breaking the CSAT ceiling

Breaking the CSAT Ceiling

How better coaching in communication can raise performance and have a sustainable impact on contact center KPIs.

futureperfect

> *If you incorporate communication into your approach to coaching, the end result will show that coaching isn't a cost to the company; it's a smart investment in dramatic KPI improvement.*

Neil Elias
Chief Services Officer

how to break your CSAT ceiling

Problem 1:
Being Vague

"What do you think you could have done differently?"

An over-emphasis on elicitation can mean that coaching sessions are not maximized for strong skill development and input. These are crucial if you are going to see communication and language development.

be targeted

Diagnose the root cause of issues and patterns across a range of calls.

Target coaching to the communication skills that are most affecting customer experience and KPIs.

Problem 2:
Being Prescriptive

"Next time, instead of saying X, say Y."

Communication isn't about copying what someone else says – that invariably leads us down the pathway of sounding "robotic" or "scripted". It's about understanding the intention and developing a range of choices that can be applied appropriately to different contexts.

build learning pathways

Have measurable goals, connected to KPIs that are clearly linked to the communication skills that are impacting calls.

Build each learning session upon the last.

Problem 3:
One-Size-Fits-All Coaching

"Why don't we listen to the call and then role-play?"

Every learner is unique, and coaching is a unique opportunity for your company to tailor learning to individual needs. The benefit of this is that learning is faster, more effective and more motivating.

develop your talent

Rather than just coaching to a problem (giving feedback) or always approaching coaching in the same way, expand your range of delivery methods to reach different learners and help them feel individually cared for and developed.

On average, a manager spends 93 days coaching each year. This is a huge resource of time, from both the coach and the agents. The ROI on the investment is often negligible, which raises the question: are we really getting the most out of this high impact development tool? And if not, why not?

In this paper, we will share the outcomes of research conducted through accredited academic and industry bodies on the top three causes of communication breakdown in contact center interactions.

We will demonstrate the difference between communication coaching and standard coaching practices and examine the three practices above that your managers can immediately apply to improve their ability to address the top causes of communication breakdown.

Lastly, we will share the results from real industry studies comparing communication coaching and standard coaching and linking those results to key measures of performance (Resolution, Customer Satisfaction, and Sales).

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1. setting the scene

%

86

of your customers

quit doing business with a company after a bad customer experience (up from 59% in 4 years).[1]

%

79

of them reported calls

as their most preferred method for customer service interactions.[2]

%

80

of your future profits

will come from just 20% of your existing customers.[3]

The story that these numbers tells us, is that customers expect and demand excellent service. This service should be a human connection, building a relationship between the customer and the company.

Effective communication is at the heart of good customer service.

We will demonstrate that effective communication is at the heart of good customer service, and coaching for communication is one of the most powerful tools to rapid and sustainable impact on the KPIs in your center.

"Even in a negative economy, customer experience is a high priority for consumers, with 60% often or always paying more for a better experience."[1]
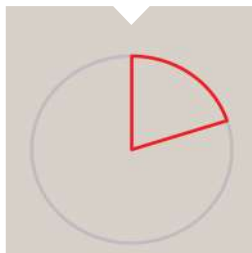
Your Customer

The benefit of voice interaction for a customer is that they get to speak to a human, they get to raise multiple issues at once and they get to argue their case.

Your Calls

Customer service in the contact center industry is at the heart of how companies differentiate, win more business and build future revenue.

Your Business

References

1. Harris Interactive, Customer Experience Impact Report, 2011

2. Forrester, Consumer Preference Report, 2011

3. Gartner Group, 2003

2. the three main causes of communication breakdown

Having analyzed thousands of calls to determine patterns in communication breakdown, we found that their roots causes have a common theme:

1- Poor Adaptability

This is the inability to adjust to the language competency of the customer and take steps to ensure good communication. This is particularly challenging when the customer's native language is not English and the agent needs to adjust their language choices, pace and structure to ensure comprehension. This is made especially difficult if the agent's own language levels are not high.

