Strategies for Improving Schedule Adherence

How to Realize the True Value of Workforce Management

Los Angeles, November 2011

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S O F T W A R E

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The True Value of Workforce Management

Providing exceptional customer service is paramount in today's competitive business environment. Satisfied customers are loyal customers. Frustrated customers take their business elsewhere.

But call centers are tasked with more than just providing superior customer service. They must control costs and increase revenues as well. In call centers, where time is literally measured down to the last second, a minute here and a minute there can mean thousands of dollars are needlessly wasted each and every month.

Call center managers not only need to keep track of agent schedules, they also must ensure that their time is being used productively to answer calls. Without a strategic approach to manage agents and maximize their time, call centers are setting themselves up to waste valuable time and expensive resources that cause damage in the long run. When every minute counts, call centers must focus on the impact agent adherence has on revenues, costs, and service levels.

Adherence: Are You In or Out of It?

One of the biggest challenges of running a call center is making sure that employees stick to their schedules. Simply defined, adherence is the degree (measured in percent) to which an agent sticks to his or her schedule. Out-of-adherence causes either overstaffing (more agents are scheduled to compensate for lost agent time) or understaffing (no additional agents are staffed to compensate for the lost agent time). Overstaffing results in soaring operational costs, and understaffing impacts revenues and service quality, both impacting the bottom line.

Running and maintaining a call center requires efficient staffing and cost management strategies. Being unable to effectively manage agent time leads to fewer orders and increases costs for every agent who is out-of-adherence. For instance, a 25 agent center can save over $30,000 per year just by improving staffing by 2% and reducing shrinkage by 15 minutes per agent per day.

Let's take a closer look at the costs of agents being out-of-adherence. Consider this example:
- A call center has 300 employees, each of whom works 5 days a week
- The call center pays each agent 20 dollars/hour
- The loss of time due to out-of-adherence activities equals 10 minutes per day per agent

The total loss of time will amount to: 10 minutes X 5 days X 52 weeks = 2,600 minutes or 43.3 hours each year per agent. That's more than one week of work lost to one agent being out-of-adherence!

When we calculate the amount in dollars, it becomes: 43.3 hours X 20 dollars = $866 per employee. Therefore, 300 employees X $866 = $259,800 lost each year. This is an astonishing amount of loss for an average size call center, and can be the difference between a company surviving or thriving. And this only considers the cost impact. Think about the potential loss of revenues through periodic understaffing caused by "missing" agents (no agents, no orders).

Many call center managers make the mistake of thinking that an occasional 10-minute delay will not matter but, as illustrated above, it can cost the company a large amount of money in the long run. A short delay will affect productivity in a huge way. Whether the call center has 1,000 agents or 10 agents, losing 20 hours per agent decreases productivity, reduces revenue, skyrockets costs, and impacts the quality of service call centers must provide to keep customers happy.

How Can You Fix the Problem?

A strategic approach to improving agent adherence is crucial for call centers struggling with the challenges of rising costs, lower revenues, and frustrated customers. Here are five strategies to help boost agent adherence:

1 Determine your current adherence level

First, determine your adherence level and how much time and money you are losing. There is a simple formula that you can use to find out the percentage of schedule adherence: [phone time + other work related activity time] / ([shift time] - [lunch/dinner] - [break] + [exception time] + [overtime]) = schedule adherence. You may need to modify some of these parameters based on the unique requirements of your call center. Once you know the level of adherence you can calculate the amount of lost time and excess costs.

2 Identify reasons for out-of-adherence

Identify and analyze the reasons why employees are not sticking to their schedules. There are different methods you can use to identify the reasons for your center: Review adherence reports to identify "weak" agents and to determine the times of day when adherence levels are at their lowest, observe agent behavior, discuss adherence issues with your team, ask individual employees what makes it difficult to adhere to their schedules, etc. Some of the common reasons for out-of-adherence problems include:

- Agents showing up late for their shifts
- Taking an extended break
- Logging out 10-15 minutes before their shift ends
- Frequently remaining absent
- An extremely rigid schedule

3   Educate about the business impact of adherence

Agents might not know about the business impact of being out-of-adherence. Have regular meetings so agents can get a better understanding of the importance of adhering to their schedules, and how their actions directly impact the success of the call center. You can use an example report from your call center to illustrate the impact of out-of-adherence on service levels, costs, ASA, and other metrics. You can also demonstrate how the adherence behavior of a few agents has a measurable impact on overall team performance. Make these meetings part of an "adherence" team-building effort to keep agents working towards a common goal.

4   Regular adherence monitoring and reviews

Adherence monitoring and reporting should be a key part of staff meetings. Remember that you can only manage what you measure. Involve your agents during the process when goals are set so that you can get their input as well. Before you implement a schedule, discuss it with your team and review the schedule. There should be no miscommunication from either side regarding a schedule or else it will have a reverse effect. Define each and every point clearly.

