COI

Better practice guidance for government contact centres

2nd edition

Contents

Foreword to the 1st Edition

I am delighted to introduce you to new guidance for better practice in government contact centres. This guidance describes the key areas that require serious consideration when setting up and running contact centres and I hope it will prove valuable.

My team at the Central Office of Information (COI) developed the original Office of the e-Envoy's call centre guidance and has referred to the National Audit Office (NAO) call centre investigation. COI has consulted widely and incorporated many thoughts from other departmental, commercial and overseas guidance. This work does not seek to replace such guidance but to complement it, and we have included other excellent sources of advice. Nor is this guidance a substitute for the professional expertise of direct marketing and contact centre specialists.

Successful contact centres are founded on a suitable blend of **people**, **processes** and **systems**. Unfortunately, systems or processes often predominate, and citizens are left feeling unsatisfied with their contact with that part of government, blighting their view of dealing with government as a whole.

So it is important that your contact centre is staffed with the appropriate numbers of trained and motivated individuals who are fully supported by properly documented processes and flexible systems that can evolve over time. If the blend is right, your contact centre can meet the citizens' expectations and help you achieve your objectives.

By focusing on the **quality** of the citizen-agent interaction, **customer satisfaction** and **outcomes**, your contact centre can become an 'investment centre' rather than just a 'cost centre', and citizens' needs will be met in ways they find convenient and easily accessible. This is particularly important for those people who may be socially excluded and most in need of government services.

The needs of our citizens are constantly developing, and contact centres in a modern public sector need to evolve to meet them. This guidance represents a step towards **even better practice** in meeting those needs.

Alan Bishop
Chief Executive, COI

Foreword to the 2nd Edition

Our commitment was to make this a ‘living document’ that evolves as the use of contact centres in government develops. Our own further thinking, the feedback from our consultation, further research and the general growing interest in government contact centres has resulted in new material that has been incorporated into a 2nd Edition.

Customer satisfaction and quality of service leading to improved positive outcomes are even more important within the context of efficiency reviews across government and greater scrutiny of the contact centre industry as a whole.

Many Government contact centres have taken great steps to increase their **efficiency**. Now the challenge is to improve **effectiveness** and show the real benefits of a contact centre as a hub of information about the citizens needs that allow a Department to proactively evolve and re-engineer its processes and service delivery, putting the citizen at the heart of the organisation.

It is encumbent on us to recognise the cost of a poor communication and the **value** of a good dialogue with the citizen, understanding the end to end citizen experience interacting across multipe touchpoints, and how it impacts on the attitudinal and behavioural changes we might seek.

Marc Michaels
Director of Direct and Relationship Marketing, COI
and CCA Board Director

Certification/endorsement

The NAO recognises that contact centres can provide services and information to the public in a way that is convenient and cost-effective.

It considers that departments should ensure that their contact centres deliver the best possible service to customers whilst providing value for money for the taxpayer. It endorses the general principles promoted by this better practice guidance and it may assess whether departments are applying the guidance in any future work which looks at contact centres dealing with the public.

National Audit Office

The CCA welcomes the COI's better practice guidance for government contact centres as a key means for facilitating knowledge transfer within this important and growing sector. The CCA endorses the need to both improve the cost efficiency of government operations, but balancing this with the need to provide effective access and service to the tax-payer. COI and CCA are working closely to facilitate this.

CCA

If you read nothing else

A poorly handled response to a citizen's enquiry can undo many years of good service and building of your 'brand' perception. It is, consequently, a waste of taxpayers' money.

Many people approach contact centres from a process point of view, or a system-driven focus. However, it is crucial that you always remember that contact centres are an important way for **customers to get in touch with government**.

Contact centres, though often considered an operational function are, therefore, first and foremost a **marketing channel** and should be treated as such.

The focus should be on **quality**: delivering the best possible service to meet (or exceed) citizen expectations within the available and appropriate resources. It should **not** be about minimising costs.

This guidance is designed to help you set up and run a contact centre. But no one size fits all. You should always seek expert advice that relates to your own specific circumstances.

Crucial factors that will determine whether your contact centre meets its objectives include:

1 making your objectives clear in a carefully considered **business case** (giving adequate resources and realistic timings) that is shared with the relevant **stakeholders**;
2 building a **project team** with the necessary customer care, marketing and technical skills to develop the specification, implement it and manage/develop the service;
3 defining clearly the **remit** of your proposed service and ensuring it will not operate in isolation from other touch-points (for example, face-to-face, publicity and referral agencies);
4 making sure you choose an appropriate **procurement** methodology to determine whether to use in-house, outsourced or a combination of provisions;
5 understanding your **target audiences**, the psychology of interaction with the citizen, their channel preferences and what they need/expect from you (which might not correspond with what you can or want to give them);
6 understanding the nature of the **demand** and being equipped to track, predict and respond to fluctuations;
7 understanding how that demand translates into an appropriate balance of **people, processes and systems**;
8 making sure all contact centre **staff** are appropriately trained, well motivated, properly rewarded and encouraged to be good communicators focused on citizens' needs;

9 **monitoring** services to make sure they adhere to your objectives (quantitatively and qualitatively) and to make sure they meet citizen demands and expectations; and
10 researching and testing the service constantly to make sure it **evolves** to meet changing needs and to exploit technological developments that add value to the service.

All of these factors should be considered within the legal framework laid down by UK and European legislation and the guidance from various industry and government bodies.

If your aim is to **make access easier and encourage positive interaction** with citizens to assist in meeting **your objectives**, it is a challenge worth engaging in.

1. About this guidance

How to use this guidance

1.01 Each chapter begins with a short introduction explaining how it can help you. At the end of each chapter we have included a simple summary.

1.02 The subject of contact centres is a large and complex one, so this guidance cannot be fully comprehensive. Where possible, we have identified other sources of useful information (both throughout the document and in Appendix G – Information and useful contacts). However, this document should provide a sound basis for discussing contact centre strategy and implementation.

1.03 Guidance does not replace the need for seeking specialist advice from experienced contact centre practitioners both inside and outside government.

Who wrote this guidance?

1.04 This guidance has been produced by the Direct and Relationship Marketing team in COI at the specific request of the then Office of the e-Envoy (OEE), now the E-Government Unit. Responsibility to revise and update its call centre guidelines, produced in May 2000, passed formally to COI who were tasked to deliver new contact centre guidance.

1.05 COI is responsible for maintaining this document and the most up-to-date version can be found at **www.coi.gov.uk/ccg** where you can register for the guidance and updates as they are produced. COI has many years' experience of working with various departments to specify, tender, set up, manage and monitor contact centres across a wide range of applications. Please address all enquiries to **feedbackccg@coi.gsi.gov.uk**.

1.06 The National Audit Office (NAO) has recognised COI as a centre of expertise on contact centres in government.

Why is this guidance needed?

1.07 The use of contact centres in government in dealing with citizens has grown considerably and has been promoted as a means of improving access to and increasing the efficiency of government operations. However, this latter objective can predominate at the expense of customer service and the quest to reduce costs becomes the main driver. This has led to criticism of some government services, for example, the report produced by Citizens Advice, *Hanging on the Telephone* September 2004 notes that some 30 per cent of the public are very/fairly dissatisfied with government contact centre services (Mori survey, July 2004).

1.08 According to the DTI's study of the UK contact centre industry in May 2004, government services make up some 5.2 per cent of the contact centre market, and some 30 per cent of the membership of the Contact Centre Association (CCA). Citizens are becoming ever more demanding and the media are generally negatively disposed towards contact centres and can be highly critical, reducing confidence and trust in that department's ability to deliver.

The aim of this guidance

1.09 Citizens are demanding accessible and easy-to-use government services. The Government is committed to meeting these demands by offering citizens **choice** in how and when they access services, while maintaining **consistency** and **quality** of service.

1.10 The Government wants information and services delivered through government contact centres to be easily accessible, helpful, high-quality and efficient. It also wants these services to employ various channels including telephone, e-mail, post, fax and SMS while giving a favourable and consistent impression of government to the citizen.

1.11 As mentioned, if delivered effectively, contact centres can offer key benefits over traditional methods of service access, including improved customer satisfaction, efficiency and cost savings. The NAO report *Using Call Centres to Deliver Public Services* (available at **www.nao.gov.uk** or **www.tso.co.uk/bookshop**) stated that there were over 130 government contact centres that answered 95 million calls. The DTI quotes a figure of 274 by the end of 2003 and gives an estimate of some 14,620 agent positions (see Appendix I). However, the majority of these centres are small (10–50 agents). This is therefore a sizeable activity for government.

The NAO report makes five key recommendations on how government contact centres could improve both quality of service and value for money. These are reproduced in full in Appendix E – NAO recommendations and, in part, our guidance reflects and addresses these recommendations.

1.12 The core aim of this guidance is to provide government with central better practice guidance on the use, set-up, management, monitoring and measurement of public-sector contact centres. **This is 'better' practice guidance rather than 'best' practice guidance because services are constantly evolving and continual improvement is something to be aimed for.**

1.13 Government should aim to provide services that are:
- designed and delivered largely to meet the end customer's requirements rather than just those of the organisation;
- efficient and effective, providing a high-quality service that is quick and simple to access;
- regularly monitored and measured against objectives and outcomes; and
- cost-effective.

1.14 The *Modernising Government* White Paper commits the Government to publishing guidelines on taking a more consistent approach to the way contact centres give information and deliver services. You can read this White Paper at:
www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm43/4310/4310.htm

1.15 In adopting this guidance, government contact centres should bear in mind the following areas from the White Paper:
- accessibility;
- efficiency, speed of access and helpfulness;
- access to information; and
- a common approach to identification.

1.16 It is hoped that departments will adopt the guidance or use it in conjunction with their own internal guidance. Although it is not mandatory, departments with contact centres will be expected to adhere to this guidance and to be able to justify where they have departed from it. The responsibility lies with individual departments to show they are meeting best practice.

1.17 In order to improve benchmarking within government, departments are invited to submit an annual return. Once the system is in place, annual returns will be submitted to COI through its website and the results will be published annually. More information on annual returns can be found in Appendix A – Contact centre annual return form.

Operating within the e-Government Strategy

1.18 The e-Government Strategy, available at **www.iagchampions.gov.uk/Estrategy/Estrategy/fs/en**, sets out a vision that 'all services which can be electronically delivered should be'. The strategy proposes that 'these services should be accessible over the Internet and through mobile phones, digital TV, and contact centres, as well as through personal computers and that the mix for any service will be determined in relation to citizen demand'. The strategy sets forward a vision for 'electronic service delivery that does not do away with the need for personal contact' but rather calls for it to be 'better supported by new technologies'.

Who is this guidance for?

1.19 This guidance is intended for:

- business managers across the public sector, including board members and strategy and policy developers;
- those specifying and tendering contact centres, whether in-house or outsourced;
- contact centre managers across the public sector;
- those providing consultancy to contact centre developments across the public sector;
- marketing communications professionals whose activities will drive citizens to a contact centre;
- outsourced contact centre suppliers to the public sector; and
- IT professionals across the public sector.

Terminology

1.20 A list of contact centre terms can be found in the glossary (see Appendix H – Glossary of terms). However, two frequently used terms are explained below.

Citizen

1.21 Departments, agencies and non-departmental public bodies will refer to their customers in different ways: as customers, clients, citizens, businesses and organisations. To avoid confusion, we advise you to use the term 'citizen' (even in a business context, dealing with people acting in a professional capacity, rather than members of the public acting on their own behalf).

1.22 Using the word 'citizen' should not detract from the fact that these are government **customers** and should be treated as such.

Agent

1.23 There is a huge variation in the terms used for individuals who handle the contacts, including operators, advocates and customer service representatives (CSRs). For consistency, we use the term 'agent' to reflect that the contact centre is acting as the voice of the citizen and the focus should be to serve their needs as much as delivering policy outcomes.

Summary

- *This guidance has been produced by, and will be maintained by, the Direct and Relationship Marketing team in COI.*
- *The guidance aims to provide government with better practice guidance on all aspects of setting up and maintaining a public-sector contact centre.*
- *The guidance is for everyone involved with contact centres in the public sector.*

2. Why a contact centre?

This chapter discusses:
- what contact centres are;
- different types of contact centre;
- their purpose; and
- their benefits.

Definition

2.01 A contact centre is a place where customers interact with an organisation through various channels. The key difference between a ‘call’ and a ‘contact’ centre is that call centres offer access only by telephone but contact centres use other channels such as post, e-mail, fax, SMS and textchat. The DTI defines a contact centre to exist where 10 or more people work exclusively or for the majority of their time in a structured telephony environment (which may also involve electronic means of customer management) including either inbound and outbound operations (*The UK Contact Centre Industry: A Study,* May 2004). They also note that two-thirds of government contact centres still do not allow e-mail contact from customers – a situation that needs to be addressed.

Types of contact centre

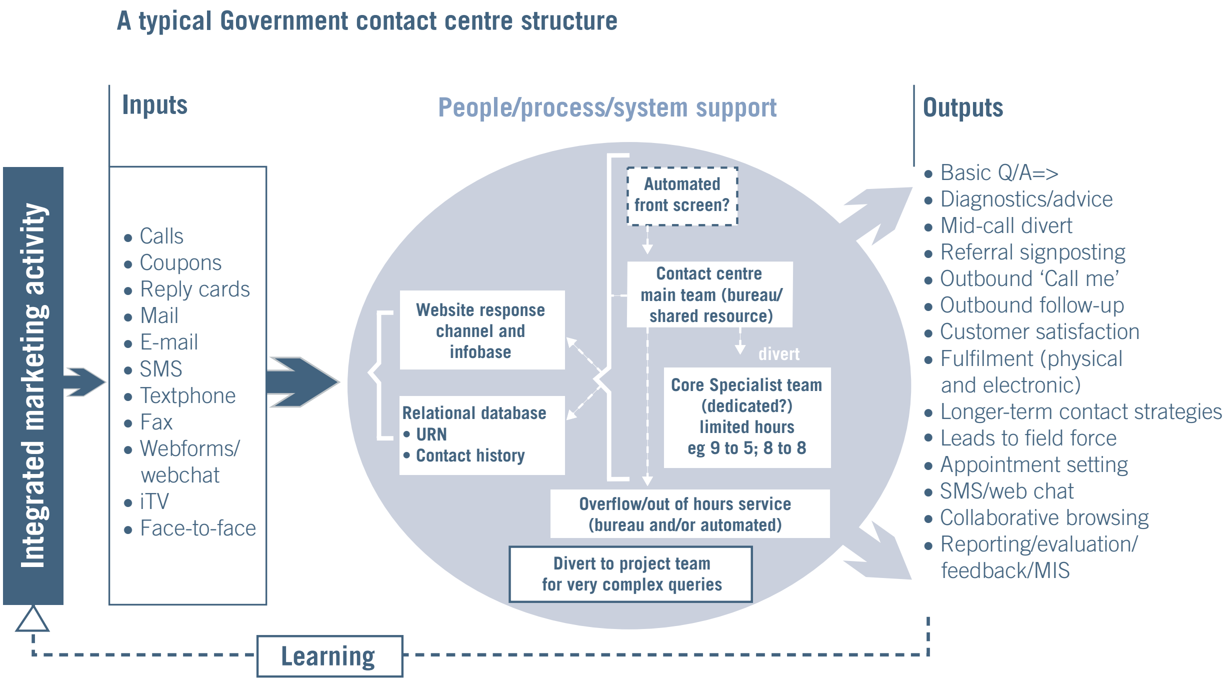
2.02 Contact centres vary throughout government and the commercial sector. Contact centres can:
- be inbound (i.e. taking contacts), outbound (i.e. making contacts) or both;
- offer simple or complex levels of support (from simple leaflet ordering to advice and counselling services);
- be external or internal facing (general public, businesses or staff);
- be in-house, outsourced or a mixture of the two (where in-house includes departmental switchboards that have a primary information-giving service); and
- deal with high or low volumes of contacts.

2.03 While the types of contact centre provision will vary, the basic principles, quality standards and good management practice should not.

2.04 Figure 1 shows the structure of a typical government contact centre. However, it should be noted that the actual make-up of the structure with the central ‘egg’ will vary according to the application.

2.05 Note that the website and database are deliberately shown linked with the contact centre in the central egg. These elements are crucial in giving a single view of the customer. Even though different elements may be the responsibility of different parties/suppliers, they should be integrated and not developed completely independently.

Figure 1: A typical structure of a contact centre (source: COI)



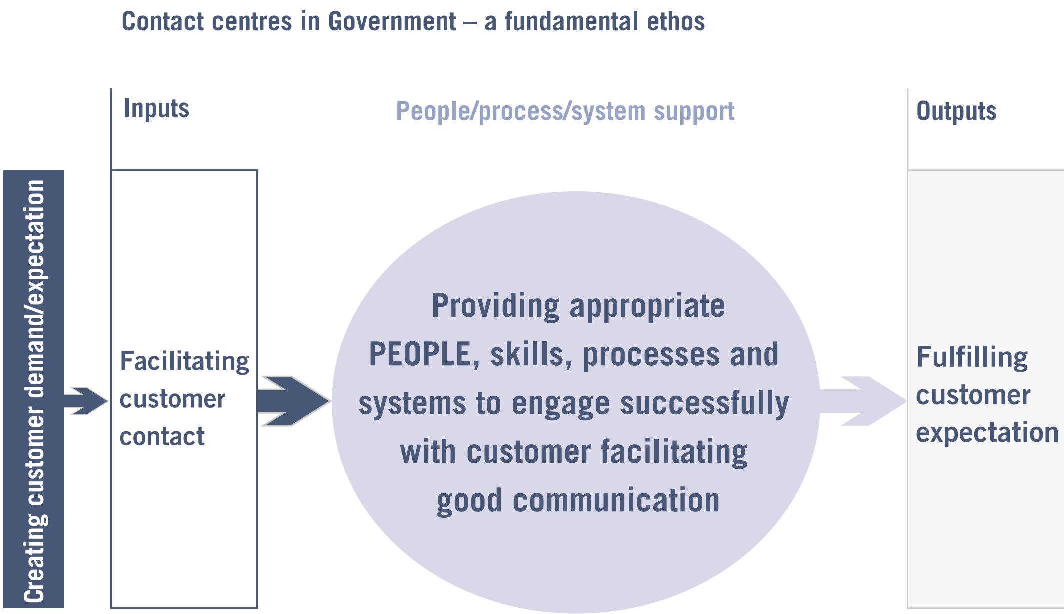
Purpose of contact centres

2.06 The key reason for setting up a contact centre is that you know or anticipate that citizens need access to a service directly through telephone, post, web, or e-mail, **and** you know that an appropriate quality service can be cost-effectively delivered through these channels. Contact centres can also empower government representatives by giving them the information and decision-making authority to be able to meet, and even exceed, customer expectations. However not all services are suitable for remote delivery and managers should be encouraged to consider whether other means are more appropriate.