2- Bad Discourse Choices

This is the failure to construct an explanation or instruction that can guide a customer through the call in a way that is clear and coherent at all times. This is further complicated by the fact that discourse styles vary dramatically depending on language and culture. These differences carry meaning that is not intended. For example, a direct speaker commonly interprets circular discourse as avoiding the answer and untrustworthy.

3- Lack of Interpersonal Relationship-Building

This is the incapacity to make good language choices that develop appropriate interpersonal relationships, i.e. to interact well and build relationships, as well as to gauge how the caller is feeling and how best to serve them.

Hayley McCarthy
**Chief Business
Development Director**

"Our agents are our main link to our customer and are crucial to nurturing the customer relationship.

the solution: communication coaching

The customer is right to complain about communication, but just not for the reasons they thought were the issue.

The common theme of communication breakdowns is that call success depends heavily on the agent's range of communication options and ability to appropriately select from them, based on the context. This sits uncomfortably with coaching practices that tend to overly prescribe, script and limit agent choices for fear of errors. In fact, extensive research into call success and complaints shows that errors are far less problematic if they don't impede interpersonal relationship building or clarity of explanation. In short, customers are more likely to complain about grammar mistakes or 'accent' if their issue wasn't resolved. Typically, the customer is right to complain about communication, but just not for the reasons they thought were the issue. The failure of the call has less to do with the fact that the agent made subject-verb agreement errors ("I is going to put you on hold") and more to do with the fact that the structure of their discourse left the customer confused and feeling that the agent was "beating about the bush" and not engaging with their individual issue.

As a main link to customers, agents are crucial to nurturing the customer relationship. The root causes of communication breakdowns demonstrate a need to build language competency for interpersonal appropriateness and message clarity. In the next sections, we will be comparing and contrasting poor and good practices in communication coaching to demonstrate how these issues can be either addressed or exacerbated.

3. being targeted

Your managers can be more effective in targeting their coaching by looking for the most common causes of communication breakdown:

+ Whether the agent has adapted their communication and rapport building to the cues they get from the customer.

+ Whether explanations are clearly structured.

+ Whether interpersonal language sounds authentic and spontaneous or rehearsed and transactional.

By doing so, managers realign their focus to the communication skills that most commonly impact calls.

The results from this approach are that:

+ Agents understand what is affecting their scores and feel empowered to achieve change.

+ Coaching sessions are more efficient because they focus on the root cause of issues, rather than their symptoms.

+ Performance management is more effective, because you can see patterns in your center and identify improvements to be made in the profiles you recruit or the focus of your trainings.

The power of accurate diagnosis is enormous, but only if the diagnosis is applied with principles of adult learning and communication development.

Let's look at an example from an authentic call to see the difference between being vague and being targeted when coaching.

the problem: being vague

The common coaching question "what could you have done better?" is not a problem on the face of it: it's always important to ask ourselves this question and try to honestly answer it, but this phrase is linked to two problems with coaching in the contact center industry: 1) focusing on surface behaviors and misdiagnosing the root cause of communication breakdown and 2) vagueness that doesn't build skills. Generalized statements like "try building rapport more" or "you could have been more clear in your explanation" may be correct, but are unlikely to change behavior. This is because they don't provide a clear, actionable learning pathway, and they don't build self-awareness or understanding on the part of the agent.

Customer: Hello Chuck, how are you today?

Agent: Um…fine thank you, and how may I help you today?

Customer: Well, I'm not sure if you can or if I'm just being a bit of an idiot. [laughs] Honestly, I'd forget my head half the time if it weren't screwed on!

Agent: [silence] Oh…sorry, what did you forget?

