the 3 secrets to NPS success

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Revealing the communication skills successful contact centers target for customer loyalty.

futureperfect

the 3 secrets to NPS success

Customer expectation 1:

"I want my issue solved quickly."

Agents threaten customer loyalty when they struggle to probe effectively, provide clear explanations and efficiently resolve the call. This causes customer effort to increase.

develop discourse and solution strategy

Having good discourse skills means being coherent and cohesive, which reduces the need for rephrasing and clarification from the customer.

Having skills in solution strategy means being able to probe effectively and provide sufficient information solve the problem.

Customer expectation 2:

"I want an interaction personalized to me."

Agents who are transactional and fail to tailor the interaction to the customer will often leave them feeling unsatisfied and unlikely to recommend the company to others.

measure and strengthen interactive skills

Having strong interactive skills means having the measurable ability to build a relationship, adapt to the customer and provide an individualized experience.

Customer expectation 3:

"I want to speak with a skillful agent."

Different accounts require different skills to meet customer expectations.

For example, a Technical Support account will be better served by agents with good instructional abilities, while a Customer Service account prioritizes interpersonal rapport-building skills.

benchmark your accounts

Communication skills are measurable and these metrics can be paired precisely with the needs of your accounts.

This means that agents have the baseline skills or can be trained in the communication skills to effectively handle the specific type of interaction they will have with a customer.

NPS measures customer loyalty and is an increasingly popular metric to assess contact center performance. What then are the top customer service expectations and can you change your processes to address them? We argue that specific agent communication skills are linked to NPS and hold the key to success for your business.

In this whitepaper, we will examine what customers expect from contact centers and what behaviors your agents can adopt to promote higher NPS scores.

Based on over a decade of research into the communication skills most likely to impact calls, we will share the outcomes of extensive studies into the top three causes of customer frustration that can threaten customer loyalty.

We will present results from analysis of over 100 calls to demonstrate the correlation between specific communication skills and their power to boost NPS. We will also share the link between communication benchmarks, the profiles of agents and their ability to achieve high NPS results.

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setting the scene

Academic researchers found there to be a clear link in contact centers between employee satisfaction, operational performance, customer satisfaction, and the financial performance of a company.[1]

This means customer service has a direct impact on your company's bottom line.

Fact:
Customer loyalty relies on the performance of your contact center.

Forrester found that "While not a direct measure of customer experience quality, NPS is widely believed to be an indirect measure."[2]

Fact:
NPS helps us to gauge customer experience.

NPS gives you an overall impression of customer experience, but you need to drill down more into the causes of this impression.

Fact:
There is a direct link between agent's skill level in communication and NPS.

Convergys found that "up to 45% amount of NPS variance accounted for service experience ratings".[3]

Your agents have a direct line to the customer and are therefore in a powerful position to increase customer loyalty and satisfaction, which leads to business and market share growth.