2.07 It is vital that the sponsoring group prepares a sound business case establishing this need. It should look at the contact centre's possible remit and establish clear objectives and a strategy for meeting those objectives (see paragraph 3.06).

2.08 Whilst the actual structure of a contact centre will vary (as per Figure 1), the basic underlying ethos and purpose remain the same. This can be seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Underlying ethos of a contact centre (source: COI)



Benefits of contact centres

2.09 Contact centres can deliver the following benefits:

Better service

A contact centre can transform a citizen's experience of interacting with government by:

- offering a simple and clear point of access;
- improving the consistency and quality of service;
- eliminating or reducing form-filling and lengthy waits for replies;
- obtaining immediate answers to questions because information and citizen history are available to agents;
- eliminating the need to travel to access a face-to-face service; and
- offering a convenient time for interaction, such as evenings and weekends.
- a positive experience can enhance the 'brand' of the organisation.

Greater effectiveness

Use of computer-based contact centre systems and processes should create a more effective system by:

- allowing simple/common queries to be made routine;
- reducing time needed to search paper-based systems; and
- reducing time wasted by errors on paper documents, such as application forms.

Cost savings

Greater effectiveness will inevitably lead to ongoing cost savings, but other indirect cost savings include:

- reducing space needed to deliver service;
- reducing the number of delivery locations, possibly to one centralised location; and
- reducing the number of interactions needed to deal with each individual case.

Return on investment

2.10 Cost savings, making tasks more routine-based and making better use of technology are worthy objectives. However, they should **not** be pursued at the expense of customer service and a balance needs to be struck as the service develops. The real benefits of a well run contact centre operation only become apparent when the contact centre is placed as the hub of the organisation becoming a voice for the needs of the citizen and proactively driving process change through the information it gathers via committed agents that both improve outcomes for the citizen and reduce innefficiencies elsewhere in the organisation. It is this approach that moves a contact centre from being perceived as a **cost** centre to an **investment** centre which is contributing to the successful delivery of policy objectives and government services. Contact centres are often hailed as successes by individuals pointing at the number of calls it has handled successfully rather than the number of needless calls it has prevented by better informing the citizen through a process change brought about by utilising information from the agents at the 'sharp-end'.

2.11 Contact centres also offer benefits to agents. Worryingly, there is an increasing level of abusive language and physical threats made by a small number of citizens towards front-line staff in central and local government. Contact centres can eliminate these physical threats and can empower agents to terminate inappropriate conversations by hanging up, or to record conversations. However, verbal abuse over the telephone can be very stressful, and mechanisms and protocols should be developed to deal with this.

2.12 Contact centres can offer tangible benefits but it is important that you understand the most effective channels to offer. You should base this consideration on the citizen's needs and the type of service being offered within the budget framework of the responsible department. The OEE has developed comprehensive guidelines in *Channels Framework – Delivering Government Services in the New Economy*, available at **www.govtalk.gov.uk/documents/channels_framework_2002-09-30.pdf**. It is key to understand the psychology of citizens' interaction with channels as merely pushing them through a less personal channel to save costs which does not give them the information/service they require will merely result in a further contact through a more personal channel.

Summary

- *The exact type of contact centre provision will vary, but the underlying basic principles, standards and management practice should not.*
- *Contact centres can deliver many benefits including better service to the citizen, cost saving and greater effectiveness against the delivery of government policy objectives*

3. Establishing the requirement

This chapter explains the factors you should take into consideration when putting together your business proposition. It looks at:

- the business case;
- who should be involved;
- citizen requirements;
- likely service demand;
- the need to gather information;
- how the citizen will access your contact centre; and
- publicising the service you are offering.

The business case

3.01 Assuming a need has been identified, a business case should be formulated before setting up a project team. If this has not happened, it should be the team's first task.

3.02 The business case has three main purposes:

- to define the business need;
- to define the overall business objectives; and
- to set the overall budget for set-up and ongoing running costs.

3.03 The business case will support the application for financial authority to proceed. Depending on the value of the project and the departmental accounting officer's levels of delegated authority, you may need to seek financial authority from the Treasury.

3.04 Once financial authority is received, the business case must be borne in mind throughout the procurement process. If at any stage it becomes clear that the approved business objectives cannot be met within the approved budget, you should immediately seek authority for a revision to one or both, or for abandoning the project.

3.05 Your business need will be derived primarily from the main policy objectives. For example, a policy objective to reduce the number of adult smokers in the UK by 10 per cent in three years may create the need for smoking counselling services, support groups, information on giving up smoking (electronic and physical), and a campaign to change attitudes to smoking. The exact business requirements of such a contact centre could be to:

- offer a central point of contact for any responders to the campaign activity;
- ensure that variation in call volume due to advertising activity can be dealt with;
- offer, and fulfil requests for, printed information to individuals and organisations;
- signpost people to counselling services and support groups;
- maintain up-to-date databases of services to which you are signposting citizens;
- support and help website respondents;
- give ongoing support to citizens through outbound communications;
- maintain a database of responders to conduct this outbound activity; and
- provide proactive reporting to improve media plans.

Setting objectives

3.06 The overall business objectives defined in the business case need to be repurposed into a set of clear project objectives. These project objectives should be set out in business terms but be worded in such a way that they are easily understood by everybody. Any project that does not start with clearly understood objectives is likely to run into major problems and this is particularly true for contact centre projects.

3.07 Contact centres should not be seen as an ‘add-on’ service but as a core part of your strategy to give citizens appropriate contact with government. Contact centres should link in with all the other elements of your organisation’s structure to provide an integrated approach, and not be perceived by internal staff as a threat.

3.08 Remember: ultimately, any proposals from prospective providers (whether in-house or outsourced) will need to be judged on how well and cost-effectively they meet your business/project objectives.

Analysing and managing risk

3.09 Once the project objectives have been defined, the project team should identify, analyse and outline a response for managing high-level risks that threaten the success of each objective.

3.10 It is important to determine both the **probability** of an individual risk occurring and the **impact** it would have, taking into account any interdependencies or other factors out of the immediate scope under investigation. This will determine the response to each risk, which could be to:

- transfer some aspects of it, perhaps by paying a third party to take it on (note that business and reputational risk cannot be transferred);
- tolerate it, perhaps because nothing can be done to mitigate it at a reasonable cost;
- treat it – take action to control it in some way; or
- terminate it by doing things differently and thus removing the risk, where it is feasible to do so.

3.11 More detailed information on analysing and managing risk can be found in the Office of Government Commerce's *Successful IT: Guidelines on Managing Risk* **(www.ogc.gov.uk/ sdtoolkit/reference/ogc_library/ it_relchange/risk_guidelines.pdf)**.

3.12 However, balanced against managing risk is the need to evolve a service constantly and to test alternative options, channels and methodologies (e.g. changing process, changing scripts); and there therefore needs to be an element of risk-taking to determine if there are better ways of doing things. Occasional service failures from a test should be viewed largely as a 'learning experience' in the quest for better service standards. Too much emphasis on avoiding risk can lead to service stagnation.

Who should be involved?

Ownership – a project champion

3.13 You will need to consider who will take ownership of the contact centre and where it sits within the organisation. The owner could be a marketing, policy, communications or operational-led team, but you should try to include representatives from each area. You will also need to secure commitment at senior management level to set up and support the contact centre.

3.14 The owner of the contact centre should be responsible for ensuring continuous improvement of the service.

3.15 A contact centre with weak or half-hearted senior management support and little long-term commitment is very likely to fail, or at least not deliver the benefits hoped for.

The project team

3.16 A strong project team will be needed to lead an audit process and build the strategy and contact centre specification that will meet both citizen and business needs.

3.17 This team should represent the key people who will either have requirements from the contact centre (whether reporting or response handling), or be involved in delivering it. For example, if it is possible that the service could be delivered in-house, input from the department's IT team will be vital to establish whether you have the necessary technology in place and the budget and expertise to deliver it. Additionally, if the policy department is managing the delivery of the contact centre, the communications department is likely to have clear requirements for handling campaigns. Or, if part of your communication strategy is to maintain regular contact with your customers, then your direct marketing advisers or agencies should be involved. It is also important to involve your HR department from the start of the project, particularly if there will be chances of employing, redeploying staff or making redundancies (see the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 1981[1]).

3.18 The project team should have the appropriate expertise and authority to ensure successful implementation of the contact centre. The size and composition of the project board, and the way in which it operates, will vary from department to department. It will also depend on the proposed contact centre's size, nature, etc.

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[1] The Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 1981 are designed to address the issue of contractual rights in the circumstances of a change of employer. They have two main objectives:

- When one employer proposes to transfer his business or part of it to another employer, both the transferor and the transferee should inform and consult with representatives of their respective employees affected by the transfer.
- When a transfer takes place, the contracts of employment of the employees concerned should be transferred automatically from the transferor to the transferee and their terms and conditions should be protected.

The protection afforded to employees by the Regulations applies to any person employed by the transferor under a contract of employment. If you suspect the Regulations will apply in your contact centre development, you should seek legal advice.

An undertaking is generally considered to be a self-contained economic unit. In many cases where services are outsourced these are classified as services and not undertakings. Again, legal advice should be sought.

3.19 The Successful Delivery Skills Programme, endorsed by the Civil Service Management Board and the Office of Government Commerce (OGC), is a recommended source of advice. The OGC's Professional Development Team can advise on this. They can be contacted at **www.ogc.gov.uk**.

3.20 While we cannot make firm rules on the composition of the team, we do recommend:

- The team should be led by a strong project manager, fully authorised and capable of driving an audit process and delivering recommendations. He or she will need to be involved throughout the process – until at least implementation stage, but ideally through the lifetime of the project. Ideally, once the contact centre is procured/set up, the same senior-level team should be tasked with ongoing implementation, overall management and evolution of the service.
- The contact centre manager should be a member of the team. If a contact centre manager is already in post, he or she should be involved from the start; if not, then immediately following his or her appointment.
- The project team should have access to expert external advice and support.
- The team should undertake a full audit of your business, citizen and service requirements. It should then offer recommendations on how the contact centre should be delivered.

Expert advice and support

3.21 Expert advice and support are vital if you are setting up a contact centre for the first time. Even if you have previous experience, input from people with wider knowledge will help – problems and solutions vary from project to project and knowledge can be transferred from different programmes already in place. As well as ensuring a quality project, expert input can save time and effort by avoiding the need to 'reinvent the wheel'.

3.22 There are two areas in particular where expert advice and support should be sought:

- *General procurement knowledge.* Your own procurement division will be able to advise you on general procurement matters and make sure you are complying with your department's procedures.

- *Contact centre expertise.* Input from someone with wide experience of contact centre projects who can provide neutral advice. COI is one obvious source of help, as is OGC, or you may find appropriate experience in your department or another department. Employing a consultant from the private sector is an option but you should choose someone who can provide neutral advice – in other words, someone whose company would not have a vested interest in any contract that may be awarded. Other sources include, for example, the CCA's Electronic Sharing of Knowledge and Information (ESKI), which allows members to ask queries anonymously and benefit from answers from the wider contact centre marketplace. Other sources of information are given in Appendix G.

Stakeholders

3.23 Stakeholders can be many and varied, so you should consider how the contact centre will affect them (positively and negatively) and you should seek 'buy-in'. For example, there is no point having a highly efficient contact centre which refers people to a local branch if the local branch cannot cope with forwarded call capacity or does not have the knowledge or experience to deal with the citizen's case at that point.

Citizen requirements

3.24 Government contact centres can deal with every type of citizen and target audience who will come from a wide range of diverse backgrounds, for example:

- general public
- business
- youth
- working age
- pensioners
- men of a certain age group
- women of a certain age group
- parents
- black and ethnic minorities
- socially excluded
- people with disabilities.

This list is not exhaustive and citizens can belong to more than one category.

3.25 However, you should avoid the temptation to assume these are generic, homogeneous audiences. From a contact centre perspective, the audience should be broken down further to make sure your contact centre can deal with their different requirements. For example, although a contact centre may be set up to deal with pensioners, there is a large difference in the types of citizen that fall into this category. A pensioner who is 90 years old will have very different contact requirements to a recently retired 65-year-old.

3.26 You should therefore consider profiling and segmenting your audience. Various established research and direct marketing techniques can be used to help you better understand the people you are targeting. This, in turn, will help determine citizen 'channel preferences', or the way citizens wish to contact you (for example, teenagers may want to contact you by SMS, elderly people by mail) and how they use those channels. This also raises issues around accessibility, cost and the timing of the contact (see paragraph 3.44).

3.27 Citizens may have queries your service is unable to answer within its remit. This means you should make sure you handle such queries directly, or signpost them to another service. For example, a young person calling the Government about going to university may also want to find out about beginning an apprenticeship instead. You should consider requirements broader than your immediate target audience and have protocols in place for dealing with them. Try to ensure that interdepartmental co-operation is in place for the benefit of the citizen.

3.28 It is worthwhile trying to resolve as many queries as possible at the first point of contact. However, if passing the respondent to another agent (for example, part of a dedicated team) or to another service is the most appropriate course of action, then this is <u>not a bad thing</u>. In fact, some services are set up purely as signposting systems.

Avoiding poor communication – aiming for the good conversation

3.29 Citizens require a service that makes it easy for them to communicate with government. This requires empowered, well-trained, empathetic agents and well-structured response channels, processes and systems. Citizens consider the following to be characteristics of poor communication:[2]

- having to repeat or request information more than once;
- long delays before a contact is answered/dealt with;
- long delays to answer after a transfer has been made;
- having to pay for a call whilst waiting in a queuing system;
- unfriendly and unhelpful agents;
- being put through/signposted to the wrong place;
- delays in finding a citizen's details;

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[2] Based on Henley Centre/BT, Central Government/NHS Teleculture report 1997

- agents who do not give their names;
- short opening hours;
- poor/complex automated/IVR system;
- uninformative queuing system/messages given out;
- an outward contact (for example, callback) that is promised but does not materialise;
- rushed contact;
- fulfilment materials not received or received late, or incorrect materials supplied; and
- agents unable to access accurate, up-to-date information.

3.30 Conversely excellent customer service can be achieved through ensuring that you are accessible with appropriate opening hours, sensible levels of resource to meet demand and avoid queues, considered use of technology and most importantly empowered agents who are able to engage in a **good conversation** and ideally meet their needs in a first time call resolution or sensibly point them in the right direction for further information if that is more appropriate.

3.31 In assessing your contact centre provision from the citizen's viewpoint, you should bear in mind these factors and have in place mechanisms to address any shortfalls in customer perception of your service, and use this guidance together with any input from experts (see paragraph 3.22) to bring in modern contact centre solutions that overcome these issues.

Likely service demand

3.32 By understanding citizens' needs and matching these with what your organisation can realistically deliver, you will be in a position to define a clear **remit** for your contact centre. This remit should be agreed with all key players in your organisation and any conflicts should be resolved so that services are not over-promised. The remit should be documented formally and clearly (it may even form part of communications to citizens to manage expectations).

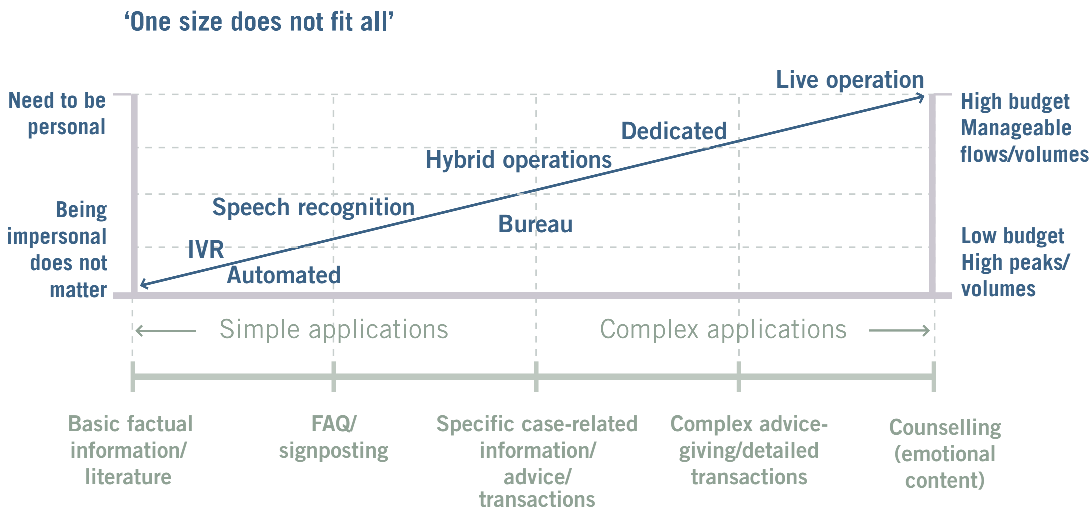
3.33 This remit will, in turn, help determine the likely structure of the contact centre. The structure should be based on:

- the degree of complexity of the interactions;
- the need for personal service as opposed to self-service (see paragraph 3.37);
- the pattern of contact demand;
- available budget and resource; and
- the anticipated length of service provision.

