

ROLE OF PERFORMANCE REVIEWS TO ENHANCE CALL CENTRE AGENTS' PERFORMANCE

Rashmi Manmohan Acharya and Edwin Rajah

ABSTRACT

An effective performance review process supports the manager to establish clear performance expectations for their employees to support individual accountability to meet the company's objectives. The aim of this research was to explore current performance review processes in New Zealand call centre, and to suggest strategies to improve current performance review processes. Qualitative data was collected from 14 call centre agents and 5 call centre managers from two call centres (inbound and outbound) in New Zealand. The findings of this research revealed differences in performance review processes for the inbound and outbound call centres in terms of performance criteria, frequency of performance reviews and feedback type. Insufficient training and development, clarity of definition of performance indicators, and lack of call centre quality monitoring processes were identified as areas for further improvement. This study aims to provide insights for call centres to enhance operational efficiency of call centre agents.

Keywords: Call centre, performance review, assessment or monitoring, feedback, key performance indicators, inbound, outbound

Over the last two decades the call centre industry has experienced rapid growth around the world (Burgess & Connell, 2004). This growth trend is similar to the New Zealand call centre industry (IBISWorld n.d.). Like call centres internationally, New Zealand call centres also face challenges such as skill capabilities, performance and commitment of employees, high employee turnover, ongoing recruitment, and training challenges (Holman et al., 2007).

There are reports that 65% of the customers are not satisfied with the services of call centres in New Zealand (Consumer NZ Survey, 2016). Hence, it is important for call centre businesses to understand the drivers affecting service quality (Anderson & Zemke, 2003). To improve levels of service it is imperative to understand the on-floor performance issues in call centres to improve customer experience (Chawla & Smutkupt, 2019). For example, the tasks carried out by call centre agents can be challenging or frustrating if they have to interact with angry or frustrated customers on a daily basis (Dollard et al., 2003). The stressful task context call centre agents encounter is one explanation for call centres experiencing high call centre agent turnover (Samson & Daft, 2012).

Hence, an effective performance review or monitoring process can support call centre businesses to support its operations to improve overall customer experience, call centre agent performance and well-being (Boyte, 2009). These benefits contribute to reduced call centre agent attrition and improve the profitability of the call centre. This study explored the challenges faced by the New Zealand call centre industry and reports findings for two small and medium call centres in New Zealand. The first part outlines the literature review, the research aims and questions. The next section outlines the methods adopted and in the last section we present the findings, discussion, and conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

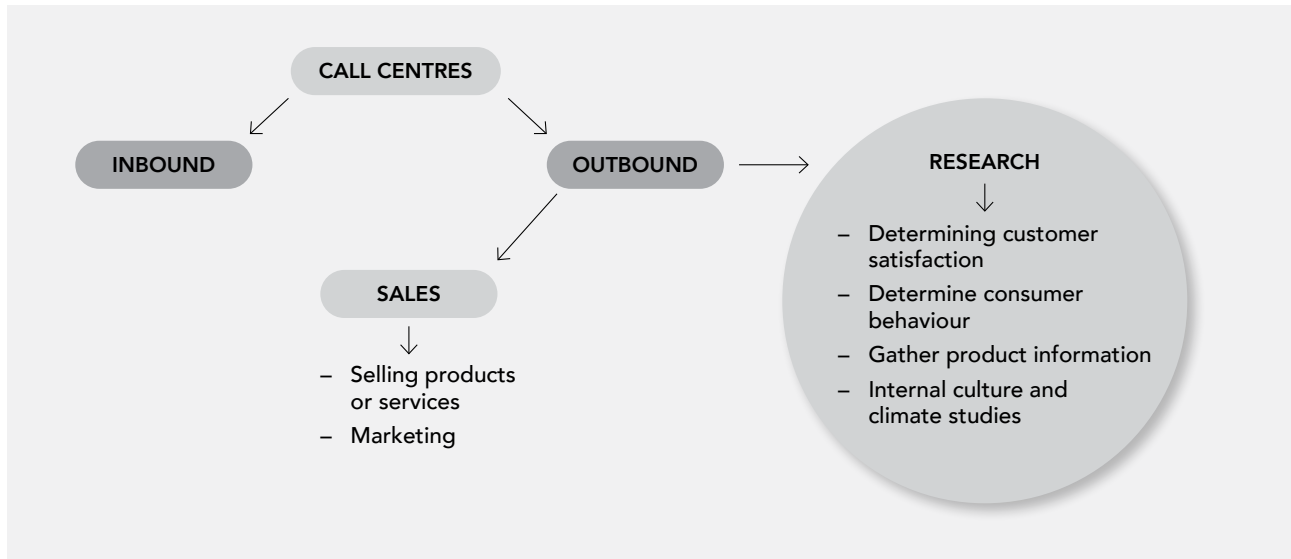
Overview of a Call Centre:

In a contemporary business environment call centres play an important role in facilitating multi-channelled service functions to support customer business communication and complaint resolution (Hinton, 2018). Taylor and Bain (1999) stated that a call centre is a dedicated service operation in which call centre staff interact with customers (through inbound calls or outbound calls) mediated through communication technology.

Figure 1 below shows that call centres have a range of functions such as help desk, customer service, telemarketing, and emergency help to support business-customer interactions (White, 2005). In general, there are two types of call centres; inbound call centre service is when transactions are initiated by the customers and resolved by the call centre, while an

outbound call centre service is when the call centre initiates the call to the customers regarding transactions related to sales, queries, complaints (White, 2005). Inbound call services mainly provide customer assistance, help desk, product, or service information. (Gans et al., 2003), whilst outbound call services calls are made to customers for promoting products or services, telemarketing, or surveys (Gans et al., 2003).

Figure 1: Types of Call Centres Source: (White, 2005, p. 8)



Call centre managers are responsible for monitoring different types of key performance indicators (KPIs) of call centre agents such as the number of calls taken, average call handling time, after-call work time, occupancy of the agents, the service level, the calls waiting in a queue (Dollard et al., 2003; Rose & Wright, 2005; Witt et al., 2004). The managers also track qualitative KPIs such as call quality, first call resolution, accuracy of wrap-up, customer satisfaction ratio, and net promoter score. Key performance indicators of the call centres can be categorised into three groups: service level, quality, and efficiency (Brown et al., 2005). With a broad range of performance indicators, it is crucial for managers and supervisors to build effective performance management strategies to support the day-to-day work practices of call centre agents (Loukidou et al., 2009). This study aimed to explore current practices, and challenges two small and medium-sized call centres in New Zealand encounter in the context of call centre agents' performance, retention and attrition (Hunt & Rasmussen, 2007).

Benefits of Effective Performance Review Process

Extant literature supports the role of an effective performance review process for successful call centres operations. A summary of the benefits of performance reviews follows: -

- Proper monitoring empowers call centre agents to develop their proficiencies and performance which has a positive impact on their well-being (Holman et al., 2002).
- Performance evaluation and monitoring facilitate the call centre to review and improve call centre agent performance, reduce costs and enhance customer experience and satisfaction (Johnston & Kong, 2011).
- Effective performance assessment provides benefits to call centre agents with accurate and timely feedback, recognition for work, fair performance assessment and development of skills (Carroll et al., 2006).

Types and Characteristics of Performance Review Process

The performance review process includes monitoring, recording performance against targets, and observing employees' behaviours (Stanton, 2000). Effective performance monitoring or review process requires performance data on criteria such as: (Holman et al., 2002; Perkins, 2013; Stanton, 2000).

