

Pivotal Role of Call Centre Managers from an Outsourced Telecommunications Company: A Case in Gauteng, South Africa

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of managers employed in outsourced telecommunications call centres regarding their managerial roles. The study takes the form of a qualitative case study with data having been collected through semi-structured, interviews. Participants were purposively selected through criterion sampling. The results reveal that scientific management principles and continuous improvement are major focus areas in the call centre environment and that call centre managers who deal with internal and external pressures have a dynamic and challenging task. The study focuses on one telecommunications company that has four outsourced call centres in Gauteng, South Africa. The sample consisted of eight participants. The outcome highlights the role played by managers of outsourced organisations and provides suggestions as to how call centre management can be improved by dealing with the challenges being experienced. By means of careful consideration of the contracting process, this research contributes theoretically and practically towards management, continuous improvement and to addressing financial constraints.

INTRODUCTION

The call centre industry is growing rapidly and South Africa is fast becoming a desired destination for outsourced call centres – a trend that will transform the industry locally into one that is large, mature and sophisticated (Balfour 2014). This is because South Africa has the ability to deliver a competitive service, based on quality and performance at affordable prices (Eastwood 2012). Given the size of the call centre industry globally and nationally – as well as the complexity associated with the various operations involved – call centres have emerged as fertile ground for research, although little of this research has been conducted in the South African context.

Call centres have been described as an enabling resource for enhanced customer service as a cost-saving strategy (McCormick 2015). Call centres are people intensive, resource demanding environments with complex management challenges and call centre managers are increasingly expected to deliver low operating costs and a high-quality service (Kim and Kang 2016; Van den Schrieck et al. 2014; Aksin et al. 2007). Call centres deliver a variety of services to customers through the use of telephones and agents and can be described as facilitating a set of functions or actions that can be carried out in a number of ways and using multiple delivery

channels. Call centres merge information and telecommunications technology, allowing clients to talk to knowledgeable representatives who have speedy access to information (Van den Schrieck et al. 2014). The call centre automatically directs the incoming client call to an agent and simultaneously presents relevant information about the caller's enquiry on the agent's computer screen. State-of-the-art technology is involved, but call centres rely on people to act as intermediaries between the services rendered to clients and the information available on the databases. The three components involved in a call centre are people, technology and work processes (SEDA 2015).

Badler (2004) believes that call centres can be regarded as a type of help desk or "one-stop help shop" in which call centre agents attempt to answer and solve client queries, concerns or complaints in a friendly and timely manner or provide information to clients. Balfour (2014) defines call centres as "workplace environments where customer-related activities occur without any physical contact with the client". These two definitions – published ten years apart – illustrate that, in terms of the literature at least, the idea of what call centres are has not changed much over time. The call centre function is generally outsourced and not performed by the organisation itself. Vying for a contract to offer call centre functions to a principal is, by its na-

ture, a cutthroat activity. This means that service providers (agents) are under pressure from the start, especially in terms of financial measures. This reality raises further challenges when the time comes to negotiate renewal of the contract in that overzealous negotiations may jeopardise a long-term relationship with the principal and thus, in turn, may threaten customer satisfaction.

Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to explore how members of call centre management perceive their roles in an organisation dealing with telecommunications and customer queries on an outsourced basis. The secondary objectives are to: 1) determine the profile of call centre managers; 2) explore the major challenges experienced by call centre management; and finally 3) to investigate the strategies used by call centre management to manage effectively. This article reports on a subsection of a bigger study, but focuses on the three objectives as outlined above. The remainder of the article is structured as follows: a theoretical background will be presented; the research method will be outlined; the results will be discussed; conclusions will be drawn from the findings; limitations will be identified; and avenues will be provided for possible future research.

Theoretical Background

This section covers the history of call centres, outsourcing, call centre management and challenges, as well as strategies used to counter those challenges.

History of Call Centres in South Africa

Call centre information in respect of the South African environment is sparse. On the international front, the first instance of using the telephone as a marketing tool dates back to the early 1900s when companies used telephone directories to compile and sell client lists and the first call centre agents were housewives in the United Kingdom in the 1950s (Bernier 2012). The first call centres in South Africa emerged in the 1970s, although it was only in the late 1990s that the combination of improved computer technology and reduced telecommunications costs contrib-

uted to their rapid growth. More recently, call centres have been widely promoted by an informal coalition of stakeholders with overlapping interests, ranging from trade unions to provincial development agencies and national government (Mann and Graham 2016; DTI 2013; Benner et al. 2007). The first call centre in South Africa was established in 1976 and more were established in the early 1990s. A further major growth spurt occurred around 1999 (Benner et al. 2007).

