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Multisourcing: Pitfalls and Best Practices

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Contact centers are an increasingly complex environment – and getting more complex all the time, thanks to multisourcing. Multisourcing is like traditional outsourcing on steroids: it is the practice of creating the best possible mix from numerous outsourced suppliers and internal resources, including remote agents. It steps up the number of variables that have to be managed, while promising the most efficient operations for a wider array of circumstances.

While this new model has a lot going for it, there are some managerial pitfalls that companies should avoid, and some best practices they should aim for.

Possible Pitfalls

The most important thing to watch out for is a decline in customer service quality. It may start to manifest itself in a mixed environment when you deal with combined in-house and external metrics. Multisourcing is a great way to assure that resources will be available when and where you need them. But the dispersal of those resources into lots of separate locations forces contact centers to pay closer attention to how the end point – the customer experience, is measured in each location.

A multisourcing-related decline in service quality may start to show up in small variations in certain key metrics like first call resolution; the number of transfers per call; or in the average length of calls.

It might also show up more obviously in a direct decline in customer satisfaction, expressed through survey data.

The cause of this problem may be something as simple as a failure to harmonize basic procedures. This sounds painfully obvious, but it's key because small disharmonies magnify into large variations in customer satisfaction.

And the consequences are serious because the customers most likely to detect inconsistencies are your most valuable ones. The ones likely to be annoyed or dissatisfied are disproportionately the repeaters, the higher value continuous customers.

The second key pitfall to avoid is setting unrealistic expectations for the kinds of savings you'll see. Why are you multisourcing in the first place? Is it a circumstantial event, originating outside the control or decision-making of contact center management? (Consolidation and mergers are the chief reason this happens.)

Or is it part of a considered effort to restrain costs? Do your plans for savings anticipate material benefits? That is, can they be measured? If you're expressing your hopes for gain in intangible things, or even semi-tangible ones like customer satisfaction, you may be in for trouble.

Contact centers often encounter the trap wherein savings in one area are overwhelmed by extra costs in another -

these can sometimes be foreseen and dealt with. It's the act of lack of foresight that gets people in trouble.

The third pitfall is the "accidental multisourcing" arrangement wherein you find yourself supporting a hodgepodge of technical infrastructures that cause a steady erosion of service levels and agent performance.

This problem manifests itself not as a catastrophic decline in service levels, but in an accretion of management headaches. For example, you might find that agents in one area are being monitored x times per month, and those in another y times per month, and who is calibrating the quality evaluations between all the different sources?

The lack of common infrastructure means you may be unwittingly measuring by different yardsticks or incenting agents for different outcomes in different locations.

Overcoming Those Pitfalls

So, having said that, is all this an argument for not multisourcing? Not at all. It's an argument for preparation, harmonization, and adoption of certain practices to inoculate yourself against these pitfalls.

Straightaway, you need to make two critical distinctions:

1. between what you can control, and what you can't control
2. and between what matters, and what doesn't matter.

The whole point of multisourcing in all its many forms is letting go. That means there will be things you might like to control that you have to give over to someone else for cost reasons. You could spend a lot of time and trouble agonizing over what switching or call routing platform your various outsourcers use. You could even lay down the law and say "I'll only use sourcers that have Avaya or Genesys or some other platform requirement.

But does that really matter? Doesn't it miss the point of outsourcing?

What matters most is the outcome, and your ability to measure the outcome. The whole point of multisourcing is to allow for variations in how to achieve the outcome you desire, because not all methods and modes are right for every opportunity.

One analogy is to think of each of your multiple sourcers as laboratories. Each one gets to apply the particular lessons and experience that go with its strengths, and you get to reap the rewards of the variety. And you also get to spread your risks around.

Benefiting from multisourcing requires you to draw a hard line on the page separating what you really and truly care about from everything you can let go. And the number one thing you care about is consistency of the customer experience: you need to abstract the measurement of the customer experience from the providers of the multisource environment.

So the first (and most important) best practice is this: despite the fact that you are multisourcing, you need to create a system-wide format for how you're going to define and measure "success" in customer interactions.

This leads directly to the second best practice: success in multisourcing depends on a consistent data infrastructure. Even if your physical infrastructure is distributed and your human resources are dispersed, you can enforce a common set of data standards among all the parties.

After all, the main justification for multisourcing is the idea that it shouldn't matter what or where the physical components are as long as you have consistent results. That's true if and only if you establish standards that have everyone measuring the same things with the same criteria and reporting through a centralized portal or data warehouse. The central dashboard should be able to roll up across all sources and should be able to pinpoint which sources deviate from set norms.

What should dictate the business processes and policies and workflow is not the outsourcer, nor the outsourcer's technology. It's call center management overall, generated in-house based on strategic criteria.

In order to get both a system-wide criteria for success and a consistent data infrastructure, a call center should implement a policy of load-balancing oversight that ensures a universal overall view of the status of the entire agent pool. This allows the center to be flexible enough to override routing mismatches that happen because of limited visibility across the network, as when the capacity of a particular outsourcer goes up and down, but agents are assigned to them whether available or not. Load-balancing oversight is often considered as an argument for including hosted tools as part of a multisourced environment.

Having a real-time view into the larger agent pool lets you respond to actual conditions as they emerge, to shifting patterns in the way you use your various sourcing options.

The final best practice to keep in mind is to centralize training and knowledge management functions in-house, and keep that resource as closely aligned with the core competence of the business as possible. Regardless of the sourcing you choose for your contact center functions, by keeping control of the knowledge resources you infuse the entire structure with the values, workflows and standards of your company.

In one major retail contact center, multisourcing proved to be a success because management retained tight control over the things they saw as both critical to them and peripheral to the role of the outsourcers – things like training, coaching, and quality control of the customer experience. In this particular case, they know that they had areas of core competency that centered around the post-sale experience that customers had with their product. They kept a close watch on (and measurement of) that aspect of the transaction, leaving more prosaic functions to the outsourcers.

The Take-Away

Don't assume that multisourcing, or outsourcing of any kind, replaces sound internal management and an understanding of what your company's real functions and needs are. You can always multisource to obtain extra capacity, but you can't multisource judgment, control or management.

Contact center multisourcing should never be the source of more risk and worry. It should always reduce risk and worry. If it's not, you've fallen into the trap.