how to recruit the perfect agent

How to Recruit the Perfect Agent

Enhance your recruitment process by avoiding the common pitfalls of communication assessment.

futureperfect

how to
recruit the perfect agent

Problem 1:
Bad Test Practices

Using assessments that look at general English skills or conducting informal assessments using standard interview questions are only some examples of test practices that result in hiring poor quality agents.

be relevant

Check that your communication tests are probing the specific skills required for success in their job roles.

Problem 2:
Error Counting

Not all errors are equal and not all errors are worth counting when it comes to evaluating the necessary communication skills for customer service in a contact center environment.

be holistic

Ensure your recruiters are testing language as it is used, in the context of a conversation.

Problem 3:
Over-automation

Even though automated language testing allows for faster assessment, an overreliance on it will not give you a full picture of a candidate's communication skills in a dynamic, conversational context.

be human

Only a live assessor, who can evaluate tone of voice, nuance, confidence and adaptability, can reliably test the communication skills that your customers expect.

Language and communication assessments are par for the course for most onshore and offshore contact centers. However, in a highly competitive industry that is constantly seeking talent, the traditional assessments used for communication screening carry two enormous risks:

1. Excluding the best talent
2. Selecting poor communicators

This white paper looks at three ways in which you can enhance your recruitment process, and shows why common misconceptions of communication assessment at recruitment can produce unreliable results. It also shares actions you can take today to improve your hiring profile and get the best communicators in the market.
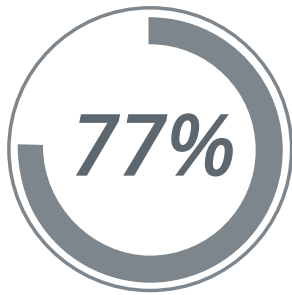
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setting the scene

77%

50%

60%

The contact center industry is continuing to grow and mature.

77% of contact centers worldwide expect to maintain or grow in size in the next 12 to 24 months.[1]

Turnover is high – with the largest centers most at risk.

31% of contact centers with 500 or more representatives reported a turnover rate of over 50%.[1]

Customers demand excellent communication skills.

Even in a negative economy, 60% of customers are often or always paying more for a better experience.[2]

Fact 1:
Maintaining a competitive advantage means recruiting the right talent.

Fact 2:
Substantial backfill requirements will entail hiring for loyalty and performance.

Fact 3:
Contact centers cannot afford to hire those who do not meet customer expectations.

1) Deloitte Global Contact Center Survey Results, 2013; 2) Harris Interactive Customer Experience Impact Report, 2011

1/ be relevant

The simplest way to find out if your recruitment assessment is probing the skills relevant to your customers is to conduct a regression test.

To do this, take a representative sample of high performers, mid performers and low performers. Then, compare their performance with their original communication tests at recruitment and determine if there is a statistically significant correlation.

If there is not, your tests are not predictive of success. You may be losing excellent talent, and ultimately, it's time to change the way you evaluate your candidates.

If there is no statistically significant correlation between performance on the call floor and performance at recruitment, then it's time for a change.

CONTACT CENTERS ARE UNIQUE

Make sure that your communication tests at recruitment are probing the specific skills required for success in customer interactions. Research into this field has identified particular communication skills that are more closely linked to achieving high CSAT, Resolution and NPS results. These are not the same skills that are prioritized for General English, or even Business English. The contact center world has very particular demands on customer interaction that your recruiters need to be testing.
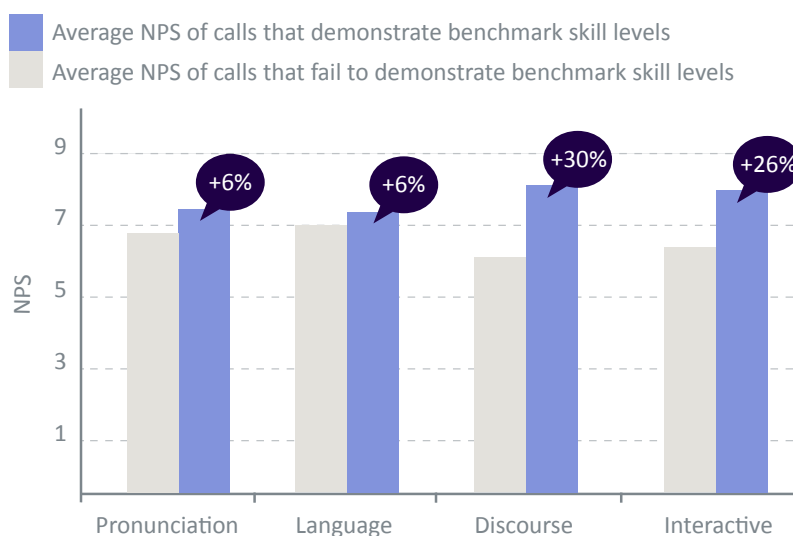
RECRUIT FOR THE SKILLS YOU NEED

The communication skills most linked to customer satisfaction and loyalty are:

Discourse: Clear and logical explanations or instructions that are easily understood and do not require customer effort to comprehend and decipher.

