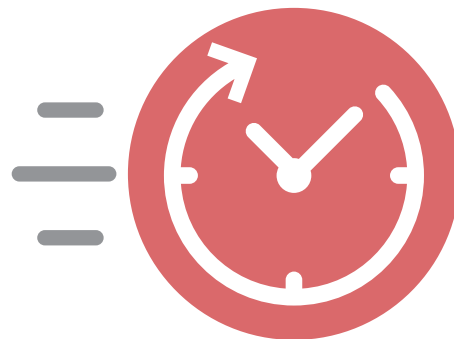# PREPARING CONTACT CENTER OPERATIONS TO RESPOND QUICKLY

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Contact Center
Pipeline

PREPARING CONTACT CENTER OPERATIONS TO RESPOND QUICKLY

Embrace flexibility to deliver results when business and client needs change.

BY Brian Burke, Garden City Group

High-performing contact centers are defined by their flexibility. Their value to clients is directly related to their ability to respond quickly, and to execute high-quality programs for customers ranging from five to 5 million and with lead times ranging from five weeks to five days.

Flexibility in the face of condensed timelines—typically a new program launch with little notice—requires an innate "readiness" that can only be achieved when contact center leadership is dialed into all aspects of internal and external operations.

The following is a collection of proven techniques to help contact center managers prepare their operations so they can embrace flexibility and respond quickly as business and client needs change.

Establish Benchmarks

Responding quickly on projects where time is in short supply is possible only when operating procedures are well-defined, standardized and communicated to all stakeholders proactively and intentionally.

1 DELIVER RECOMMENDATIONS STRATEGICALLY

Clients know their businesses better than anyone, so it is reasonable for them to have ideas about how best to achieve their program objectives. However, when those ideas conflict with what you know to be effective, the result is lost time. Mitigate this by knowing how and when to deliver your expert recommendations; communicate recommendations up front and, whenever possible, back them up with data and case studies. Leveraging your expertise out of the gate is crucial to the success of projects executed on shortened timelines.

2 DEFINE EXPECTATIONS

In projects with rapid ramp-up periods, it is essential that all parties know and agree upon the expectations. Internally, team members should recognize that short timelines demand an "all-hands-on-deck" mentality and how that could manifest in late nights or weekend hours. On the client-facing side, mutually define clear and unambiguous expectations related to communication preferences, approval mechanisms and progress reporting in advance so timelines can be designed and managed accordingly and delays can be avoided.

3 STREAMLINE INTERNAL PROCESSES

Programs launched on condensed timelines are magnets for mistakes, however minor they may be. Eliminate the potential for something to slip through the cracks by designing checklists, timelines and templates to guide management decision-making on everything from technology logistics to recruiting, training and quality assurance processes. Having these as a reference will eliminate guess work in the planning stage and help get programs off the ground quickly when time is limited.

Facility Preparation

When faced with a rapid-response program, it is (understandably) easy to get distracted by human resource priorities such as staffing and training. Equally important, however, is to remember the basics: the contact center environment itself. A minimal amount of effort toward maintaining the facility on an ongoing basis can be a defining factor in the center's ability to respond quickly.

1 TAKE A SECOND LOOK AROUND

Contact center leadership should periodically take a look around the physical space to ensure it is set up for success. Are all workstations in the building—even those outside the dedicated call center space—capable of being wired in to meet short-term demand? Is the underused space kept clean and free of unnecessary foot traffic during down times? Caring for the physical environment will remove one thing from the to-do list during the next quick ramp-up.

2 STAY UP-TO-DATE ON PREVENTATIVE MAINTENANCE

Preventative maintenance is fundamental to creating an environment capable of responding quickly. On a quarterly basis, inventory,

test and clean equipment such as computers, keyboards, headsets and phones—especially those not in daily use—to ensure their optimal condition. Avoid delaying the replacement of necessary equipment, which will adversely impact the contact center's capacity to respond quickly.

③ DIAL IN THE TECHNOLOGY LOGISTICS

Contact center programs don't exist without the technology to support them. It's critically important that the IT team has procedures in place for quickly procuring essential technology such as phone lines, Internet service and software licensing for the workstations not currently in use. Similarly, IT teams must be prepared to eliminate those services just as quickly in the post-program phase to minimize the company's cost burden.

Staffing

A contact center is only as flexible as its team, so managers who proactively develop a robust bench of temporary agents from which to pull when business volume changes quickly are already one step ahead (and so are their clients' programs).

① STAFFING AGENCY PARTNERSHIPS

The single most important thing contact center managers can do to support staffing flexibility is to invest time into the relationship they have with their partner staffing agencies. Agency partners should fully understand the company's business model, client objectives and values. This small amount of effort delivers a maximum return: a higher caliber of prospective hires when timelines are condensed. Also, strive to be forthcoming with agency partners about potential changes in your business workflow so they, too, may be prepared to respond quickly.

② TAKE THE LEAD

While staffing agencies are a great solution, nothing compares to doing your own homework. As time permits, meet with potential candidates and slowly develop and maintain a strong pipeline of candidates to approach when you need to staff a program on short notice. Whenever possible, conduct interviews and complete background checks in advance to ensure a seamless—and fast—onboarding process.

③ DEVELOP NEXT-GENERATION SUPERVISORS

Under some circumstances, the transition from phone agent to floor supervisor may need to happen overnight. Contact center managers should always be identifying high-performing customer service representatives and working with them over time to develop their leadership and management skills. This not only will ensure that they are prepared to step into supervisory roles with minimal notice, but also will enhance their performance in their current capacities.

Training & Quality Assurance

Training is the crux of any successful contact center as it underpins the company's ability to ensure the quality of its service. When faced with a situation requiring a quick response, it is crucial to modify training in a way that fully prepares contact center agents without negatively impacting the customer experience.

① MODIFY WITHOUT NEGOTIATING

The key to successfully modifying training modules is to identify areas where you can save time without sacrificing learning. For example, policy paperwork can easily be signed electronically following Day One of training, freeing up critical hours for customer-facing aspects of training. But remain firm on the training non-negotiables, which likely will include a combination of HR, customer service, telephone and software, and program-specific training.

② TAP INTO THE EXISTING TEAM FOR REINFORCEMENT

When time constraints exist, it is imperative to make the training environment as dynamic as possible so authentic learning takes place. This can be achieved, in part, by incorporating high-performing team members into training. Seasoned agents will be able to assist managers, provide trainees with first-hand insight and may even naturally step into informal mentorship roles on the critical peer-to-peer level.

③ ADAPT QA PROCESSES

If time prohibits traditional one-on-one call monitoring, an effective quality assurance program is still attainable. First, determine the most critical performance indicators for the program, such as proper verification, politeness and accuracy. Then, schedule a few minutes every hour or two for QA managers to conduct brief call sweeps, monitoring the lines at random for those predetermined KPIs. Don't hesitate to call in reinforcement from floor supervisors—if their skills have been properly developed, there is no reason they will not be effective in this capacity.

Position Your Center for Success

The value of a successful contact center is in its ability to respond quickly to the ever-changing needs of its clients. But it also has to produce results, regardless of lead time, and this demands a sharp attention to detail and ongoing commitment to staying prepared.

Contact center managers who establish benchmarks with their stakeholders, maintain the readiness of their facilities, staff their program strategically, and modify and thoughtfully execute their training and quality assurance programs will be positioned to respond quickly to client needs and deliver results, time and time again. ◉

Brian Burke is Senior VP of Operations for GCG, a leading global provider of legal administration and business process outsourcing solutions. 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 GCG has in progress at any given time. (www.gardencitygroup.com)

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