

Chapter 17

Ten Ways to Improve Agent Job Satisfaction

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In the business world, it's a generally accepted principle — one that I agree with — that companies with happier employees tend to have happier customers. By improving your agents' job satisfaction, you're likely to improve your customers' satisfaction as well.

In this chapter you'll find a list of things you can do to maximize your agents' satisfaction with their jobs.

Recruit People Who Value the Work

When recruiting, you need to look for two things in a candidate — skill and motivation. (For more on recruiting, see Chapter 10.) Most employers are good at finding the skill, but motivation is more difficult.



Remember that finding employees who value the work means you'll have employees who continue to be motivated after the honeymoon is over. In some cases, this might mean accepting a candidate with fewer or lesser skills. I'd take the person who's slightly less skilled but highly motivated, every day of the week.

This can be tough in some places. The knee-jerk reaction is to hire the most skilled person who knocks on your door. However, you often end up hiring a highly skilled person who's “between jobs.” It should be no surprise when the person quits as soon as they find something that he or she considers better.



A more disconcerting situation occurs when the unmotivated agent doesn't find something better and ends up resenting your call center work for under-challenging them. They “quit” emotionally, but stay on the payroll.

Clarify Expectations

Tell your agents what's expected of them and what they'll get for meeting and exceeding those expectations. (I talk more about developing and communicating expectations in Chapter 3.)

One of the reasons why employees fail to do what's expected of them is that they aren't *told* what's expected of them. Being clear in your expectations — even before they accept the job — is one way to make sure that your agents aren't disappointed (and you aren't, either). Confusion about roles and contributions frustrates everyone.



Clear expectations set the road for achievement and, even if the rewards of meeting those expectations are intrinsic to the employee, enhance job satisfaction.

Provide Good, Job-Specific Training

Train your agents in the skills they need to be successful. Lack of skills is a roadblock to success and job satisfaction. (See Chapter 10 for more on training.)

Imagine trying to order dinner in a country where you don't speak the language, and nobody else speaks yours — you might go hungry. You'd certainly be frustrated.



Having the right skills, and an adequate level of ability in those skills — some of which are critical, such as call control, anger diffusion, sales, product and system knowledge, and policies and procedures — improves agent achievement, which is motivating. With a solid foundation of skills your agents can become skilled professional achievers.

Tell Them How They're Doing, Often

Good or bad, people need feedback; it tells them whether they're getting closer to their goals. (I talk more about feedback in Chapter 11.)



In the absence of feedback, agents will be frustrated because they don't know how they're doing or may feel their contribution is unappreciated. Failing to provide sufficient feedback can spoil a lot of your planning and managing.

At a very minimum, feedback tells your agents that you notice them and appreciate what they're doing.

Remove Roadblocks to Success

Obstacles occur in almost every endeavor, and your agents are likely to run into lots of them. Obstacles aren't, in themselves, de-motivating for staff; if, however, management does little to help remove these roadblocks, they can become very de-motivating.

Examples of roadblocks might include processes and tools that don't work, customer-unfriendly policies, or unhelpful management.



It doesn't matter how controllable or uncontrollable the roadblock is, if it's not removed it will eventually frustrate your employees. You've got to do something about it — your employees need to see you're trying to improve the situation.

Remove Fear

W. Edwards Deming, the famed statistician and business consultant, said that the "Economic cost of fear is appalling...."

Call centers can easily become scary places for employees. The level of accountability is very high, and in an increasingly competitive world the drive for results is only increasing. Poorly trained or bad managers compound the problems of fear.



Fear makes people shut down. It dampens their enthusiasm and prevents innovation and improvement. A lot of good people leave call center jobs because of fear.



Your management team must step in to ensure that hard-working employees need not fear for their jobs. This implies a fair workplace with a strong culture governed by a strong set of values.



You need to adapt policies to ensure accountability goes both ways. Agents are accountable for doing their best and management is accountable for contributing to the agents' success.

Regular (at least monthly) employee opinion surveys are a tool you can implement to ensure that a fear-free culture is maintained. Management should be responsible for the job satisfaction of their staff. Also, exit interviews will help to determine how successfully management is driving out fear.

An appeals process is a very effective way of ensuring that employee rights are maintained and, done well, will go a long way to reducing fear. With an effective appeals process, the frontline agent can appeal any disciplinary action to a panel of peers. The appeals process needs to be well thought out and designed, and staff must be trained to use it.

Don't Ask Them to Do Anything You Wouldn't Want to Do

If you can't see yourself doing something, then don't ask your agents to do it — including handling angry customers or making cold calls.



Have your managers do the frontline job from time to time — it's a worthwhile exercise. Some of the very best managers that I've seen will sit down in an agent's seat and say, "Watch me." This is a very fast way to get the respect of your call center agents. It shows that you're willing to do the job and, if you're good, might even give them some tips on how to do the job better.

Communicate the Good and the Bad — Be Straight and Honest



Effective communication is critical to agent job satisfaction.

If you've worked in a call center for any length of time, you can probably attest that call centers are rumor machines. It's not surprising, when you consider that so many people are brought together in one place. Furthermore, call centers abhor a vacuum — so if you're not communicating the truth, the rumor mill will fill the void.



My experience is that you can't communicate too much — the more, the better, including good news and bad. The more information you communicate, the less room there is for the rumor mill.

The great news is that today's call centers have lots of ways of communicating. From team meetings and e-mail to internal Web sites and chat sessions, you can communicate openly and honestly — and a lot.

Ask for Feedback

Communication needs to go both ways. On a regular basis (I suggest monthly) you should be asking employees for their feedback on how well management is doing at creating a healthy and effective workplace. You can, and should, ask a number of questions, but the one that's most important asks employees if they value their job.



You should also provide a mechanism for employees to give open-ended comments and suggestions. You may have to make the survey anonymous — even in the best environments some staff will not be comfortable completely opening up.

You may find a lot of harsh criticism. In any operation you're going to have some less satisfied employees, and they will be vocal. The important thing is to listen to the overlying trends.

It's important to work at either improving the most critical areas, as defined by your employees, or communicating why these things are as they are.

In subsequent months, you'll want to add specific questions regarding key areas of dissatisfaction to see if your staff feel you're improving.



Tying part of your managers' rewards to employee satisfaction is also a good idea, because it engages the entire management team in improving job satisfaction.

Be Positive

Call centers are great environments for tracking accountability, and in the quest for constant improvement it's easy to focus on finding things that aren't right. However, if this becomes too narrow a focus, you and your supervisors will soon find yourselves concentrating mainly on "catching people doing something wrong." While well intentioned, this management style is inherently negative and can dampen enthusiasm and morale.

Constant improvement is a worthy goal. When your suggestions for improvement come in a predominantly positive environment, they'll be received much more enthusiastically. (I talk more about process improvement in Chapter 12.)



As basic as it may sound, I subscribe to the idea of a ten-to-one positive to negative ratio. People in the office should be given ten pieces of positive reinforcement for every suggestion for improvement. Even suggestions for improvement can be framed in a positive manner: “Jane, you’re already good at this — imagine what will happen when you start following the troubleshooting guidelines!”

I like to ask supervisors to tell me ten compliments and pieces of encouragement that they’ve given out to staff during the day. This should be easy: catch people doing something right! If it isn’t easy, then we’re not doing enough to create a positive environment.



I’m not suggesting a withdrawal from holding people accountable. What I am suggesting is accountability in a very positive environment.