Using Workspace Design to Improve Call Center Agent Performance

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## Call Center Workspace Needs to Better Support the Evolving Work of Agents

The work of customer service agents has greatly changed from the days of being heads-down "order takers." Today this role has a wide range of responsibilities that require problem solving and ongoing interaction with other agents and supervisors. The planning model and spaces supporting this work need to evolve as well. However, there is a lack of information about how to best align workspace design with the performance goals of these agents. Fortunately, many aspects of agent work performance are objectively measured. In this research we identified workstation design features that influence agent performance. Based on these findings, we offer planning and design insights to better align the space with performance goals.

Using a statistical technique called "Predictive Modeling," this project compared the effectiveness of two different workstation standards on Customer Service Representative (CSR) performance. One setting was located within a modest building in Florida using a highly open and flexible design and ergonomic seating, and the other located within a Class A building in Minnesota, using a traditional systems furniture approach that offers less flexibility. The work conducted by CSRs at each call center, and work load, is exactly the same. There is no significant difference in the age and gender distributions between the two locations.

Summary of Insights: Key Design Features that Improve Agent Performance

We found that a mix of furniture features, group space design, and planning principles play a small but significant role in improving agent performance on objective metrics. These are summarized below:

- To reduce After Call Work time, offer both good ergonomic furnishings and design of workspace—and places for employees to socially connect, such as café spaces and small lounge areas.
- To increase First Call Resolution rates, offer a variety differently sized group spaces with the appropriate technology to best support group work.
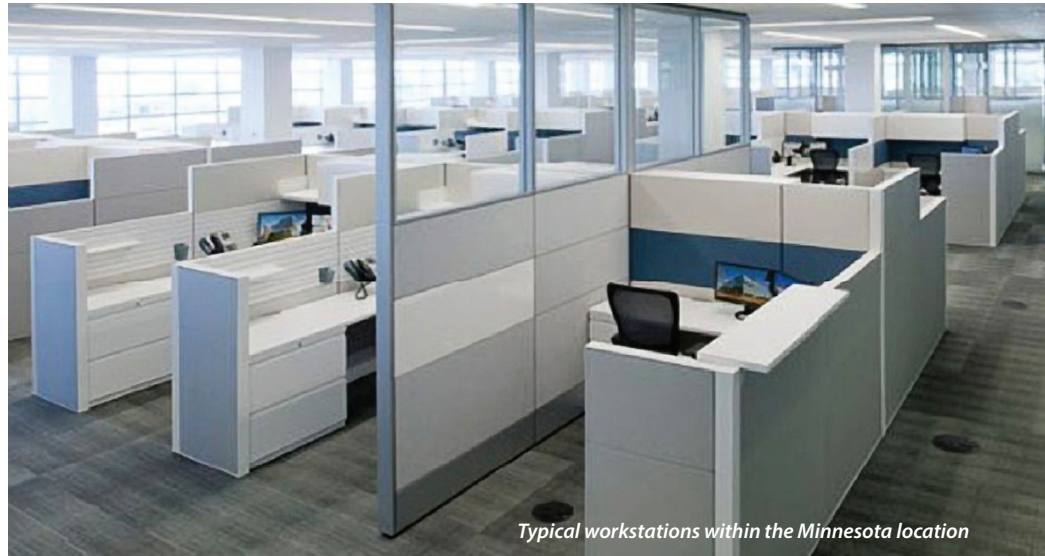
Typical workstations within the Minnesota location

- For higher customer satisfaction scores, invest in adjustable ergonomic features.
- To increase employee retention, design spaces that enhance sense of community, control over physical features of the immediate workspace, and satisfaction with those features.

We Compared Call Centers in Minnesota and Florida

The Minnesota Call Center facility is comprised of "Class A" office space and houses approximately 1,150 employees, primarily CSRs but also management and administrative functions. CSRs are seated within traditional systems furniture workstations having 42" high sides, providing seated privacy. These workstations come with file storage and rails for work tools. The flat screen monitors are placed directly upon the worksurface. Managers are seated in larger workstations with more enclosure, adjacent to CSR workstations. These workstations have limited flexibility.

The Florida Call Center facility houses approximately 950 employees, primarily CSRs. This facility has a higher density (about 10% greater) of people per square foot than the Minnesota location.