3.34 Your remit should focus on positive outcomes to the citizen. What you might consider low-value work (e.g. basic queries) might well be valued by the citizen even if you consider it largely a drain on resources.

3.35 Figure 3 shows the range of activities and combinations that you should consider when deciding on the structure of your contact centre.

Figure 3: A graphical representation of the contact centre space (source: COI)



3.36 It is important to consider where your service lies in this market space, remembering that parts of your service may call for one kind of treatment and other parts may need a different handling environment.

3.37 Government needs to offer various levels of support and, as the NAO states, you should consider different levels of service that can increase quality and improve the cost-efficiency of the service. For example, it would not be efficient for a trained counsellor to take a call from someone who only wanted to request a booklet. In this case you could consider offering a front screen of agents who can deal with simple queries, backed up by a dedicated team of highly trained agents who can handle complex queries and give advice. Telephone call automation can also be used to help pre-sort calls (see paragraph 8.22 for more information on automation) or as an overflow. Alternatively you could look at making use of skills set-based routing through intelligent call handling platforms if this is available.

3.38 Depending on your requirements, contact can be handled through:

- **Dedicated agents**

  These are agents trained only to work on one service/campaign. Because they are dedicated to one service, they generally deal with more detailed and complex interactions. During telephone calls they will often follow a call guide rather than set scripts. Departments pay for agents' time regardless of whether they are dealing with contacts all the time. Outsourced costs are generally paid for by the hour and, as this risk is transferred to the department, it is important to minimise downtime. One way to do this is by making sure agents can handle various types of enquiry (for example, e-mail, post and outbound phone) or giving them administrative duties. This can be a complex matter of forecasting permanent and shift staff levels. The key to cost efficiencies is good forecasting of volumes with a steady base flow of contacts. It is also possible to use semi-dedicated teams who work on a limited number of services for one department or service type.

- **Bureau agents**

  Bureau agents are a shared resource between services/campaigns. Agents may be trained to a lower level, though there are specialist bureaux who do cover more complex applications, and supported by appropriate technology and training can deal with these. Bureau agents typically work on up to four services, and may rely more on computer-based systems to give information often following a set script. The key benefit of bureau agents is that costs are shared between services, downtime is minimised and they are often easier to scale up to meet periods of high volumes. Outsourced costs are normally paid for by the minute, often at a slight premium to an hourly rate because the risk is transferred to the supplier. If you have too little or too much capacity to cope with demand, efficiency will be lost – whether operational, staff or contact handling efficiency. This in turn will lead to financial loss.

- **Automated–Interactive Voice Recognition (IVR)/Speech Recognition**

  See paragraph 8.22.

3.39 In truth many successful contact centres are a blend or hybrid of live and automated services, and the cost of poor forecasting on a line service can be high for both in-house and outsourced contracts.

Gathering information

3.40 Before you consider how your contact centre should be sourced and resourced, you should calculate its expected size and workloads. This is not easy to do and it is a major cause of failure: too small and it will not cope with demand; too big and it will not be cost-effective. This is an area where advice from a contact centre expert can be really useful.

3.41 Before deciding on your contact centre model, you will need to gather the following information:

- types of activity to be managed. For example, what kind of customer contacts will you receive? What are the nature and purpose of the enquiries? This applies to all channels;
- the likelihood of increased volumes at time of launch and during any periodic marketing exercises. Conversely, you should also consider the likelihood of decreased volumes after launch and between any marketing exercises;
- the volume of customer contacts you receive or anticipate receiving. This information should be broken down by times of day (even down to half- or quarter-hour segments), days of the week and weeks of the year to see what the time, publicity and seasonal effects are. Knowing this will help to shape your overall requirement;
- contacts achieved and contacts abandoned. For example, on a telephone system your resource planning should aim to achieve the full number of 'attempts' (taking into account rediallings);
- the staff required for pre- and post-contact activity (for example, fulfilment). You should also consider whether these activities could be done by separate (in-house or outsourced) providers;
- the combined skills needed to manage contacts (how specialist are the activities? Is extra training required?);
- likely hours of operation for the contact centre; and
- the number of staff needed to maintain the level of service. You should allow for absences, staff turnover, training, etc. and start to think about what approach you will use for staffing. You should consider supervisory staff as well as agents. This will help you to consider in-house provision and evaluate any proposals from outside suppliers.

3.42 You should also consider the average length of time it will take to manage each type of contact and whether this is likely to increase or decrease as the service develops. In some cases a service may deepen its remit, involving an increase in contact length to improve customer satisfaction – this is not in itself a bad thing. Contact centres often focus on reducing contact time to improve efficiency but this may be counterproductive if citizens gain a negative impression of your contact centre, or if it leads to negative outcomes.

3.43 You may find it helpful to start with maximum and minimum estimates for each variable listed above, and then to narrow these down as work progresses.

3.44 Depending on the complexity of the project, it is often a good idea to seek specialist advice on sizing. If you have a contact centre expert on board, as suggested, they will be able to provide first level advice and may also arrange further assistance, for example from advisers with load simulation packages. At the end of the exercise it must be remembered that sizing is only an estimate, so contingency plans are essential.

Access

3.45 The main purpose behind contact centres is to provide a more accessible service for citizens than they would receive from a more traditional, local office-based contact.

Opening hours

3.46 You should assess opening times by looking at the following factors:

- the needs of your target audience;
- the type of service you are delivering;
- if you have an existing service, historical statistics showing when people made contact. Try to locate this as early as possible. (You should look at when people **attempted** to contact, rather than just when they made a successful contact);
- publicity/communications plans (there is no point running a direct response TV advertisement at 11pm if the contact centre is shut); and
- your budget and the resources available.

3.47 You should carry out customer research into current and potential future demand for opening hours, as part of the service definition. Within this, you will need to consider day and time of contact, and look for any potential or known contact volume patterns throughout the year (for example, are school holidays or the end of the tax year peak periods?).

3.48 Many contact centres in the UK operate from 8am to 8pm, seven days a week, but a popular operating time is 7am to 11pm. Public demand and the nature of the service might also call for 24-hour access.

3.49 It is never acceptable for a caller to receive a continuous ringing tone, so you should make some provision for out-of-hours service. Using automation/IVR and/or an overflow to an outsourced bureau will increase opening hours but may not always be appropriate. You should also consider merging out-of-hours activity with other government organisations that have longer hours services.

Cost to the citizen

3.50 Based on your primary target audiences, you should also consider the cost of accessing the service. Not only does this make sure that citizens on low income can afford to contact you, but it also encourages citizens to call by removing the cost barrier.

3.51 For telephone services, this involves decisions over whether to offer a geographical number or a non-geographical number such as 0800/0808, 0845/0844 or 0870/0871. Non geographical numbers have traditionally provided advantages in terms of intelligent routing, which helps manage call flows and can provide a better service to the end customer (although the more advanced networks can provide intelligent routing on standard geographical numbers and this should be explored as an option).

The following guidance has been put together with input from Ofcom.

3.52 Free services would be appropriate if you are targeting those who may be deterred by the cost of a call (for example, the elderly, young people or those on low incomes or where the nature of the call is confidential) and is particularly applicable if your objective is to encourage as many people as possible to call. For example, with counselling services, if the call is free it will not normally appear on the phone bill and as such a free call is very appropriate. (Note that some mobile operators currently do charge for free number calls.[1])

3.53 However 0800/0808 numbers can suffer from hoax calls, and you may wish to consider a geographic number or an 0844/0845.[2] For example, cost is likely to be less of an issue for businesses, so 0844 or 0845 may be more appropriate here.

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[1] Work is being undertaken by COI together with other bodies to see if this difficult area can be addressed.

[2] 0845 in particular has been known as ‘local rate’ – however with increased competition in the marketplace and resultant changes in tariff structures, these rates will often be in excess of normal local rates that citizens might be charged on their package. 0845 (and 0844) costs through phone boxes and some mobile tariffs can also be expensive to the citizen and this should also be considered.

3.54 0870/0871 numbers are not recommended, particularly when targeting individuals as by dint of falling call rates, these have become expensive to the caller relative to a geographical call, which can act as a barrier to communicating information that the citizen should have access to as a right. If 0870/0871[3] is being used then other alternatives – i.e. a standard geographical number (either in parallel with, or as an alternative to, the 0870/0871 number), the web or postal mechanisms should be considered and made available. 0870/0871 might be appropriate in a business environment, but even here its use should be treated with caution.

3.55 If you are asking citizens to respond by coupon, we recommend offering a freepost address to avoid the cost and inconvenience of postage stamps.

3.56 If you are using SMS, you should consider the cost to the citizen of sending a text, and indeed a response may involve multiple texts back and forth.

3.57 You should always clearly communicate the cost to customers on publicity materials (see paragraph 3.75) and this should not use any misleading terms such as 'local', 'national rate', etc.

3.58 Premium rate revenue generation numbers should **never** be used for public services.

3.59 Tariff is often a decision that should be made as part of the wider communications/publicity planning and should be given due consideration and the impact on the citizen discussed.

Single entry points versus multiple entry points

Single entry points

3.60 Departments often feel that operating, for example, a single telephone number for all departmental requirements (or at least a sizeable subset of them) would be of benefit to citizens, as it would:

- make promoting and remembering the number easier;
- act as a 'one-stop shop' allowing 'cross-selling' of initiatives; and
- cut down on the number of unnecessary pass-ons.

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[4] 0870 in particular has been known as 'national rate', however this is misleading and 0870 can be very expensive to the citizen in comparison with the tariffs they would normally pay for a national call. Increasingly distinctions between local and national are fading in tariff structures anyway. 0870/0871 more generally has the added issue of revenue share (this can be available on 0845/0844 but is smaller, less universal and less perceived by the public). This can be viewed negatively by the citizen who may feel the Department is exploiting them, as even if the revenues are being utilised towards the costs of the operation of the service, this might not be fully understood.

3.61 Similarly, using a single e-mail address or a single web portal or url is thought to offer these sorts of advantages.

3.62 However, it is important to recognise that for all the theoretical advantages, there can be some **considerable disadvantages** to single entry points:

- potential 'bottlenecking' and the risk of one element of the service damaging others;
- the need to sift citizens initially to establish their requirements, and the confusion this can cause. Often, there may be a temptation to do this with automation/IVR (see paragraph 8.22), which may cause problems;
- a reduction in the ability to accommodate new services without affecting the other strands;
- resource forecasting and budget risk issues. Single entry points demand more co-ordination of publicity (paid and unpaid) at both a national and a local level if all activities are focused on a single point. Experience suggests that this level of co-ordination is difficult to achieve;
- lack of ability to track and report on activity for sub-activities and media source of the enquiry. This is particularly bad for the web where sending citizens to a home page for example means no tracking can be undertaken relating the response back to the original media and often leads to confusion as to continuation of the response journey (see 3.64); and
- problems with different services under one umbrella requiring different tariff entry (for example, 0800 versus 0845) and different levels of agent quality.

3.63 Contrary to popular belief, the majority of citizens do not retain telephone numbers or e-mail addresses in their memory, but either react to publicity presented to them or actively hunt out the service contact points.

3.64 Moreover, citizens generally have a specific need, and it can be valuable to drive them directly to the right entry point, so that the 'journey' that began with whatever prompted them to respond continues along the same lines. For example, commercial companies will have one number for sales and another for queries, or perhaps one number for new customers and another number for existing ones who require a more complex service. Alternatively for example a piece of direct mail targeting women with a particularly apt creative tone should direct people to, for example, a microsite that continues in that vein rather than a more generic site.

3.65 Departments choose to use different contact centres for different elements of work because of the volatile nature of contact volumes. Aside from marketing activity that naturally causes planned-for peaks and troughs, government lines and services are at risk from adverse publicity, ministerial announcements and wider, unforeseen problems that may be caused by emergency situations. A single number would only be effective if it were to operate so flexibly that it could deal with these peaks and troughs rapidly – something which is difficult to achieve both physically and financially.

3.66 For example, if one element of the department caused thousands of people to make contact, it is very likely that, despite best planning, citizens requesting information on other elements would not be able to get through to the contact centre. This would damage the overall reputation of the department. Similarly, websites can collapse because the traffic demand to one area is too great at a particular time.

3.67 A service that requires a degree of sensitivity of call handling, such as counselling or complex advice, is unlikely to work bundled in with other services that are more process-driven or where there is a front-end automated sift.

Multiple entry points

3.68 Generally, using multiple entry points, such as a range of numbers, different specific landing pages or specific e-mail addresses:

- allows flexibility of resource across a campaign;
- assists the accommodation of new initiatives;
- protects other departmental services from excessive contact volumes and adverse publicity;
- facilitates improvements to customer service by ensuring citizens are able to get the right level and quality of information/service they require first time, rather than having to be sifted to access the right department or having to get an agent to make a transfer; and
- helps considerably in the analysis of marketing activity, as individual service contact volumes can be tracked and analysed against media, making sure that these elements are fully accountable.

3.69 However, departments may consider a single overarching entry point to be useful as a backstop for those who are unclear. The system set up behind it could act as an overflow service for the other sub-services in the system. If used at all, its importance should be minimal (you should not necessarily lead with it) and you should aim to reduce both of its roles over time by:

- better educating the public to go through to the direct services available;
- running the other services so efficiently that an overflow is not needed;
- ensuring better cross-transfer of citizens between services; and
- defining and publicising better the **remits** of the individual services.

Alpha numerics

3.70 Alpha numerical phone numbers are becoming more widely used and research has shown they are an effective marketing tool. They work by replacing the digits within the phone number with the alpha characters on phone keypads (for example, 0800 Pensions (0800 736 7467)). In the USA, where alpha numerical phone numbers were first used, research has shown that using alpha numerics increases the overall campaign effectiveness by 14 times compared to either ‘golden’ or cosmetic numbers. In the UK, when people were asked to recall phone numbers shown to them, 83 per cent recalled the alpha numerical number, while only 3 per cent recalled the traditional number.

3.71 Alpha numerical numbers also have a number of distinct disadvantages:

- Not all phone users have access to phones with alpha numerical keypads, so communications should also include the full non-alpha numerical number.
- Writing down a number, even a golden number, prevents mistakes being made when making the call. Alpha numerics tend to push people towards remembering the number. If this is remembered incorrectly and therefore dialled incorrectly, there could be problems with callers being directed to another organisation or service.
- Many departments change campaigns or initiatives over time. If the alpha numerical system is used and the key word selected becomes irrelevant over time, another number will need to be used. Care should therefore be taken over the selection of the key word.

Disability access

3.72 The Disability Rights Commission estimates that there are over 8.5 million disabled people in the UK – over 15 per cent of the population. They include:

- around 2 million people with visual impairment;
- over 8 million people with a hearing impairment, including 60,000 to 70,000 profoundly deaf people who use British Sign Language;
- 250,000 people who have both visual and hearing impairment;
- around 1 million people with a learning disability;
- over 700,000 wheelchair users; and
- at least 7 million people with literacy problems.

3.73 Disabled people are as likely as the rest of the population to use contact centre services for advice or to receive information in an accessible format. However, disabled people may need the centre to adjust its services to meet their specific needs, as the law now requires.

3.74 Part III of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) says that service providers must make 'reasonable' adjustments to their services and practices to make them accessible to disabled people. Since October 1999, service providers have been specifically required to make information available in alternative formats, if it is 'reasonable' to do so.

3.75 The following are ways in which contact centres should deliver their services in order to help them meet the demands of the DDA:

Telephone

Telephone response and helplines may be especially useful to people who are elderly or housebound, people with visual impairment and those with literacy problems. However, telephones can create their own problems that should be considered:

- Disabled people generally have a smaller disposable income than the average citizen. Wherever possible, phone numbers should be free to the caller or there should be a way for the agent to phone back if the call is likely to prove expensive.
- A textphone should be provided for agents to communicate with deaf people and those with speech impairments. To avoid confusion it is important to make it clear in publicity that the textphone number is for people who have access to a textphone, and is not for text messaging. Be aware that when telephone campaigns are very busy some non-disabled citizens may use the textphone number, tying up the line for those in real need.
- Agents should also be trained to use the RNID Typetalk service (an alternative to using a textphone).
- Agents should have disability awareness training to help them deal patiently and sensitively with people who, for whatever reason, need more time or have difficulty understanding or making themselves understood. This may need additional funding if it is in depth.
- Touch-tone options can be confusing or intimidating, so if a touch-tone system is used, it should be as simple as possible, with a limited number of options at each stage, and instructions should be delivered slowly and clearly (see paragraph 8.33).
- Videophones are not yet in common use, but eventually they will provide a valuable means of communication for sign language users. They may also benefit people with learning difficulties by enabling them to see who they are talking to. You could also consider offering a web conference type facility which would allow the disabled customer to see the agent.

Leaflets and other printed material

- All printed material should be designed and printed for maximum legibility (see *The Informability Manual*, available from the Stationery Office at **www.hmso.gov.uk**).
- You should always use plain language and be as brief as possible.
- Contact details, such as telephone numbers or web addresses, should be highlighted by making them larger or bolder than the surrounding text.
- Wherever possible, print material should be available in other formats (such as large print, Braille, audio cassette and electronically).
- Agents should be aware of all the formats available and make sure that callers are given the opportunity to ask for information in alternative formats.
- Try to ensure that your fulfilment material is delivered in good time, ideally before the launch of your service.

Coupons

- Disabled people and older people may have larger than average handwriting due to sight impairment or physical disabilities. Coupons should therefore always allow enough space to write the information requested.
- Text used on coupons should be a minimum of 12 point (and ideally larger).

E-mail

- E-mail/textchat can be of great benefit to some disabled people. Blind people, for instance, **may** have software that enables them to create speech or Braille from electronic text. This can also provide an alternative method of access for those who are hearing impaired.
- E-mail for fulfilment should be offered as an alternative if information in a particular format (for example Braille) is not available.