Customer: Oh, many things! But today it's my password on my internet banking. I was sure I remembered the right one, but it isn't working for me – might just be me, you know? These days there are so many different requirements for passwords – add some numbers, some capitals, it's too much for me! [laughs]

Agent: I've just checked it and your current password should work fine,

Customer: Oh! Really?

Agent: …but just to be sure, I'll send an auto reset to your email and you can then change it to a memorable password. The instructions are in the email.

Customer: Oh well, thank you. I told you I was having a crazy day, didn't I?

Agent: Uh, no, it's not crazy… um, sometimes it just can have a technical fault, or… maybe caps lock was on, uh, they can be case sensitive…

Customer: Not to worry, not to worry. Look, can you tell me how I can get this auto reset done if this ever happens again in the future?

Agent: Oh, yes, but it's probably –

Customer: I'd like to know, so I'm not calling you all hours of the day and night!

Agent: Oh, no, it's no problem to call us. We are always here at your service.

Vague Approach

Tell the agent that the customer was trying to put the agent at ease by being friendly and informal. Direct the agent to also be more friendly and less "stiff" with their customers.

Emphasize that the customer asked for instructions on how to auto reset and that the agent should have complied. Set a rule with the agent to always listen to and to honor all customer requests.

Targeted Approach

Highlight where the word, "crazy", was misinterpreted and show how context and cues can be used to determine the underlying feeling behind different expressions.

Delve into the customer request for knowledge to solve similar issues in the future. This was misunderstood as a need for reassurance from the agent, when it was in fact an indirect way of saying that the customer wants to be self-reliant.

4. building learning pathways

A good learning pathway is manageable and measurable.

By creating measurable, goal-focused learning pathways, communication is appropriately addressed as a skill that needs to be practiced, guided and honed. You won't see results overnight, so expectations need to be set in advance. Otherwise, it is both demotivating for agents and frustrating for coaches. So what does a good learning pathway look like?

A good learning pathway is always measurable against KPIs and manageable, medium-term (3-6 weeks) and targeted to the skills that were diagnosed. Each session should build on the last, along the following key stages:

1. Awareness building

2. Discrete practice

3. Application and feedback

4. Impact

the problem: being prescriptive

Knowing that we can be overly vague (and thereby unhelpful) in our coaching sessions, managers should be aware of over correcting and becoming too prescriptive. Managers who prescribe language to their agents are providing, at best, a "band-aid" cure, and at worst, damaging the agent's ability to interact spontaneously and appropriately with customers.

Anyone who has ever worked in customer service knows that no two interactions are exactly the same, and the ability to adjust the "standard" to the context of an individual is a large part of the success of an interaction. This is because language is dynamic: the context and function have too many potential pathways for scripting to ever mimic an authentic interaction, unless the call is absolutely routine.

To close down options for the non-native English speaker agent is counter-productive in encouraging the agents to be responsive and spontaneous in their functional communication with the customer.

Dr. Jane Lockwood
Co-founder

what is a good learning pathway?

Building a learning pathway means to create a plan with your agent that includes measurable, medium-term goals that target key skills and where each session builds on the last.

Here's an example:

Opportunities Identified **Overall Focus Area**	Solution Strategy Providing tailored solutions to the customer's requirements.

coaching plan

Session #1

Objective   To identify areas of improvement for explaining options available to the customer.

Tasks   To listen to a random call that was handled by the agent, and identify the following things: 1) how the customer was feeling when the balance transfer offers were proposed? 2) what went well in relation to offering the solution? and 3) what would you change if you could take the call again?

The agent should come up with alternatives for effective responses and role-play them. Summarize the points covered in the session, and give the agent the task of drawing a diagram of how options are provided clearly, reflecting on how the areas of improvement could be implemented within their calls going forward.

Session #2

Objective   To demonstrate how to explain options available to the customer effectively and to ensure solutions are achieved to a high standard.

