GARDEN CITY GROUP

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GCG⌐
Garden City Group, LLC®

Developing an employee-centric culture through training, collaboration and respect.

BY Susan Hash, Contact Center Pipeline

The modern call center may be evolving, but the industry is still struggling to overcome a negative reputation. Let's face it: In many centers, agents have very little control over their time or work, no diversity in their daily tasks and no real career path. It's no wonder that centers have had a long battle with low morale and high turnover.

That is an image that BRIAN BURKE wants to change. Burke is SVP of operations for Garden City Group (GCG), the nation's leading provider of legal administrative services. Burke oversees GCG's 60,000-square-foot mail, call and processing center in Dublin, Ohio, which supports the hundreds of active class action settlement administrations, restructuring and bankruptcy administrations and mass tort settlement programs that GCG has in progress at any one time.

Burke believes that breaking the negative stereotype can only come from improving the culture within the center. By developing an employee-centric culture built on learning and development, Burke and the leadership team at GCG have made great strides in changing the conventional image of the call center.

Aligning Culture with Core Values

GCG has been building trust and confidence for three decades as the partner of choice for leading law firms, corporate legal departments, government agencies and other legal professionals that require administrative support.

Known for its experience and responsiveness, GCG's commitment to aligning its culture and core values is stronger than ever due in part to strong messaging from a newly composed executive leadership team. As JENNIFER PRISTERA, SVP of Human Resources, describes it, GCG is "a brand-new 30-year-old company."

"We know that to provide our customers with the best experience possible, we need a fully engaged workforce," she says. "We're putting a lot of focus on our culture and in training and developing our people."

Creating a learning culture can be a challenge for a center that deals with continual call volume peaks based on project lifecycles. For most centers, coaching and training fall to the wayside when volume spikes. But for Burke, a GCG veteran who has led GCG's contact center through several major

JENNIFER PRISTERA
SVP of Human Resources

BRIAN BURKE
SVP of Operations

national settlement programs providing claimant outreach from facilities in multiple states conducted in more than 140 languages, ramping up to handle peak volume means new resources coming into the center with diverse backgrounds and fresh ideas. "As leaders, we want to learn something new every day—and more importantly, we want to teach something new every day," he says. "I consider myself very fortunate to continue to learn and grow in my role, and that's what I want for every member of our team."
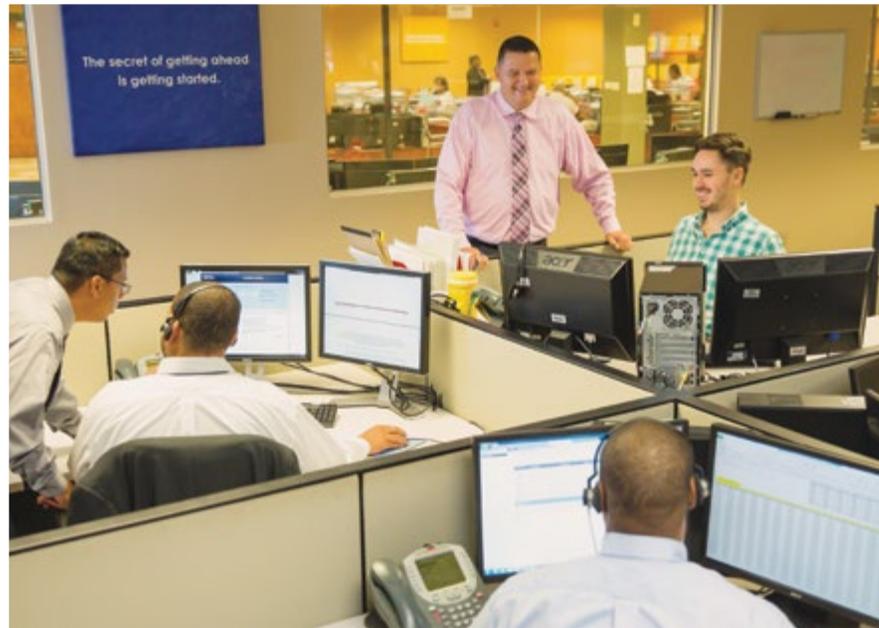
Selective Hiring, Robust Training

GCG's contact center has a base staff of around 100 agents, but headcount can fluctuate from 70 to more than a thousand agents based on the number of cases in progress, says Burke. To help with temporary staffing needs, the center has a long-standing partnership with two local recruiters.

Despite a continuous cycle of ramping up and ramping down to staff caseload volume peaks and valleys, GCG's hiring process is selective to ensure that new-hires are a good fit for the culture. The goal during the recruiting and hiring process is to identify those agents who want to grow and develop with the company.

"We have a rigorous process to get the right person in the door. When we hire somebody, we're looking to make a career for them, not just a job," Burke says. The ideal GCG contact center agent is someone who displays an openness to learn and who is comfortable with change. And importantly, candidates need to be service-oriented and display the desire to help others. Pristera adds that "the most successful candidates are those who have empathy, are passionate and who want to learn more about our business so that they can thrive in this environment."