South Africa is now home to a large and mature call centre industry. Over the past number of years call centre business process outsourcing (BPO) and offshore activity – serving the South African market as well as foreign businesses – has shown a very healthy growth rate (Banks and Roodt 2011; DTI 2008). Call centre activity in South Africa is concentrated mainly in the major economic hubs of the country, most notably in Gauteng and Cape Town. The most recent data available (South African Call Centre Survey 2007) indicated that, in 2007, nearly 51 percent of call centres locally were located in Gauteng. The Western Cape had the second highest number with 38 percent of call centres and a further eight percent were situated in Kwa-Zulu Natal (Cohen 2013; Benner et al. 2007). Unfortunately, no more recent studies have been undertaken in South Africa that might provide a picture of the current status – a fact that provides further impetus for additional research in this area (search conducted on call centres in South Africa on Web of Science™ 2016).

Outsourcing

Freytag et al. (2012) define outsourcing as “the operation of shifting a transaction previously governed internally to an external supplier through a long-term contract, and involving the transfer to the vendor.” Oppong (2014) and Xia et al. (2015) argue that outsourcing has evolved into an accepted business model and that it has become part of the vital maturing process through which companies go to create better services and products for their customers while continuing to generate shareholder value. One of the most important differences between the various types of call centres is that between those that are run “in-house” as opposed to those that are “outsourced.” An in-house call centre is developed by the company itself, the

operation is managed internally in conjunction with other business function units and the business makes use of its own infrastructure and personnel (Van Jaarsveld and Yanadori 2011; Benner et al. 2007).

The rapid growth of outsourcing suggests that both public and private organisations expect benefits from outsourcing. Naturally, various organisations operating under different circumstances will expect different benefits. It is impossible to list every possible benefit, but many of the desired benefits are general and shared across organisations (Xia et al. 2015; Oppong 2014). Outsourced call centres are run by firms that specialise in providing a customer relationship and interface service for external clients. The call centre service provider is responsible for providing the infrastructure and personnel for its clients as stipulated in a legal contract. According to Vitasek and Manrodt (2012) and Oppong (2014), there is a variety of reasons for companies to outsource part of their operations – reducing and controlling operating costs; improving company focus on strategy and core functions; gaining access to world-class capabilities; freeing internal resources for other purposes; enhancing control measures; dealing with the lack of available internal resources; accelerating the re-engineering of benefits; difficulty in managing out-of-control functions; making capital funds available; sharing risks; acquiring better management; enhancing credibility; infusing cash; assisting in rapid growth situations; handling overflow situations; avoiding being swamped with extra administration in a period of growth; accelerating a learning curve in a new business area or, conversely, cutting the need for investment and improving the quality and efficiency of existing outsourced service. Freytag et al. (2012) stress that, although outsourcing provides an extensive list of benefits as outlined previously, it is also – for an increasing number of firms facing the reality of re-evaluating their outsourcing solutions – often associated with difficulties and unfulfilled expectations or objectives. Strategic management thus plays a vital role in ensuring that there is harmony between technology, people and work processes.

The advantages that call centres offer to business make them desirable to organisations. These advantages include curbing expenditure and improving efficiency and productivity, thus

allowing organisations to achieve higher profits (Van Jaarsveld and Yanadori 2011; Russell 2008). These authors furthermore mention that call centres are currently valuable in various sectors and in almost all national economies in both developing and developed countries. South African organisations have been no exception as they have also experienced growth in the use of call centres since the 1990s (SACCCOM 2011), as pointed out earlier.

Cohen (2013) emphasises that while India (Agarwal 2014) and the Philippines (Pandy and Rogerson 2014) dominate the global market for outsourced back office (also referred to as the operations division) services, South Africa is Africa's third largest economy and had grown between 30 and 35 percent over each of the previous five years. South African call centres employ approximately 210,000 people, with 9 percent of those working for offshore companies. South Africa can be regarded as the ideal location for serving the British market because of the accents of employees, cultural affinity and similar time zone, as well as operational costs that are 50 percent lower than in the United Kingdom. New undersea telecommunications cables have also spurred investment with data costs having fallen by 85 percent from 2003 to 2009 (Cohen 2013).