Tasks   Take an explanation and break it into its component parts, then rebuild and see which parts are necessary for clarity. Then listen to an authentic call and discuss the strengths of how the agent explains the solution to the customer. Identify the techniques used by the agent that are effective and why. Identify how the agent goes the extra mile.

Session #3

Objective   To analyze how a clear explanation to the customer affects the effectiveness of the call.

Tasks   Take an authentic example of the agent's explanation of a problematic call. The agent identifies the key points that impacted communication and the success of the call. The agent then role-plays an improved version of the call with the coach and records themselves. Play back and highlight the key points that made explanations clearer. The agent then explains the difference by comparing and contrasting the two call excerpts.

5. develop your talent

Adapt tasks to what will connect most with the agent.

Developing your agents means expanding your range of delivery methods to reach different learners and help them feel individually cared for and developed.

Your managers can immediately improve the relevance and impact of their sessions by taking the time to understand their team's various learning styles. Once managers identify an agent's learning style, they can adapt tasks to what will connect most with the agent. Doing so creates sessions that are not only engaging and relevant, but ones that will also measurably help agents advance along their learning pathway.

the problem: one-size-fits all coaching

While in training, a one-size-fits-all approach may be necessary; however, coaching sessions allow the coach to tailor the style, delivery and task to the individual. Unfortunately, this opportunity is rarely maximized, because many coaches will provide the type of learning experience that they themselves would appreciate.

Consider a kinesthetic coach helping a reflective learner: the kinesthetic coach plans a session around role-plays to immediately implement and try out new strategies. The reflective learner feels intimidated and is unable to digest the learning points before implementing them in a role-play. The result: agent does not learn effectively and the coach may find this agent to have less potential than another, more kinesthetic learner. These biases are simply a product of a lack of awareness of the differences in learning approaches. Once coaches become aware of different styles, they can adapt to different learning types and learning effectiveness can exponentially improve.

See what it means to have and coach to different learning styles.

adapting to your agent's learning style

There are a wide range of strategies that you can adopt to better coach specific skills for different learning styles.[1]

Here's an example:

coaching for clear explanations

	Auditory learns best by using aural content in visualization and association.	Listening to authentic calls and evaluating explanation.
	Visual learns best by what they see - pictures, diagrams, demos, etc.	Diagrams and pictures to show how calls are managed.
	Kinesthetic learns best through physical or practical hands-on experiences.	Role-play explaining effectively and compare with poor explanation.
	Reflective learns best by observing and thinking about what happened.	Allow time between input and practice to consider how to make a clear explanation.
	Verbal learns best through written and spoken explanations.	Organize a jumbled text into a clear explanation.
	Sequential learns best in linear steps - each step following from the previous.	Start with specific scenarios and components, then move on to general application of clear explanations.
	Global learns in large jumps - absorbing material almost randomly, then seeing the connections.	Open-ended elicitation about what makes a clear explanation.