Interactive skills: Exhibiting appropriate tone and register, intercultural awareness, and the ability to manage customer emotions, to repair communication breakdown and to adapt to the customer's communication style.

Analysis of over 100 calls at a leading global contact center showed that agents who exhibited benchmark skills in discourse or interactive were also those who achieved at least 25% higher NPS (Net Promoter Score) than their colleagues.

Legend:
- Average NPS of calls that demonstrate benchmark skill levels
- Average NPS of calls that fail to demonstrate benchmark skill levels

Bar chart (NPS axis 1–9) with categories: Pronunciation (+6%), Language (+6%), Discourse (+30%), Interactive (+26%)

TESTING FOR WRITING SKILLS

Not assessing for writing skills is a huge risk, because speaking and writing skills are not correlated. In a sample of 100 agents taken across India, Sri Lanka and the Philippines, only 40% of people, who were strong speakers were *also* strong writers.

Customers are far less forgiving of writing errors. It is important to ensure that the candidates who will eventually represent your company through written communication have the benchmark skills to perform according to these expectations.

ASSESS FOR ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

Using General or Business English assessments means that you risk not targeting the very skills you are hoping to find in your talent pool.

General English and Business English tests look for grammar accuracy and the ability to sound professional and comprehensible. While important, this is only half of the story in contact centers. Beyond that, you need to be able to:

1. Make a fast connection with the customer;

2. Explain and provide clear instructions; and,

3. Listen and accurately interpret to arrive at a resolution.

INTERVIEWS VS. ASSESSMENTS

Most applicants prepare for generic interview questions. As they will have rehearsed, they will probably sound a lot more polished than what they can produce spontaneously.

In addition, these questions do not probe the type of skills that customers expect - confidence in complex situations and the ability to explain and manage emotions.

Assessment tasks that do not link to the skills actually required of the candidates will not give you an accurate picture of their capability. For example, tongue-twisters are not a good predictor of comprehensibility or telling a story around a cartoon is not a good predictor of the ability to make a connection with a customer or explain a complex process.

Even though only 18% of large contact centers assess for writing, all of them expect their agents to write directly to customers in either chat or email format.

2/ be holistic

Ensure you are assessing language as it is used.

This means that you should evaluate language based on the overall experience of speaking to the person and how they were able to communicate in a relevant context. Gauging overall comprehensibility, a candidate's language choices, and their ability to explain and interact are far better predictors of performance, than scoring based on errors or specific words used.

Language is a system of dynamic choices that are driven by the changing context of human interactions.[1] A selection process based on clear criteria using tasks that elicit language in context is therefore the best approach to assessing a candidate's ability to communicate.

Language is a system of dynamic choices that are driven by the changing context of human interactions.

PRIORITIZE RANGE OVER ACCURACY

When holistically assessing language and communication, we know that in most cases it is more important to have a wide range of structures and vocabulary than to be 100% accurate with them all of the time.

Consider the two examples below:

Prioritizing Accuracy

AGENT	Thank you for contacting Company X. How may I help you?
CUSTOMER	I'm trying to log into my account, but can't seem to get in. Can you help me log back in?
AGENT	OK. I can help you on that.
CUSTOMER	Thanks!
AGENT	You are welcome.
CUSTOMER	So – what do I do to log back in?

Prioritizing Range

AGENT	Thank you for contacting Company X. How may I help you?
CUSTOMER	I'm trying to log into my account, but can't seem to get in. Can you help me log back in?
AGENT	Certainly! I'm happy to help. I'll be giving you an instructions on how to reset your password. We'll try that first and if you're still unable to log in, we'll try some other option.
CUSTOMER	OK great.
AGENT	In order for me to help reset your password at this end, can you provide your 4-digit passcode?