Websites

All websites should be designed to be accessible to disabled people. Website design should follow the guidelines laid down by W3I (**www.W3.org/WAI/**) and the RNIB (**www.rnib.org.uk/digital/hints.htm**).

A number of these issues (for example, having coupons with enough writing space and using clear language) would represent good practice for dealing with citizens generally.

Language requirements

3.76 Therre are some 4.6 million ethnic minority individuals in Great Britain with diverse backgrounds and literacy and language requirements so these need to be considered. You should either offer agents who speak other languages or offer a translation service (COI, for example have an agregated contract with Language Line). The public sector have accessibility commitments under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 which make it unlawful to give services on less favourable terms or conditions than offered to people of other racial groups as well as a general duty to promote race equality.

3.77 The languages citizens need will depend on the activity. Remember, although some people may not read English, they may be able to speak it and understand the written word. Audio versions of fulfilment can be useful here.

3.78 The Welsh Language Act 1993 (available from **www.hmso.gov.uk/acts/acts1993/Ukpga_19930038_en_4.htm**) also demands that information and communication are offered in Welsh. The Government Communication Network (GCN) offers a number of documents on its website at **www.coms.gov.uk/guidance**, covering the Welsh Language Act and government communications with citizens generally.

Keeping records

3.79 It is important to gain a feel for the type and quantities of services that citizens require, to help you plan for the future. We therefore recommend that you keep records of the numbers of calls from people with disabilities or in different languages.

3.80 COI can give you advice on all aspects of communicating with people with disabilities and people from minority backgrounds.

Publicising the service

3.81 It is important to remember that in order for citizens to access your service, you need to publicise the service's existence, its remit and its response channels.

3.82 A large number of contacts are often the result of referrals. Whether referrals come from colleagues, friends or intermediaries, it is important to consider marketing beyond the direct target audience. For example, you should make sure that organisations such as Citizens Advice Bureaux and libraries are aware of your service. COI maintains a database of

c. 82,000 such organisations and high street points of interest on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions. This *Publicity Register* is available for other departments to access through COI.

3.83 There is currently no central list of government contact centres so you should consider using directory enquiries and telephone directories such as Yellow Pages and Thomson. COI is investigating the creation of an overall government contact centre section. The OEE's UK online portal should also include details of all government services available online.

3.84 When including your contact details on any marketing materials, you should consider:

- voicing over the telephone number/web address/SMS code and key word on TV commercials and making sure the number is on the screen for at least 10 to 12 seconds;
- repeating the telephone number/web address/SMS code and key word on any radio commercials;
- ensuring the number and/or contact details are clearly visible;
- ensuring that there are not so many options that people get confused;
- managing people's expectations by making sure the call to action fits the remit of the service people will receive (for example, do not ask people to call for advice if you can only give them information packs); don't let the advertising creative lead to difficulties for the contact centre;
- letting people know if it is free to call;
- letting people know if there is a cost to contact you above local rate; and
- including your opening hours if they are limited and you have the space to include them. Also, if you are open at weekends or have extended hours you should let people know, as many may assume you are not open.

3.85 Publicity activity can have a massive impact on the type and number of contacts you receive over your base traffic. Different media have different 'response curves' so this needs to be taken into account. It is therefore vital that your marketing agencies, media planners and contact centre work together to manage the process.

Content

3.86 The key messages of your publicity activity (paid and unpaid) will drive the type of contact you receive. For example, an advert to businesses about providing financial advice will increase the number of queries on this topic, even if the service offers general business advice. The call to action will also shape the respondents' expectations of what they will get out of the contact. For example, are they expecting to be offered a free information pack or to be signposted to a local service? Any **call to action** on marketing materials should be passed to the contact centre for comment. Good marketing communications can affect response volumes dramatically and even manipulate them.

Volumes and contact patterns

3.87 The volume of contacts generated by marketing activity depends on many factors, such as the media channel you are using and your call to action. For example, if TV highlights the web as the primary response mechanism, you may get telephone calls, and if direct mail is used rather than press, your response is likely to be more staggered. You need to be aware of the different response rates and curves for different media.

DRTV

3.88 Direct Response Television (DRTV) needs to be treated with great caution. It can deliver such huge peaks in contact volumes that even the largest outsourced agents have difficulty handling in a live environment.

3.89 Other channels, such as Direct Response Radio, are likely to get less peak volumes. However, the volumes they can generate should not be underestimated. Make sure your contact centre is aware of all activity surrounding the service and the potential volumes this can generate. This might include:

- planned PR activity in press/TV; and
- direct marketing in the form of press, direct mail, inserts, door drops, for example.

3.90 Contact centres should have sight of planned marketing materials as format, design and layout of materials can impact on the handling costs and time to process. Even a poorly designed coupon can have a negative impact. Contact centres should be given time to comment on and input into these materials.

3.91 Contact details can often be included in operational mailings that may not be classed as direct mail. This means that marketing and contact centre staff may not be aware of them and this could cause unexpected surges. Poorly written communications with no marketing communications input can also lead to misunderstandings and even stress for the citizen, creating unnecessary contact demand which could have been avoided.

3.92 You should also consider the impact of non-paid-for activity, such as stories or issues in the press brought about by ministerial announcements, events or general media interest in the issues covered by your contact centre. Often unnecessary contact demand can be created through poor media briefing or from 'holes' in the operational process that generate queries. It is better to fix the process.

Briefing agents

3.93 To maximise quality, contact centre agents should be fully briefed on all activity that is happening and when it is happening. This will allow them to deal with queries efficiently. Briefing includes showing agents the creative work and, where appropriate, asking the marketing team to brief on the strategy and the likely contacts that could arise from publicity.

Evaluating marketing

3.94 It is vital that contact centre agents are also fully briefed to track the impact on campaigns and to measure the value of marketing spend over time. Plotting this against the events that create the demand will allow you to see the effects of particular marketing activities on your base level. It will also help future forecasting by refining the assumptions your model is based on, and therefore make it much more of an interactive process.

3.95 Unless there is very good reason not to, **all** contacts should be asked where they found out about the service. You should also track not only the main media (for example TV) but also the channel. This information can be used to improve the effectiveness of your media buying. You should make sure this is tracked in a reportable format, using fixed fields rather than free text. Ideally different media should have different telephone numbers so it is completely clear which medium generated the call (see paragraphs 3.60–3.69 on single and multiple entry points).

3.96 In addition to calls received, you should also make sure that responses from other channels, such as the web, SMS or coupons, can also be tracked to make sure that information on the media used can be fed back to marketing teams, for example by using different landing sites, drop-down media completion boxes on sites and different e-mail addresses in different media.

3.97 Profiling techniques such as geo-demographic profiles (ACORN, MOSAIC) or volumes segmentation can also be applied to customer data to see whether certain media are better at reaching your target audience, and can allow you to produce differential communications that will vary response rates across audiences.

3.98 COI is the Government's publicity specialist. It has considerable experience in this area that can be drawn from previous activity undertaken across numerous government departments.

Summary

- *A successful contact centre needs a project champion to 'own' it, a project team, expert advice and support, and stakeholders' input.*
- *It is essential to consider all the possible citizen requirements and how you will handle them.*
- *Understanding service demand and calculating expected size and workloads will allow you to determine your contact centre model.*
- *You should consider all aspects of accessibility, from opening hours and ways for citizens to contact you to the way you intend to publicise your service.*

4. Budgeting

This chapter looks at the major operating costs of contact centres. It examines:
- operational budget requirements; and
- cutting the cost of transactions.

4.01 The cost of a contact centre can be broken down into six main areas:
- staff to handle contacts and manage the operation;
- a building to house staff and related services;
- telephony and infrastructure;
- information technology and databases;
- independent evaluation of performance and quality of service; and
- fulfilment activity, including costs such as postage and carriage, and possible ongoing outbound contacts.

4.02 You should be fully aware of **all** the costs – fixed, semi-fixed and variable – and understand the relationships between the different elements. Finances should be actively managed on an ongoing basis, and the financial arrangements of each element should be **transparent**. This is not always automatically the case. For example, in some larger outsourced facilities management contracts, contact centre provision may be 'bundled' with other activity, which can be misleading.

Operational budget requirements

4.03 The most significant operating cost of a contact centre is staffing. The DTI (May 2004) estimates that this usually accounts for about 72 per cent of the overall budget. It therefore makes sense to focus most attention on this area, rather than on systems. It is also worth noting that with technological advancements in the networks and IT, costs for appropriate solutions are ever-changing.

Potential cost impacts

4.04 Unforeseen events that require extra resources can occur at any time. They could include:
- introducing a new or upgraded computer system;
- a new marketing campaign;
- a sudden increase in demand;
- a change of requirements prompted by policy change or citizen demand;
- system issues; and
- relocation.

4.05 Organisations need to anticipate and plan for the impact that events such as these could have on the overall operating budget. Typically, staffing, network and training costs will increase. In particular, the cost of relocation can be considerable when you take into account building, upgrading furniture and equipment, and planning and co-ordinating the move itself.

4.06 The centre's future capital requirements should also be considered. Capital investments in more sophisticated technology will require a business case that outlines the potential cost savings, efficiency gains and overall return on investment. You should also take into account the cost of depreciation of capital equipment. Normally, capital equipment is depreciated over a three-year period. However, with developments in network technology capital expenditure is not always required.

Equipment upgrades

4.07 Introducing new technology should form part of the annual planning process. Organisations need a planned approach to capital investments, ideally using a three-year planning cycle for system upgrades and new technology. Vendors and IT departments tend to focus on enhancements and upgrades to telephony equipment and information systems over a two-year cycle.

4.08 The decision to upgrade or introduce new technology should only be made after a thorough appraisal of the marketplace. Benchmarking and attending industry events can help with this process.

Cutting the cost of contacts

4.09 Once a contact centre has been operating for 12 months or more and is well established, many organisations start looking for ways to reduce the overall cost of service delivery. Use of technology such as call automation (see paragraph 8.22) or rostering software can greatly increase efficiency.

4.10 Other ways of maintaining cost-effectiveness include assessing cost risks that could impact on the way you deliver your service. For example, employing a large team of dedicated agents on a daily/hourly rate or giving them long contracts is risky for any new service where contact volumes are quite unpredictable.

4.11 Efficient resourcing through workforce management (see paragraph 6.44) and effective performance management will help to maximise the overall level of productivity and therefore efficiency. This might possibly involve looking at the periods of low inbound demand and using that time for outbound communication or e-mail processing, for example. Alternative contact methods, such as self-service web-based transactions and outsourced non-core transactions, can also help reduce costs. Re-engineering processes to strip out unnecessary stages should also be considered.

4.12 Consolidation of contact centres, where appropriate, could also create economies of scale, with joint working between public agencies. However, amalgamation is not always appropriate, and it depends on the nature of the target audience or the subject matter of the services involved.

Cost versus effectiveness

4.13 Cost is a key consideration and will impact on the solution you offer and the service levels that you agree to meet – but it should **not** be the prime driver. Cost, service levels, service quality and outcomes are all closely interrelated. For example, the true measure of a counselling service's effectiveness will be whether the caller is helped, not the cost per call or the number of calls answered. In a situation like this, you may need to adapt your service levels to focus on **quality** rather than quantity.

Summary

- *It is essential to be aware of fixed, semi-fixed and variable costs, and the relationship between the elements.*
- *Most attention should be focused on staff because they are the largest operating cost.*
- *You should plan ahead for unforeseen events and equipment upgrades that can affect costs.*
- *Cost should never be considered in isolation from the quality of the service you are offering and desired outcomes.*

5. Procurement

This chapter aims to advise you on the procurement processes you should follow to make sure you obtain best value for money and meet your business objectives when setting up contact centres. It also examines the merits of outsourcing and 'insourcing'.

5.01 We have taken what is generally regarded as best practice in procurement and tailored it to meet the special requirements of procuring contact centre services. It is worth noting that even if your contact centre is managed in house, many of the good practice processes still apply and will help you decide whether the in-house solution really offers best value for money.

Methodology

5.02 It is important that the project team adopts and sticks to a proven methodology for planning and controlling the procurement process. Various methodologies are available, any of which may be appropriate in different circumstances. It is quite possible that your department will have laid down standards and your procurement division can advise on this if necessary.

5.03 One of the most important decisions to be made, and one of the most complex, is whether contact centre services are to be contracted to an outside supplier (outsourced) or provided in house (insourced), or whether you will use a mixture of the two.

5.04 You should therefore:

- identify the parts of the service that are non-core and would be appropriate to outsource; and
- establish robust reasons for outsourcing and demonstrate the business case for it.

Outsourcing versus insourcing

Reasons for outsourcing

5.05
- When the capabilities that might be outsourced are not 'core competencies' of the department procuring the contact centre. In some cases the capabilities may be seen as a distraction to the main organisational objectives.

- When the contact centre is going to have difficulty in meeting its service level targets in a cost-effective way on its own. An outsourcer/supplier can have access to a much larger pool of resources, such as human resources. The potential supplier should be able to offer greater flexibility and scalability (the ability to increase the contact centre's size). However, this is finite and it is important to set expectations early on and consider 'what if' scenarios to avoid difficulties later.
- Where the capital requirements for building a contact centre are difficult to meet. In general, the private sector currently has relatively easy access to investment capital.
- Where the project is short term and the outsourced contractor has the capacity to do it without capital outlay.
- When the function under consideration for outsourcing is easily defined and readily achievable, and good performance is easy to measure and incentivise. If this is not the case, managing the contract with the supplier is going to be difficult. An outsourced solution can be particularly effective as a pilot test bed when little is known of the likely demand for a service, because it usually minimises capital outlay and offers a lower-risk option. Such testing could then lead to a more formal longer-term procurement decision.
- Where there is going to be a problem acquiring the skills needed to operate a contact centre.

5.06 Outsourcers can be a valuable source of advice as they can transfer experience from similar projects/contracts in other industries to improve services and efficiency at lower risk.

Reasons for insourcing

5.07
- When the function under consideration for outsourcing is not easily defined and not readily achievable, and good performance is difficult to measure and incentivise. These circumstances can create problems in any contact centre.
- When core competencies or core skills can only be found internally.
- When staff in in-house contact centres have other skills that the organisation does not want to risk losing, even when those skills are not core competencies.
- When staff might move from working in the contact centre to other parts of the organisation (and vice versa) on a regular basis.

These reasons apply most strongly when you consider outsourcing the whole contact centre.

Outsourcing

5.08 There are a number of different outsourcing options to choose from. The principal options are:

- *Total outsourcing.* Responsibility for all processes, infrastructure and service is delegated to the outsource service provider;
- *Selective outsourcing.* Component parts are outsourced to one or more suppliers but you retain the elements that match your own competencies or that you prefer to keep in house;
- *Hosting.* You manage the operation and own the service responsibility but your physical infrastructure (premises, workstations, IT, telephony hardware) is rented from the hosting organisation. Usually, you are responsible for the system's integration and application software. Potentially, any or all of the other component parts can be provided by you, contracted via the hosting company or sourced separately;
- *Alliancing.* You work with another organisation to support each other to your mutual benefit. For example, government department contact centres could assist each other if one department is busy when another department is quiet;
- *Outsourcing technical aspects.* For example, you could buy or rent lines and/or equipment from a telephone services provider. This may also be done through an IT services provider if you are confident they have the expertise and experience; and
- *Outsourcing the contact centre infrastructure.* For example, you could outsource the buildings, equipment or technical support, but staff them with in-house resource. This could be achieved by renting space at an outside contact centre and may save on the initial capital costs.

5.09 Whichever outsourcing option you choose, you should consider:

- What already exists in-house, if anything? If the new services are going to be provided in-house, what additional capital investment and costs will be required?
- What are the likely peaks and troughs in demand? Could in-house staff cope cost-effectively with these, compared to an outside supplier? Could in-house staff be given other non-time-critical tasks to even up their workloads?
- What do you need to do to cover unexpected absences, and could an in-house service cope? Providing this sort of cover might be more difficult and create a larger overhead (in percentage terms) for a small centre than for a large centre.
- Would an in-house service be able to acquire and train staff with the skills they need to run and manage the service?
- Are the staff knowledge and capabilities you need core competencies for the department? If so, are there valid reasons for keeping them in-house?

- What is the risk of future changes to volumes and/or types of enquiry and/or types of response channel? Would an in-house provider be best placed to cope with this risk?
- Will you need to keep pace with technological change or stay at the forefront of communications development? Outsourced provision can allow you to buy into a constantly evolving marketplace, benefiting from shared system development, rather than into single bespoke builds.
- Are the requirement, performance measurements and incentives easily defined and understandable?
- Is the information needed to answer contacts well developed and understandable? If not, would an in-house service give more flexibility for developing responses?
- What timings need to be considered? A sample timing plan covering a full *Official Journal of the European Union* (OJEU)[1] procedure and the use of internal suppliers can be found in Appendix D – Timescales. However, a 'crisis' may need alternative methodologies.

EC directives

5.10 If all or any part of the contact centre is to be outsourced, the full requirements of the EC directives on awarding services and supply contracts may apply. These directives are enshrined in British law, so when they apply observance is mandatory. If you are in any doubt, consult your procurement division.

5.11 Where full observance is necessary, there are two procurement options:

- Carry out your own procurement process following the procedures laid down in the directives. This includes advertising the contract(s) in the OJEU and observing the timescales laid down (which must also be allowed for in the project timetable, including the increased sift time that will be likely).
- Select and appoint suppliers in partnership with another government organisation. Such partners will have approved suppliers with framework contracts awarded following the EC directive procedures. COI maintains an **actively managed roster of suppliers** that should meet most needs, and can also run or act as an adviser for OJEU procurement activity.

5.12 Incidentally, even when the full EC directives do not apply, you are still legally required to award contracts fairly and without discrimination on the basis of location.

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[1] With effect from 1 February 2003, the *Official Journal of the European Communities* (OJEC) changed its name to the *Official Journal of the European Union* (OJEU). For more information on the correct procedures to follow, visit **www.ojec.com**.