- **Frequency:** frequency relates to whether the performance reviews are conducted regularly, continuously, or occasionally (Perkins, 2013; Stanton, 2000).
- **Performance Criteria:** relates to types of performance criteria adopted to assess performance such as quantitative and qualitative (Holman et al., 2007; Perkins, 2013).
- **Feedback Type:** refers to how feedback or performance reviews are undertaken such as one-on-one feedback, mentor-mentee approach, corrective feedback, preventive feedback, group sessions and feedback (Perkins, 2013; Stanton, 2000).

- **Purpose:** relates to how performance review data is applied for correction, prevention, professional development or reward and recognition (Stanton, 2000).
- **Source:** refers to how performance data is collected and who conducts the performance reviews, for example, whether the performance reviews are conducted by the supervisor or other manager (Holman et al., 2007; Perkins, 2013).
- **Target:** this is in reference to whether the performance review is conducted at an individual level or group level (Perkins, 2013; Stanton, 2000).

There are two approaches to performance reviews: - "Traditional" and "Electronic" (Holman et al., 2002). The traditional form of performance review process involves observation of performance, listening and monitoring of calls, self-reporting, and work sampling, and using a mix of qualitative and quantitative performance data (Holman et al., 2002). This approach requires a human observer to monitor or measure the performance of the call centre agents (Perkins, 2013). Electronic performance reviews, on the other hand, adopt remote monitoring and computerised collection of quantitative data such as the number of calls answered, average call handling time, abandoned rate, and call times. This latter approach supports continuous performance monitoring (Perkins, 2013). Electronic monitoring provides more real-time information on call centre agent performance. The literature shows call centres internationally adopt either traditional, electronic or a mixed monitoring approach. In mixed monitoring, the call centres apply technology to collect call centre agent performance data and adopt traditional monitoring to provide feedback.

RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTIONS

Since effective performance review or monitoring is critical to enhancing employee work commitment and performance, this research aimed was to evaluate the current performance review processes in two New Zealand call centres and to suggest strategies for further improvements.

To address the research aim, two research questions were posed.

1. How are the performance reviews conducted by the call centre managers to assess the performance of the call centre agents?
2. What improvements can be identified in the performance review procedure to improve the performance of the call centre agents?

METHODS

Given that this is exploratory research a qualitative research method was adopted to collect the primary data to evaluate call centre agents' and call centre managers' perceptions of performance review experiences. The rationale for a qualitative approach is twofold: first, qualitative research is suitable when collecting opinions, and perceptions to delve and probe deeper into issues (Patton, 2005). A second reason was that the literature supports qualitative methods in the context of call centres (Carroll et al., 2006; Nikolaos et al., 2006; Sayers et al., 2003; Waldeck, 2012).

The primary data collection was confined to two call centres; one call centre dealt with customers purchasing electronic appliances for their home, while the other call centre dealt with customers purchasing well-known newspapers. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) lockdown limited the data collection to the Auckland region. Nineteen participants comprising of 14 call centre agents and five managers provided the data points for this research. The average tenure of the call centre agents was 24 months. The average tenure of call centre managers was 32 months. We adopted a minimum of a six-month tenure as a selection criterion for call centre agents and managers for our study. Table 1 and 2 show participants interviewed had a minimum of six months of experience.

Qualitative data was captured from call centre agents and call centre managers using a semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews are appropriate to obtain participant perceptions, mindsets, and behaviour (Raworth et al., 2012). Semi structured interviews also enhance the potential of more detailed discussion to obtain a wider range and more in-depth information from interviewees (Patton, 2005). This research also adopts purposive sampling to ensure the participant sample represents a specific target group of participants for the call centres context (Etikan et al., 2016; Tongco, 2007).

Sample size and participants

Data was obtained from the participants approximates to 18% of the staff from the two call centres. The data collection activity was conducted by interviewing employees of two different types of call centres. Two groups of participants were interviewed. Call centre managers were interviewed to obtain their views of the current process of performance review, its effectiveness, challenges, business objectives and current performance, while call centre agents were interviewed to obtain their perspectives with regard to experiences of performance review. The tenure of a minimum of six months for call centre agents and managers were used as selection criteria for them as shown in Table 1 and 2. Ethics approval was granted by the Otago Polytechnic Auckland International Campus Ethics Committee dated 17/04/20, reference number AIC45 for this research.

