



ICMI Tutorials

Creating a Training Strategy and Evaluating Effectiveness

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Developing a Call Center Training Strategy

Key Points

- Key elements of a call center training strategy include:
 - Alignment with organizational and call center objectives
 - Senior management support
 - Involvement of call center managers
 - Quality in program design, development delivery and evaluation
 - Motivation of participants
 - Integration with human resource management policy
- Training is often identified as the solution to all call center ills. Training should be deemed necessary only when it has been determined that training is required to ensure employees will meet performance expectations, when the benefits of training are greater than the consequences of not training, and when training is the most cost-effective solution to the problem or opportunity.

Explanation

A call center training strategy determines intermediate to long-term training priorities, objectives and direction. The training strategy should align with the call center's overall objectives and strategies.

Elements of a Training Strategy

The following are essential elements of an effective training strategy:

- **Alignment with organizational and call center objectives:** Training initiatives must be tied to overall organizational and call center objectives. Training initiatives should be driven by business needs, contribute to the goals of the entire organization, and provide individuals with the skills and knowledge they need to improve their performance and increase their value to the organization.
- **Senior management support:** The effect of call center training on the organization's customer acquisition and retention strategy must be understood by all levels of the organization's senior management to ensure ongoing financial support.
- **Involvement of call center managers:** The best results occur when the skills acquired through training programs are practiced in a simulated

environment and immediately applied to real job situations. Even if training programs are well-designed, desired results may not be achieved if the work environment does not reinforce the skills and knowledge taught in the program. Call center supervisors and managers must be held accountable to monitor and coach employees' demonstration of critical skills and knowledge acquired in training.

- **Quality in program design, development, delivery and evaluation:** A successful training program directly supports business objectives. Participants learn what was intended and knowledge is successfully transferred and demonstrated. Development should conform with the principles of instructional design and adult learning methodologies. Program delivery should include opportunities for participant interaction and for realistic application of concepts learned. Finally, the effectiveness of training should be evaluated according to actual changes in performance. (See *Evaluating Training Effectiveness*, pp. 13-14.)
- **Motivation of participants:** Employee motivation may affect participant's ability to learn successfully. If expectations, objectives and valid reasons for the training are not communicated or if the program does not have management support or the proper facilities, participants may not be motivated to learn. Conversely, high morale encourages self-study, informal on-the-job training and enthusiastic participation in training, all of which facilitate a learning environment.
- **Integration with human resource management policy:** Training initiatives should be tied to key HR initiatives. For example, training programs must meet legal requirements, as well as fit cultural and developmental HR standards.
- **Inclusion in workforce management planning:** The scheduling of training must be integrated into the workforce management plan. This is typically done through a rostered staff factor (or shrink factor) that includes the number of agents that will be unavailable to handle contacts because of various activities, including training. Communication between call center managers, trainers and the workforce management team is vital to providing time for training and meeting service levels.

Strategic Decisions

There are a number of important strategic decisions to be made when designing the training strategy, including:

- **Focus:** Who requires training – an individual, a team, a call center or the enterprise?
- **Development:** Who should direct and review the development of training materials to ensure alignment with training objectives?

- **Location:** Should the training be performed on-the-job, within the call center or off-site?
- **Provider:** Should the training be developed within the call center and/or training department or purchased from outside sources?
- **Content:** Should the content be customized or can it be generic and purchased “off the shelf”?
- **Make or buy:** Should courseware be designed and developed in-house or purchased from outside of the organization?
- **Facilitator:** Should the facilitator be a trained call center subject matter expert, an internal trainer or an external trainer?
- **Delivery:** Should the delivery be adapted to personal learning styles or can everyone learn the same way (e.g., all classroom or Web-based)?
- **Evaluation:** How will success be measured and determined?

As with other aspects of strategic planning, budgetary limitations should not be an initial consideration. Rather, the training plan should be developed first, and then the resources sought to implement the plan. If resources are unavailable, the training plan may have to be revised. However, to allow budgetary factors to drive training often leads to ineffective or unnecessary training.

Linking the Business Needs to Needs Assessment

Training initiatives should be linked to business requirements and supportive of management objectives. The call center training department must demonstrate how a training initiative will assist management and agents in supporting the needs and expectations of customers and the organization. Further, training should be conducted when the benefits are greater than the consequences for not training. In other words, training should support a clear business need and the training plan should be the most cost-effective solution to the identified opportunity or problem.

Many managers wisely use a return-on-investment (ROI) model to decide when training is appropriate. While ROI is an important tool in making training decisions, it should not be the sole deciding factor. For example:

- Some essential training programs expect a negative ROI (e.g., health and safety programs and government compliance issues).
- A positive training ROI does not guarantee successful implementation. An ROI analysis might indicate that additional training would enable agents to cross-sell/upsell an organization’s products and services. However, if the organization is not willing to support resulting higher average handling times, training will be ineffective.