Call Centre Management

According to the International Customer Management Institute (ICMI), call centre management is defined as the art of having the right number of skilled people who support the resources in place at the right time to handle an accurately forecast workload, thereby achieving quality service (ICMI 2015). Accurate, efficient and effective workforce management in a contact centre is essential in order to ensure high-quality customer service levels and will also improve employee morale. However, such management relies much more on information than on a basic schedule of planned campaigns (Kreamer and Gouthier 2014; Childs and Donovan 2012). As society increasingly relies on group effort, and as many organised groups have become large, the task of managers has increased in importance and complexity (Weihrich and Koontz 2008). Follett, a pioneer in management, defines the concept as “getting things done through people” (Douglas 2015; Kinicki and

Williams 2003), while Weihrich and Koontz (2008: 32) use the following definition: “The process of optimising human, material and financial contributions for the achievement of organisational goals”. Annarelli and Nonino (2016), Bateman and Snell (2014), and Bush (2011) define management as the attainment of organisational goals in an effective and efficient manner through planning, organising, leading and controlling organisational resources. The latter, furthermore, points out that quality, speed, innovation; costs, service and sustainability are the five essential types of performance on which an organisation beats, equals or loses to its competition in the corporate arena. A call centre manager is a person who is ultimately responsible for the overall performance and budget, and makes decisions on people, processes, technologies and customers that form part of the operations of a call centre. The manager also focuses on the future strategy and development of the centre; and is responsible for liaising with other departments such as Human Resources (HR) and Information Technology (IT). Depending on the size of the call centre, managers will have a number of team leaders (or assistant managers at larger centres) who report to them. They will be responsible for recruiting, developing and coaching those who report directly to them (Childs and Donovan 2012). Pandy and Rogerson (2014) assert that issues around the quality of work, HR policies and labour processes at call centres continue to attract scholarly attention nationally and internationally, and that all of these remain pivotal roles of the call centre manager. A study conducted by Banks and Roodt (2011) into South African call centre management at more than 44 different organisations found that the measures that direct the management practices of call centre managers demand focus on cost and production efficiency. According to Banks and Roodt (2011), integrating information and computer technologies for optimal service delivery to customers is central at all call centres and is referred to as the “Taylorism of white-collar work”. In a study conducted into four call centres in Gauteng, Fisher et al. (2007) found that South African call centre management practices “have a historic disposition towards control and Taylorism” and that they focused on production irrespective of the conceptual service model. According to another study, call centres in South Africa are ranked among those with

the highest degree of monitoring (Benner et al. 2007). While the range of services, functions and tasks carried out at call centres require a high level of skill, knowledge and experience, for most call centre workers, it seems that, in future, call centres will continue to be characterised by target-setting and Taylorism (Desai 2010; Bain et al. 2002). Elements of scientific management are still relevant and have become deeply ingrained in all modern organisations (Excoffier et al. 2016). Call centre workforce management includes three key levels of the decision-making process, namely (see Mehrotra et al. 2010) long-term planning that includes the determination of how many agents to hire and train, short-term decisions that involve the scheduling of an available pool of agents over a time span of one week and, finally, real-time adjustment decisions including the update of agent schedules and routing of calls on a daily basis. Although scientific management does play an obvious role in the 21st century, the method does have weaknesses that limit its influence on current work environments and, consequently, not all its tenets apply to modern organisations. In sum, effective management is important for the service excellence and sustainability of the call centre as agent for the contracted principle. In essence, effective management revolves around utilisation of resources – particularly, people, technology and finances.