1) Michael Halliday, Categories of the Theory of Grammar, 1961

In these examples, we can see how having range and interpersonal control of language can turn a robotic transaction into a positive, interpersonal experience. When accuracy is prioritized at recruitment, the customer is driving the call, because the agent does not have the range or control of communicative strategies to be proactive or set expectations. When the recruiter selects agents who demonstrate range, the agent is able to set expectations, to use interpersonal language to reassure and to build a relationship. Despite noticeable grammar errors, the customer was much happier with that interaction.

CONTEXTUALIZE THE ASSESSMENT

In internationally recognized tests, such as IELTS and TOEFL, the requirement that there "must be a relationship between the language used on tests and that used in real life "[2] is nowadays generally the accepted view. The realities of a contact center requires an agent to manage clear instructions, emotion and be spontaneous, professional and confident throughout. This is a very specific context, compared to Academic English or even Business English. For that reason, contact center tests should probe the very communication skills expected in the agent's job.

FOCUS ON COMPREHENSIBILITY & EFFECTIVENESS

While it is useful to note systematic errors, and errors that impede comprehension, they are not the be-all and end-all of assessments. In fact, focusing too much on errors can lead to disastrous hiring results, because not only are you liable to penalize people who take more risks and speak more extensively, but you may miss other crucial aspects of communication, such as interpersonal skills.

KNOW WHEN ACCURACY IS IMPORTANT

Some aspects of accuracy are more important than others. Noticeable errors, such as subject-verb agreement are less important to communication effectiveness than other errors that affect meaning, such as tenses and modal verbs. It is important that the prioritization of errors focuses on how systematic they are, and how likely they are to break down communication with a customer.

2) Lyle Bachman, Fundamental considerations in language testing, 1990

Holistic scoring does *not* mean giving an overall score.

"A much more valid and reliable assessment for the contact center industry is to score each aspect of communication and to match them to the needs of the particular line of business. For example, a technical support account will need different communicative competencies than a collections account."

Dr. Jane Lockwood
Co-founder

3/ be human

The communication skills you require from your agents can only reliably be tested by a live assessor, who can evaluate tone of voice, nuance, confidence and adaptability. Researchers agree that though automated tests provide busy recruiters with data quickly, the technology is capable of assessing only a very limited slice of a candidate's ability to communicate.

"The slice that is measured is probably the easiest part in terms of mastery, but least vital in terms of judging whether [they] can succeed. Machine-scored tests could have a role in preliminary screening, but can't replace a [face-to-face] oral proficiency interview."[1]

Automated tests provide data quickly, but are only capable of assessing a limited slice of a candidate's ability to communicate.

Stretch your candidates' skills

Live assessors are not limited to canned questions. With the ability to choose questions most appropriate to each candidate's skill level, recruiters can stretch candidates to their full potential, so that a valid assessment can be made of their capabilities. For example:

Topic
"Parents determine the personality of their children."
Do you agree?

Follow-up question for a low-level candidate:
Describe two personality traits that you think are important.

Follow-up question for a high-level candidate:
In the future, genetic engineering may eliminate susceptibility to diseases. Do you think there are any downsides to this?

Live assessments can be local

Offshore sites can do just as well with local assessors as they would with native speakers, as long as assessors have strong communication skills themselves.

High proficiency in communication is the most important skill for an assessor to have. In fact, a recent study conducted by the FBI on language assessors showed that proficiency was most important to assessor reliability, than whether or not they were native speakers.[2] We recommend an assessor with skills at or above CEF C1 (Common European Framework) or BUPLAS 3.5/4.0 on a scale of 0.5-5.0, as a minimum benchmark.

Interpersonal skills can only be assessed by people

For assessing speaking, live assessors are able to evaluate intercultural adaptability, by discussing complex and sensitive topics and seeing how candidates handle them. They would also be able to ask questions that require quick thinking to judge confidence and spontaneity.

For assessing writing, live readers can pick up on the candidate's ability to identify implicit tasks in emails. Unlike text recognition systems, they would also be able to assess for coherence of explanations in email responses. Last, but not least, readers can see if all queries have been effectively and fully addressed, thus avoiding a follow-up.

1) Liz Hamp-Lyons in an interview with The Guardian, Test takers answer to the machine, 2009; 2) Rachel Brooks, Comparing Native and Non-native Raters of US Federal Government Speaking Tests, 2014

Receive actionable insights

If you use live assessors who have a robust framework to assess candidates, they will be able to not only score the candidates, but also give diagnostic comments that can be used for individual development purposes. Effective diagnostic comments should follow the C.L.E.A.R. method:

Comprehensible: use clear appropriate terminology, understandable by everyone.

Logical: are clearly expressed with a logical flow and order.