Customer Expectations

Harris Interactive reported that "even in a negative economy, customer experience is a high priority for consumers, with 60% often or always paying more for a better experience."[4] For them, a better experience with contact centers can be distilled down to their top three expectations, according to the EMEA Customer Preference Report[5]:
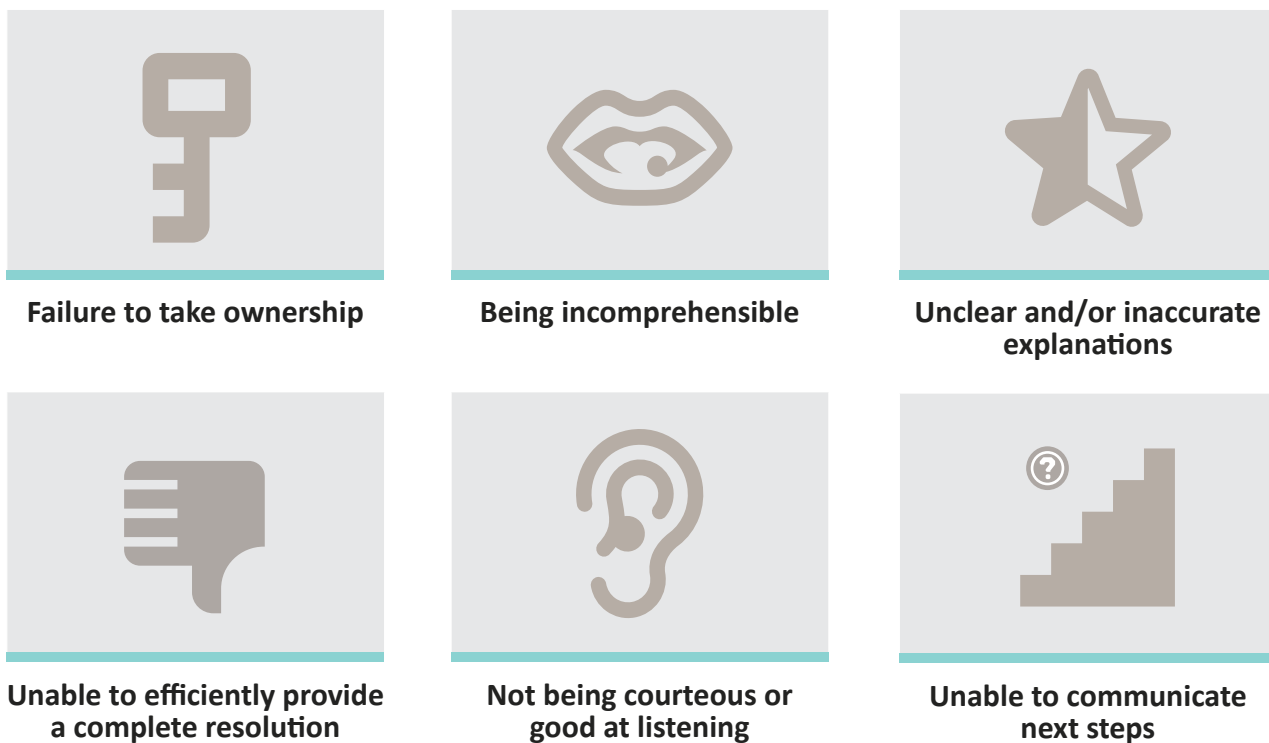
1. Their problem being solved quickly.
2. To have personal interaction with an agent.
3. To speak with a skillful agent.

Competent communication is at the heart of customer expectations and therefore has the power to drive higher NPS. In their study, Convergys looked at aspects of the call that cause customer frustration which are within the agent's control, versus elements that fall outside of their control, such as company policy and the IVR system. They found that *"two-thirds of customers' frustrations are within the agent's control".*

References

1. Marr, Bernard and Neely, Andy, Managing and Measuring for Value: The Case of Call Centre Performance, Cranfield University, 2004.

2. Forrester, Consumer Preference Report, 2011

3. Convergys, 2011

4. Harris Interactive Customer Experience Impact Report, 2011

5. EMEA 2011 Consumer Preference Report – Contact Centres, A Forrester Consulting Thought Leadership Paper, Avaya, 2011

Convergys found that these following elements are "agent-controllable", with at least one seen in 90% of customer complaint feedback:

Failure to take ownership

Being incomprehensible

Unclear and/or inaccurate explanations

Unable to efficiently provide a complete resolution

Not being courteous or good at listening

Unable to communicate next steps

When concluding the study, Convergys found that there was "a direct link between agents and NPS" with high overall agent scores correlating to NPS promoters, while low overall agent scores correlated to NPS detractors.
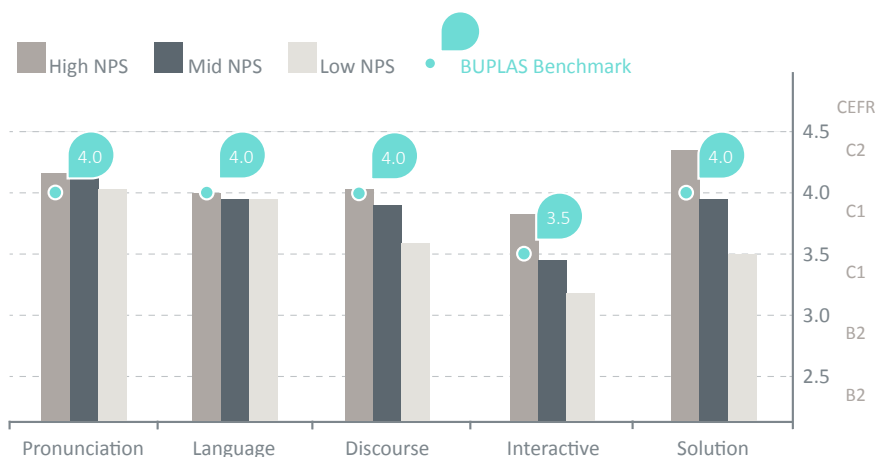
How Communication is linked to NPS