Challenges Faced by Call Centre Managers

Managers of call centres face numerous challenges as reflected in previous studies and literature (see, for example, Prichard et al. 2014; Desai 2010; Russell 2008). They are responsible for operations that are capital intensive and that have a high demand for continual investment to keep up with rapid developments in technology – as opposed to low-cost operations. Furthermore, in many instances they are responsible for large numbers of staff who often work shifts (Robinson and Morley 2006) which is not conducive to good morale (Renker et al. 2015). According to Jack et al. (2008), there are four trends in the call centre industry that present significant challenges to managers. Firstly, over ten years preceding Jack’s study, customer expectations for high quality service at call centres had shown an increase with customers demanding quality service, convenience, speed, accu-

racy and value. Secondly, there was a significant increase in the scale and scope of call centre operations. Today's call centres are increasingly required to perform non-traditional tasks with the same resource allocations. Although the more traditional roles of call centres (such as collections and customer support) are still important, current trends suggest that more strategic roles (such as building customer relationships and selling company products and services) have become more prevalent. Thirdly, call centres have become multi-channel communication centres where various new technologies are used to provide a wide variety of services to customers: fax, phone, internet, e-mail and web chat are all used extensively to maximise opportunities for increased customer contact and assistance. Finally, a significant trend has emerged: the outsourcing of call centre operations to foreign locations. Aksin et al. (2007) and Van den Schrieck et al. (2014) argue that call centre managers are increasingly expected to deliver low operating costs and high-quality service and this study seeks to explore whether these costs are among the critical challenges that managers have to deal with. To meet these potentially conflicting objectives, call centre managers are challenged with deploying the right number of staff members with the appropriate skills according to a workable schedule to meet an uncertain, intermittent demand for service. Traditionally, in order to meet this challenge, call centre managers were required to wrestle with classical operations management decisions about forecasting traffic, acquiring capacity, deploying resources and managing service delivery. Call centres struggle with the challenge of properly forecasting the technology and labour resources required to meet the demands which fluctuate daily (Prichard 2014; Oppong 2014; Pandey and Rogerson 2014). The strategic role of call centres is ever changing. As a result of internal and external changes associated with outsourcing, call centre managers should have the ability to handle these challenges, which means that they should have the ability to think and act strategically (Freytag et al. 2012). Organisations attempt to achieve customer satisfaction by offering their customers easy access to their services and products while lowering their costs through a consolidated approach (Banks and Roodt 2011). The authors emphasised that this approach has its challenges and that managers struggle to bal-

ance the efficiency and quality imperatives of their businesses. High levels of call centre agent turnover (ranging from 15 percent to 35 percent per annum) are also a major challenge that managers experience (Oppong 2014; Robinson and Morley 2006) and one that threatens service excellence.

The next section will describe the research design and method, including the data collection method; method of reasoning; population and sampling; research instrument; validity and reliability; data analysis; and how ethical issues were attended to.

RESEARCH METHOD

This section addresses the research method. This should not be confused with research methodology which is a broader concept (see Saunders and Rojon 2014). Essentially, the research method covers the population, sample and sampling, data collection instrument and data analysis/es techniques, all of which are dictated by the purpose of the study (Saunders and Rojon 2014). The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of managers of an outsourced call centre (agent), providing a service to an ICT company (principal) regarding their managerial roles in dealing with customer queries and also to find out their profile, the challenges they experience during management and how they address these challenges. Given that the nature that the study was exploratory, the most appropriate design was a qualitative case study (Babbie and Mouton 2010). A qualitative case study design was followed because it allowed the researcher to enter into the natural setting (call centres) of the participants (managers) in order to observe the behaviour and listen to the words the participants used to describe the environment in which they operate (Struwig and Stead 2015). Consequently, one outsourced call centre providing a service to an ICT company was selected because of the challenges that it was facing at the time of the study. Literature is not unanimous with regard to the norm for case studies but, according to Struwig and Stead (2015), one organisation is sufficient and this organisation was specifically selected because, at the time of the study, it was experiencing challenges with regard to its outsourced call centres. Unfortunately, no more information than this can be divulged as, given the small number

of organisations active in this market, this might lead to the identification of the organisation concerned. This would constitute a breach of research ethics, specifically in terms of the undertaking given that the identity of the participants in this specific market would be withheld (anonymity).