5   Set realistic goals and offer rewards

Adherence goals should be realistic and achievable. You need to give agents a decent grace period. For example: an agent who is supposed to log in at 3:00 might log in at 3:02. Taking strong action against this is impractical and will negatively impact employee morale. Establish different thresholds for various activities like breaks, lunch/dinner, login time, etc., and reward agents who stick to their schedules (95% within adherence). Bonuses boost morale, increase responsibility towards the organization, and motivate other agents to perform at a higher level.

These are just a few strategies to consider. You need to monitor and work with your agents closely to find out which factors are significantly contributing to your call center's out-of-adherence problem. Regularly monitoring agent adherence is one of the most effective ways to see how your center is performing so you can take the necessary actions to improve performance.

There are many activities that are important for adherence monitoring. This data collation is critical for making an agent schedule that works. Here is a simple checklist:

- Real-time monitoring is necessary to make intra-day changes and to ensure whether your agents are sticking to the schedule. Real-time dashboards make it easier for everyone to stay on track.
- Provide easy examples while you are explaining threshold limits. Set a certain figure as an alert. For instance, schedule adherence between 90-94% can be considered as an alert, meaning that the employee should immediately begin working on improving schedule adherence.
- Different call centers have unique needs, so the configuration and definition of call and non-call activities will vary accordingly. Make your expectations clear and add all call and non-call related activities into your scheduling and adherence model.
- Factors like call wrap-up, special after-work, outbound preparation, and other required activities that impact service levels and performance need to be monitored.
- A large call center will likely have numerous channels, so the schedule should be made to reflect the capability of supporting multiple channels.

How Can a Workforce Management (WFM) Solution Improve Agent Adherence?

Workforce management (WFM) solutions play a crucial role in optimizing agent adherence. When each and every minute counts, there is no better way to optimize agent adherence than using a WFM software solution. WFM software allows you to easily track and monitor adherence and then, when needed, adjust forecasts and schedules accordingly—all from a central dashboard and with a few mouse-clicks. Typically, WFM software can be customized to automate reporting capabilities and adherence tracking based on your unique requirements. A customized WFM software solution dramatically improves agent adherence by providing:

- A flexible schedule that can specifically address your specific requirements like flexible start and end time, time off, fluctuating call volumes, etc. This will result in better utilization of agent time and higher productivity.
- Real-time adherence, which uses real-time data from automatic call distribution (ACD) systems to provide up-to-the-moment agent tracking information.
- Reducing shrinkage through real-time adherence tracking. Since you are viewing the activities of your agents on a real-time dashboard, you can work directly with them to strictly adhere to their schedules. You can provide data projections, clearly define out-of-adherence, discuss how to work better as a team, and so on.
- Accurate forecasts of call volumes. You need to be aware of the capacity of your organization (i.e., how many calls can be handled at one time, total call volume, response times, and other metrics). A WFM software solution improves the level of accuracy in forecasting, creating more optimized schedules that reduce both understaffing and overstaffing. This is an effective way to meet service levels and ensure that it is achieved at the lowest possible cost.

How Affordable is Workforce Management Software?

Workforce management software used to be expensive and difficult to implement, but the new cloud-based WFM solutions provide more flexibility and eliminate high upfront investments and ongoing maintenance costs. Implementation is fast and you can access the software from anywhere, any time. A pay-as-you-go pricing model makes computing in the cloud an especially attractive benefit. You only pay for the actual capacity and infrastructure that are used. The biggest advantages are that you don't have to invest a huge amount, monthly savings are higher, and the risk factor is almost completely eliminated. Monthly savings from adherence improvement are typically higher than the monthly cost of cloud-based WFM, so call centers start saving right away. If you add other WFM capabilities into the calculation, such as more accurate forecasting and more flexible schedules, the solution delivers an even greater ROI.

Implementing a workforce management solution is a proven, measurable way to improve agent adherence. It removes all of the guesswork that is inherent using manual processes. Agent schedules are easier to track and follow, and savings are seen almost immediately.

In this economy every organization is looking for low cost and low risk ways to streamline processes and spend less, yet still perform at the highest levels for their customers. For call centers, a WFM solution is a sure-fire way to increase agent adherence, boost productivity, and reduce costs.

For more information about agent adherence or a demo, please go to www.monetsoftware.com, call 1-310-207-6800, or send an email to info@monetsoftware.com.

About Monet Software
Monet Software is a global provider of workforce management software solutions for call centers. Monet's cloud-based solution, Monet WFM Live, is an affordable and easy to use call-forecasting and employee-scheduling solution including ACD integration, real-time adherence, intra-day management, analytics and agent performance management. Call centers will start improving service levels and reducing center costs without the upfront expenses and IT requirements of traditional workforce software.

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