To evaluate Convergys' statement, Future Perfect researchers took over 100 calls from a US-facing customer service account in one of the largest outsourced contact centers operating world-wide. We found that communication ability, as evaluated on the BUPLAS assessment system, is a significant factor in NPS score achievement on a call and an agent level.

Further supporting Convergys' conclusions, as well as those from Forrester Research and in the EMEA Customer Preference report, we found that only *certain* communication skills are linked to NPS.

Solution strategy (efficient probing and providing a clear and complete resolution) showed **a very strong relationship with NPS.** In this case, the difference in this communication skill between NPS promoters, passives and detractors is very significant.

In addition, discourse skills (the ability to explain clearly and control the call) and interactive skills (relationship building, adaptability and intercultural appropriate choices) show **a good link to NPS.**

Lastly, NPS promoters, passives and detractors showed **little or no difference** in their pronunciation skills or "accent" and language accuracy.

Chart legend: High NPS | Mid NPS | Low NPS | BUPLAS Benchmark

Categories: Pronunciation, Language, Discourse, Interactive, Solution

Benchmark values: Pronunciation 4.0, Language 4.0, Discourse 4.0, Interactive 3.5, Solution 4.0

Right axis (CEFR): 4.5 / C2, 4.0 / C1, 3.5 / C1, 3.0 / B2, 2.5 / B2

HOW DO WE MEASURE COMMUNICATION?

Future Perfect works within established principles of language assessment, and applies independent research to arrive at an assessment framework that is specifically tailored to the contact center industry, while adhering to global standards of valid and reliable communication competency testing.

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

The BUPLAS framework sits within a socio-linguistic model of language assessment, with the standpoint that language and culture are inextricably intertwined, and draws on research that focuses on how culture is negotiated through interactions and the context of those conversations.

The BUPLAS scale runs from 0.5 – 5.0 with 0.5 increments. This precision allows companies to differentiate between people who require substantial proficiency training versus those who need minimal training/ coach input to polish their skills. Each domain of BUPLAS is scored to ensure the candidate has not only the surface level proficiency (pronunciation, language), but also the communication strategies necessary to provide a fast, clear and pleasant resolution.

SOLUTION STRATEGY	Are they able to probe effectively? 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? Are they culturally appropriate and able to repair communication if it breaks down?
DISCOURSE	Are they clear and coherent? 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

BUPLAS	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)
5.0	C2
4.5	C2
4.0	C1
3.5	C1
3.0	B2
2.5	B2
≤ 2.0	B1

BETTER COMMUNICATION EQUALS BETTER NPS

Not only did we find a significant difference between high, mid and low performers in NPS when linked to communication, but we found that those who met the communication benchmark achieved substantially higher NPS scores than those who did not. Again and again, the study showed that the most important skills to affect NPS were discourse, interactive and solution strategy.

	Low NPS ≤4	Mid NPS 5-6	High NPS ≥7
Solution		✗	✓
Interactive		✗	✓
Discourse		✗	✓
Language		✗✓	
Pronunciation		✗✓	
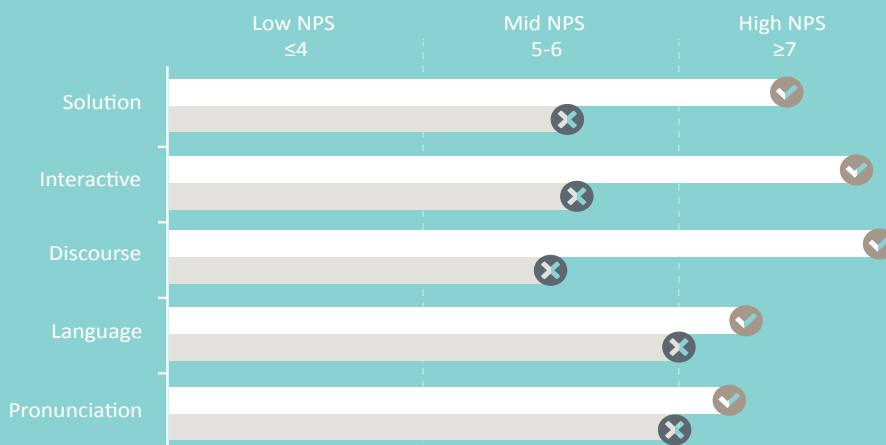
customer expectation:
"i want my issue solved quickly"