Hence, the population consisted of call centre managers from one outsourced call centre in Gauteng. The call centre had four offices in Gauteng from which the sample was selected using criterion sampling based on experience in the industry and the position the managers occupied. In order to identify a distinct group of information-rich participants, the following criteria were applied during the selection process: 1) position (manager) and 2) experience (minimum of eight years' experience in the call centre industry with a minimum of three years at management level). Two managers from each centre proved to be eligible, resulting in eight participants. The sample in this study was small – typical of qualitative case studies (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). The data were collected by structured interviews using an interview guide (measuring instrument) to ensure that the same questions were asked of all participants. Prior to the study, the interview guide was piloted to test the questions in terms of clarity, whether the interviewee had the information required and was prepared to divulge it, the time needed to conclude the interview, whether they understood the questions and whether they were willing and able to divulge the information needed to solve the problem. The interview guide was divided into Section A (closed questions, biographical by nature) and Section B (open-ended questions) consisting of questions dealing with call centre managers' perceptions of their roles, challenges experienced and possible solutions, as well as their management strategies. The conversations were audio recorded during the face-to-face interviews and transcribed directly after each interview. One-hour appointments were scheduled with each interviewee at venues convenient for them. Participation in this study was purely on a voluntary basis and candidates were told that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point. To protect the anonymity of participants and for data analysis purposes, the eight call centre managers were denoted by unique alphabetical letters according to the specific call centre (A–D) and each call centre manager was

denoted by a number (one to eight). Data analysis (Bryman and Bell 2014) for qualitative studies commences with coding, meaning that coded data is not revealed in its original format but that it is interpreted by the researcher. Coding is a method of condensing the data and many approaches can be used, as deemed fit for the particular study. Coding was guided by the theory explaining call centre management, but some codes were unique as they were not addressed by theory. These codes were directly related to the objectives of the study. In this way, data was reduced to parsimonious intension relevant to the study. Themes were identified with due consideration to the feedback received after each question and in order to find meaningful similarities as well as standout comments that could add value in closing the knowledge gap in this study. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of South Africa to conduct this study and participants signed a letter of consent.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results derived from the interviews are discussed under the following headings: 1) Section A: Biographical data and 2) Section B: Roles, challenges, and management strategies employed. This section will also distinguish between call centre managers and staff – commonly referred to as agents in the call centre environment.

Section A: Biographical Data

The codes denoting each of the call centres and the participants who were interviewed in the Gauteng region are displayed in Table 1.

The gender, age and educational background of the participants are indicated to provide an overall demographic picture of the individuals involved in this study. Call centre sizes varied from 160 to 800 seats and their managerial experience from eight to a maximum of 15 years. The age distribution reflects a management profile representing a relatively young workforce – mainly Generation Y, typically born between 1980 and 1990, and having constant access to technology (Alston 2016). Participants were not requested to indicate their racial group since this information would not contribute to the essence of this study.

Table 1: Biographical data

<i>Call centre managers</i>						
<i>Call centre</i>	<i>Respondent number</i>	<i>Call centre size(seats)</i>	<i>Years of experience (call centre)</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Highest qualification</i>
A	1	430	9	Male	27	Matric
A	2	800	11	Male	32	Degree
B	3	350	10	Male	28	Diploma
B	4	160	13	Female	35	Diploma
C	5	160	10	Male	31	Diploma
C	6	220	15	Female	35	Diploma
D	7	423	8	Male	28	Matric
D	8	160	8	Male	32	Diploma

Section B: Management Roles, Challenges, and Strategies Employed

The data were categorised according to three major themes based on the topics in the interview guide, namely 1) the perceptions of call centre managers regarding their roles, 2) the major challenges experienced and suggestions for improvement, and 3) the managerial strategies that they employed at their call centres. The themes were determined and grouped according to the questions posed during each interview.

Perceptions of Call Centre Managers Regarding Their Role

Participants were asked what they understood by the term “call centre management” and thereafter how they perceived their roles as call centre managers. Predominantly, participants understood their roles as taking total responsibility for the call centre, its people and its performance. Recurring themes included that they take overall responsibility for the call centres and that this includes contractual obligations as set out by clients; the budget and finance-related tasks; ensuring the continuous improvement of the process and the development of the call centre (people, processes and technology) and client relationships (Participants A1, A2, B3, B4, C5, C6 and D8). Participant D7 outlined that, as a manager, he or she needed to proactively and reactively provide internal and external clients with recommendations identified through investigation and analysis in order to improve overall business including cost reduction and customer experience. Only participant B4 mentioned the importance of training, developing, mentoring and motivating agents and of focussing on the

morale of agents as part of their role. These roles are factual and consistent with the theory (see Annarelli and Nonino 2016; Douglas 2015; Bate-man and Snell 2014).