This Call Center is located within a renovated building that formerly housed a retail shopping center. It is an inexpensive but functional space that contrasts sharply with the high quality look and finishes of the

Typical workstations within the Florida location

Minnesota facility. CSRs are seated within workstations that allow seated adjacent workers views to each other's monitors. Each workstation has two flat screens with monitor arms. The worksurfaces are set to 28" to permit the keyboard to be used directly on the work surface. Each workstation has 42" high screens to reduce seated visual distractions and a moveable seating pedestal for visitor seating. Managers are seated in larger workstations nearby.

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We Used Surveys and Objective Performance Measures in the Analyses

We used an online questionnaire to collect data from agents on issues relating to work and workspace: evaluation of workstation features, adjustability, discomfort, collaboration, job control, group cohesion, sense of community, and job satisfaction.

A total of 540 surveys were completed for an overall 32% response rate. The response rate for Minnesota was 47% and for Florida was 53%.

We also collected and analyzed data from Automatic Call Distributor (ACD) measures. These objective measures are collected via the software system for each call and include:
• Average Handle Time (AHT)
• After-Call Work time (ACW)
• First Call Resolution
• CSTS Scores (external customer satisfaction survey)

Agents at the Florida Location Had Higher Performance on 3 out of 4 Metrics

We analyzed call performance data (AHT – average handle time, ACW – after call work time, First Call Resolution and CSTS - external customer satisfaction scores) for CSRs at both sites during the one-month time period that survey data was collected.

Minnesota had significantly lower AHT scores than Florida. However, the AHT results may be the measure least related to performance, since the duration of the call is dependent on the customer's needs, and the difficulty of the issues that need to be resolved. Most managers agree that the ACW and First Call Resolution are better indicators of the quality of the interaction and of agent performance.

Florida had significantly better scores than Minnesota on the three most important measures of performance: ACW, First Call Resolution, and CSTS scores. Customer Service Transactional Survey (CSTS) data is collected by an independent third party on a monthly basis to assess customer satisfaction with the agents' performance. The results showed that for the 9-month period that we analyzed the monthly CSTS data, all three CSTS measures were consistently higher for Florida than for Minnesota.

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Predictive Modeling Revealed Design Features that Impact Agent Performance

We used the combined data from both sites to compute regression analyses so that we could learn if any workspace design features influence agent performance metrics.

We used evaluation ratings of workstation furnishings as the "predictor" variables in the regressions, and AHT, ACW, First Call Resolution, external customer satisfaction evaluations, and job satisfaction as the "outcome" measures.

Four Design Recommendations for High Performing Customer Service Agents

To reduce After Call Work time (ACW), take two actions: 1) design the individual workspace and specify furnishings to reduce work-related pain and discomfort, and 2) offer spaces such as cafés or casual lounge areas to support group cohesion. (Discomfort and Group Cohesion scores predict 6% of the variance in ACW time.)

- To improve employee retention, measured as "intention to stay" (and reduce replacement costs), address three issues: 1) design spaces that promote a sense of community, 2) specify furnishings that increase physical control over the workstation, and 3) design workspace features that offer the highest user satisfaction. (The analysis showed that Sense of Community, Environmental Control and Satisfaction with Workstation Features together predict 9% of the variance in "Intention to Stay" outcome measures.)
- To improve First Call Resolution rates, provide a planning model and spaces that support employee collaboration. (Workspace Support for collaboration predicts 5% of the variance in First Call Resolution scores.)
- To increase customer satisfaction scores (CSTS), 1) specify adjustable ergonomic features (to reduce pain and discomfort) and 2) provide environmental control (through workstation flexibility and job design). In this analysis we found that customer satisfaction scores are especially sensitive to employee pain and discomfort.

These analyses consistently show that there is a small but real and significant contribution of workspace design features on objective agent performance outcomes. The results related to First Call Resolution are especially powerful since this is an outcome with direct implications for costs and customer retention.

Haworth research investigates links between workspace design and human behavior, health and performance, and the quality of the user experience. We share and apply what we learn to inform product development and help our customers shape their work environments. To learn more about this topic or other research resources Haworth can provide, visit www.haworth.com.

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