Even: are brief and distributed relatively evenly across each aspect of communication.
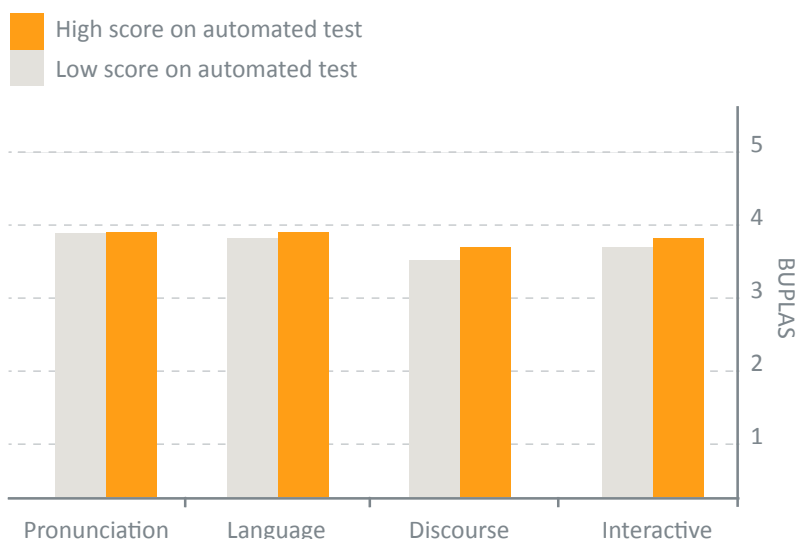
Accurate: match the scores and the skills of that candidate.

Relevant: highlight important strengths and weaknesses and use examples appropriately.

Gain the ability to differentiate candidates

Automated tests struggle to differentiate reliably above a weak CEF C1 level (BUPLAS 3.5), which is the typical entry level score for the contact center industry. This means that automated tests are unable to effectively distinguish between borderline and top quality applicants.

A study of 22 high-scoring and 20 low-scoring automated test takers show that when the same candidates are assessed using BUPLAS, the difference in their scores is negligible. This suggests that automated tests cannot effectively differentiate candidates into those who need near-hire training, and those who are clearly high performers.

■ High score on automated test
■ Low score on automated test

How do we measure communication?

BUPLAS (Business Performance Language Assessment System) assesses the aspects of communication that are critical to achieving success in customer interactions in the contact center industry:

SOLUTION STRATEGY

Can they use information to tailor a solution and communicate it effectively to the customer?

INTERACTIVE

Can they tailor their communication style to audience expectations?

DISCOURSE

Can they control the call flow and ensure links between points are easily understood?

LANGUAGE

Do they have the language choices to be understandable?

PRONUNCIATION

Are agents globally comprehensible?

✛ buplas

faq

1. Would my hire rates suffer if we profiled for communication skills at recruitment?

Not necessarily. In fact, we have found that typically, centers who focus too much on language and pronunciation end up rejecting viable candidates at the recruitment stage. By adding this talent pool back in, you may in fact find that your hire rate increases. One center we partnered with found that when they assessed for communication skills that are linked to performance, they had a more efficient recruitment process (with fewer candidates rejected at the operations interview stage for communication issues), and increased their hire rate by approximately 50%.

2. Can automated assessments profile the right candidates for me?

Not yet. They can, however, help you to manage volumes and can be an important part of initial filtering and screening. Automated tests can help you to find out if a candidate has a baseline skill set and is worth your recruiter's time to interview. They won't, however, tell you whether a candidate can perform in explaining, interacting and being spontaneous and confident in a customer context. Perhaps one day, automated assessments will be able to capture these skills, but as of the time of this writing, this is not the case.

3. Is it recommended to assess candidates on communication more than once?

You should only test communication skills once, unless you are: 1) testing different skills, such as speaking versus writing, or 2) conducting an automated/ quick filtering test, followed by a more in-depth assessment.

If you are unsure if your communication test is working, doubling up does not make it more rigorous. A good communication assessment only needs to be done once and should provide you with not only scores, but also a diagnostic profile of the candidate.

We have found that using a fast filtering test to screen candidates, followed by a more in-depth diagnostic assessment is an excellent model to maximize your resource time and get sufficient information about your candidate's communication skills.

4. Are native speakers better assessors than non-native speakers?

Not necessarily. It all comes down to proficiency, not whether or not the language is your mother tongue. In fact, a study was recently conducted by Rachel Brooks on the FBI comparing native and non-native speaker assessors, which showed that proficiency was important in determining the reliability of assessments, not linguistic background. Assessor training organizations should consider proficiency level, rather than whether or not they are native speakers.

