

# A strategic approach to training

CONTACT CENTRES



The estimated 30,000 staff working in contact centres across New Zealand have arguably just come through one of their toughest years on the frontline, says **Mike Hull**, from industry training organisation ETITO



A profession seasoned at bearing the brunt of weather of all kinds has had its usual challenges added to having been on the end of the phone line or email to customers under increased financial stress, those reeling from the effects of the Christchurch earthquake and aftershocks, those in the midst of frustrating infrastructure failures in areas such as telecoms and transport. The list goes on.

What we have seen though is somewhat of a silver lining for the contact centre industry – the continual emergence and evidence of a sector that continues to grow as a profession in its own right.

While managing frustrated or complaining customers is a very visible demonstration of the value of the skilled contact centre staff member, thankfully the role itself is more in content and in contribution to the wider business or organisation. In this new era of professionalism, contact centre staff have moved on from being the voice at the end of the line, to the problem-solver, the diplomat, the skilled negotiator and not only the manager of the company reputation, but also one with the ability to enhance reputation, build customer value and loyalty.

The change has happened by design and is the result of a partnership between companies with contact centres, ETITO as the industry training organisation for contact centres, and other professional and training bodies. At the core of a high performing contact centre is a qualified workforce with skills tailored to meet the needs of the unique contact centre environment.

Culture and motivation, retaining good people and developing a clear career path are

essential. At its best, national qualifications training can be the catalyst and the glue that binds these elements together.

The strategic approach that contact centres are taking is in aligning their qualifications training with learning, development and performance systems and processes. This is when achieving qualifications work best. After all, workplace training and performance measures have the same objective: to improve performance and results.

Where organisations are effectively linking the two, staff, the business and its customers are reaping the greatest and longest term results.

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The first thing that needs to happen is to create a clear and communicated definition of the chicken-and-egg situation of contact centre training. Are staff being offered training as a reward (upskilling top performers) or are they doing the organisation a favour by becoming more productive? Both are true, but how this is framed can have a big impact. How staff feel about training is something that needs to be understood well.

It is crucial that training is something that staff get to do rather than have to do.

Smart contact centres market national qualifications training to their staff. It's important they see the value before they launch into a qualification. Good engagement achieves the best results. Staff who have already achieved national qualifications are usually the best advertisement. They readily display improved personal and professional skills, including motivation. It rubs off.

Qualifications have been designed to introduce incremental levels of skill, starting with the National Certificate in Contact Centre Operations (Level 3) and moving up to the National Diploma in Contact Centre Management (Level 5). There are also First Line Management and Business Administration qualifications that provide additional and broader skills.

In taking a strategic approach, some companies use Level 3 to benchmark their staff to the same level, offering the opportunity to undertake higher-level qualifications to staff who demonstrate commitment and leadership potential. Time off the staff floor is also used as an incentive to provide support to achieve a qualification. Celebrating and rewarding achievement caps off the process and provides a morale booster and incentive to continue with further training or encourage others.

ETITO is the industry training organisation for seven industries, including telecommunications and contact centres.

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