The Solution:

Clear, complete and tailored explanations.

Direct, clear explanations are culturally informed, with some cultures being more likely to be circular or indirect with explanations. It is therefore important to provide the necessary testing and training to ensure agents have the skills to provide the number one skill expected by your customers. The benefits are both in the time taken on calls and the satisfaction and experience of customers.

DISCOURSE

Gives clear and logical explanations or instructions that are easily understood and do not require the customer to exert effort to comprehend and decipher.

SOLUTION STRATEGY

Conducts efficient and effective probing, with the ability to tailor solutions to the customers' needs, to provide sufficient follow-up information and to set expectations for next steps.

Did you know?

Agents with the required discourse skills achieve 30% higher NPS scores than those below requirement. Similarly, those with the required solution strategy skills achieved 30% higher NPS scores than those below requirement.

The Problem:

Elongated, inapt resolutions that require a call back.

Without the communication skills required to effectively probe, tailor responses and provide clear accurate explanations, agents may cause:

- Unnecessarily lengthy calls due to excessive hold time, repetitions and circular explanations.
- Frustration because solutions are not tailored to their specific needs.
- Increased customer effort to understand and action the resolution, leading to escalations and call-backs, increasing the time to resolve.

The impact of this is increased call length, which not only affects productivity and cost to your business, but causes the customer to feel frustrated at the time and effort they need to spend on resolving the issue.

customer expectation:
"i want an interaction personalized to me"

The Solution:
Interpersonal adaptability skills.

INTERACTIVE

Exhibits appropriate tone and control of register, manages customer emotions and build rapport, shows intercultural awareness, repairs communication breakdown and adapt to the customer's spoken communication style.

Did you know?

Agents with the required interactive skill level achieved 26% higher NPS scores than those below requirement.

Interactive skills are often called "soft skills" and are generally plagued by being poorly understood in training and testing. In fact, far from being nebulous concepts, interactive skills are a set of specific communication strategies that enable agents to personalize calls, manage different customer emotions and scenarios effectively, and sound confident and credible.

This means that interactive skills are not just good control of tone and appropriate responses to customers, but they concern the ability to accurately interpret the customer. Reading underlying meaning and picking up on cues is critical to being able to manage the emotion and interpersonal aspects of a call. A customer who feels truly listened to will not only feel that the agent understood their explicit queries, but also predicted their needs.

And while cultural awareness is often misinterpreted as being country facts (e.g. geography, history etc.) and idioms, these are surface features of a culture. The aspects of culture that are most likely to impede rapport and communication lies in mismatched expectations of communication style (e.g. direct vs. indirect, passive vs. aggressive). By giving agents clear strategies in how to meet and adapt to their customers' communication style, we can truly set them up for success.

The Problem:
Sounding transactional, lacking credibility and not taking ownership

Without interpersonal communication strategies to effectively meet your customers' expectations, agents may cause:

- Dissatisfaction, because the call felt transactional.
- Frustration when customers feel that the agent is not taking ownership of their problem.
- Longer resolution times if agents cannot pick up on nuance and miss underlying meaning and implicit tasks.

The impact of this is missed opportunities to build a relationship with the customer, which can contribute to customer loyalty, and exacerbating frustration by not picking up on underlying meaning and not taking ownership of the issue.

customer expectation:
"i want to speak with a skillful agent"

The Solution:

Communication benchmarking.

The concept of "failing" a call in terms of communication means that you did not meet the minimum communication standards set for that process, or the 'communication benchmark'.

Communication benchmarking sets standards for skills, such as discourse and solution strategy, weighting them according to the requirements from a customer perspective.

Did you know?