In short, a training program's ROI should not be considered in a vacuum. It must be considered within the larger context of the organization's goals and direction.

Working with HR and Outside Providers

A training agreement with human resources or outside firms to provide training usually contains the following elements:

- Roles and responsibilities
- Project plans and timelines
- Needs assessment to determine the gaps in performance
- Establishment of requirements for the learning experience
- Identification of necessary subject-matter experts for collaboration on content development, as well as learning strategies and delivery
- The administration and logistical responsibilities associated with training
- Followup to ensure use of knowledge and skills on the job

Drivers of Call Center Training Requirements

Key Points

- Each training program should be viewed in the context of an overall training framework designed to provide employees with the tools they need to perform within expectations.
- There are six primary drivers of call center training:
 - Business opportunities or problems
 - Management planning
 - Changes in technology
 - Changing customer requirements
 - Political/regulatory changes
 - Labor issues

Explanation

Each training program should be viewed in the context of an overall training framework designed to provide employees with the tools they need to perform within expectations. While some training needs are driven by internal requirements, others are prompted by external factors such as changing legal requirements or labor issues.

There are six primary drivers of call center training:

- **Business opportunities or problems:** Business opportunities often require new or additional training; e.g., for new product training or customer segmentation awareness. Industry or organizational problems often require additional or restructured training to address existing or revised work processes and systems.
- **Management planning:** The call center presents a unique environment with issues and challenges not present in other management environments. Call center managers should be trained in call center resource planning, queueing principles, real-time management, call center-specific technologies and the unique people management issues associated with the environment. Ongoing training is required to ensure managers are aware of industry developments and call center trends. Supervisory staff must be trained to effectively manage daily resources, monitor contact activity for adherence and quality, and coach agents to performance objectives.
- **Changes in technology:** Today's business environment involves constantly changing technology. Call center employees must be able to understand,

operate and interact with a variety of systems and technologies, including specialized telephones, online capabilities, unique desktop tools, reporting systems and others. In addition, the “softer skills,” such as selling and customer service, are demonstrated differently when delivered through different contact media.

- **Changing customer requirements:** Meeting customer expectations is at the heart of providing quality service and creating satisfied customers. The increase in customer access channels and heightened customer expectations require call center management to redefine processes, technologies and objectives, and clearly communicate those objectives and corresponding expectations in the training environment.
- **Political/regulatory changes:** The call center agent is often the most frequent, if not primary, point of contact for customers. When political or regulatory mandates dictate organizational response and customer communication, it is often the call center that must handle questions, concerns or complaints regarding these initiatives. Improperly trained staff armed with incorrect information can leave an organization vulnerable to negative publicity, loss of customers and even legal action. For example, a pharmaceutical company facing a product recall must be certain agents are trained to follow recall procedures precisely.
- **Labor issues:** The competition for skilled agents (especially when coupled with high turnover) makes an organization’s training strategy critical to the ongoing success of the center. Turnover and/or growth requires the organization to allocate sufficient resources to train the new employees.

Identifying Training Needs

Key Points

- Training needs analysis performs three distinct functions:
 - It establishes what present practices are
 - It projects what the desired results should be
 - It provides the basis for cost justification
- The general process for identifying training needs includes the following steps:
 - Conduct a training needs analysis
 - Determine the gaps between current performance and desired results
 - Develop recommendations for decreasing or eliminating gaps
 - Identify non-training issues that may affect performance

Explanation

According to training consultant Garry Mitchell, needs analysis is an examination of the need for training within an organization. It performs three distinct functions:

- It establishes what the present practices are
- It projects what the desired results should be
- It provides the basis for cost justification of training (p. 107)

General Process for Identifying Training Needs

Training needs are generally identified through the following process:

1. **Assess current performance and determine future objectives:** This first step in the process involves analyzing current performance and identifying future objectives. For example, if a new product or service will be introduced in six months, determine what knowledge, skills and abilities will be required for the call center to provide sufficient support. Or, if customer satisfaction surveys are revealing that some customers are purchasing from competitors because of inadequate customer service, how does service need to change to retain customers?
2. **Determine the gaps between current performance and desired results:** This step assesses the differences between desired performance and current performance levels. Once the differences have been determined, it is

critical to identify the causes for gaps. These causes generally fall into three categories: those due to the individual, those due to management and those due to the organization. For example, if an overall objective is to resolve 90 percent of customer requests on first contact, but current performance levels stand at 82 percent, the reasons for this gap could include lack of skills or knowledge at the agent level, management's failure to provide an adequate customer problem-tracking system, or an organizational culture that discourages frontline decision-making – or some combination of each.

