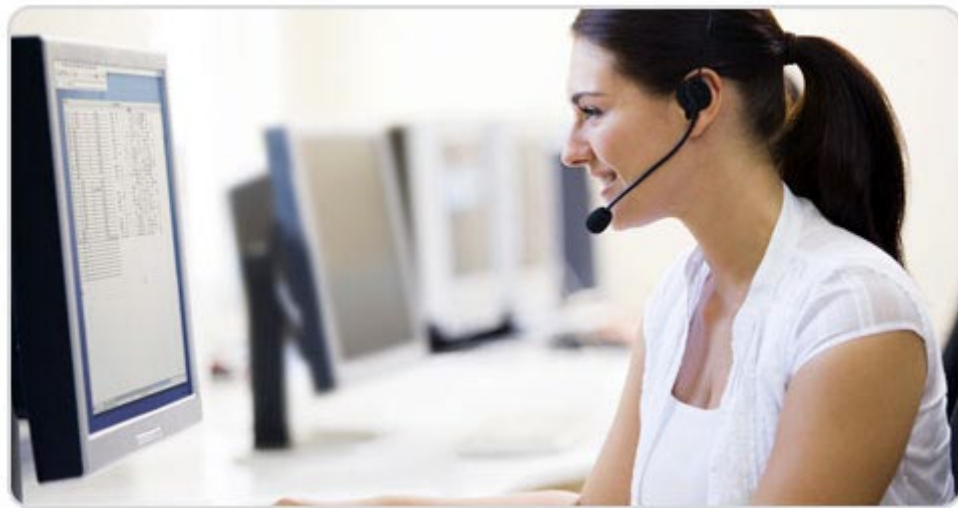


How to roll out knowledge to contact centres

- Current trend to customer self-service will lead to a shift in agents handling more complex (and emotional) calls
- A positive learning culture with regular and effective communication is essential to keep contact centre staff knowledgeable
- Give customers and staff a shared elearning experience - engaging elearning helps build and maintain product knowledge



In a real-time business environment, how do you ensure staff

are kept fully up to speed on new products and services, while also keeping customers happy? Lars Hyland outlines ways in which technology can improve knowledge, learning and communication in the pressurised environment of the contact centre.

It's hard to keep up, isn't it? Product cycle times are shrinking, in some industries down to a matter of weeks, with the frequency of product and service launches growing each year. Customers are demanding ever more variety and choice, with competition fierce for their money and attention.

Large organisations often struggle to communicate in as timely and consistent a fashion as they would like. Meanwhile, marketing pushes ahead, sometimes leaving sales and service staff struggling to service the resulting enquiries.

With the advent of the internet and the seemingly unstoppable race towards real-time communication, the stakes are raised even higher. So it's not surprising to read the results of the Customer Contact Association's 2009 membership survey indicating a strong trend towards customer self service. Essentially, this means providing the customer with information and services to answer their basic queries and conduct interactions with an organisation, without picking up the phone.



'We need to manage knowledge in new ways. In the future it is less about 'know-how' and more about 'know-now. Lars Hyland

Interestingly, the expectations were not a huge reduction in call volumes, but more of a shift towards agents handling more complex (and emotional) calls. These are more demanding and support another expectation that contact centre staff need to be much less process driven and become knowledge workers who can flexibly address a wide range of issues for the customer.

So how do you keep knowledge workers knowledgeable? That requires a learning culture, regular and effective communication, as well as efficient performance support tools that staff can reliably trust and use with confidence. Let's take a look at how learning technology can be applied to deliver a more agile and dynamic customer service culture.

1. Build and maintain a product knowledge e-learning portfolio

Every product and service your organisation offers to the market can be effectively explained using engaging interactivity, covering the key features and benefits, presenting how they sit within the wider portfolio. There is a commitment required to maintain and update this suite of knowledge modules, but when structured in an easy to access and intuitive fashion they can provide much improved consistency of understanding across your workforce.

The process needs to be fast, flexible and fit with the speed of product development and launch in your organisation - internal processes must be aligned with the e-learning for it to be engaging and responsive.