Technical support processes tend to need stronger discourse skills, while Collections need stronger interactive skills. Communication benchmarks reflect these unique requirements.

Benchmarks are customized to find the right profile for specific process needs, to leverage the current composition of the talent pool and to quickly find the right people at the right time. This involves evaluating the minimum skill set required to be successful by assessing a cross-section of agents from the process, listening to calls to determine the required level and understanding the analysis of key stakeholders to determine the variety and range of call types in the line of business.

To be successful, communication benchmarking needs to take into consideration:

1. Scope for off-script or unusual interactions;

2. Interaction type, its frequency, complexity and sensitivity levels;

3. Business requirements and the communication level required for agents to address them; and

4. Customer demographics and cultural difference.

The Problem:

Lacking credibility and the skills to do the job.

If an agent does not have the skill profile to succeed in a process, they may cause:

- Lack of trust, due to loss of credibility and lack of confidence.
- Frustrated customers who are not able to get a clear resolution to their issue or do not feel listened to.
- Low employee satisfaction, potentially leading to attrition and impacting customers through the quality of calls. Research has demonstrated a clear "link between employee satisfaction, operational performance, customer satisfaction, and the financial performance of a company".

The impact of this is missed opportunities to build credibility with the customer and not providing an agent who is capable of effectively responding to a customer's query. This can both elongate the call and cause frustration which may negatively impact NPS.

> *...communication breakdown rarely had anything to do with MTI (mother tongue interference) and much more to do with intercultural and language issues in understanding the nuanced meanings in the calls, with the way in which they organized their responses and with interactional rapport building skills.*

Dr. Jane Lockwood
Co-founder

hire, train and coach for results in NPS

Skills	How to Hire	How to Train	How to Coach
Discourse	**Assess on responses** Ensure your communication assessment tests the ability to give clear explanations, provide examples and clarify.	**Authentic practice** Use real calls to give new hires exposure and practice on how to structure explanations to meet customer expectations and reduce customer effort in understanding them.	**Strategies to be direct** Raise awareness of how direct explanations are made and coach on specific strategies tailored to the individual learning style. For example, listen to model explanations, create visual diagrams of the call flow, organize a jumbled explanation and role-play a clear response to a customer query.
Solution Strategy	**Assess listening skills** Use an interactive communication assessment to evaluate the ability to listen, question and adapt to a range of scenarios.	**Scenario-based learning** Integrate communication with your product-specific training by using simple and complex call scenarios to train communication skills such as probing efficiently, using information to profile the customer's needs and tailor a solution.	**Strategies to probe effectively** Help agents differentiate between useful and irrelevant information and practice picking up on the relevant information faster and applying it to a visual profile of the customer. For example, use a "mind map" methodology with multiple pieces of information provided but only the relevant pieces should be added to the profile visual.
Interactive	**Group assessments** Assess more than one person at a time to allow you to gauge how candidates listen and respond spontaneously to one another. If you assess one-on-one, ask questions that require sensitivity in responding to determine how well candidates would be able to handle delicate situations.	**Culture is behavior, not country information** Use a student-centered learning model to give plenty of time for practicing a range of interactive strategies. Ensure that culture training takes a behavior and communication-expectations approach, rather than focusing on country facts and idioms. These are just surface features and do not touch the aspects of culture, such as privacy, underlying meaning and directness that are more likely to affect calls.	**Raise awareness of multiple interpretations** Raise awareness of different communication styles and expectations and how one style can be misinterpreted (e.g. indirectness can be interpreted as not knowing the answer/ being untrustworthy). Coach on specific strategies tailored to the individual learning style. For example, listen to calls with missed opportunities, role-play repairing communication and reassure customers in a way that sounds confident and credible.

faq

1. HOW LONG WOULD IT TAKE FOR AN AGENT TO SHOW IMPROVEMENT IN THEIR NPS IF THEY ARE COACHED IN COMMUNICATION? HOW MANY HOURS PER WEEK WOULD THEY NEED TO BE COACHED?

Across a range of industries and countries, we have seen that coaching communication for 30 mins – 1 hour on a weekly basis can be expected to improve NPS scores by 10% - 15% within 3 months, and to reduce complaints by 20% to more than 50% across the same period. The range of results depends on the skill gap at the beginning of the coaching program, and on the skill and incentives of team leaders to coach in communication.