3. Develop recommendations for decreasing or eliminating gaps: What strategies and actions are necessary to close the gaps? In making recommendations, the following must be considered:

- Skills and experience of the target population
- Required resources
- Barriers that may mitigate the success of the initiative. (See “Barriers to Successful Training” in the ICMI Tutorial, *Developing and Implementing Training for the Call Center*)

4. Identify non-training issues that may affect performance: If the cause of the performance gap is primarily due to the management approach, current processes, the organizational culture or other factors, training will likely be ineffective. The real solution is for managers to take action to address the specific problems.

Sources of Information

There are many possible sources of information that can help in conducting a needs analysis. Examples include:

- Organization and call center plans, goals and objectives, and the progress toward those objectives
- Job descriptions, which provide the tasks and duties that should be performed
- Industry experts, who can provide information on job requirements and performance standards
- Performance reviews and monitoring data, which provide specific information about employee and team performance trends
- Customer satisfaction data, which can point to gaps in the center's ability to meet customer expectations
- High performing employees, who can provide input on what makes them successful

- Benchmarking data, which can identify standards and results in other organizations. (However, be cautious. Call center requirements and drivers of the benchmarked centers may be very different from those in your environment.)

New-Hire Training

Effective new-hire training improves morale and retention. A thorough job analysis should be conducted for each position in the call center to determine the skill and knowledge competencies required. Both general skill requirements and specific organizational knowledge should be included in the competency list. Each competency should be designated as a skill that must be present at the time of hire, or one for which the organization will train. This competency map should be translated into a training curriculum that provides new employees with the knowledge they need to succeed in their position. The following table includes some suggested general knowledge and skill requirements for several call center positions.

Position	Example competencies
Agent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call center dynamics (basic understanding of how a call center operates) • Data entry • Telephone techniques (including verbal communication and listening skills) • Online communication • Customer service skills • Sales skills • Handling difficult customers • Applicable call center technologies • Time management • Organization's products and services • Organization's industry (e.g., regulations, vocabulary, etc.)
Team Leader/ Supervisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agent competencies, plus: • Supervisory skills • Coaching • Monitoring • Conducting performance reviews • Interviewing skills • Leadership skills • Queuing theory/real-time management • Applicable call center technologies (including monitoring and real-time management tools)

Position	Example competencies
Call Center Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team Leader/Supervisor competencies, plus: • Workforce management • Call center planning framework • Customer behavior • Quality improvement techniques • Budgeting process • Call center technologies (including planning and reporting tools) • Time management • Mentoring • Recruiting, interviewing and hiring skills • Organization's products and services • Organization's industry
Workforce Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Queuing theory • Workforce management • Call center planning framework • Reporting • Data analysis skills • Customer behavior • Quality improvement techniques • Applicable call center technologies (including workforce management system and desktop tools) • Budgeting process • Time management • Organization's products and services
Technical Support Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call center technologies (including installation and maintenance) • Queuing theory • Call center planning framework • Budgeting process • Organization's products and services

Aligning Call Center Training with Organizationwide Initiatives

Key Points

- The role of the call center is to support the organization's mission and help the organization meet its strategic objectives. This effort requires the development of targeted call center training to improve the effectiveness and increase the contribution of each worker.
- To ensure call center training objectives are in alignment with organizationwide initiatives, call center training managers should:
 - Operate in tandem with larger training initiatives
 - Maximize call center employees' knowledge and skills as resources for the organization
 - Make training valuable by providing solutions to critical business issues
 - Develop relationships across the organization
 - Understand the corporate culture
 - Ensure training initiatives keep pace with change

Explanation

The role of the call center is to support the organization's mission and help the organization meet its strategic objectives. This effort requires the development of targeted call center training to improve the effectiveness and increase the contribution of each worker.

To ensure call center training objectives are in alignment with organization wide initiatives, call center training managers should:

- **Operate in tandem with larger training initiatives:** Call center training cannot be developed and implemented in a vacuum. Eliminate the duplication of efforts by sharing resources and materials between call center and corporate trainers and determine if any training initiatives can be jointly developed. Every effort should be made to design call center programs that complement and align with larger training initiatives.
- **Maximize call center employees' knowledge and skills as resources for the organization:** The call center's value lies in the vast knowledge and skills of individual employees. With primary responsibility for the development of the call center's workforce skills and knowledge, training managers have the responsibility to design training programs that will

leverage each employee's potential.

