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Why Getting Back to Just "Death and Taxes" Represents Real Progress

There is a timeless expression that goes something like "the only things you can count on in life are Death and Taxes." But anyone who has spent enough time in call centers knows that there are a few things you can count on in our industry too. Here are a few:

- 1) Step-function changes in output measure ([Customer Satisfaction](#) scores, Talk Time, After Call Work, etc) performance are virtually impossible. The best you can hope for is improvement in the form of creeping incrementalism from one-agent-at-a-time [coaching](#).
- 2) If you have a seasonal business that requires a big ramp of agents, output measure performance is going to drop during that ramp as the agents come up the learning curve.
- 3) The farther from "home" (geographically and culturally) the outsourced agents get the lower their [Customer Satisfaction](#) scores (CSAT). That is, the CSAT scores for a domestic outsourcer are lower than your own agents, near-shore outsourcer performance is lower than domestic outsourcer performance, and far-shore [outsourcing](#) is the lowest of all.
- 4) High double and even triple digit turnover is unavoidable.



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We are in the second year of implementing Agent-assisted Voice in our own call centers and at our outsourcers. This solution forces you to get very explicit about what you want the agents to say to the callers and do in their systems. You build out that exact process and then allow the agents to "execute" the process using pre-recorded audio files and pre-programmed system actions. If the call goes off the beaten path, the agents just jump in with their live voices.

At peak, we have over a thousand agents, in five locations, on two continents handling calls using this approach. We are watching the call center givens previously listed crumble before our eyes:

- 1) Our output measures are 5 to 20 percentage points higher than they were last year. This is a huge change with the same customer base, same call types and same agent population. The primary difference is that we spent the summer and fall improving the call flows...the agents are executing better processes this year than they were last year.
- 2) Despite ramping 900 agents over the last few weeks, we have seen no degradation in CSAT or AHT performance during the ramp period. We feel this is because performance is now much more a function of the processes we built as opposed to the skill, accent, motivation, training, etc of the individual agents.
- 3) There is no statistical difference between the CSAT performance of our own agents and the outsourcer's domestic and offshore agents.
- 4) Turnover is way down though this is hard to attribute to the new solution. The global economy is crumbling and many are happy to have a job. But the agents love the solution because it makes their jobs so much easier.

Your center is probably not implementing a solution like this, but you can still benefit from what we are learning:

- 1) If you can't explicitly define how a call is supposed to be handled, you have work to do.
- 2) Every agent in the world uses one of two voices we recorded here. Result: onshore performance with offshore cost savings. We get almost no escalations due to the performance/accents of our offshore agents. In my 15 years in the call center industry, I have never seen anything like it. Find highly standardized, frequently repeated portions of calls and let your agents play recordings in a voice other than their own. Your customers won't even blink.
- 3) We don't know if we have influenced turnover or not and we won't until the economy improves. But I have never observed a correlation between increased pizza parties/listening sessions/other environmental improvements and lower turnover. Based on what the agents are telling us, we think by making the agents' jobs easier we may have cut the Gordian knot of turnover.

The "givens" of life can give-way if you are willing to throw out the same-as-it-ever-was approaches and rewrite the playbook. That's why getting back to only being able to count on death and taxes is real progress.

About Alan Madison:

Alan is currently responsible for Retail and Digital Tax Service and Technical Support for H&R Block, serving 75M clients across six sites world-wide with over 2,500 associates. Alan was also the Vice President of Customer Care for Intuit and the Vice President of Clinical Services at Tucson Medical Center.

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