Typically, you will see an immediate up-swing as soon as agents receive their first 1-2 communication coaching sessions because these will raise awareness of behaviours that they can immediately begin to change. Improvement will be maintained, but less dramatically across the subsequent 8-10 weeks.

2. OUR NPS METRICS ARE NOT LINKED TO INDIVIDUAL AGENT PERFORMANCE. HOW COULD WE BENEFIT FROM INITIATIVES THAT TARGET SKILLS AT THE AGENT LEVEL?

Each agent interaction contributes to overall NPS from a customer point of view. By enhancing the quality of customer contact, you are remedying a common pain point for customers and meeting their high expectations of personal service. While not the only factor, it is an important one – and one that your center can control and effect change in.

As we have shown in this whitepaper, the personal connection and effectiveness of agent interactions has been linked to customer loyalty and overall NPS, so even if you aren't individually measuring it, your whole site will benefit from each agent receiving communication coaching.

One word of caution: ensure agents are effectively incentivized by NPS (or a correlated measure) if they are not individually scored on it. This will drive self-improvement which is a core component of effective coaching.

3. OUR TALENT POOL IS ALREADY TOO SMALL FOR OUR NEEDS AS IS. IF CANDIDATES DON'T MEET THE RECRUITMENT COMMUNICATION BENCHMARKS, WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO ENSURE NPS IS NOT HURT BY TALENT BEING HIRED AT A LOWER LEVEL?

There are several ways to address talent pool deficits without risking NPS - the best method will depend on your business.

Firstly, you can look at which skill is most important for NPS in your business. For example, you may find that interactive skills are the number one requirement and that you can afford for other aspects of communication to be lower than industry standard, whilst maintaining high NPS results.

Secondly, you can invest in upfront training. You can expect to see communication gains after 80 hours of training, but these need to be reinforced with weekly communication coaching sessions if they are to be retained.

Finally, you can invest in 1-hour weekly communication coaching, run by a dedicated coach or by the team leaders, and expect a 3-month development period before NPS will be at target or average rates.

4. WE SEE VARIABLE NPS RESULTS MONTH BY MONTH AND WE DON'T GET ENOUGH DATA PER AGENT TO MAKE IT RELIABLE. HOW CAN WE ACCURATELY INCENTIVIZE AND DIAGNOSE THE ROOT CAUSE OF NPS DRIVERS WITHOUT SOLID AGENT-LEVEL DATA?

The simple answer is by incorporating a diagnostic tool that correlates to NPS into your Quality measures.

BUPLAS can be embedded in a QA scorecard as the communication element, or you can use any correlated tool as an additional measure that has a percentage weighting in overall agent-level metrics.

We have successfully embedded the BUPLAS communication domains into quality scorecards for a range of industries, customizing the weighting and approach to the needs of the business so that the QA form is not just a "tick box", but a tool that provides root cause analysis into the 'why' behind NPS results.

5. WE ARE ABOUT TO MIGRATE TO NPS AS A KEY METRIC FOR THE FIRST TIME – WHAT SHOULD WE BE AWARE OF TO MAKE THE TRANSITION AS SMOOTH AS POSSIBLE?

NPS has a very strong relationship to holistic communication skills across the board. While other metrics may focus more on one aspect of communication, (resolution has shown to be linked to probing and tailoring explanations, ASAT similarly showed a relationship to interpersonal connection and comprehensibility), NPS is related to 3 core skill sets: 1) call control and efficiency, 2) interpersonal connection, and adaptability, and 3) probing and tailoring responses.

What this means is that you need to weight your training and coaching to ensure agents have both the interpersonal comprehension and connection skills, and the solution effectiveness and efficiency. In short, NPS will give you a snap shot view of the whole package, and your agents need to be prepared for that.

Communicate clearly to agents what NPS is looking for and ensure each of them has received training or coaching to give them awareness on the skills that link to being successful in a call. NPS is about the whole package, so focus your messaging and development on holistic learning rather than specific words or discrete behaviours.