Potential suppliers

5.13 If you are following EC directive procedures, all suppliers expressing an interest will need to be included. If you are not subject to EC directives, you will need to draw up your own list. COI can assist here and lists of possible service providers are available from organisations such as the CCA (**www.cca.org.uk**)[2] or OGC.

5.14 You will then need to obtain sufficient information from each potential supplier to select your shortlist of companies you will be asking to tender. Normally, you will ask each company to complete a pre-qualification or 'sift' questionnaire. You should include:

- *financial information* to test financial soundness, size of turnover, and changes in levels of business over the last three years;
- *staffing information*, such as numbers in different categories of work (full-time, part-time and contract), staff turnover, recruitment policy and training policy;
- *infrastructure* in terms of buildings, equipment, phone lines and software;
- *size and capacity* to handle your volume of work (which may largely be calculated on the financial, staffing and infrastructure information);
- *previous relevant experience* of the type of work you are looking to contract out;
- *the ethos and culture* of the company and whether it fits your own organisation's way of working;
- *investment policy*, for example in new or upgraded equipment, and their attitude to future development; and
- *quality accreditations*.

5.15 You should evaluate the responses using previously defined and weighted criteria. The top scorers will make your shortlist.

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[2] CCA is a non-profit making, member-funded organisation, which is the professional body for call and contact centres. Our key objective is to facilitate knowledge transfer across member organisations with the ultimate aim of measurable standards of operation. Funded by member subscriptions. CCA strategy is led by 10 board members and an industry council structured around a group of foundation partners who, as expert organisations in their field, contribute their professional knowledge to drive CCA's agenda. CCA membership includes over 650 organisational members throughout the UK. 20% of the UK membership is in the Public Sector. Members have unique opportunities for networking and sourcing solutions. CCA has developed a membership category specifically for LECS, TECS, RDA's and investment organisations to give access to existing membership benefits and networking opportunities. CCA will facilitate interaction between these organisations and call and contact centres to ensure that there is an understanding of the challenges facing the industry for the future.
Access to CCA membership services and benefits includes CCA Research Institute, regional events and seminars, forum groups, CCA newsletter and the member only section of the website. We also offer a unique web based networking service – ESKI. This enables members to anonymously highlight issues and problems they are experiencing within their contact centre allowing fellow members to assist and offer advice. COI and the CCA are committed to working closely together in the future, and COI is represented on the CCA Board.
See Appendix F – CCA Standard: A Framework for Best Practice©

5.16 If you are working with COI, a large part of the above will be avoided. COI will recommend a shortlist of companies who have already been evaluated and considered suitable, and who have been awarded framework contracts.

5.17 There may be a temptation to save time and resources by approaching a company already contracted by your organisation on a single tender basis. This 'contact creep' approach should only be used after careful consideration of the various dangers involved:

- A single tender will not give any real assurance that best value for money has been achieved.
- There is a strong risk that requirements will need to be compromised to meet the solutions that a single supplier can offer. Competitive tendering gives a better chance of finding solutions that meet the requirements.
- If the already contracted supplier is not a specialist in the field (for example a general IT supplier), it will not be well placed to give the expert support and advice you need. Similarly, a company providing telephony may not offer best value for money or be able to provide telemarketing services.

Invitation to tender

5.18 The invitation to tender (ITT) should be based on the requirement specification. We recommend you concentrate on the deliverables/outcomes you need and leave the suppliers to propose solutions to encourage innovative responses. Always consider how many tenders you invite – this will depend on the size and complexity of the project and the marketplace – as tendering makes a lot of work for all parties (both preparation and evaluation). It is unlikely you would ever wish to invite more than five to eight companies to tender.

5.19 The ITT should enable those tendering to:

- understand the requirement in terms of expected volumes, expected peaks and troughs, responses required, and speed of response required;
- propose solutions in a way that demonstrates the tendering company understands and can meet the requirements; and
- fully cost their proposed solution, with a costing structure that allows for future increases and decreases in work levels.

5.20 All companies should be given the same level of information. Fairness and even-handedness should be constantly monitored.

5.21 The ITT should include instructions on how to respond, including the format of the bid, deadline for receipt and details of who to approach with any queries.

5.22 It is also a good idea to include the proposed form of contract so that any queries can be dealt with at the tendering stage, rather than after a preferred supplier has been selected. Suppliers are also more likely to accept your terms and conditions without argument at the tendering stage than they are after they are told they are the preferred supplier.

Final selection

5.23 The project team's final selection of the winning supplier is carried out in four stages:

1. *Evaluation of tenders*
   You should use previously defined and weighted criteria, link the evaluation to the requirement and be as objective as possible. Price is important but it will be only one of many factors affecting the decision. Other factors include previous experience, agent quality, flexibility of operation, account management ability, reporting, competency and staff retention rates (similar to the original sift criteria – see paragraph 5.14).
2. *Client references and case studies*
   You should take up detailed and meaningful references that give real information about the supplier's performance.
3. *Visits to suppliers*
   These serve three purposes. First, you can check suppliers have the systems and people infrastructure, etc that they claim (this will allow you to meet and engage with agents – a useful barometer of the quality of an operation). Second, you can deal with any detailed queries arising from their tenders. Third, you can assess how well you will be able to work with them. Visits may only be necessary to the top three or four rated suppliers after tender evaluation, depending on how many were approached initially. Make it clear prior to your visit what you want to see and what you would like to be covered.
4. *A final evaluation*
   This should take all the above into account.

5.24 As many members of the project team as possible and as appropriate should be present throughout the tender process. For the sake of fairness, we advise that the whole team should attend all the visits.

5.25 Remember: the lowest tender may not offer the best value for money. A supplier that cuts its profit margin to an unreasonable level in a bid to win the contract is unlikely to be able to sustain the type of 'partnership' service that is desirable. Ideally, you and the supplier should be looking for a 'win-win' position.

Contracting

5.26 The contract will be based either on your organisation's standard terms and conditions or on the already agreed framework contract if you are going through a roster.

5.27 You will need to add to this the mutually agreed services to be provided, the prices/rates to be charged and the performance measures (quantitative **and** qualitative) with any incentive payments or penalties that will apply if these are surpassed or missed (if appropriate). Remember: any penalties should not be overly punitive.

5.28 The contract should also include:

- an agreed basis for renegotiating processes/rates for any increases or decreases in workloads outside of the agreed pricing structure;
- an agreed limit for any increases that may be sought, such as at the annual review of prices/rates. Any increases must be fully justified and set against any decreases through cost efficiencies gained through the lifetime of the contract; and
- a provision to terminate immediately if a change in policy removes the need for the services. Disengagement planning is important to consider in any outsourcing contract, whether strategic or tactical. The supplier must provide watertight guarantees that the contract can be terminated in an orderly way, and the service can be resourced in some other way. In this event, the supplier should be fairly recompensed for any direct loss it will incur but not, for example, for any future loss of profits.

5.29 Negotiations can be made on price but should also take into account service levels, resources and frequency of actions (for example, batched instead of daily fulfilment for non-time-sensitive matters). Offers should be considered in good faith, rationally and with respect for each other's position – you will be working with the outsourced provider for some time. Once in place, both parties should try to operate by the **spirit** rather than by the letter of the contract in a mutually beneficial relationship.

Ongoing management

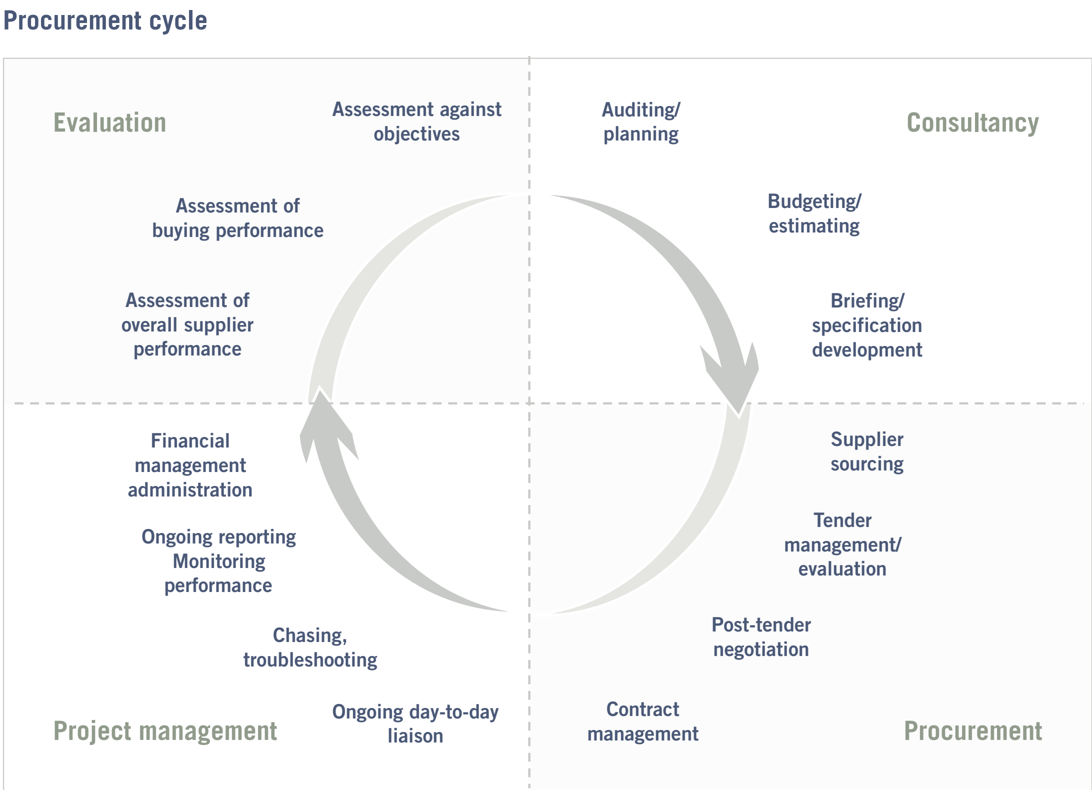
5.30 The ongoing relationship between you and your chosen supplier should be one of partnership. Regular informal and formal contact should encourage this. You should also consider regular scheduled meetings and ad hoc meetings when either party requires them.

5.31 Your supplier will be contractually bound to meet agreed performance measures but you should not rely on this. In the right relationship, suppliers will seek to beat these measures because they want to, not because they have to.

5.32 It will be to your mutual benefit if the supplier is encouraged to come up with proactive suggestions. Any problems that arise will be better dealt with in an atmosphere of mutual trust rather than one of confrontation.

5.33 In government, a lot of effort and resources are usually put into supplier sourcing, tendering and negotiation. **Equal** effort and resources should be devoted to the ongoing management and evolution of the relationship and services provided. This way, you can both **evolve** to meet changing circumstances and the supplier can **meet the agreed standards**. Figure 4 shows the procurement cycle you should follow.

Figure 4: The extended procurement cycle (source: COI)



Insourcing

5.34 An in-house service will not be subject to a contract in the way an outside supplier is. Nevertheless, a formal agreement on costs, performance measures and so on should be drawn up and regularly reported against.

We recommend you introduce a service level agreement and fully disclose all relevant costs, as well as making sure that overhead and centralised costs are apportioned fairly.

5.35 As with outsourcing, if you are to provide the best possible service, you will need a mutually supportive relationship between clients and colleagues in your organisation.

5.36 The same value for money criteria should apply as for the outsourced service provider, and if an in-house bid is being compared against an outsourced option, it is imperative that there is a level playing field, with comparisons made on a like-for-like basis and without hiding any buried costs in other budgets.

Location

5.37 Departments should carefully consider the location of the contact centre from the point of view of the cost base and the availability of a skilled pool of appropriate people. With modern technology and advanced networks, a remote location should not be a bar to successful contact centre provision. Indeed, the use of networking technology can lead to the growth of multiple sites (useful for contingency planning). Whilst political factors such as the levels of employment in the area are an important consideration for government, they should not be the prime factor in decisions to site a contact centre in a particular location.

Overseas contact centres

5.38 You should consider whether the service you are delivering has any requirements that may impact on the location of your contact centre. For example, would agents need to have local knowledge which could not be delivered through training? Generally UK citizens have a negative attitude towards offshoring and there have been a number of media stories surrounding this issue; and although the threat of negative publicity should not affect your decision, you should consider how you would deal with it.

5.39 If you are outsourcing through an OJEU procurement process, you will need to consider how you might deal with applications from suppliers outside the UK, such as those from India and South Africa. They may have much cheaper running costs but may not necessarily offer value for money. You should consider all the issues above but also whether there will be any staff retention or cultural issues which could have a detrimental impact on the quality of contact handling. There are also possible health issues with staff overseas working through the night to fit in with western daylight time zones. There may also be data protection issues that need considering. However, private sector experience has shown that use of overseas centres can be of benefit and provide a good level of quality and productivity, using highly motivated staff. They can be a serious, cost-effective option.

The DTI's report *The UK Contact Centre Industry: A Study* (May 2004) gives useful information about offshoring as it relates to the UK industry.

Summary

- *Your procurement process should follow a proven methodology.*
- *There are advantages and disadvantages for outsourcing and insourcing areas of your service.*
- *There are various outsourcing options to choose from, and tender processes should be fair and rigorous with a focus on value for money, balancing quality and cost.*
- *Ongoing management and evaluation of services is just as important as procurement.*
- *It is equally important to ensure that insourced provision gives the same **real** value for money.*

6. People

This chapter looks at the people working at your contact centre – the most important element in providing a professional service to citizens. It examines:
- staffing requirements;
- recruitment;
- training;
- retention and motivation;
- scheduling, rosters and working patterns; and
- agent performance monitoring.

6.01 The people working at your contact centre are the most important element in providing a professional service to citizens. Consequently, proper motivation, recruitment, retention, training, reward, and health and safety are essential.

6.02 Contact centres should work in partnership with employees and trade unions to:
- recognise and value the central role of people in the contact centre;
- develop a common understanding of the aims and goals of the contact centre;
- agree a work culture (attitudes, beliefs and behaviours) in common with the rest of the organisation;
- share a commitment to training every individual in the contact centre;
- encourage and support people to identify and enhance their own skills;
- try to develop career paths and opportunities for advancement for all levels; and
- create an inclusive relationship between the contact centre, employees and their representatives.

6.03 Contact centres should also adopt high-quality employment standards and employ robust equal opportunity policies.

6.04 Many existing HR policies and practices are directly applicable to contact centres. However, there are particular issues that require special attention in this environment.

Staffing requirements

6.05 A full analysis of your project means that decisions can be made about the standard and quality of team you need. Several organisations can help departments analyse their project needs.

6.06 A service that requires sensitive individual call handling will have different staffing needs from a service that handles relatively simple requests for standard literature. While the following section concentrates on agents, remember that every individual in the contact centre will need careful selection and training.

6.07 Good verbal communications and interpersonal skills are prerequisites and generally rated as the most important abilities for contact centre staff but, on the basis of the level of service you are offering, you need to consider the following:

- Skills and knowledge agents need to answer contacts. Can they be trained? Do they need qualifications? What IT skills are needed? Specific product service training
- Channel skills. Will agents be required to handle contacts using various methods? Will they need written as well as telephone skills?
- Soft skills. Will agents be handling sensitive or straightforward contacts? Is there emotional content?
- Administration. Will agents need to carry out administrative duties?

The DTI's *The UK Contact Centre Industry: A Study* (May 2004) pp91–99 looks in detail at the skills and competencies required, the typical educational attainments of various levels of staff and the training and accreditation on offer.

6.08 This is particularly important when looking at deploying agents from current in-house services. It will also be important to review the resourcing strategy and the posts as the contact centre develops.

6.09 The move away from employing full-time, permanent staff is another key trend in contact centres. You should therefore consider using:

- *permanent staff* who can be used effectively where the service involves giving a large amount of detailed/complex information and help. Staff need, therefore, a considerable amount of ongoing training. Permanent staff can also be used effectively in services that have a fairly stable and almost guaranteed volume of contacts so agents can reach good levels of occupancy;[1]

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[1] Occupancy in this context is defined by the percentage of time that agents spend actively on a contact/call (taking into account breaks, wrap-up time, etc).

- *part-time staff*, who are becoming more important to contact centres as further research and analysis identifies the trends in the times and days contacts are made. For example, it is relatively common industry knowledge that despite more and more contact centres becoming true 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week operations, contact centres still receive the highest volume of calls on a Monday morning. Part-time staff can help by working during these known busy periods as well as covering for break periods and training;
- a pool of *casual staff* who can give contact centres greater resourcing flexibility. Where contacts are likely to increase over and above planned activity, casual staff employed through agencies can be used to increase the number of seats available at relatively short notice and for set agreed periods of time. The employment of casuals can ultimately lead to offers of permanent employment, based on the casual staff members' performance and their suitability for permanent positions; and
- *home-working staff* who, under the right service solutions, can work at home using their own equipment. This is due to advances in technology in the networks and the Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) systems used by modern contact centres. For more information, see paragraphs 8.16–8.21. This is often referred to as a 'virtual' contact centre.

Other people involved

6.10 Consultants and project managers, from COI or other providers, may also be involved in developing and managing the contact centre on an ongoing basis. Other parties involved can include individuals for internal or external IT support, telecoms providers, publicity agencies, fulfilment providers, printers and the Royal Mail/other postal suppliers/carriage firms.

6.11 The contact centre project team should make sure relationships are good between all the parties involved in providing contact centre services, and generating and fulfilling citizen expectations.

Recruitment

6.12 Once you have established your proposed contact centre solution and calculated how many agents you need, it is essential that you use a robust recruitment process to recruit the right staff, based primarily on competencies for the role.

Job descriptions and person profiles

6.13 Developing a job description and person profile is an important part of the recruitment process. You should understand the components of the job and the characteristics needed to fulfil it. In a start-up situation, it is sometimes difficult to determine exactly what the job will entail. However, an understanding of required customer outcomes and of the objectives and purpose of the contact centre should help. Some organisations include in the job description the factors or measurements of success which can be used to form the basis for appraisal. Examples are shown in Appendix B – Example job descriptions and agent profiles.