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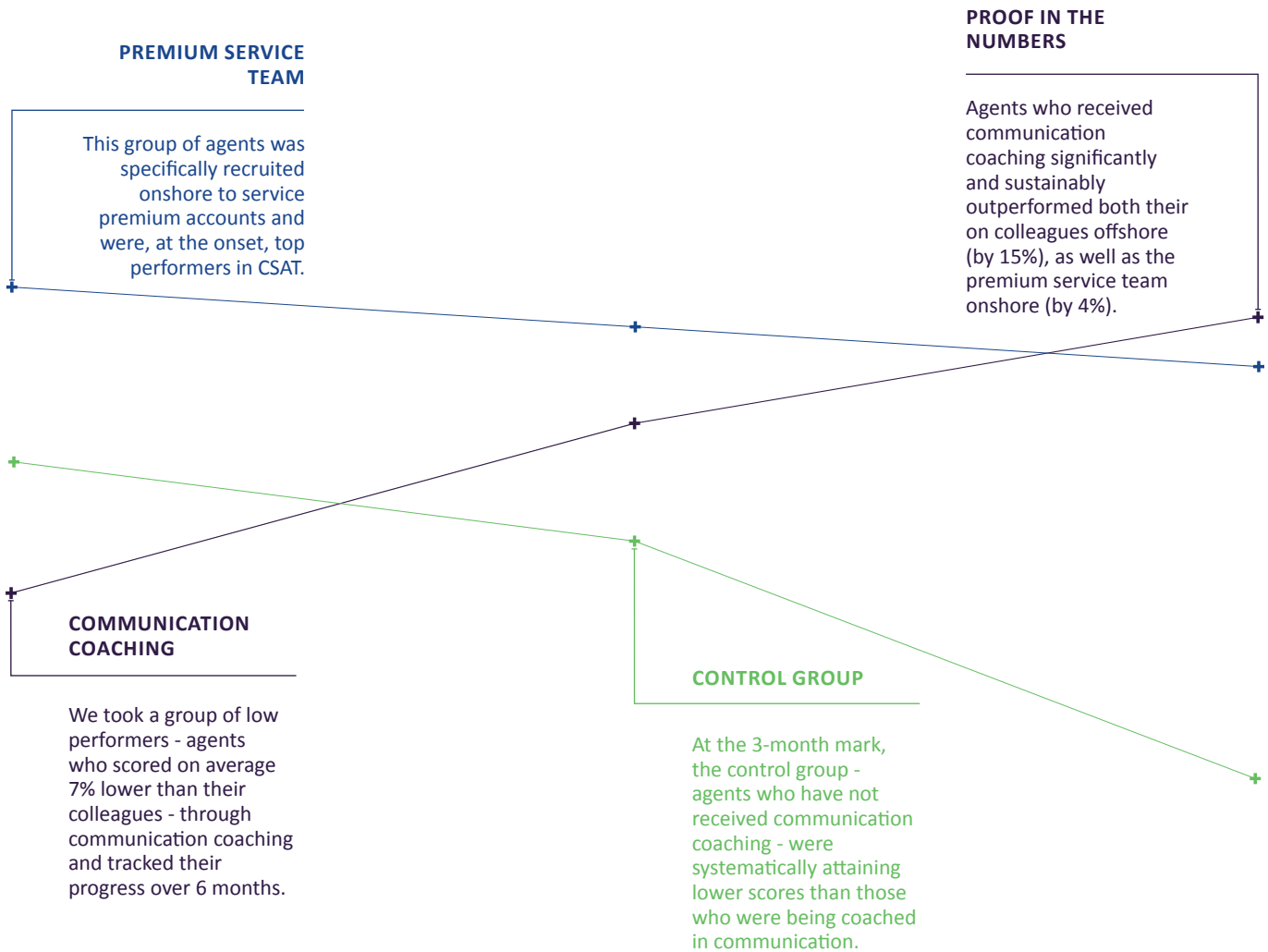1. Felder, Learning Styles & Strategies, North Carolina University, 2005

Honey & Mumford, Manual of Learning Styles, 1985

6. the results

For the KPIs most important for businesses in the contact center industry, such as customer satisfaction and resolution, the agents who received communication coaching quickly and sustainably outperformed their peers. CSAT and Resolution scores of these agents exceeded those of the premium service team onshore - those who set the standard of communication and take escalated calls to ensure high quality call handling.