2. Virtual practice builds confidence and competence

Simulating customer interaction can help agents and advisors practice and model best practice behaviours. There are often significant constraints that will affect the call outcome based on what can be said, when and how. There is a fine balancing act to be struck between inflexible scripted responses and offering more flexible, "human" conversation, while remaining compliant.

3. Compliance/regulatory training can be automatically tracked and audited

Keeping compliant is a significant undertaking with high administration costs. Learning management systems automate the collection and reporting of completion data for later auditing purposes. Going beyond the letter of the law it is possible to have employees understand the spirit of the regulation to which they must comply. For example, no-one would argue with the need to protect data and treat customers fairly, but sometimes the regulation can overshadow the core message. Good e-learning design can address this.

4. Give customers and staff a shared learning experience

In the true spirit of self service, it makes sense to offer a similar experience for your customers and staff that ensures there is a shared understanding in place. A higher budget is often spent on 'superficial' customer communication and marketing than on staff training, often leaving the customer wanting more detail to inform their decision.

Staff also need detail and knowledge in order to serve customers well. Perhaps sharing these budget pots in a more balanced way will result in high quality learning and communication deliverables that will enable customers to self-serve, and contact centre staff to be more enthused and self-motivated about the products and services they offer.

Note that e-learning content doesn't just have to sit inside an LMS - it can be on the external website, directly linked to applications your staff and customers use.

5. Less learning more often - focus on performance support

Product knowledge dates quickly. Pulling staff away from their jobs to sit in training sessions that do little to inspire, much to confuse, only for them to forget most of what was presented is not a productive use of time. Building learning opportunities into the everyday work flow is an essential part of a modern day contact centre environment.

6. Start staff learning before they arrive

The pre-induction learning portal is proving to be an excellent tool to dramatically improve new staff engagement and productivity from their very first day. The Aberdeen Group Report on Effective Onboarding Techniques and Strategies made this one of its key recommendations for organisations looking to reduce training costs and improve employee engagement.

As we move out of recession, there will be further pressure to retain talented staff at all levels. There is much evidence to show that staff decisions to stay with an organisation for the long term are strongly influenced by the experience they receive within their first three months of employment. The pre-induction learning portal is an excellent way to bridge the chasm of communication between accepting a new role and arriving on the first day.

Brightwave and Sky, the satellite television and media communications provider, worked together to build a highly engaging pre-induction experience that includes many of the recommendations made above, to good effect. Up to ten hours of learning covering product knowledge, compliance topics, as well as sales simulations, have led to staff arriving confident and competent. This has reduced induction training by one week and measurably improved sales and customer service performance. The portal also won the Most Effective Training Programme award at the recent Customer Contact Association Global Excellence Awards. It's a best practice model well worth replicating.

7. Serving a wider community

In a globalised and outsource driven economy keeping a consistent level of knowledge amongst suppliers, resellers, customers and your own internal staff can only be managed using technology. E-learning is a cornerstone of that strategy and, with the right design, deployment, and content management practices in place you can keep pace with the rate of change we are all experiencing.

In many respects as we hurtle forward, we need to manage knowledge in new ways. In the future it is less about "know-how" and more about "know-now". That means searching, finding, and acting at the moment of need. Hold on to your hats, it's only going to get faster.

Summary points

- Current trend to customer self-service will lead to a shift in agents handling more complex (and emotional) calls – a positive learning culture with regular and effective communication is essential to keep contact centre staff knowledgeable

- Give customers and staff a shared elearning experience - engaging elearning helps build and maintain product knowledge
- Simulations can help improve customer service and interaction
- Help staff understand the purpose of compliance and regulation with good e-learning design
- Less learning more often – focus on performance support
- Get staff learning before they arrive - the pre-induction or onboarding

Note to editors - About Brightwave

Brightwave is the UK's leading provider of highly engaging work-based e-learning that delivers results and helps change behaviour. Brightwave works in partnership with complex global clients to provide a complete e-learning service, from content development to innovative tools, hosting and management, performance support and evaluation.

Clients include BT, Bupa, DHL Logistics, EDF Energy, IKEA, ScottishPower, Sky, Swiss Re, T-Mobile, TUI, The Royal Bank of Scotland, Virgin Atlantic Airways as well as public sector organisations like the Healthcare Commission, City of Edinburgh Council and Office for National Statistics.

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