? Go home and come back tomorrow? Also, if the candidate wants to think over the offer, be sure to give a deadline for responding.
- Introduce the new hire to some or all of your team members. Once the candidate has accepted the job, it's a good idea to introduce him or her to at least a few of the people with whom he or she will be working. Doing this right away allows the new hire to feel like a part of the team before he or she even shows up for that nervous first day on the job.

NOW THAT YOU'VE GOT THE RIGHT PEOPLE, HOW DO YOU KEEP THEM?

Employee turnover is one of the most persistent and difficult problems facing contact center managers in all industries and all locations. A high turnover rate has been largely accepted as just an inevitable reality of contact center life. But it doesn't have to be that way. If you're confident that you've got the right people for the job, it's worth your while to invest considerable time, energy, and resources in keeping these employees on your team.

In particular, the impression you and your company make to an employee on his or her first day of work is extremely important. Start out strong by having a top-notch orientation program. Following are some tips:

- Give new employees a good idea of what to expect on their first day on the job.
- Greet new employees at the front door on their first day.
- Formally introduce new employees to the team and to key coaches they can go to for special attention.
- Explain company procedures and clearly describe initial expectations.
- Inform new employees of their role in adding value to the team.



- Let new employees know where to go for help.
- Partner new employees with an experienced employee they can turn to for support.
- Ask if new employees have any special needs.
- Offer new employees a warm welcome.


Remember, your current employees are your greatest resource in attracting new candidates for your contact center.

Once you've hired the right candidates, keep them around by making your contact center a great place to work. Following are some tips to help you accomplish this.



TIP!

Tips for Reducing Turnover

- Create and maintain a consistently high-morale environment.
- Offer rewards and incentives that are based on what the agents want (versus what upper management thinks is a good idea).
- Reward managers and supervisors for retaining their best performers.
- Help agents to see their own progress and growth, and to recognize that more lies ahead.
- Offer a bonus to employees who refer friends for job openings at your center.
- Conduct exit interviews with employees who leave and then make good use of the information gathered so that you can prevent future departures.
- If a valuable employee indicates that he or she wants to leave the company, ask, "What will it take to keep you?" 



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Books

Jordan-Evans, Sharon, and Kaye, Beverly L. *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1999.

Levin, Greg, Solomon, Laurie, Smith, Ann, Harp, Leslie Hansen, Sitzer, Wanda, Mayben, Julia, Wilber, Jennifer, Craig, Mark, Lowe, Dan, Mock, Bette, and O'Hara, Anita. *Call Center Recruiting and New Hire Training*. Annapolis, MD: Call Center Press, 2001.

O'Malley, Michael. *Creating Commitment: How to Attract and Retain Talented Employees by Building Relationships That Last*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000.



Companies

FurstPerson (helps call center organizations find, hire, and keep employees). URL: www.furstperson.com; phone: 888-646-3412.

Manpower (provides staffing services). URL: www.manpower.com; phone: 414-961-1000.

Associations, Magazines, and Interesting Web Sites

American Management Association. URL: www.amanet.org; phone: 800-262-9699.

Call Center Jobs.com (Web site that helps call center employers meet with potential call center employees). URL: www.callcenterjobs.com; phone: 888-353-7529.

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. URL: www.eeoc.gov; phone: 800-669-4000.

U.S. Department of Labor. URL: www.dol.gov.