Selection methods

6.14 The size and complexity of the contact centre are just two variables that should be considered during selection. You should use a reliable and valid selection system, consistent for both internal and external candidates. In addition to traditional face-to-face interviews, you could use the following alternative approaches. In certain contact centre environments these are encouraged as recruitment and selection methods:

- *telephone interviewing.* This is normally used as the first stage of any selection process and is very useful in screening applicants. The expectation of the role can be clearly communicated to applicants at this stage, enabling 'self-deselection' early on if the job is not what they want. The telephone interview is a structured, cost-effective way to examine specific competencies important to the role;
- *assessment role-play.* This gives you the opportunity, through various tests, group discussions and activities, to evaluate specific competencies and skills in depth. For example, you can test keyboard accuracy, teamwork and personality traits. Assessment centres are now commonly used by many contact centre operations; and
- *psychometric tests.* These can add value to the recruitment process by acting as valid predictors of job performance. However, they should not be used as the only basis for selection decisions. There are many psychometric tests available specifically designed for the contact centre sector.

6.15 Exit interviews can provide information as to why staff leave the contact centre. This can be used to improve initial recruitment and current workforce management practices.

Outside help

6.16 You could use private-sector companies to take on departmental recruitment and training work. As a matter of course, they should abide by the guidance set out above on these areas.

6.17 Consultants can help with recruitment. It is important to remember that staffing is not generally part of an IT contract, and we recommend you use someone specifically in the contact centre marketplace.

Training

6.18 The dynamic environment of the contact centre needs a constant focus on skills development and training for all agents.

Induction training

6.19 All new agents should be properly inducted into the contact centre environment. In addition to the standard department/organisation induction programme, any comprehensive induction programme should at least cover:

- the aims and structure of the department/organisation as a whole, and the role and purpose of the contact centre and how it fits into the rest of the organisation;
- knowledge of particular service(s) as appropriate, the subject matter and the business process of the service;
- customer service skills, in general terms and specific techniques that can be used across all channels, e.g. telephone, letter, e-mail;
- familiarity with IT systems;
- health and safety;
- organisational policies and procedures;
- team building;
- stress management; and
- management training for team leaders.

6.20 The length of induction training will depend on the skills the individual already has and the complexity of the business processes.

Ongoing training and development

6.21 Ongoing training and development are essential to reinforce and refresh the initial training message and to support continuous improvement. As the service develops, new training will be needed. Training should focus on the learning and personal development of the individual, in the context of the needs of the service. Many contact centres refer to their team leaders as ‘coaches’, which highlights the importance of coaching in managing and developing people.

6.22 Adequate time should be given for ongoing training because it leads to excellent service delivery and maximum customer satisfaction. Contact centres should set targets for the number of days' training their teams take each year. Training can include peer-to-peer training – such as listening into and watching other agents – mentoring, computer-based training and background reading. Such informal styles of training encourage consistency in contact handling.

6.23 Ongoing training, including training agents in the different services offered by the contact centre, benefits both the agent and the contact centre by providing greater flexibility in meeting resource demands. You should also put mechanisms in place to measure the effectiveness of training.

6.24 For further information on National Vocational Qualifications in contact centre management and team leading, and for contact centre agents, visit the CCA website at **www.cca.org.uk**.

Positions of contact centre manager and team leader

6.25 The roles of contact centre manager and team leader are very different from traditional management roles in the public sector. They require specialist training, experience and support.

6.26 The roles are characterised by:

- moment-by-moment management (i.e. the need to respond instantly to changing conditions in the contact centre and to interpret complex management information immediately);
- the need to give continuous feedback on performance to staff;
- the need to cope with different working patterns; and
- the need to manage attendance and sick absence to provide maximum productivity from the contact centre.

Retention and motivation

6.27 Many, but not all contact centres in the private sector have experienced problems retaining and motivating staff, shown by the large variations in staff turnover. Staff retention has not yet been seen as a large problem in government,[2] but public sector contact centres need to be aware of the potential causes of high staff turnover and unauthorised absenteeism in order to prevent them.

2 The DTI's *The UK Contact Centre Industry: A Study* quotes a 9.8 per cent annual agent attrition rate compared to an industry average of 14.5 per cent, and notes average length of tenure is highest in the public sector at 51 months.

6.28 In surveys carried out in the private sector, the intensity of the contact centre working environment is quoted as a major reason for high staff turnover rates. You should therefore have effective methods for ensuring balanced workload and reducing stress.

6.29 You can help your team avoid the repetitive nature of the work by:
- giving people a variety of jobs and tasks by reorganising workloads;
- multi-skilling agents in a wide range of services (although agents comfortable with call handling may not be able to adjust to e-mail or textchat, which is less personal in nature and requires written skills); and
- using motivational techniques.

6.30 Many agents do not feel empowered to deliver customer service, even though staff feedback generally suggests that helping citizens is a motivating factor. Therefore, you should empower them to own and resolve customer queries by giving them the tools (information, processes and systems) and support they need and ensuring that their work objectives and remit are clear.

6.31 Developing career paths within the contact centre and to/from other parts of the organisation can help agents see the possibility for progression within the contact centre and other parts of the organisation.

6.32 If people do not see career progression or development opportunities, you can overcome this by:
- focusing on training and development and trying to map out a career path; and
- finding out people's long-term ambitions and why they have applied for a job in a contact centre, to make sure you recruit people who are less likely to get bored and move on.

6.33 In promoting a people-based culture, you should also try to:
- adopt an inclusive management style through open communication, staff representative forums and increased one-to-one feedback;
- provide a programme of socialisation, integration and celebration through various social events and activities; and
- provide a programme of reward and recognition that values the contribution of the individual and the team.

6.34 It is important to recognise that the right level of staff should be employed. Someone who is a good administrator may not be suited to the more 'conversation-based' contact centre role, regardless of what his or her grade might suggest.

Accessibility for staff with disabilities

6.35 You should take into account the accessibility of the premises and the equipment in them for your members of staff with disabilities. It is worth noting that grants are available to purchase specialist equipment.

6.36 When adapting premises or equipment for disabled people, you should seek professional advice but, most importantly, you should also seek the views of disabled people themselves as they are the people who know what will best meet their needs. For information on making services accessible to citizens with disabilities, see paragraph 3.71.

Salaries

6.37 For internal, department-managed contact centres, salary issues will be consistent with the overall department and government rates. However, in the past there have been reports by the press that contact centres are the new 'sweatshops' of the modern world. Therefore, it is important to make sure that where outsourced companies are used, staff are paid for the work they do to **at least** the Government's minimum wage levels. Ideally, you should make sure work is placed with companies that **value** their employees and pay them in accordance with the delivery of quality service. For in-house staff, grades employed and salaries should **reflect the responsibility that a customer-facing role demands**.[1]

Details of the national minimum wage and other employment guidelines can be found at **www.tiger.gov.uk**.

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[1] The DTI reports that salaries for new agents typically start at around £12,000–£13,000 with an extra £1,000–£2,000 coming for experienced staff. Team leaders (who may supervise 10–15 staff) will earn around £18,000 with managers earning over £27,000 per year on average. However, this does hide considerable regional variation. The DTI also notes that salaries are certainly well below the national average in most contact centres. (*The UK Contact Centre Industry: A Study* May 2004.)

Scheduling, rosters and working patterns

6.38 Depending on the activity undertaken, government contact centre opening hours should be set prior to the campaign launch and should be based on the requirement of the service. Traditionally, government has always operated a core working time of between 10am and 4pm, with flexi-time outside these hours. However, citizens, who now have access to 24-hour telephone banking, might expect services to operate for longer hours and over the weekend.

6.39 This change in public perception, coupled with the introduction of more flexible working practices, requires effective scheduling, rosters and working patterns to be established. It also requires the different methods of employing staff within a contact centre environment to be fully understood.

6.40 The customer-facing nature of the contact centre environment means that managers need to know the exact number of agents available to answer and make contacts at a particular time of day. Managers also need to be able to support an extended business day, or even a 24-hour service.

6.41 If you are staffing the contact centre using current in-house staff, their working patterns may need to change and these will need to be worked through with the appropriate unions. Working patterns also need to be decided against a clear understanding of the business need and the anticipated contact patterns. It is the department's responsibility to renegotiate terms and conditions, if necessary.

6.42 Industry trends in contact centres show that organisations are moving towards more flexible work practices to gain greater resourcing efficiencies and cost reductions during peak and non-peak periods. There are also workforce management tools commercially available which can achieve greater efficiencies in contact-handling strategies.

6.43 Once the business need and contact patterns are understood, there are several ways to achieve working patterns that meet the business requirements.

Workforce management

6.44 As the number of agents increases beyond 20, it becomes more difficult to take into account various rostering variables. In such cases, you should consider the use of specialist workforce management software. Specialist rostering software is available that uses call data to provide the basis for calculating the number of staff required. The real benefit of a sophisticated rostering system is an increase in staffing efficiencies, which may result in cost savings. Staffing numbers will more accurately match calling patterns and it will take less time to construct rosters.

Flexible working

6.45 Evidence shows that agreeing and maintaining a flexible working system (where a number of agreed hours are worked over a set period as demand decides) works with teams of around 12 agents. The team is responsible for staffing the centre to an agreed level, but they decide among themselves which agents work particular hours. This empowers people to take control of their own working patterns within agreed boundaries and guarantees appropriate staffing levels.

6.46 Consider creating part-time posts to cover unpopular shifts. Offering a wider range of part-time shifts (four or five hours) can give staff more flexibility and offer a family-friendly choice. It can also give the contact centre manager more flexibility to meet peaks in demand. You can build team spirit by allowing teams to work the same shifts, and by giving them the opportunity before and after their shift to receive information and discuss problems, concerns or advice.

6.47 One way to maximise agent performance on a continuous basis is to understand the impact of shift length (hours worked per day) on productivity. Long operational hours at a contact centre, particularly one operating seven days a week, will also impact on agent performance over the long term.

6.48 In a normal eight-hour shift, you should give enough time for lunchbreaks, morning and afternoon teas and staff meetings. Increased flexibility in rostering staff is therefore clearly important. Some more stressful activities (for example, counselling) may require shorter shift periods.

6.49 The degree of flexibility in working patterns needed in a contact centre environment means that there is a real need to consider the role of HR. We advise you to locate the HR function and contact centre together in larger contact centres.

6.50 Appropriate IT systems are essential to allow flexible working. IT systems need to make it straightforward for staff to find customer-focused information, they need to provide continuity of support across shifts and they need to allow staff to work on multiple services on a shared basis.

Working from home

6.51 This can give contact centre employees and managers another element of flexibility and convenience. However, when considering whether to use home workers in contact centres, you should take the following into account:

- the physical and technical security implications of allowing home working for agents who need to access government data in order to carry out their jobs;
- the needs of agents to interact with their colleagues for social and job satisfaction reasons and in order to remain in touch with changes to working practice and service delivery;
- the ongoing training needs of agents working at home; and
- the ongoing management of resources that are geographically spread out.

6.52 Many of the working patterns outlined above can be used within current public service terms and conditions. All of the approaches can lead to an element of flexibility by providing part-time work. Evidence from the private sector shows that varied shift patterns are a good way to provide jobs that are family-friendly and promote diversity.

Working environment

6.53 It is vital that you consider the standard of the working environment in the contact centre to make sure you comply with legal obligations and to improve motivation and morale. The working environment will also have a direct impact on agent performance. Providing the right working environment can help increase productivity and quality by making sure staff are less prone to error and work-related injury. For both in-house and outsourced services, departments should examine and approve the service providers' working conditions before appointment. They should also assure regularly (through site visits and agent feedback, for example) that working conditions remain of an appropriate standard.

6.54 You should aim to make sure that workplaces and supporting technology are designed to meet human needs. This includes meeting the needs of any workers with disabilities (see paragraph 6.35).

Layout

6.55 You should make sure the environment promotes teamwork and offers agents easy access to supervisors, but minimises noise and disruption. This includes providing areas for training and meetings and especially a separate area for breaks. You should also consider positioning of equipment and use of sound-absorbing fabrics.

Health and safety

6.56 Details of health and safety in the workplace can be found at **www.hsl.gov.uk/case-studies/callcentres.htm**.

6.57 The longer business hours in a contact centre mean that you should consider the personal safety and security of staff when choosing your contact centre location.

6.58 You should make sure the area surrounding your contact centre can supply enough suitably qualified agents. This is particularly important if your contact centre is likely to produce a need for a high-volume short-term team to deal with peaks in contacts. We advise you to consult local recruitment agencies to discuss these issues for both temporary and permanent agents.

6.59 To draw in a suitably qualified team you should consider how accessible the location is for both public and private transport. For locations with poor public transport facilities you will need to assess parking availability and whether lack of public transport will have a detrimental effect on staff recruitment. You will also need to check that if public transport is available, it will meet agent shift requirements. You should also consider how accessible local amenities are for agents.

6.60 It is also important to make sure the contact centre is accessible to key stakeholders. These include your government department's management team and its agencies, as regular site visits are advised.

6.61 You will need to assess location costs in terms of average staff costs, property costs and availability. As part of assessing property costs, you should also consider the implications for expanding the site.

Temperature

6.62 This should be easily adjustable to cope with all variations: seasonal changes, the time of day and the number of workers in the centre.

Lighting

6.63 The work area should be well lit to reduce eye strain but you should balance this against the need to reduce glare and reflections on computer screens.

Noise and voice care

6.64 Contact centres can be noisy environments, which can render communication difficult, so sound buffers should be used. Moreover, you should recognise that contact centre workers are using their voices all day, competing against other workers' voices and possibly dealing with difficult citizens and time pressures. Therefore, you should consider employing voice care methodologies. You should also consider that there is an EU directive regarding exposure of workers to the risk arising from sound levels.[1]

Workstations

6.65 You should ensure that equipment is designed and laid out to improve posture and minimise injury. This includes items such as adjustable chairs and other supporting equipment such as foot- and wrist-rests. Headsets should be personal to the individual and not shared.

6.66 It is important that agents are consulted about their views on improving their environment. Any ongoing complaints and suggestions should be considered seriously.

6.67 For more information on working environments, please refer to the Health and Safety Executive at **www.hse.gov.uk**.

Agent performance monitoring

6.68 Measuring individual performance is vital for effective service delivery. However, care must be taken that excessive performance monitoring does not have a negative impact on staff morale and overall agent productivity. The purpose of performance monitoring is to improve on agents' activity through constructive feedback, **not** to punish them or catch them out.

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[1] An EU directive on the minimum health and safety requirements regarding exposure of workers to the risks arising from sound levels came into force in February 2003 and exposure levels will be further reduced in February 2006.

6.69 Depending on the task of the contact centre, individual productivity can be measured against:

- average number of contact calls handled per hour and per day;
- percentage of clerical work undertaken in relation to contacts; and
- average contact transaction time (for example, talk time and after work wrap-up time for phone-based contacts).

6.70 Monitoring should not just be on productivity but also be balanced and reflect the overall **quality** of interactions with citizens taking place on a one-to-one basis. This calls for a more qualitative measurement methodology. More information on the methods for checking quality of service can be found at paragraph 7.124.

6.71 Agents should get direct feedback about their performance in a non-adversarial manner through call-back evaluations, customer surveys, call monitoring and monthly statistics (see paragraph 7.121).

6.72 Contact centres can use progressive and annual staff appraisals to link to possible performance-based pay.

6.73 Contact centre managers should also recognise that other factors affect the performance of the contact centre agent. These include the performance of IT systems, the effectiveness of business processes and the physical work environment. Improvements in systems, processes and the work environment will affect individual performance and management should be receptive to agent suggestions for such improvement.

6.74 Agents should be made aware that they are being monitored and how this monitoring is taking place, that it is necessary to benefit all parties and how information will be fed back.

Summary

- *The people working at your contact centre are the prime factor in the effective operation of contact centres.*
- *A full analysis of your project will determine the type of agent you require.*
- *A robust competence-based recruitment process is essential in order to recruit the right team.*
- *Skills development and training are vital for all agents, both initially and on an ongoing basis.*
- *The nature of contact centres requires special consideration of scheduling, rosters and working patterns.*

- *Steps should be taken to improve staff retention and motivation.*
- *Agents should be empowered by information, processes and systems to be able to meet citizen needs, and not frustrated by inflexible approaches to these.*
- *Salaries, health and safety issues and the working environment itself are all crucial in enabling staff to provide a professional service to citizens.*
- *Appropriate performance and monitoring are crucial and should always take the quality of interactions with citizens into account.*

7. Processes

This chapter looks at processes and the important role they play in a successful contact centre. It examines:

- the need for process documentation;
- the channels and tools that can be used and how to manage them;
- the importance of fulfilment;
- dealing with non-interactive contacts;
- outbound calling;
- forecasting and resource management;
- collecting data;
- knowledge management;
- performance management;
- setting standards and targets;
- key performance indicators;
- monitoring and day-to-day management;
- measuring service quality;
- improving processes; and
- financial transactions.

7.01 Well-planned, well-documented processes are an important foundation for a successfully run contact centre. However documentation of everything is not a panacea and space should be left for empowered staff to react to specific circumstances.

7.02 Processes should be identified, analysed and then mapped to establish the actual process that people follow when providing contact centre services. This may differ from what management think the process is because people will invent 'work-arounds' that need to be considered. If these are happening then perhaps the process may be wrong and should be revised.

7.03 Mapping of the processes encourages constructive criticism of the current process by:

- eliminating, conditioning, changing or adding elements to the current process;
- spotting gaps in the current process and revealing functions or audiences not covered by it; and
- thoroughly documenting any new improved processes.

7.04 Management should be encouraged at all times to 'walk the process' from the point of view of the citizen.

Process documentation

7.05 It is good practice to document contact centre procedures in fine detail. Producing a manual of processes gives a clear record of everything that ought to be taking place, when, how and to what standard.