5. Can language testing at recruitment be done over the phone?

Yes, but be careful to ensure your assessment provides sufficient opportunities for interaction. More time should be spent on relaxing the candidate, since they don't have visual cues to help put them at ease. We highly recommend giving your candidates the best opportunity to perform, and feeling comfortable is always the starting point for that.

6. What's the best way to test for interactive skills?

The best way to assess interactive skills is with tasks designed to elicit sensitivity, repair-strategies, cultural understanding and adaptability. By putting candidates in a context where they are expected to respond appropriately to various stimuli that are unforeseen, you will see how capable they are of being spontaneous and handling curve balls, while maintaining an appropriate tone.

7. Should we be customizing communication testing to each client's business line, such as banking or telecommunications?

Yes and no. You should definitely be customizing your benchmarks, but it is rarely efficient nor required to customize the actual communication test. A good contact center communication assessment should be able to tell you how well a person is able to adapt language, explain clearly, elaborate, adjust tone and express interpersonal skills. You can then weight these skills, according to how important they are to a specific line of business.

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.

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.

buplas

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.
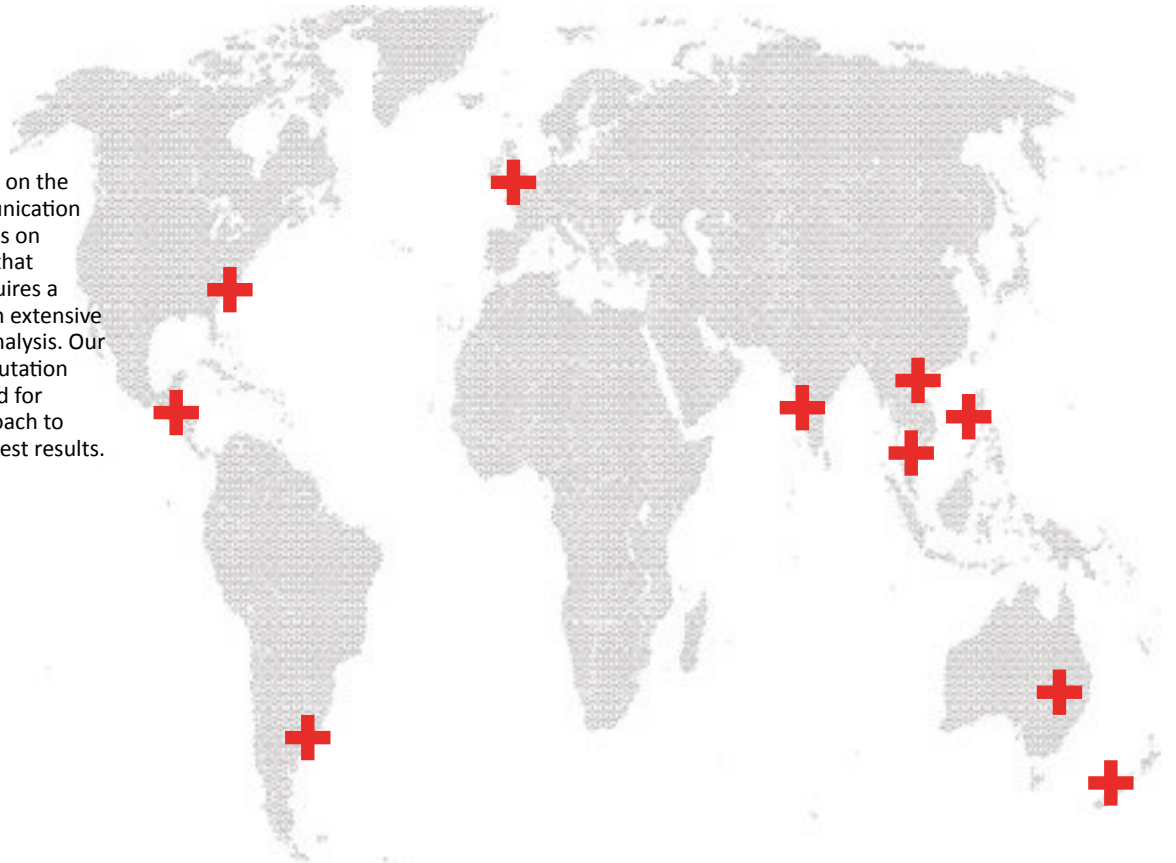
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