Major Focus Areas as Call Centre Managers

Participants were requested to identify their major focus areas. On this particular topic, participants were expected to provide what they believed to be the major focus areas as call centre managers. Participants A1, B3 and B6 mentioned that they were responsible for ensuring consistent compliance with company policies and procedures; people management (which includes recruiting and retaining agents), developing agents through training, mentoring and coaching agents, ensuring effective communication, motivating and satisfying agents and, finally, ensuring that they have the necessary means to perform efficiently are the key themes (A1, A2, B3 and C6) outlined throughout. Participants (A1, C5, C6, D7 and D8) highlighted the importance of customer satisfaction, including client engagements, increased customer satisfaction, delivering an excellent quality service the first time and improving customer experience. It is evident that participant D7 focused on customer experience and needs (external) only and did not mention the importance of agent satisfaction (internal). Participant B4 indicated that the development of the management team was important. All the participants highlighted that it was their responsibility to ensure that the targets set by clients were met. These focus areas correspond to theory relating to planning, organisation, leading, control, communication, management and decision making (see Excoffier et al. 2016; Mehrotra et al. 2010).

Challenges Experienced and Encountered

Participants were requested to list four major challenges that they experienced. The feedback was grouped into similar themes. All the participants agreed that managing the modern-day call centre was extremely challenging. Effective communication emerged as a major challenge for the majority of participants (A1, A2, C5, C6 and D7). This was mainly due to the dynamic nature of the call centre environment and the large staff complement in each call centre. Additional challenges that surfaced included agent attrition (A2, B3, C5 and D8), agent motivation (B3, C5 and C6), time management (A1, B4 and C6) and agent management which included performance (B3 and D7). It is however alarming that both participant C6 and D8 pointed out that there was a lack of advancement opportunities (flat structures) for tenured agents as well as a lack of salary increases and permanent employment.

Reasons for Challenges

A question was posed to participants to identify possible reasons for the challenges outlined in the previous discussion. Call centres are dynamic environments where change takes place frequently and are characterised by large agent complements. This makes effective communication (A1, C6 and D7) and agent management a huge challenge. Products change rapidly and agents do not have access to e-mail – hence, communication needs to take place verbally. Call queues are frequently high, causing delays in providing a consistent message to all agents. Agent turnover is also a major challenge because most agents are employed on a temporary basis and there is little opportunity for career progression (A2, B4, C6 and D8). Employees are always looking for permanent employment. Agents also regard call centre work as an entry-level position and want to move on career wise. Competition in the call centre industry is intense, which makes agent retention very challenging. Agent motivation is a huge challenge because call centre work is highly pressurised and agents have to deal with demanding customers and repetitive work on a daily basis (A2, B3 and D8). Absenteeism is also rife since call centres are high-pressure environments. Interestingly enough, no participants in this study mentioned budget or

finances as a major challenge. This is contrary to a study by Robinson and Morley (2006) in which budget constraints were cited as the biggest challenge of call centre managers in performing their jobs. Participants A1, B4 and C6 highlighted that the majority of agents were between 21 and 30 years of age and they battled with time management. Childs and Donovan (2012) argue that when Generation Y-employees enter the workforce, especially in the call centre environment, it might be necessary to train them in time management and its impact on productivity and efficiency. Members of Generation Y have difficulties with time management (Lipkin 2016). Literature has covered a number of these themes, but attrition, motivation and competition is not clearly discussed and was mentioned a number of times when this question was posed. Another fact is that people representing Generation Y, do not stay the same position longer than two years because, as soon as a better opportunity is available, they find it easy to make a career change (Lipkin 2016).

Suggestions Offered on How to Deal with Challenges

The interviewer requested participants to identify possible suggestions on how to overcome the challenges identified earlier. Participants spoke freely about the various ideas and interventions they employed at their call centres to manage the various challenges they experienced. Respondent D7 suggested that promoting teamwork plays a vital role when dealing with a large agent complement. Agent management can be made easier when implementing an effective and transparent performance management process and rewarding excellent performance. Planning needs to be accurate and should be carried out strictly on a daily basis while processes at the call centre need to be monitored and measured frequently with deviations being attended to immediately (Participants A2 and D7). Organisations should also consider employing agents on a permanent basis and creating a fun working environment. Effective communication and time management were outlined as suggestions for managing possible challenges. Participant B4 was of the opinion that agents should be micro-managed initially before being given the opportunity to function independently. This might pose a challenge to managers who have

to deal with agents from Generation Y, since such employees tend to be more self-confident and are more likely to question the status quo, look for self-development opportunities, accept changes and leave quickly when they are unhappy in their current positions, according to Childs and Donovan (2012).