Table 1: Sample Description Summary – Call Centre Agents 'Tenure

CALL CENTRE AGENTS		
TENURE	OUTBOUND %	INBOUND %
0- 6 Month	0%	0%
6 Month - 1 Year	57%	14%
1 - 2 Year	14%	29%
2 - 5 Year	14%	14%
More than 5 Years	14%	43%
TOTAL	100%	100%

Table 2: Sample Description Summary – Call Centre Managers' Tenure

CALL CENTRE MANAGERS		
TENURE	OUTBOUND %	INBOUND %
0-1 Year	50%	0%
More than 1 Years	50%	43%
TOTAL	100%	100%

Interview Questions Design:

Open-ended questions were used for conducting semi-structured interviews (interviews). Two sets of interview questions were developed one for the call centre managers and, the other for call centre agents. To obtain a clear perspective of the current processes of performance review in the call centres, the interviews were developed to include each of the following categories:

- **Performance Criteria:** to obtain information on the key performance indicators used for performance reviews (Perkins, 2013; Stanton, 2000).
- **Frequency:** to obtain information on the frequency of performance reviews (Perkins, 2013; Stanton, 2000).
- **Current Performance Review Strategy:** to obtain information as to who was conducting the performance reviews and the type of feedback (Perkins, 2013; Stanton, 2000).
- **Motivational Aspects:** to obtain information related to reward and recognition for the levels of performance (Perkins, 2013; Stanton, 2000).
- **Improvement Areas:** to obtain improvement areas or recommendations for current performance review processes (Perkins, 2013; Stanton, 2000).

The interviews for call centre managers adopted the same categories as call centre agents, however, two additional categories were added:

- **Standard Operating Processes:** to obtain information on the defined processes for performance review.
- **Challenges:** to obtain information on the challenges from a management perspective of the performance review process.

Data Analysis:

Qualitative data analysis involves the process of reading, understanding, categorisation and discovering relationships within data points in the dataset (Mason, 2010). Data analysis was completed using a thematic coding process. Thematic coding is a method to identify categories of textual data each relating to a particular theme in the context of the research objectives (Gibbs, 2007). The aim of thematic coding is to analyse patterns, ideas, and codes in the qualitative data in relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend a six-step process for conducting qualitative data analysis. This research adopted the six-step data process to analyse the qualitative data collected from the interviews with both group participants.

1. **Familiarisation of data:** Step 1 - reading the interview transcriptions to become familiar with the data.
2. **Initial Coding:** Step 2 - coding the data in meaningful and a structured manner.
3. **Generating Themes:** Step 3 - codes were developed into distinct themes relating to the research questions.
4. **Validity and reliability of themes:** Step 4 - the researcher reviewed, modified and created preliminary themes identified in step three.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Step 5 - focused on recognising specific meanings of and finding relationships with other themes.
6. **Interpretation and Reporting:** Step 6 - this is the end point of the data analysis process wherein the findings of this research are presented in the form of article.

FINDINGS

Findings for Theme 1 - Performance indicators (Research Question 1)

The operation of the outbound call centre is dominantly sales driven, so the key performance indicator adopted was sales targets. However, other indicators such as number of calls made, or accounts checked were monitored when required. The inbound call centre adopts a more balanced approach, using both qualitative and quantitative performance indicators (refer to Table 3).