7.06 The key benefits of a manual are as follows:

- It clearly defines the service levels that have been agreed and can help form the basis for reviews.
- It can act as a valuable reference point by clarifying any procedures that may be in dispute.
- It can be a valuable training tool for new staff.
- It provides a 'bible' for contact centre management, defining exactly what should be done and how.

7.07 If government departments want to achieve accreditations for their contact centre (such as ISO 9002), it is essential to document procedures.

7.08 There is no right or wrong way to do this, but some useful headings to consider are:

- background to the contact centre requirement;
- key contacts and responsibilities;
- process maps;
- call flows and scripts;
- data-capture requirements;
- fulfilment matrix;
- agreed service levels; and
- disaster recovery.

7.09 Detail is important. The best test for a manual is if someone unfamiliar with the contact centre can pick up the manual and find what they would need to do if they were an agent. However, the manual should not be so onerous that it prevents agents from doing their job and reacting to changes in circumstance.

7.10 One common failure is for an excellent manual produced at the start of a project to become outdated and useless. To avoid this, someone should champion the manual and be responsible for reviewing it and keeping it up to date. The manual is a record of how it is at the moment, **not** how it should always be. Continuous improvement should be sought (see section on improving processes – paragraph 7.155).

Channels – telephone

7.11 When contact centres used to be known more commonly as call centres, the telephone was the key response mechanism for handling citizen response and queries and for providing advice.

7.12 Although these guidelines concentrate on all channels used by contact centres, and while each is becoming as important as any other, the telephone is still a key response mechanism, and more response is handled through it than through other channels across all government contact centres. However, there are already incidences where other channels are becoming more popular (for example, youth are using more electronic response methods such as the web, e-mail and SMS).

7.13 Telephones allow both inbound and outbound contact, and they can be used for very simple literature order lines through to complex advice or counselling services.

7.14 A large advantage of the telephone is that it allows for personal contact. Callers are able to discuss issues or problems with agents, ask questions of them and receive advice. Tone of voice and emotion are experienced by the caller and can add substantially to (or even detract from) the quality of a communication – this is not the case in an e-mail exchange. As such, it is important to ensure appropriate resources, training and information are available to agents to enable them to achieve successful telephone contacts.

Using scripts and call guides

7.15 The project team should regularly document scripts and call guides. Scripts, call guides and data capture requirements should be carefully examined to make sure they are not too onerous for the caller or clumsy for the agent. You should only seek to capture data that is needed and will be acted upon. Consider asking for non-essential information on a statistically valid sample basis.

7.16 The purpose of scripts and call guides is to help manage the quality of the conversation and ensure consistency of data capture, but the main factor behind a good call is still the **quality of the agent**. Research shows that good listening skills, 'rewarding' the caller with verbal treats and making sure the caller is satisfied with the information they get are the main drivers of quality.

Scripts

7.17 Contact centres often use scripts so that telephone conversations flow properly. In simple terms, a script is a relatively prescriptive list of things that agents say during a call – such as 'Good morning/afternoon, my name is John, how can I help you?' – with appropriate routing options that guide the call.

7.18 Scripts are ideal for simple scenarios such as a brochure request line when callers are calling for a specific reason and precise information needs to be exchanged.

7.19 Using scripts offers several benefits. Scripts can:

- help the call to flow properly by giving it structure;
- give agents an element of control and consistency over what they say to callers;
- ensure both parties get the information they need from the call;
- help control the length of the call; and
- supply agents with prompts to help them manage the call.

7.20 Agents usually follow a set pattern, saying the same things in the same order for every call. However, scripts can be counterproductive if they are too prescriptive and agents sound like automatons reading from a screen. Scripts can also stifle an agent's ability to assist the citizen if the requirement goes outside the norm.

Call guides

7.21 Not every call-handling scenario needs a rigid script. Sometimes a call guide is more useful. Call guides give agents a framework of areas that need to be covered but give them flexibility to cope with different caller needs and reasons for calling. Call guides should reflect the agent's remit. Try to avoid ambiguity and work with the contact centre to develop these.

7.22 Call guides are useful in complex call-handling scenarios where citizens could be calling for a variety of reasons and need different information depending on their circumstances. A call guide allows agents to tailor the way they approach calls based on individual callers' needs. However, a call guide should not be a licence for agents to handle calls as they please. Effective call guides make sure vital information is exchanged in every call, but allow agents to steer the call away from irrelevant information as appropriate.

Developing scripts and call guides

7.23 When developing call-handling scripts and guides, you should bear in mind the following factors:

- Try to avoid an overly long salutation to allow the caller to join the conversation as early as possible.
- What information needs to be captured from the caller?
- What information needs to be provided by the agent?
- How structured does the call need to be?
- Are callers likely to be calling the same number for several different reasons and to have multiple queries in one call?
- Is there any information that **must** be read out during every call (e.g. a disclaimer) or **must not** vary from an agreed set of wordings?
- How long should the average call be?
- What are callers' expectations likely to be? (The call to action on any publicity promoting the telephone number will influence what callers expect to find out and will therefore affect the approach you take.)
- Why are people calling and what emotional state will they be in? For example, if callers are likely to be worried or upset, starting the call with a series of questions before asking what help they need is probably inappropriate.

7.24 Again there may be a need for a hybrid script/call guide approach if certain elements of a contact require consistency but others can be more free-flowing dialogue.

Managing other channels

Coupons and reply cards

7.25 Coupons and reply cards are often used in communications with citizens. They are a proven response method and in some recent government campaigns up to 70 per cent of response has been received via this method. Even though many now feel this is old-fashioned, some audiences still prefer to communicate by mail.

7.26 It is important that the contact centre is aware when a postal mechanism is to be used.

7.27 The coupon or reply card needs a return address. Depending on the campaign, this could be a PO Box, a freepost address or it may require citizens to pay their own postage. It is recommended that the address given is managed by the contact centre, as this will save time from receipt of the coupon to the point where data is captured.

7.28 An agreement needs to be made (and incorporated into a contract or service level agreement (SLA)) as to the time it should reasonably take from receipt of the coupon to the point where the fulfilment material or response to the request is sent out. There have been occasions when coupons have been received and stored by contact centres until what is seen to be a suitable number has been received – 'batching' – before they are processed. This can mean that somebody replying by this method may wait weeks for receipt of any material, while somebody else may only wait days. If somebody is waiting, he or she may make a call to follow up their request. This is generally unacceptable. It not only puts additional pressure on the contact centre but also damages citizen perception of the service and, consequently, the department.

7.29 The coupon should be approved by the contact centre before being dispatched to citizens. This allows the contact centre to set up an appropriate data capture service for coupons and also ensures that any fields that are being recorded on the call side of the operation can be included. This is important if the information is being monitored to identify patterns or trends within the audience, and so that the database can be used for analysis purposes, regardless of the method of initial response. Coupons/reply cards should be carefully designed to give sufficient space for writing and use of tick boxes. They should be printed on a non-glossy surface.

E-mail

7.30 E-mail is increasingly replacing the telephone as a way to communicate:

- The expectation of this medium is that it is immediate, so e-mails should be answered on the same day they arrive, even if to politely acknowledge receipt and say that a fuller response will be sent later. If you have agreed target times for responding to queries have the auto-acknowledgement tell people what this standard is. Put effort into ensuring that your auto-acknowledgement is as human and well branded as other communications as it can set the scene for future contact, being the first impression the citizen gets.
- Citizens expect the same level of service that a telephone call would receive.
- After any necessary action has been taken, the message should be filed for future reference.
- Avoid using UPPER CASE. Capital letters can be difficult to read and in e-mail use they are considered the equivalent of shouting.

In ongoing communications:

- Include an 'opt out' at the bottom of your message to allow citizens to 'opt out' if they wish.
- Include reference/links to a privacy statement to reassure citizens.
- Don't assume bouncebacks are undeliverable – there may have been problems with the ISP. After two attempts fail then they will need further investigation. A 'hard bounce' means nothing is right. A 'soft bounce' means it recognises the server. Up to 30% of citizens will change their e-mail every year.
- Remember electronic communications are devoid of inflection or tone. You should therefore be as professional as possible and carefully choose words that might be ironic or sarcastic or rely on anything more that just the conveyance of words. There is a tendency to feel that e-mail is more relaxed and that short-cuts, poor grammar and misspellings are acceptable. Agents should avoid this.
- Personalise where possible.
- Remember that it is harder to read on screen so keep sentences and paragraphs short and broken down into manageable sized chunks.
- If you want people to take further action consider putting the response at the top and bottom (or even in the middle) as people scroll up and down.
- Test what your e-mails look like in terms of format when they have been sent, particularly if it is HTML and contains pictures.
- Make sure the sizes (eg attached PDFs) are not too large. Not everyone is on broadband.

SMS

7.31 SMS (texting) can be used effectively, both inbound and outbound, but the current size limit on SMS text messages (11 characters for headers and 150 characters for body text)[1] restricts the impact of your marketing campaign.

7.32 Therefore, you should make sure that campaigns using this tool are planned and conducted in a way that ensures the communication is clear and response can be maximised. Also, you should only contact people who have consented to receive messages.

[1] Developments are under way to increase the size of individual SMS messages.

Inbound SMS

7.33 Recent research from the Henley Centre company, Teleconomy, indicates that mobile phone users in 2003 are twice as likely to send a text message as to make a call.

7.34 Inbound SMS is becoming a greater response channel, and although it will never be able to deal with all of government's current enquiries (after all, contact centres are run by people for people), it is a medium that has a future and therefore contact centres need to be able to handle it.

7.35 Using SMS has the following benefits:

- It can increase response by providing citizens with an additional and sometimes more convenient channel (for example, it can make posters a more responsive medium).
- The response is initially handled automatically and the measurement of it is very accurate.
- It enables cost savings to be made through:
  - reduced contact centre resource;
  - reduced lead generation costs; and
  - improved advertising effectiveness.
- Once a system has been developed, it is relatively low-maintenance (it can, for example, be set up and run via the Internet, with some providers allowing changes to be made online).

7.36 SMS calls to action usually consist of a requirement on the part of the citizen to send a key word/phrase to a specific five-digit short telephone number code or full telephone number (for example, an advertisement may ask citizens who wish to receive information about the Army to text ARMY1 to short code 88XXX).

7.37 Through the use of different words, the response generated can be monitored and reviewed against specific marketing execution or campaign type; and the fulfilment element, which is usually, in the first instance, an outbound acknowledgement text, can be tailored specifically to the request.

7.38 However, SMS has limitations in terms of what can be asked for/captured, as only 160 characters are available and this will need to include opt-out information on any response SMS. Like automated phone responses and e-mail, SMS lacks the personal touch and would be less attractive as a response channel for more complex subjects.

Outbound SMS

7.39 User consent for outbound SMS is required by law. You can get consent from the end recipient by way of a website, a telephone call, a written signed letter, or a third party company holding valid user consent. You should keep a record of this consent. For example, you can use the log files of your web server where the citizen has filled in a form and submitted it to the database.

7.40 The sender name of the message should be distinctive and unique to your campaign. For example, announce your department in the header part of the message.

7.41 If you intend to send a generic header such as 'Pensions Information', you should clearly name your distinctive organisation brand or department name in the SMS text message body, preferably at the start. For example, 'FREE IMPARTIAL ADVICE FROM THE GOVERNMENT'.

7.42 Sometimes people do not want to receive SMS marketing. Therefore, you should make sure you include an option for users to opt out or be removed from mailings. This helps both the department and the user.

7.43 The SMS culture contains many text abbreviations. For example, 'later' becomes 'l8r' and 'text' becomes 'txt'. These acronyms are too informal for government contact centres to use and not everyone will understand them.

7.44 While the content should be tailored to the target audience, we recommend using clear text that cannot be misleading, and keeping the message short and effective.

7.45 'Pay as you go' numbers can be passed from one person to another. A message may not be read by its intended recipient and be ignored or misunderstood. You should avoid any potentially offensive content being written in the body of the SMS text message (for example, what you might send to a young person could unintentionally offend an elderly citizen).

Web/textchat and collaborative browsing

7.46 Web/textchat allows a contact centre agent to have a 'real-time' e-mail dialogue with the citizen, using both free text and pre-determined text blocks (collateral).

7.47 Collaborative browsing is often done in association with web/textchat or, if the citizen has two lines, could be in association with a call. It allows the contact centre agent to join the web user on the web page to help the citizen locate specific information or to 'push' pages that the agent feels will be of benefit to the citizen.

7.48 Both web/textchat and collaborative browsing are relatively new areas for government and future versions of this guidance will bring more detail as they become established. In the meantime, if you are offering webchat at your contact centre, you should consider the following:

- The process can take a long time, so your agents are likely to be busy on a contact for longer.
- Agents using webchat should be trained to keep messages short and concise with only appropriate detail.

Interactive television (iTV)

7.49 Over the next few years, more and more government departments will begin using the functions available to them through new digital TV. There are currently two options available:

- Interactive pages can be run within the menu and services pages of the digital supplier. This works in a similar way to a website (although the programming language is different) and allows citizens to identify and read information that is relevant to them. These citizens may also wish to make contact regarding the information and, as well as pages offering telephone and postal options, iTV allows them to fill in forms via their television set, which are then sent to the contact centre electronically.
- On certain marketing campaigns, advertisements have included an option that allows citizens to receive information at the time the advertisement is running. This is usually undertaken through the inclusion of a red button that appears in the top right portion of the screen. Upon pressing this button, citizens can be taken to content pages or they can simply be asked to confirm their contact details (which appear on-screen and are held by the digital provider). Their order for a specific product can then be made.

7.50 It is worth looking to de-duplicate records from iTV as people unfamiliar with the technology can submit their details several times, leading to duplicate fulfilment.

7.51 The contact centre must liaise with the digital provider to confirm the detail and information regarding where the order data is to be sent and the file format this will take. Usually, they will be able to forward the order data in a format that can be loaded and used with the databases.

7.52 It is important to include these responses within any management reports that are produced. However, due to the limited data collection nature of iTV, it may not be possible to get all the profile information that is normally asked for during calls, and, from a data-protection point of view, the citizen responding will not have been given an option to either opt in or out of receiving further information. Therefore, it is important that this is flagged against the record held on the database.

7.53 To date, many of these iTV activities have been 'incentivised' (for example by including a prize draw), so while response may be high, quality of response might not be so good, as it may be attracting 'button pushers'. It will be useful to see how this channel operates as it settles down to become a more accepted method.

Contact centres and the Internet

7.54 There is a tendency to believe that the Internet is going to reduce the need for telephone/postal/face to face contact. In part this is and will continue to happen, however there is a good deal of overlap as often citizens will not really consider the mode of contact:
'did you get that e-mail I called about last week, when I saw that thing on the web your letter told me to go to...?'

7.55 The web and the contact centre need to be closely interrelated on any Government initiative, for example:

- Agents should have access to the web as a central point of up-to-date information, signposts and other useful links, as otherwise the citizen could be better informed than they when the citizen is looking for more detail. Indeed the provisiona of standard information on the web means that agents need to be able to deal with more detailed queries or with issues that require a personal perspective, 'selling' or clarification. The website should clearly flag the remit of the contact centre and when and how to make contact – e.g. traling the number of Call Me Buttons.

7.56 The agents themselves can provide useful feedback through frequently asked questions to improve the sites own information, which can take the load off the agents answering routine queries. The contact centre can even ben an early warning system for problems with the site, omissions, crashes, etc.

7.57 The web can receive orders for literature or allow downloads which can remove some of the more mundane tasks for agents.

7.58 Don't automatically assume that channeling people to the web will necessarily result in a cost saving as:

- It may be inappropriate for their needs (e.g. there may be emotional content).
- They may need further help/or be unsatisfied and call the contact centre anyway.
- The quality of the respondent who comes through the phone may be higher (as they may be closer to the issue).
- It denies the opportunity for injecting human contact into a longer term customer relationship and the ability to 'cross-sell/upsell'.
- It can deny real time interactivity and the adaptability of a human conversation.

7.59 Instead consider the strengths and weaknesses of each channel and use them appropriately that meets the needs of the audience and in support of each other.

Fulfilment

7.60 If your contact centre is offering a piece of fulfilment (physical or electronic) as part of the service, it is vital that it is delivered effectively. **It is better not to take a contact than to promise fulfilment and not deliver on it promptly and accurately.**

7.61 You should consider your ability to turn around stock, including hand/machine enclosing, quality control issues, data expertise and storage. You may wish to consider offering a separate contract for this work if it cannot be delivered in-house, or if the suppliers you are considering are not experts in the field. Contact centres do not always give a high enough priority to the fulfilment component of a project.

7.62 It is good practice to include a personalised letter with any fulfilment items explaining what has been sent. It should also include any information about out-of-stock products and explain whether these will be forwarded under separate cover. Personalisation can also extend to specific information (such as variable texts depending on circumstance, drop-ins of nearest location details, not just name and address details). This can improve the service to citizens and their perception of your organisation.

7.63 In some contact centres, orders are received from both citizens and third parties who often order bulk quantities to distribute through their own channels. If stock is expensive, you should be given maximum order levels so that stock distribution is controlled.

7.64 Fulfilment and stock management are large topics and outside the present scope of this guidance. You should seek specialist advice to make sure the back-end logistics are in place to support your contact centre. Further information is available from COI or the Direct Marketing Association (**www.dma.org.uk**).

Dealing with non-interactive contacts

7.65 Contacts where there is a positive, constructive dialogue between the citizen and the agent are often referred to as **interactive**. Other contacts are usually described as **non-interactive**, although these are not always entirely unproductive. Non-interactive contacts may include:

- wrong numbers;
- silent calls;
- hoaxes;
- serial callers and telephone addicts;
- abusive calls;
- threatening calls; and
- suicidal calls.