As one might expect, GCG agents deal with a wide range of cases so the training program is also rigorous. It begins with an onboarding process that takes new-hires through an overview of the company, policies, procedures and compliance standards. Next, Burke's team provides customer service skills refresher training to ensure that even those with a strong service background understand the importance of providing a positive experience on every call.

That is a critical element for agent success, Burke says. Unlike many consumer-oriented centers where callers who are unhappy with a product or service may be offered an exchange, repair or refund to immediately resolve their issue, providing compensation in the types of cases the GCG contact center supports can be a longer process.

"The nature of the cases we handle means that we're dealing with an upset clientele to begin with," Burke explains. "For instance, on the securities class action side, callers typically have lost money in the market due to alleged fraud. Litigation can be an arduous process that prolongs the time it takes to get their money back. Our agents have to be able to handle that conversation in an empathetic, understanding way, as well as being savvy enough to discuss the different securities, stocks or convertible bonds."

Providing comprehensive and consistent training is a critical factor in supporting agents. "We never want someone to be in a situation where they feel they don't have the tools they need," he says.

The depth of knowledge that agents must tap into is fairly

extensive. An agent may take a call about a securities class action alleging fraud. The next call may be a mass tort where someone claims to have been injured, followed by a call about a product defect. Besides understanding the specifics of each case, agents must be prepared to handle a wide range of emotions from caller to caller.

In addition to taking client calls, agents are cross-trained to handle claims processing and fulfillment tasks. Cross-training allows the center's management team to balance staffing during call volume peaks and valleys, and it also provides agents with a break from the phones.

"Being on the phones every day is a very difficult job," Burke says. "We have an open culture—one in which an agent can let us know if they're having a bad day or not feeling positive, and we can have them work on something else. We value our employees and we want them to be able to provide the best service for our clients. But we understand on days that they can't, and we can shuffle people around and make sure that we're giving our customers the best service while attending to the employee's needs."

A Collaborative Environment

In addition to its formal training programs, GCG's learning culture is reinforced through daily sharing and collaboration among staff and management. "Every day, we're either learning something new or rehashing information—taking the commonplace topics that we all assume that everyone knows, but adding different perspectives on them and discussing them in an open forum in which everyone can share his or her views," says Burke.

This type of open environment is also conducive to collaboration between agents and other functions, sites and project teams. It's not an atmosphere where agents are simply reading scripts that they're provided. Agents are fully empowered to reach out to colleagues in other departments and locations to get answers to their questions, and as permitted by GCG's clients, they can update FAQs and knowledge base content.

The contact center team's work is not restricted to the Dublin office, Burke says. Projects routinely involve cross-functional teams in the company's offices in Seattle, New York, Tallahassee and New Orleans. Agents often travel to other locations to cross-train or may even relocate, if an opportunity arises.

Pristera notes that the call center provides a talent pipeline for other areas of the organization. "The call center is a great place for our folks to learn this business and build a foundation," she says. "We have a lot of great people who are able to make a career within the contact center through promotions, and there are also opportunities for employees to move into other functions or offices. We've relocated staff from our Dublin center to offices in Seattle and New York so that they could pursue opportunities there. We have a lot of success stories within our employee base."

A Supportive Workplace Builds Camaraderie

Changing a culture can only come from leadership. Company leaders are the ones who set the vision and direction, and employees take their cue from the leader's passion, values, and commitment to the success of the team as a whole.

Burke says that simple everyday actions can help leaders to demonstrate appreciation for the frontline staff. "Our role is to support the front line in any way possible," he adds. "No matter what questions or issues agents have, we aim to do anything we can to keep the team on the phones happy."

When questions arise, Burke ensures that there is always a member of the management team on hand and ready to help. "Whether it's a supervisor, manager or myself—there is no level of management that is not willing to jump in and support someone."

Pristera agrees. "As leaders, our role is to remove the barriers that employees face on a day-to-day basis in order to get their job done, and get their job done well," she says.

Building a supportive environment is a concept that extends beyond office hours at GCG. The center holds regular potlucks as well as weekly kickball and volleyball tournaments for staff to have fun and relax after work. As Burke points out, the positive atmosphere makes people want to hang around and socialize with their colleagues after their shifts are over.

The company recently hosted a picnic for employees and their families. "It's nice to be able to thank spouses for the time that people put in when they're away from their families. It's that part of our culture that keeps people on the phones every day and in a happy, positive way," says Burke.

Adds Pristera: "Our call center is very unique. It's our people who make it a great place to be. We've built a culture of camaraderie where people really enjoy working with each other."

It's Not Just About the Numbers

Running a high-performance contact center is not just about the numbers. Burke firmly believes that the best measure of a call center's success is the atmosphere that can be felt the minute you walk through the doors. "If people are smiling and happy to be there, it's a success," he says.

"The image of the contact center historically has been an operation that is driven by numbers. As leaders, we need to take a step back from the metrics and look at who's driving those metrics. We need to get to know our teams and the people on the phones," Burke says. "People shouldn't be looked at solely for their average call time, but the other skills and values that they bring to the table. Our agents are a resource that we want to nurture and grow. We're only here because of their effort and hard work." ⊛

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