Table 3: Examples of Participants' Responses for Theme 1

	OUTBOUND	INBOUND
Call-centre agents	"Our main KPI is 3 sales in a day and 15 sales in a week. No particular targets have been given for number of calls and average talk time as our call centre is driven mainly on sales." (Participant 1)	"My main KPIs are availability, call quality, email collection, e-billing. Sometimes, they- do monitor some specific campaigns performance like digital promotion on call." (Participant 7)
Call centre managers	"As it is sales driven call centre, we have main operational KPI which is sales number. Other than we do monitor number of calls made, system accuracy, paperwork after sales." (Manager 1)	"As an operational KPIs, we have service level, availability, call quality, email promotions. Also, we are monitoring call disconnection and average call handling time as well." (Manager 2)

Findings for Theme 2: Frequency of Performance Reviews (Research Question 1)

The frequency of performance feedback varies for both call centres. Feedback typically occurs on a weekly or monthly basis for the outbound call centres, while monthly, half yearly and annual feedback are more prevalent in the inbound call centres. In both call centres, immediate performance reviews occur when there are incidents of customer escalations, or inappropriate behaviour observed on the operational floor (refer to Table 4).

Table 4: Examples of Participants' Responses for Theme 2

	OUTBOUND	INBOUND
Call-centre agents	"I am getting feedback on my sales target achievement on weekly basis." (Participant 2)	"Mostly they review the performance and give feedback on monthly basis. Also, in the middle of the month if they found any mistakes then they give feedback on errors so the same mistakes will not happen again." (Participant 3)
Call centre managers	"There is no particular guideline for conducting review. However, as a supervisor of the call centre I am conducting weekly reviews." (Manager 1)	"The defined process is that we need to conduct monthly, half yearly and yearly reviews on defined performance indicators." (Manager 3)

Findings for Theme 3 - Feedback Type (Research Question 1)

Call centre agent participants from both call centres received feedback from managers on the performance indicators which indicates the call centres are adhering to Corrective Action and Preventive Actions (CAPA) feedback processes. The main purpose of feedback is to make call centre agents' aware about their performance on the performance indicators against set targets. For the outbound call centres, the managers largely focus on sales targets. The findings show that call centres agents participants indicate they are dissatisfied with sales as the dominant focus and expect other qualitative feedback from the management (refer to Table 5).

Table 5: Examples of Participants' Responses for this Theme 3

	OUTBOUND	INBOUND
Call-centre agents	"The review meeting is getting conducted one-on-one wherein all the achievements and failure reasons being discussed. Similarly, at the end of the meeting mutually the agent and the manager are finalising final action points and changes on which they both need to work in future. As, we are working on sales only, the manager is emphasizing on sales numbers only." (Participant 6)	"In our performance review process, they assess how many calls I have taken, how many I have converted in e-billing, how many times I am available on call, call quality, proper actions has been taken or not. These are the things that they assess during the month. Based on those findings and one-on-one feedback has been given by the manager in our monthly performance review meeting." (Participant 1)
Call centre managers	"At the end of the week or in between of the week I am analysing lowest performer based on sales numbers. I am conducting one-on-one review with low performer in which i am discussing his/her sales numbers and trend." (Manager 1)	"Performance review has been done on the performance of each KPIs. The manager is also looking all other aspects which are sickness, attendance, behaviour in the office, retention%, upgraded service, key areas to improve the performance, call quality, availability and so on. On every monthly we meet with the agents and giving positive and negative feedback on each point discussed above." (Manager 1)

Theme 4 Findings - Areas for Improvement (Research Question 2)

For both the call centres, both groups of participants *report a lack of training* or coaching for performance reviews and indicated this as an area for improvement. Both outbound and inbound call centre agent participants reported the need for *more frequent performance reviews*. Alongside this expectation, call centre agent participants prefer that supervisors share the results of their performance reviews regularly to support real-time performance improvements. Outbound call centre agent participants reported that performance reviews were predominantly sales-driven with a focus primarily on revenue. They suggested adopting both qualitative and quantitative performance indicators to improve outputs such as sales number, number of calls made, accuracy of data, call quality, connectivity and so forth. Outbound call centre agent participant also indicated a general lack of *call monitoring or listening processes* were in place. They alluded to it being important for managers- / -supervisors to listen in to calls to identify errors and to identify operational tactics for improving overall customer call experiences. Inbound call centre agent participants reported similar issues with the *process of call quality monitoring* and suggested concerns in two areas. Firstly, managers/supervisors were only listening in on some categories of calls resulting in biased sampling of monitored calls. Secondly, managers/supervisor were also reported to listen in on calls partially resulting in an incomplete view of the call. The suggested improvements were to sample all call types and listen in on every sampled call in its entirety (refer to Table 6).