Strategies Employed for Effective Call Centre Management

Participants had to outline different strategies that they used to manage their call centres effectively. Participants provided numerous suggestions for effective call centre management. All the participants alluded to the fact that an effective communication and robust performance management process needed to be in place. Other suggestions that surfaced included creating a favourable working environment, implementing an incentive programme to reward agents for excellent performance, empowering agents and considering a combination of temporary and permanent employment options. Effective performance management processes should be followed and continuous agent engagement, involvement and education should be encouraged and a culture of continuous improvement, learning and development should be fostered (B3, B4, C5, C6, D7 and D8). Interestingly, participant C6 highlighted that agents can be developed by assisting them with in-service training to further develop their careers and to invest in their employer's call centres.

In conclusion, the demographic data obtained from the participants in the investigation was used to determine the profile of call centre managers from four outsourced telecommunications centres in Gauteng. Call centre managers understood their roles to be overall responsibility for the call centre, its people and performance. Target achievement was high on their agenda. The major challenges experienced by call centre managers revolve around agent management, communication and high attrition. This becomes even more challenging when managing large agent complements. Participants provided numerous suggestions for effective call centre management. All the participants stressed that effective communication and a robust performance management process needed to be in place. Having drawn conclusions regarding the secondary research objectives to attend to the

primary objective one can conclude that call centre managers in Gauteng perceive call centre management as taking total responsibility for the call centre, its employees and their performance. It is a primary goal for an outsourced call centre manager to meet the contractual obligations and the needs of clients.

According to various studies discussed in the literature section (see Robinson and Morley 2006), financial constraints are listed as a major challenge for call centre managers that have to manage their call centres effectively. All eight call centre managers discussed some aspects of customer service as an overarching management responsibility. Remaining within the financial budget is also nominated as a significant area of their management responsibility (Robinson and Morley 2006). It is evident from this study that it is not difficult to find examples of scientific management in the 21st century and this study revealed that employing such scientific management is relevant in the modern day outsourced call centre – as mentioned by Priestly (2005). This is mainly because there is a major focus on productivity, efficiency and continuous improvement. This is unlikely to disappear in the near future as it places a great deal of focus on the personal needs of workers – something that Taylor's (Taylor 1911) scientific management theory ignored.

This section concludes with the data presented analysed and discussed. The next section concludes the empirical section and thereafter, recommendations, limitations and possible areas for future research will be presented.

CONCLUSION

Call centres have, over the past decade, become a key element in the way that information services are produced and offered to the public. The purpose of this article is to provide insight into how call centre managers from a major telecommunications company perceive their role in understanding the challenges that they experience when executing their duties as well as understanding the management strategies that are in place in order for them to manage effectively. The profile of the call centre managers was skewed towards relatively young male representatives of Generation Y. When considering how they perceived their roles as call centre managers, they revealed that planning formed a vital

role in their success when managing their divisions. Communication came out in various questions as being key to managing effectively. Challenges included the size of the working divisions, high attrition rates, Generation Y employees and a lack of career prospects. Considering how the call centre managers employed strategic management, it stands out from all the feedback received that it is important to them to remember that it is people who are managed and that these people have intrinsic and extrinsic needs. If the employees are happy and content, the organisation will definitely benefit tremendously. Although recent studies on call centres in the South African environment cannot be located, this study opens the opportunity to explore this segment of the market more deeply and to address the shortcomings identified in this study. The knowledge gap has been closed as the purpose and all the objectives of the study have been met.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the responses received, the following suggestions are recommended for the effective management of outsourced call centres: 1) Outsourced call centre managers need to be understood and granted assistance and support in order to successfully cope with their challenging environments, 2) A balanced approach should be adopted whereby the focus is on performance and the needs of employees, 3) An effective communication process should be in place to foster an open and honest communication, ensuring that agents are able to participate in the decision-making process, and 4) Policies should be reviewed annually and should be flexible to allow agents the opportunity to give inputs. It is recommended that a follow-up study be conducted focussing on Generation Y and how their viewpoints and characteristics influence the call centre environment.

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