- **Make training valuable by providing solutions to critical business issues:** Proactive training initiatives should identify strategic business issues (through frequent needs assessment) and be designed to target these critical areas.
- **Develop relationships across the organization:** The actions of other divisions influence the performance of the call center and vice versa. Training managers should develop and maintain relationships in other departments within the organization to share ideas and formulate call center training strategies that are in alignment with the rest of the organization. Cross-departmental training and work assignments can facilitate relationship development.
- **Understand the corporate culture:** Though the call center may be geographically located far from “corporate headquarters,” the call center’s culture should reflect the culture of the larger organization. Call center training, especially new-hire orientation, should reflect the organization’s brand messages and image so that they are conveyed to customers.
- **Ensure training initiatives keep pace with change:** The call center is the eye of the hurricane in most organizations, making it adept at adjusting to change. Call center training should keep pace with change in the organization and industry and flexibly adapt training initiatives to address change. To stay ahead of the curve, call center training management should be able to look into the organizational horizon and anticipate future training needs to support organizational objectives.

Evaluating Training Effectiveness

Key Points

- Training evaluation should result in:
 - Determining the effectiveness of the training program
 - Deciding whether to change, stop or expand the program
 - How to improve the program for future delivery
- When assessing a training program, there are four levels of evaluation:
 - Level 1: Reaction
 - Level 2: Learning evaluation
 - Level 3: Application to job
 - Level 4: Evaluating the impact and ROI

Explanation

Call center training requires precious time away from handling customer contacts, so it is important to ensure that the program meets the objectives of the call center. A thorough and systematic evaluation process is needed to assess the effectiveness of training.

At a basic level, evaluation consists of defining objectives, specifying those objectives measurably, and then assessing the extent to which learners have mastered those objectives. Evaluation should result in:

- Determining the effectiveness of the training program
- Deciding whether to change, stop or expand the program
- How to improve the program for future delivery

Four Levels of Evaluation

Training programs should be evaluated on four levels:

Level 1 – Reaction: Reaction comes primarily from evaluations filled out by attendees at the conclusion of the training program. In survey format, it usually covers such items as program methodology, group and individual exercises, quality of materials and media, facilitator capabilities, facilities, etc.

Level 2 – Learning evaluation: This is the process of collecting, analyzing and reporting information to assess how much the participants learned and applied in the learning experience.

Level 3 – Application to the job (also called transfer): This step assesses the degree to which the knowledge, skills and abilities taught in the classroom are being used on the job. It includes identification of enablers and barriers that facilitate or inhibit successful application. (See “Barriers to Successful Training” in the ICMI Tutorial, *Developing and Implementing Training for the Call Center*)

Level 4 – Evaluating the impact and ROI (also called results): This is the process of determining the impact of training on organizational productivity, improved customer satisfaction, and the organization’s strategic business plan. There are two aspects to Level 4 evaluation:

- **Impact:** What is the change in business metrics attributable to training?
- **ROI:** What is the return on the training investment (calculated by dividing the net dollar value of the benefit by the costs of training)?

Identify the Performance Metrics Required for Success

To determine the results of training, management must first establish baseline performance metrics based on the needs assessment. That is, “What measurement is used to identify the gap?” The measurement could be adherence to schedule, accuracy of information, compliance to policies and procedures, etc.

Decisions from Evaluation Information

Managers should make changes to the training program based on feedback from the evaluation process. Key issues include:

- Effectiveness of the facilitator to determine if a change in instructors or additional training for the instructor is required (from Levels 1 and 2).
- Effectiveness of the materials to see if content, sequence or priority need to change (from Levels 1 and 2).
- Effectiveness of the instructional/learning strategies to see if they reinforce the content and allow for practice and application (from Levels 1 and 2).
- The extent of the use of new knowledge and skills on the job to determine if there needs to be a change in the content, instructional/learning strategies, delivery method – or whether training should continue (from Level 3).
- The environmental factors that support or hinder the use of the knowledge and skills on the job, to decide if changes in system support tools are needed (from Level 3).
- The extent of the impact on the business or enterprise metric to determine if training should continue (from Level 4).
- The ROI to determine if training should continue (from Level 4).



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This ICMI Tutorial is an excerpt from ICMI's *Call Center People Management Handbook and Study Guide*. Part of a four-volume series developed to prepare call center management professionals for CIAC Certification, these encyclopedic resources cover virtually every aspect of call center management. The other titles in the series are

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About the Editors

Brad Cleveland is President and CEO of Annapolis, Maryland based Incoming Calls Management Institute. Recognized for his pioneering work in call center management, he has advised organizations ranging from small start-ups to national governments and multinational corporations, and has delivered keynotes and seminars in over 25 countries. Brad has appeared in a wide range of media, including *The Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, and on PBS, CNBC and Knowledge TV. His critically-acclaimed book, *Call Center Management on Fast Forward: Succeeding in Today's Dynamic Inbound Environment*, co-authored with journalist Julia Mayben, is used by call center managers around the world.

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