Table 6: Examples of Participants' Responses for Theme 4

	OUTBOUND	INBOUND
Call-centre agents	<p>"...management needs to acknowledge the employees' issues related to sales performance and support them by providing proper training. Instead of focusing only on sales targets, the company needs to analyse on why sales are not being achieved and accordingly actions need to be taken." (Participant 2)</p> <p>"Well, the only thing that matters to management is the number of sales, if they can include other factors like the quality of the data, call quality, attendance and the chance of change in prices of the products, this can bring in a different aspect to the performance assessment" (Participant 3)</p>	<p>"In terms of performance review, they are conducting the same on every month. However, I would recommend if they do have time and expertise to do it then they should do it on fortnight basis because the call centre is taking almost 500 to 1000 calls in a day, it will be good to get feedback on fortnight basis so that we will not make same mistake for different customers." (Participant 1)</p> <p>"I think the manager needs to listen the variety of the calls as sometimes they listen only 2 or 3 types of the calls only. If they listen all types of sample calls, then I will get overall feedback on my performance as currently I am getting feedback on same call types repeatedly" (P5)</p> <p>".....think the call quality audit process needs improvement as my supervisors are listening to the calls which are 3 or 4 min. long. Also, they are giving all the feedback of our call listening at the end of the month. Call centre is dynamic industry in which you cannot wait for month to complete." (Participant 6)</p>

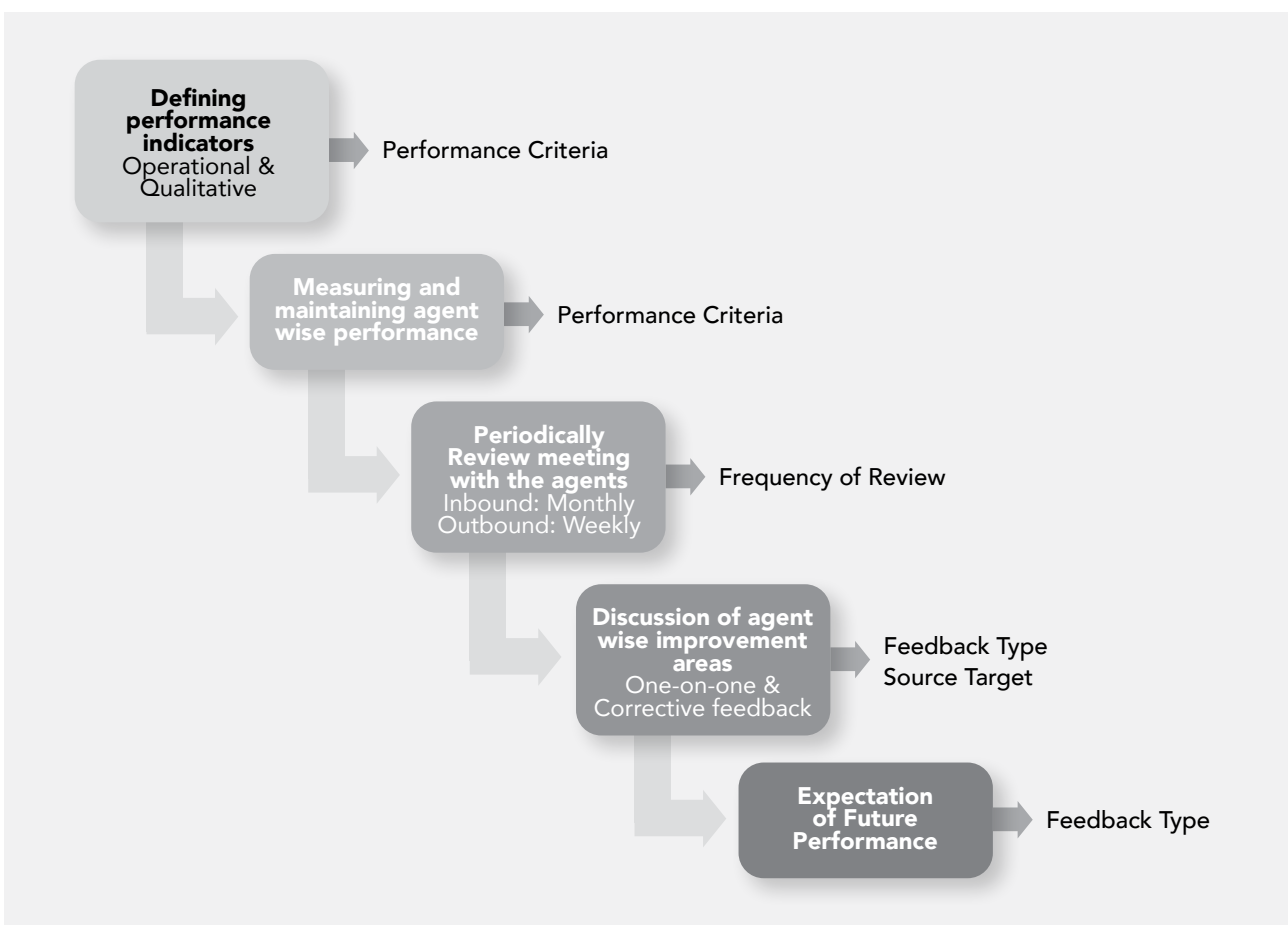
	OUTBOUND	INBOUND
Call centre managers	"....., I am strongly recommending that the supervisors need to provide feedback at the time when he/she is listening to the calls and if possible, agent and manager needs to listen the call together." (Manager 2)	".....recommending that the supervisors need to provide feedback at the time when he/she is listening to the calls and if possible, agent and manager needs to listen the call together." (Manager 2)