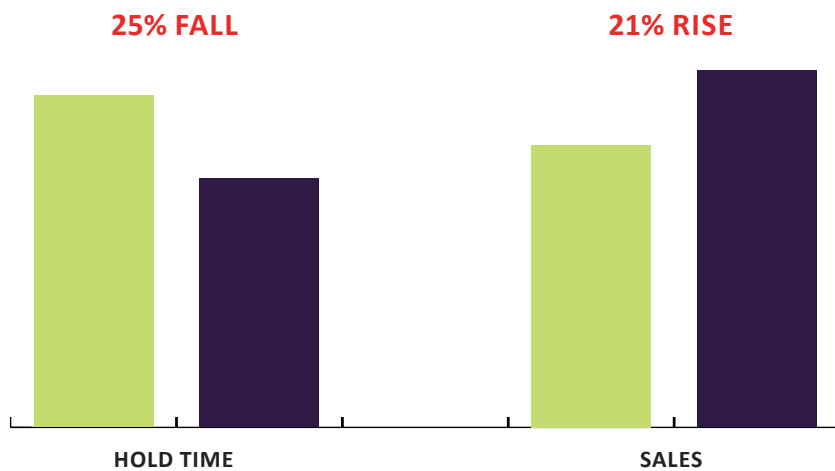**DRAMATIC IMPROVEMENT IN CUSTOMER SATISFACTION**

6-month CSAT scores

PREMIUM SERVICE TEAM

This group of agents was specifically recruited onshore to service premium accounts and were, at the onset, top performers in CSAT.

PROOF IN THE NUMBERS

Agents who received communication coaching significantly and sustainably outperformed both their on colleagues offshore (by 15%), as well as the premium service team onshore (by 4%).

COMMUNICATION COACHING

We took a group of low performers - agents who scored on average 7% lower than their colleagues - through communication coaching and tracked their progress over 6 months.

CONTROL GROUP

At the 3-month mark, the control group - agents who have not received communication coaching - were systematically attaining lower scores than those who were being coached in communication.

improving the KPIs crucial for your business

25% FALL **21% RISE**

HOLD TIME   SALES

Achieve sustainable and significant progress only after 3 months.

Good communication coaching has a positive impact on all of the KPIs important to your business, because your agent and their ability to effectively communicate is key to how your customers will perceive your company.

Beyond customer satisfaction, successful sales have also been a result of communication coaching, because a sale made during a service interaction requires the ability to tailor the product offered to the needs of the customer and convincingly explain how the item or service would enhance the customer's experience with the company. These types of sales tend to fail when it sounds disconnected or poorly transitioned. This relates back to the ability to connect and transition - both communication skills that are related to discourse.

Want solutions?

Interested in communication coaching for your company? Contact us for a free consultation.

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In addition, KPIs linked to call efficacy, such as hold time and average handling time, improve when your agents are coached to be better communicators. For example, while in some cases hold time may be legitimately required to investigate a problem, the agent primarily uses hold time to 1) decompress if a customer is frustrated, 2) to ask a peer what the customer meant, 3) to take time and find a way to better explain, so that the customer can understand and 4) to ask supervisors for help on call management. Addressing the communication issues at the root of these uses will result from a reduction in hold time. If hold time is used to decompress, it comes from a lack of ability to manage interpersonal relationships and to defuse anger. If hold time is used to ask others how to understand the customer or to manage a call, or to find different ways to frame your own explanations, improving discourse and probing skills can be essential.

faq

1. DOES COMMUNICATION WORK ONLY IN OFFSHORE LOCATIONS WHERE ENGLISH IS A SECOND LANGUAGE?

Native speakers are not always expert at building relationships, explaining clearly or adapting. For example, the impact study in the Results section demonstrates that offshore non-native speaker agents can outperform domestic, native-speaker agents with communication coaching. Simply having language proficiency is not enough – the skills and strategies associated with good communication are more than just pure language.

In our partnerships with companies operating in the contact center industry, we have seen that native speakers show a wide range of capabilities in discourse, adaptability and interpersonal skills. This directly links to their performance, which one large shared service in the banking sector saw as a good opportunity to improve the KPIs of their onshore centers.

2. WHAT ARE THE LOGISTICS OF COMMUNICATION COACHING? FOR EXAMPLE, HOW LONG WOULD IT TAKE TO IMPLEMENT IT IN A SITE WITH 40 MANAGERS SUPPORTING 500 AGENTS?