6. AS A 3RD PARTY CONTACT CENTER, WE HAVE SOME CLIENTS WHO USE NPS, BUT MANY WHO DO NOT. HOW CAN WE MAKE OUR STANDARD CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION TRAINING AT ONBOARDING EFFECTIVE FOR NPS? DO WE NEED TO HAVE SEVERAL TYPES OF CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION TRAINING?

You don't necessarily need multiple types of Culture and Communication (C&C) training to cater to customer metrics. You may need to consider this for accounts that are minimally customer evaluated (e.g. Collections, Fraud, Outbound Sales). However, it will be critical to analyze exactly which communication skills correlate most strongly to metric success so that you can balance and weight your C&C to give each agent the best chance.

For example, if you find that NPS correlates equally to explanation skills, interpersonal connection and probing/tailoring, while CSAT relates most to interactive skills, then your program could weight interactive slightly higher. This would not mean that the other skills are not covered, but would enable you to ensure agents for both NPS and CSAT accounts are given the skills required to achieve their KPI goals.

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.
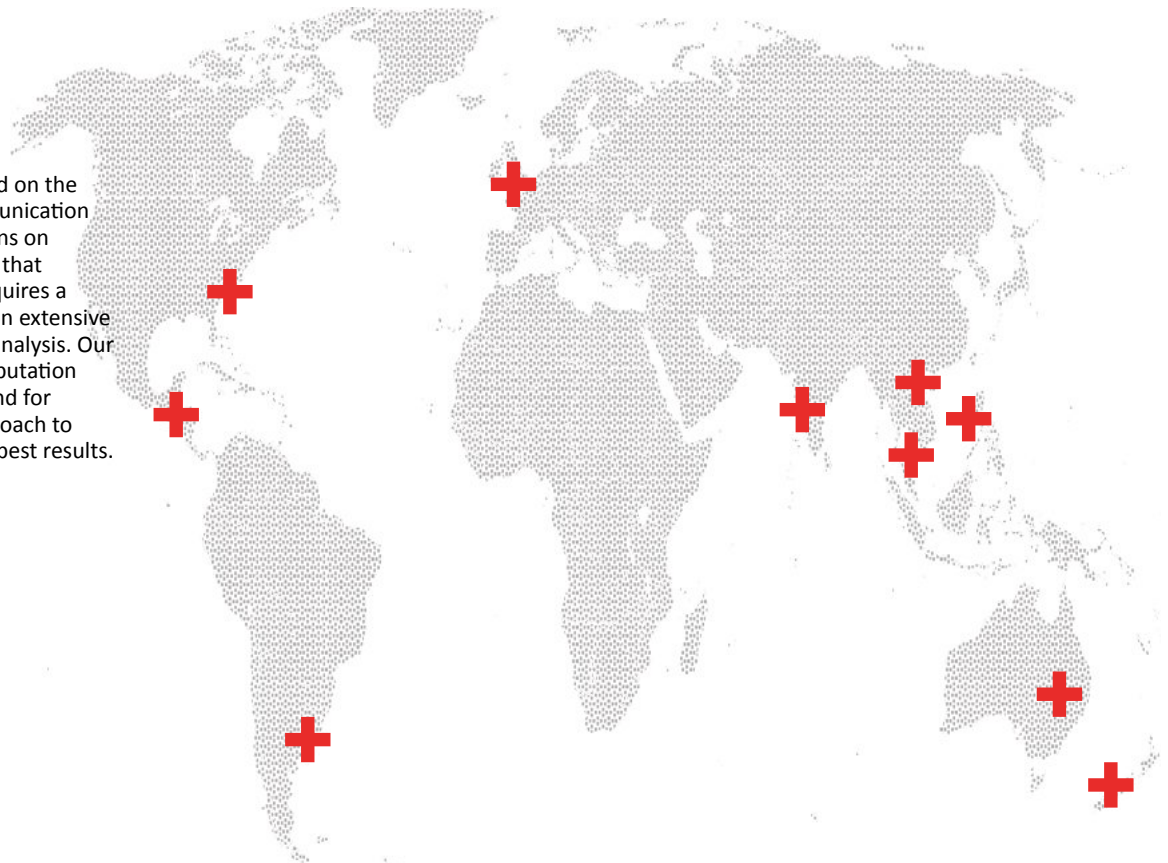
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BUPLAS - OUR FLAGSHIP PRODUCT SUITE

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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