DISCUSSION

Performance Review Process:

In general, the performance review approaches adopted by both call centres broadly adopt the CAPA feedback methodology (refer to Figure 2). The New Zealand call centres sampled adopted regular performance reviews where performance was measured on defined performance indicators against agreed targets.

Figure 2: The Performance Review Process of New Zealand Call Centres Source: (Holman et al., 2002)



One finding reported in Theme 1 shows that the outbound call centres were focused primarily on revenue generation performance criteria, while the inbound call centres adopted a more balanced approach to performance criteria applying both quantitative and qualitative performance criteria. The extant literature presented supports adopting a range of criteria such as availability, number of sales, service level, and number of calls taken or made to measure performance efficiency (Marr & Neely, 2004). The outbound call centre agent participants focus mainly on quantitative sales target performance and appears to be more stressful work compared to the inbound call centre agent participants who are providing and supporting customer services. The higher levels of stress for outbound call centre agent participants may have implications for high employee turnover rates in call centres which primarily focus on sales targets resulting in higher levels of stress and reduced well-being. Another finding was both the call centres undertook performance reviews on a weekly or monthly basis. This differs to performance reviews in call centres internationally which adopt more real-time performance reviews. The lag in providing timely feedback may contribute to reduced efficiency of call centre agent participants over time. Unchecked recurring errors between the periods of performance review feedback are costly to call centres (Marr & Neely, 2004; Waldeck, 2012). Additionally, call centre agents might experience reduced motivation levels

over time as a consequence of not being supported in their jobs (Waldeck, 2012). Providing more frequent or even real-time feedback can have the effect of more motivated call centre agents which in the longer run can reduce staff turnover and support staff retention (Waldeck, 2012). Retaining experienced call centre agents might in the longer term be beneficial in terms of performance efficiency and meeting set targets (Marr & Neely, 2004). In this context, several studies support conducting more frequent and real-time performance reviews to improve operational efficiency and staff well-being (Alferoff & Knights, 2003; Carroll et al., 2006). Other studies also echo that one-on-one performance reviews and feedback encourage two-way communication between call centre agents and supervisors (Boyte, 2009; Carroll et al., 2006). Based on these findings and other supporting evidence, we surmise that both the call centres sampled were applying a more traditional based approach to performance reviews.