It depends on how you would like to roll out the new skill set. A mass roll out of accreditation would take around 2 months, but a staged approach would take longer.

A staged approach has the benefit of being internally sustainable. This would be achieved by training approximately 8 top performing coaches at the outset. Then, while training the next group, accrediting the first 8 coaches to be mentors, who will support future coaches. This approach would take around 4 months, depending on scheduling.

3. DOES THIS KIND OF COACHING APPLY TO PROCESSES OTHER THAN CUSTOMER SERVICE? FOR EXAMPLE, SALES OR COLLECTIONS?

The methodology is appropriate, but it needs to be applied differently by changing the weighting of the skills and the focus on the specific strategies that are most linked to success in those processes. For example, Collections agents need more negotiation, empathic and solution tailoring skills. Technical Support agents need to be highly capable in probing effectively and clearly providing instructions and explanations that are easy to follow.

4. DO COMMUNICATION COACHES NEED TO HAVE A BACKGROUND IN LANGUAGE TEACHING, IN ORDER TO LEARN THE SKILLS NEEDED TO COACH AGENTS?

The short answer is no, but they do need to have good communication skills. The only entry requirement for being accredited in communication coaching is strong proficiency in English. Everything else can be taught in the accreditation process, which is not only possible, but is highly effective.

5. IS SIDE-BY-SIDE COACHING EFFECTIVE? ARE THERE ANY TIPS FOR MAKING THEM MORE EFFECTIVE?

Side-by-side sessions can be extremely useful and have high impact, if they are linked to a pathway and are reinforcing topics from past coaching sessions. If they are simply a "don't do that"/ "do this more" feedback moment, they lack impact and can be confusing for the agent, because the points for improvement are not related to their development path.

6. ARE THERE BROADER ORGANIZATIONAL BOTTLENECKS THAT CAN DICTATE HOW SUCCESSFUL GOOD COACHING CAN BE?

Yes, absolutely. Often operational measures that determine contact center contracts receive too much focus in coaching sessions (e.g., Average Handle Time). Aligning the focus to customer experience is critical.

A related issue is the necessity of being consistent with the message from the business. If metrics keep changing and there is always a new "metric of the month", agents will not have a chance to digest and develop the skills necessary to be successful before the metric or weighting changes again. It becomes a reactive, rather than proactive process that is far from ideal.

Lastly, commitment to the time spent on preparing coaching sessions is another operational bottleneck that can impede impact of high quality coaching. If managers are not given the bandwidth to analyze calls, prepare effective coaching sessions and spend time off the phone each week with their agents, you limit their ability to positively and significantly impact KPIs.

7. WHAT CRITERIA CAN BE APPLIED TO SELECT CANDIDATES WHO HAVE THE BEST COMMUNICATION SKILLS TO BE EFFECTIVE COACHES AND EFFECTIVE AGENTS?

The same criteria in communication that is measured in operations must be used during recruitment.

By using an end-to-end approach, you ensure that a manager that is in a communication coaching role has the prerequisite skills to be accredited for effective coaching.

In addition, this approach would allow you to better track agent progress and recruit the communication profiles that you would need to service an account at any time. For example, if a Technical Support account needs rapid on boarding, you would be able to recruit for higher baseline capabilities in discourse that could be more quickly upskilled, during the communication coaching process.

about us

ABOUT FUTURE PERFECT

Future Perfect is a communication advisory firm that optimizes performance and cross-cultural collaboration through expert understanding of English for Occupational Purposes. Our unrivaled products are based on rigorous research and authentic data – ensuring our insights are relevant to real-world business needs.

Our teams are specialists in applied linguistics, who will provide results-driven and customized solutions. They will ensure your teams are trained to implement our tools and provide continuous support for quality assurance.

