

Workforce Management in a Union Shop



With nearly 800,000 customers depending on it for reliable power, this busy utilities provider operates an around-the-clock customer service center that handles approximately 2.2 million calls per year. More than 120 multiskilled agents in this center handle customer concerns, such as billing questions, payment arrangements, transfer of service, new service and service disconnections. They also field calls dealing with rebate programs for customers who operate air conditioners and appliances within efficiency guidelines.

Technology Selection in a Union Environment

The company's agents belong to a union, so its relationship with its contact center employees comes under the scrutiny not only of contact center managers but of union officials as well. "We are governed by a collective bargaining agreement," says the company's customer service team leader, "that tells us what kind of schedules we can run, what work shifts we can require, how we implement the schedules, and how quickly we can change them if the need arises. Basically, we work from a huge document of do's and don'ts, which is very challenging when you're trying to implement technology to optimize performance."

Keeping Everyone Happy

The challenge is two-edged. In addition to meeting the requirements in union agreements, the contact center has to answer to budget planners whose primary concern is keeping costs down. The contact center is not a profit-making operation. Company executives see it as a necessary cost, and budget planners don't want to fund any more staffing than is necessary. That means managers have to get the most productivity possible out of the staff they do have.

Aspect At Work

To accomplish this, the company leverages the workforce management capabilities of PerformanceEdge™, which enables contact centers to forecast scheduling needs based on call volumes, generate schedules that match predicted traffic, monitor in real time and make adjustments as necessary. The company uses Aspect® eWorkforce Management™ in addition to being a long-time user of Aspect® Enterprise Contact Server™, an advanced routing product for multisite and multichannel contact management and Aspect® CallCenter® ACD, which provides processing for high call volumes, agent skill-based call routing, and advanced queuing and reporting capabilities.

The net result of this kind of solution is having enough agents on hand to maintain service levels without overstaffing. Convincing budget planners that this kind of efficiency-enhancing software is worth what it costs is fairly easy. Convincing the union that it doesn't work against the goals of the collective bargaining agreement is another matter. The union has a strong say in what technology the company utilizes. If the union doesn't approve it, the company can't implement it, because to do so might result in contract violations and strikes.

A case in point is the optional Aspect eWorkforce Management-Perform enhancement. Since it tracks statistics relating to individual agent performance, naturally the union was skeptical of it. But an explanation of how the module works and how the statistics can be applied won union officials over.

Ultimately, the union wants the company to be successful so that union members don't get laid off. It wants the business to make money so that its members can pay their union dues. If the company is doing well, the union and its members are doing well. Contact center managers explained in detail how performance metrics are gathered and how the Aspect® eWorkforce Management™ - Perform enhancement combines them and feeds them out as reports, and the union conceded that the software would ensure that the agents were performing at high levels, and that it would help good agents stay on their jobs.

Getting Bottom-line Results

From the company's point of view, the results have been good. The contact center has demonstrated huge cost savings in sign-in and compliance percentages alone. The center had been having trouble meeting service levels during the summer months, and, by focusing on sign-in and agent adherence, brought service levels back in line without having to take any other measures. The solution also saves supervisors and managers time. They don't have to spend hours and hours looking through reports to figure out where the call volume is and where to schedule agents. The process is virtually paperless, and all the data, including day-today items like vacations, sick leave and non-phone work, is kept in one centralized system, where it is always accessible, even if leadership in the contact center changes.

Well Worth the Effort

From this utility company's point of view, the Aspect Software workforce management product is worth the effort—the effort of convincing cautious budget planners to buy, and the effort of educating the union about the benefits that good workforce management tools offer to their members. Contact center management has asked the company to consider the Aspect eWorkforce Management-Empower enhancement from PerformanceEdge™, which automates the process of requesting and approving schedule changes, as well. This would further reduce administrative costs because agents wouldn't have to do manual exceptions and requests for schedule trades, and managers wouldn't have to spend time approving the requests and communicating schedule changes.

In addition to the features mentioned above, contact center staff praises the organization and flexibility of the Aspect Software product. "If you can think of it and work it out, you can probably do it in the software," says one manager, "because Aspect Software tries to think of everything. And if there are small things that you find you can't do, and you let Aspect Software know, then sure enough, a year later, they show up in the next version."

About PerformanceEdge™

PerformanceEdge combines workforce management, recording and quality management, performance management, campaign management, and coaching and eLearning to enable organizations to holistically respond to changing business conditions. The PerformanceEdge applications dynamically interoperate to help contact center managers consider everything and act immediately. Inbound, outbound and blended contact centers can now more easily control costs, enhance service levels, align performance with strategic goals, and extend those benefits into the enterprise. For more information, visit www.performanceedgesuite.com.

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