

DESIGNING HIGH-IMPACT TRAINING MODULES

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Use a systematic approach to create a learning experience that prepares new-hires for success.

BY Brian Burke, GCG

Merriam-Webster defines training as “a process by which someone is taught the skills that are needed for an art, profession or job.” Training, therefore, is not an event, but a process—one that necessitates careful planning and preparation.

This rings true especially in the contact center, where the process of training is unique in form and design. Unlike traditional employee training and onboarding, which often occurs in a controlled fashion over several weeks, contact center managers can be charged with conducting the highest quality training programs quickly, and often with little notice.

For this reason, a systematic approach to the design and delivery of training modules is paramount to creating a learning experience that prepares new employees to exceed position expectations and, ultimately, safeguards a positive customer experience.

Prepare

Effective contact center training begins long before day one in the classroom. It requires managers and trainers to have forged partnerships that bring qualified individuals in the door, to create an environment where learning can thrive, and to identify—in advance—the desired learning outcomes for each training class.



1. PRIORITIZE RECRUITMENT: The first step in successful training is selecting the right candidates. In the contact center setting, where the number of new-hires can reach hundreds, it's imperative that only qualified, committed candidates are recruited. Lean first on employees who have previously worked within the company and proven themselves successful in their roles. Next, establish and maintain strong relationships with partner recruitment agencies so they are able to find candidates that match your hiring parameters at the outset.

2. PREPARE A QUALITY TRAINING

ENVIRONMENT: The effect of the training environment on learning outcomes cannot be understated. Make sure your training space is outfitted with updated, functional equipment and can be adapted to meet the needs of trainees with different learning styles. As class size permits, aim to conduct training onsite, which will provide a sense of comfort and familiarity for trainees as they transition into their job roles.

3. IDENTIFY LEARNING OUTCOMES: Before high-quality training modules can be designed or delivered, specific learning outcomes must be identified. These outcomes should be constructed collaboratively with clients, include a combination of soft and hard skills, and connect directly to the key performance indicators on which employees will be evaluated throughout their employment.

Design

Designing training modules that fully encompass all aspects of an agent's role within the contact center is not something that can

be achieved overnight. The most effective approach is one that involves key internal stakeholders, anticipates the needs of your trainees and promotes flexibility.

1. EMPOWER YOUR TEAM IN THE PROCESS: While your management team may know the ins and outs of the contact center, nobody knows the role of the customer service representatives (CSRs) better than they do. Ask high-performing agents which aspects of training were most beneficial and which needed adjusting, and then modify modules accordingly. By seeking the input of agents who do the job each and every day, not only will you build more holistic and effective training modules, but also will empower your team to contribute to the process.

2. ANTICIPATE SPECIFIC PROGRAM NEEDS: Not all trainees will bring the same level of experience to the classroom, nor will every program require the same type of customer engagement. By determining, in advance, the nuances of the program for which you are training, you can make adjustments to modules to better prepare your workforce. For example, call center programs involving complex subjects may require additional program-specific training, whereas those involving senior citizens may require supplemental empathy training. In all cases, take the time to convey the “why” to trainees, so they have a comprehensive understanding of the project and its customers.

3. BUILD IN FLEXIBILITY: In a perfect world, all contact center training programs would last two weeks and touch on all key aspects of the job function and client program up front. But it's not a perfect world, and contact center managers must be prepared for the unexpected. Build flexibility into your programs by modularizing training into smaller components, which will enable you to deliver critical modules up front when faced with time constraints, and revisit others once employees are in place and programs are underway.

Deliver

Effective training is equal parts design and delivery; a well-designed training module will not serve its function if it is not presented thoughtfully and dynamically by qualified, approachable trainers who understand the specific needs of each training class.

1. CHOOSE TRAINERS WISELY: While

delegating training to a professional trainer might seem strategic, it is not the best use of resources. In fact, the most impactful trainers oftentimes are the floor supervisors entrenched in the contact center's day-to-day functions. They understand the nuances of the environment, its people, its clients and its programs so are best equipped to prepare the next-generation workers. Further, they have a vested interest in the success of the trainees and will become a source of familiarity for trainees, serving as mentors, problem solvers and leaders once training is complete.