OUR VISION

Future Perfect was founded on the idea that workplace communication has far-reaching implications on business performance and that targeting improvement requires a specific strategy founded on extensive research, application and analysis. Our products have earned a reputation for being transformative and for proving that a holistic approach to communication yields the best results.
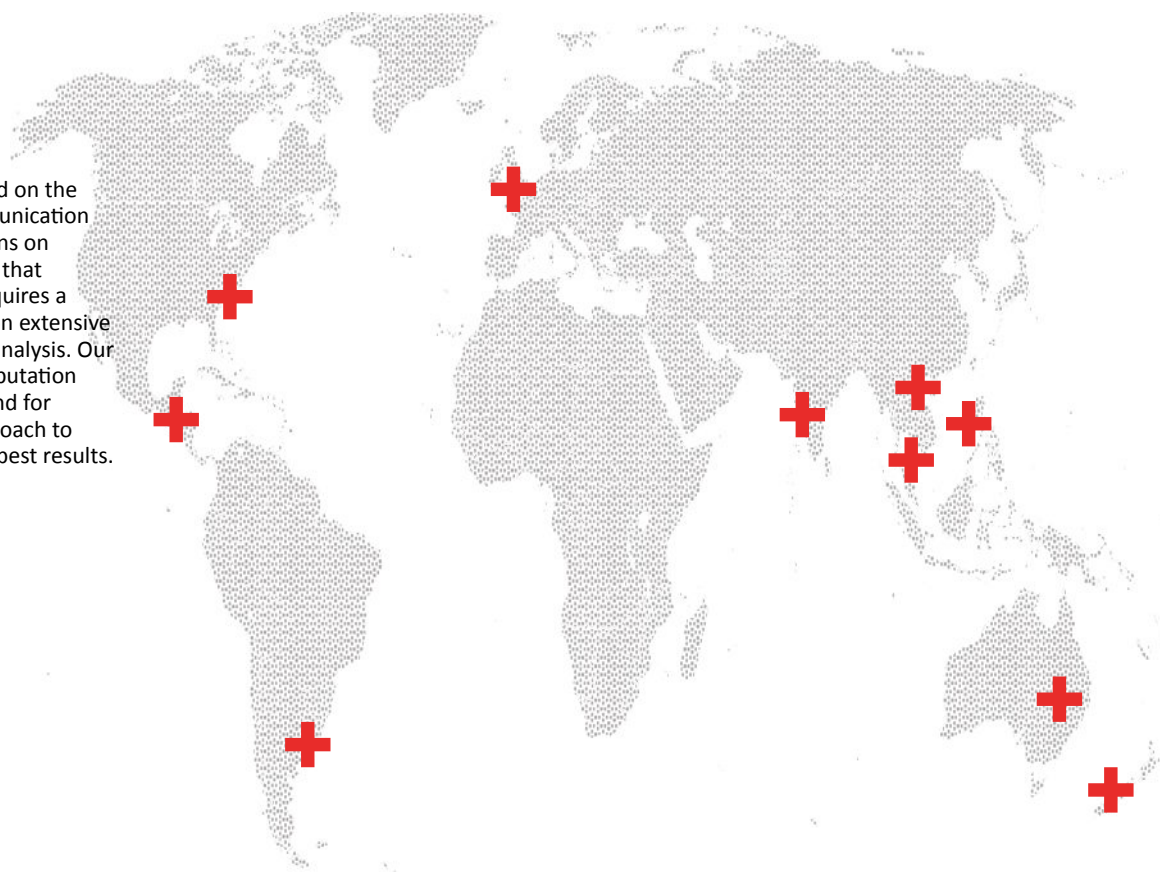
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BUPLAS - OUR FLAGSHIP PRODUCT SUITE

BUPLAS (Business Performance Language Assessment System) is an end-to-end communication assessment and training system that recruits for, trains and coaches the real skills for contact center success.

This set of customized tools coupled with our support and quality assurance makes BUPLAS internally sustainable and allows companies to recruit and develop top performers every time.

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