Improvement Areas of Performance Review:

Both groups of participants reported that lack of training and development, less frequent performance reviews, call quality monitoring processes are areas for further improvement. Research question 2 aimed at addressing areas for improvement in the performance review processes. Although both call centres adopt corrective feedback approaches for performance reviews, the participants from both call centres mentioned that their call centres need to provide more training and development initiatives in this area. For example, the outbound call centre agent participants mentioned that management is not providing proper training to support skill development, and yet had expectations of high sales numbers. Similarly, the call centre agent participants in the inbound call centres indicated that the training and development programmes were inadequate. The study conducted by (Sawyer et al., 2009) indicates that proper training and development of the employees would ultimately benefit the call centres in reducing costs, improving overall performance, and enhancing wellbeing.

RECOMMENDATION

Although the sampled call centres of New Zealand met the performance review frequency guidelines (Holman et al., 2002; Perkins, 2013; Stanton, 2000) both groups of participants indicated that the frequency of reviews was an area for further improvement. For example, call centre agent participants expressed dissatisfaction at getting feedback at the end of the month or week. With the high volume of customer call interactions, quicker turnaround of feedback would contribute to minimising errors and mistakes. Thus, the lag in continuous untimely feedback time was contributing to delayed performance improvement of the call centre agent participants.

Call quality monitoring process was another area for improvement for both the call centres studied. It was observed that regular call listening, and feedback were lacking in outbound call centres, while inbound call centres were drawing biased samples as a consequence of partial call listening audit processes. Real-time monitoring and feedback support the call centre manager/supervisors to track the performance of their call centre agents and immediately alert them to any discrepancy that requires intervention (Urlings et al., 2005). One study concluded that focused call quality monitoring processes helped the call centre agents understand the process of call-taking, and improved overall efficiency and customer service (Chawla & Smutkupt, 2019). Another study found that when call listening occurred at least twice a week by managers/supervisor that this helped in creating a supportive environment for coaching and feedback (Chawla & Smutkupt, 2019; Preece et al., 2018). Literature reviewed suggests that call centres must aim to adopt a balance between the production-line and a customer orientation approaches for performance reviews (Gilmore, 2001). The production line approach adopts quantitative performance criteria while the customer orientation approach focuses on qualitative criteria (Gilmore, 2001).

LIMITATIONS

The research sample was limited to two call centres, one call centre serviced newspapers while the other dealt with home and kitchen appliances. A second limitation is that as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, the sampled call centres studied were drawn from the Auckland region.

CONCLUSION

The results show that both the call centres studied veered towards a traditional approach in their performance review processes. Both the call centres were lacking in training and development, real-time feedback on improvement areas and call quality monitoring process. To overcome the deficiencies, it is suggested that call centres adopt best practices from well-known call centres such as "Concentrix" a highly ranked outsourced call centre (Simon, 2019). Two best practices Concentrix adopts for its performance review are as follows:

- applying the five-why root cause analysis process to identify the root cause of low performance by an employee. The intent here is to identify the root cause of the problem to help in systematic problem solving which enhances problem-solving (Serrat & Serrat, 2017).

- implementing the “CUAIRS” (Commit, Understand, Automate, Implement, Review and Sustain) framework for sustainable improvement (CMMI Institute, 2019). This latter approach helps in developing and standardising the input processes to help drive performance improvement. By applying these best practices Concentrix was able to improve overall customer service and operational efficiency (CMMI Institute, 2019).

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