2. ACCOUNT FOR DIFFERENT LEARNING STYLES: The best training programs take into account how people learn, recognizing that no two people will acquire knowledge the same way or at the same pace. It's critical that training modules are delivered across the mediums that reach the three primary learning styles: visual, auditory and kinesthetic, or hands-on. Ensure that the training facility is equipped for visual presentations, that all trainees have the opportunity to hear trainers explain the content, and that time for hands-on training is built into the module.

3. COMMIT TO COMPLETING TRAINING: Time does not always permit the delivery of all relevant training modules at the outset of training. Although you may prioritize certain modules to get agents on the floor quickly, it's important to deliver the full company training program to all new team members. You may be pleased to find that the second round of training can be even more productive than the first, as employees have spent time in their job functions often will come with questions and comments, making for a more robust session.

Transition

Training should not end at the conclusion of the formal program. Rather, the transitional period—the time when team members move from formal training to working independently—is when real learning occurs, so it's important to have systems in place that help new agents build their confidence and hone their skills during this time.



1. APPROACH TRANSITIONS DELIBER-

ATELY: The transitional period after training often is marked by uncertainty and nerves. Trainees, especially those with limited formal experience in a contact center, may require more time before they are comfortable taking calls and interacting with customers. One way to slow down the transition is to utilize your dedicated training space. If the training center is wired to receive calls, consider allowing the trainees spend their first few post-training days in that space, where they are surrounded by familiar faces and assistance is always nearby.

2. DETERMINE EMPLOYEE READINESS: By and large, new employees are eager to perform to the highest standards and can be hesitant to say if they are feeling unprepared. Mitigate this training challenge by asking the right questions and, above all, listening. Don't ask closed-ended questions such as, "do you feel prepared," but instead opt for open-ended, experiential questions such as, "what would you do if..." Above all, do not punish trainees for what they have not yet retained; retention rates are different for each individual.

3. LEAN ON SUPERVISORS AND KEY AGENTS: Once new agents are on the call center floor, having a helping hand nearby is essential. If you enlisted the help of floor supervisors throughout training, you are already a step ahead as they will provide new team members a sense of comfort and familiarity. Additionally, designate several high-performing agents to act as mentors, providing peer-level insight and resources for new agents following formal training.

Assess

Contact centers undergo constant change and, as such, training modules that prove successful today may be less effective tomorrow. Assessing the strengths and weaknesses of your company's training programs will enable managers to make adjustments in real time and provide new team members the most effective training available.

1. CONDUCT TRAINING AUDITS: In addition to standard quality assurance programs, training-specific audits are necessary to ensure that the modules are adequately preparing CSRs for success. Appoint someone who was not involved in the design or delivery of training to monitor new agents for the

quality indicators and learning outcomes that were established during the training design phase. Neutral third-party auditors will provide management the unbiased insight and critical feedback necessary to gauge training effectiveness and make adjustments.

2. HAVE FORMER TRAINEES WEIGH IN: Once new team members are embedded in their roles, they are among the best people to provide insight into the effectiveness of training modules and to identify areas for improvement in future programs. Schedule regroups with trainees who transitioned into successful employees, asking them to weigh in on their training experiences and provide insight the strengths and opportunities of the modules in which they participated. The feedback will be invaluable.

3. LOOK AT THE DATA: Training audits and quality assurance measurements will always be important indicators of the success of contact center training modules. But don't overlook the importance of the data. What are your on-hold times following training? Do clients return to you with future business needs? Do your programs stay on budget or require additional personnel? These business markers can often be traced to employee performance and, consequently, training effectiveness.

The single greatest indicator of a high-impact training program is a contact center's culture. A culture that promotes learning and development must be fostered and celebrated in the day-to-day operations, not just during formal training programs. Make learning a part of the company's DNA by affording employees new learning experiences and looking for opportunities to teach someone something new every day. That's the process of training. ●



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