7.66 Every contact centre needs clear policies on dealing with these contacts. Agents must be given training, plus suitable respite and support to deal with potentially distressing contacts. Any persistent offenders should be traced if appropriate.[2]

7.67 On some services, non-interactive contact levels will be extremely significant. For some government counselling services, levels are as high as 80 per cent, and 30–50 per cent is not untypical. Levels will depend on:

- the subject matter;
- how and where the contact details are advertised;
- the target audience (activity targeted at children will generally result in more non-interactive contacts); and
- tariffs (non-interactive contacts can be a major problem with 0800 numbers, but even local call rate lines (0845) will attract some).

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[2] Even if a nuisance/abusive caller withholds their number it is still recorded by the telephone company. If the time, date and duration of the nuisance call are supplied to the telephone company then it will be able to identify the number. Once this is done, calls from this number can either be barred at a network level or identified by the internal telephone systems and routed to either a specialist team or a pre-recorded message.

Your telephone company should be able to provide you with assistance if the police needs to get involved, and most larger telecom providers will have a dedicated helpline. If further action is planned, it is advisable to have the facility to record the calls.

Acts of Parliament that cover the area of telephone harassment include: the Telecommunications Act (1984), the Malicious Communications Act (1988) and the Protection from Harassment Act (1997).

7.68 Strategies for dealing with these contacts include:

- *wrong numbers.* Ideally, direct the caller to the right one. You should also respond to any e-mails sent by mistake;
- *silent calls.* These can occur where someone is playing a prank, is distracted, or is too scared or worried to proceed. Sometimes callers will simply be testing the line to see whether it is a live service or automated. If the caller does not hang up immediately, agents can use various methods to initiate a two-way conversation. You should develop protocols for ending such calls supportively, even when there is no response;
- *hoaxes.* These calls often stem from boredom, but may be masking some other need. Suggested protocols include:
  – confirming that the caller is through to the service, and that the agent can hear them;
  – explaining briefly the remit of the service;
  – suggesting that the caller calls again at another time when they can talk sensibly;
  – ending calls in a respectful manner. The agent should tell the caller what they intend to do. It may be appropriate to tell callers that their actions are preventing others with genuine need from accessing the service; and
  – forwarding post, fax or e-mail hoaxes to the department;
- *serial callers.* Agents need to be made aware of these individuals. If the contact is productive, they should be directed to more appropriate sources of help, such as face-to-face. If the contact is unproductive, agents should explain that they are stopping others with genuine need from accessing the service; and
- *abusive calls.* You will need policies on responding to and ending insulting, drunken, sexual, threatening and other abusive contacts. Sexist, racist and homophobic contacts all need careful handling.

7.69 Non-interactive contacts may not be productive, but they do use up resources. High levels of non-interactive calls can also have a serious impact on staff morale, productivity and costs. Mechanisms should be developed to try and reduce these levels (for example changing tariffs and message intercepts). Non-interactive contacts must be taken into account when forecasting.

Outbound calling

7.70 Outbound calling involves the contact centre contacting the citizen, either proactively or at the citizen's request. It is used extensively in the private sector as part of an organisation sales strategy. However, it is being used more as an element of a wider, longer-term contact programme, together with other methods, such as direct mail, e-mail or outbound SMS.

7.71 Within government there are a number of reasons why an outbound call may be made:

- appointment booking;
- workshop/seminar/local event promotion;
- follow-up to initial response;
- customer satisfaction/research; and
- ongoing, long-term contact.

7.72 Unlike inbound campaigns, where citizen demand is key, with outbound the contact centre is largely in control of the service. Therefore, planning the system and staff to manage the process is much more easily arranged.

7.73 Outbound calling is usually costed on an agent per hour basis. As a general rule, agents can be expected to make around six to eight calls per hour. This depends, however, on the length and complexity of the contact and the quality of the data file. A successful call is often referred to as a DMC (decision-maker contact).

7.74 The following list shows some considerations for managing an outbound operation:

- Know the hourly cost involved in the operation and monitor the performance of the agents regularly to ensure you are getting the most cost-effective service, looking at talk time, wait time and 'wrap-up' time.
- Listen to calls regularly.
- Monitor call-backs and the reasons for them.
- If the agents are doing well, they need to be told. One of the key factors in the success of outbound calling is the motivation of the agents making the calls, particularly if they are, in turn, trying to motivate citizens to take action.
- Keep a record of the outcomes of calls and use it to monitor individuals' performance. If one agent is getting constantly poor outcomes, there may be a retraining issue. This also allows you to talk to agents who are successful and share their tips and experiences with the rest of the team. In addition call outcomes also allow you to analyse the quality of the original call file provided.
- Attend the training sessions and, if possible, get involved. Agents should be armed with as much information as possible.

7.75 Outbound calling still has a poor reputation in the industry, because of the indiscriminate and inconsiderate 'cold calling' that is carried out by some less reputable firms.

7.76 Government bodies should only use outbound calling when the citizen has given explicit (or, in cases where the citizen has responded and asked for further information in the future, implicit) permission for this channel to be used. They must ensure calls are made at appropriate times of the day (often a citizen will specify this, if asked). Even if permission has been obtained, a department is not at liberty to call someone continuously to try to convince them to respond in the desired manner (unless there is a legal requirement to do so). Indeed there should be clear business rules that include the number of attempts that will be made to contact a citizen and the number of times one would make the offer. In addition, if citizens opt out of this channel, their wishes must be respected.

7.77 If a department wishes to use outbound calling to contact individuals it has not established a relationship with, it must screen against the Telephone Preference Service (TPS).[1]

7.78 Predictive diallers which automatically make a call and then connect to the agent once the contact is established have led to a problem of 'silent calls' when the dialler outpaces the ability of the agents to take the call. This silence can be particularly worrying for elderly or vulnerable citizens and annoying for others. It can also have a serious negative impact on agent morale. Government departments undertaking outbound should avoid use of predictive diallers. A recent study by CM insight showed no significant efficiency gain by using predictive dialler technology.

Forecasting

7.79 Forecasting contact volumes is necessary to understand the level of support you need to offer at particular times. This will enable you to provide a prompt and reliable service and to manage demand through the most cost-effective balance of flexible staffing and automated response handling.

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[1] TPS allows people to block their number to 'marketing' calls and has attracted some 25 per cent of British households – 3.9 million telephone numbers – since its inception in 1999. There has been a general growth in uptake in recent years because of 'silent calls' resulting from use of predictive diallers. Recently businesses were included under TPS and can also 'opt out' of such contact by registering. Because government's relationship with the citizen is different to that of a commercial enterprise, this is a difficult area, and advice should be sought on individual circumstances.

7.80 For new services, prediction can be based upon similar campaigns. Alternatively you could analyse the likely publicity activity and try to work out a ballpark cost per response.

7.81 For existing services, you should carry out a full audit of historical contact statistics. You should look at volumes, but also time of day and day of week, and take into account any new publicity plans.

Calculating forecasts

7.82 When looking at volumes and capacity you should take into account the length of time needed to manage a contact. This can vary dramatically depending on the type of contact. For example, a simple e-mail query may take two minutes to answer but a complex phone call may take up to ten minutes. A textchat 'dialogue', while it may be a preferred channel, could increase contact times considerably over a call exchange. You should look to see if there is any way to reduce the length of the contact without compromising quality.

7.83 When forecasting, you should consider:

- volume of contacts broken down by time of day, day of week and time of year;
- potential peaks and troughs caused by publicity activity (see paragraph 3.81) and seasonal trends;
- volume of contacts broken down by channel type and then by time to complete;
- customer lifecycle in terms of ongoing contact, e.g. recalls, transactions occurring naturally out of first contact; and
- response curves or how long response lasts from a particular stimulus – for example a magazine advertisement will have a longer response curve than a TV spot.

7.84 When forecasting inbound activities you should look at all the possible demands through all the channels. For calls, this needs an understanding of queuing theory and Erlangs (a measurement of telecommunications traffic used to describe traffic volume in one hour). Many Erlang calculators can be downloaded free from the internet, but these are basic and may not meet your needs. To calculate your staffing requirements using an Erlang formula, you will need to know the number of calls forecasted, the average duration of these calls and the average delay you feel is acceptable for incoming callers to experience.

Workforce management systems

7.85 Larger contact centres may need workforce management systems that can convert forecasts into staff requirements by using service standards such as the grade of service and average waiting times. However, these systems do have limitations that should be borne in mind, and they are expensive. You should only invest in them if the size and complexity of your operation makes it worthwhile.

7.86 The benefits of using these systems are:

- improved accuracy of forecasts; and
- more cost-effective and efficient scheduling to help reduce queues and abandoned calls, or delays in responding through other channels.

7.87 The accuracy of the data you input affects the reliability of these systems. The system you choose needs to integrate with the automatic call distributor (ACD) and in some cases with the payroll system. Every contact centre is different, so you should make sure the software is compatible with the environment and can produce suitable reports. Forecasts should look at all the possible response channels and their impact on workload.

7.88 When looking to purchase such a system, you should detail all your requirements. There are numerous systems available that can carry out management tasks. Suppliers may try to convince you that the system you need should be built from scratch to your particular specification, but this is not usually necessary.

Collecting data

7.89 Data collection requirements will vary from application to application (and indeed may vary over time, with some data being captured for a limited period to establish a trend then not asked in the future). For example, services that deal in highly confidential information may capture no data, while services with a significant personalised fulfilment element may require certain information to ensure the transaction can be completed.

7.90 It is usual practice for government activity to collect at least the following data from contacts:

- media seen or heard to make the contact (for example, where the citizen saw the number advertised). This is key information which can often be missed or poorly captured. With the growing use of portals, home pages and single numbers, media capture is often absent, and a full picture of the success of publicity (national or local) or of where calls are being generated from is not always available, which can lead to poor decisions. See paragraph 3.61;

- gender (usually a silent question);
- whether the call is on behalf of an individual or an organisation;
- job title (if calling on behalf of an organisation);
- industry sector or type (if calling on behalf of an organisation);
- organisation size (if relevant);
- address;
- postcode;
- age (if relevant);
- whether the caller can be contacted again for research purposes;
- time of call;
- date of call;
- outcome of call;
- information requested or given; and
- requested literature fulfilled.

7.91 However, specific campaigns may want to know other information, such as employment status or answers to research questions (for example, how many cigarettes do you currently smoke a day?). Other services may have very extensive data capture requirements, such as filling in claim forms.

7.92 Departments can then use this information for many purposes, including submissions, mid-campaign re-planning, subsequent campaign planning, ministerial presentations, policy documents, budgeting and parliamentary questions. Accuracy of data capture is therefore a key consideration and much importance should be placed on it as well as on understanding the implications of poor performance in this area, such as duplicates, inaccurate records leading to citizen complaints and reflecting badly on the department.

Citizen authentication

7.93 In some cases it is crucial to identify and authenticate a citizen. Contact centres should also adopt a common approach to identification and authentication. Contact centres should measure their current identification processes against the common standards set out below. You should also be aware of the Government's *Authentication Framework Guidelines* (**www.e-envoy.gov.uk/assetRoot/04/00/27/26/04002726.pdf**). Alignment of the *Contact Centre Guidelines* with the *Authentication Framework Guidelines* will result in the production of a contact centre profile for the recommended trust levels 0, 1, 2 and 3.

7.94 Levels of identification and authentication will vary according to the nature of the transaction:

Class 1: providing information on government services that is not specific to an individual

Example:	Providing tourist information orally or by post.
Identification:	No identification is required, and individuals should not be asked to identify themselves. Callers will need to provide their name and address if information is to be sent through the post, but this need not be verified.

Class 2: disclosure of personal information by government to an individual

Examples:	Pension forecast, dates of payments, tax liability or payment values.
Identification:	Random permutation of at least two pieces of personal information such as: • full name; • address; • postcode; • date of birth; • an identification number (for example, NI number or tax reference); or • a piece of information only likely to be known by the caller, for example their mother's maiden name or random digits from a PIN number.

Class 2a: disclosure of personal information to the government by an individual that could affect payments to, or the liability of, that individual

Example:	Change of circumstances (address, name or marital status).
Identification:	Random permutation of at least two pieces of personal information such as: • full name; • address; • postcode; • date of birth; • an identification number (for example, NI number or tax reference); or

- a piece of information only likely to be known by the caller, for example their mother's maiden name or random digits from a PIN number.

NB: Written proof of change of circumstances may be required by statute or may be a sensible fraud prevention measure. In the case of benefits payments, a site visit may also be required.

Class 3: an individual paying for a government service

Example:	Buying a TV licence.
Identification:	Valid credit or debit card details. (Class 2a identification may also be required, depending on the service. For example, buying a TV licence **would** require Class 2a identification as well.)

Class 4: payment to an individual by government

Example:	Benefit payment.
Identification:	Identification requirements should be set in the light of audit and risk assessment requirements. Because of the emergence of new technologies and processes, this class is always under review.

Class 5: registration – individual registering for a service

Example:	Passport or driving licence application.
Identification:	Identification requirements should be set in the light of audit and risk assessment requirements. Because of the emergence of new technologies and processes, this class is always under review.

Third party access

7.95 One problem area that has been raised by the Citizens Advice Bureau[1] is that of effective third party access where an individual is using a third party to deal on their behalf (e.g. they may have learning or verbal difficulties).

7.96 They have found difficulties with public sector organisations in being able to effectively resolve citizens' problems because the organisation will not accep the client's verbal or written authorisation, often quoting the Data Protection Act 1988 (DPA).

7.97 However, this does not prevent information being collected or disclosed, provided that the data subject, the citizen, has given her/his consent to

[1] Hanging on the Telephone, September 2004.

the disclosure. The Act simply regulates and limits the circumstances in which this can take place, and does not deal specifically with third party access.

7.98 CAB appreciates that organisations must only respond to requests for information about individuals to third parties with the express permission of the individual(s) concerned. When ringing a call centre to discuss a citizen's case, CAB or any other third party could have:

- posted the citizen's consent some time before;
- faxed the consent through, or
- have the citizen with them during the phone call to answer any security questions.

7.99 But this does not always work either because the authorisation is not logged on the call centre's computer system or there is a lengthy timelag between providing the authorisation and the CAB being able to have the dialogue with the call centre on the citizen's behalf.

7.100 This is an area that needs further discussion and resolution.

Collecting data from channels other than telephone

7.101 Most government contact centre activities allow citizens several ways to respond. Call-handling scripts and guides should be designed to make capturing information easy and painless. However, you should also think about making sure that channels other than the telephone are easy to access and user-friendly.

7.102 Web forms and coupons should be user-friendly, explaining **why** and **how** they need to be filled in and **what** will happen next. Remember people can be wary about leaving details on the web (especially youngsters who are explicitly told not to) so ensure that it is very clear that this is a government site and that details will be kept safe and only used for appropriate purposes. Make clear what fields are mandatory and why they are.

7.103 Ideally, all response channels should offer the same information and opportunities so that citizens receive a consistent experience whichever channel they use. The different channels should all capture the same information as a telephone script. For example, regardless of the method of contact the data to be collected should be standard. This allows responses from multiple channels to be reported on in the same way and it helps give a total picture of campaign results. Media capture is often a problem with these channels and needs to be carefully considered (see use of multiple entry points paragraph 3.67).

Knowledge management

7.104 In order for agents to help citizens, they need access to a properly structured information base that allows them quickly to locate key information. Ideally, that database should be structured so that it can build dynamically and import answers to new problems, questions and issues as they arise. It should also be able to develop information that can be shared, for example between contact centre agents. Knowledge must be up to date and reliable or there could be negative implications for the citizen, who could then take action based on incorrect information.

7.105 Effective knowledge management is crucial because it helps agents resolve issues on the first contact. This increases customer satisfaction and reduces the need for re-contacts, which is known to be a major irritant to citizens. (For advice on measuring the qualitative output of your contact centre, see paragraph 7.124.)

7.106 You should try to develop your content by including help screens, FAQs, and access to other data, referrals and signposts. This will help make your content:

- comprehensive;
- as up to date as possible and easy to update;
- easy to navigate; and
- multipurpose, i.e. similar content can be delivered through different channels, which will reduce costs and improve the consistency of the information delivered.

7.107 A lot of knowledge can be drawn from existing publications or websites and from people involved in the activity centrally or in local offices. This information will, however, need to be edited appropriately. The existence of a knowledge base will help counteract the knowledge drain caused by loss of contact centre staff, and it will improve ongoing training.

7.108 To establish whether the knowledge management system is working for agents, contact centres should monitor:

- the number of contacts transferred to other government departments, agencies, non-departmental public bodies and local authorities (categorised by department or agency) because a query is unresolved; and
- the level of customer dissatisfaction/complaint.

7.109 Agents can also provide useful feedback on the efficiency of the knowledge management systems.

Performance management

7.110 You should produce some form of service level agreement (SLA) to define the service that your contact centre will provide on behalf of the client, and the functions the client will need to carry out to make sure the contact centre can operate successfully.

7.111 This is a very difficult area to offer guidance in. Contact centres provide many different types of service, with many different structures and levels of resource across different audiences, and so one set of performance standards cannot be appropriate. However, government contact centres are not expected to vary too much in quality; citizens should not be able to see great differences between contacts, with either central or local government.

7.112 Standards and targets should, therefore, take into account:

- *expectations of the target audience(s).* For example, there is no point setting a target of responding to an e-mail within a week if the target audience expects a response in 24 or 48 hours;
- *functionality and complexity of the service offering.* For example, setting a target to reduce call duration to three minutes is no use if it takes an average of four minutes of talk time to explain the information and make sure the caller is satisfied. Such a target represents false economy and compromises service quality; and
- *available resources.* For example, if demand constantly outstrips your contact centre's ability to deal with enquiries, there is no point insisting on immovable targets without providing additional resources.

Setting standards and targets

7.113 The SLA should set out:

- the objectives for delivering the service;
- the criteria for success; and
- specific performance targets against elements of the service.

7.114 Operational objectives should always be understood in relation to each other. For example, setting a service level too high could lead to overstaffing, which will reduce the occupancy level. Focusing too much on duration of transactions could impact on the quality of the interactions, which will reduce customer satisfaction.

7.115 You should make sure that operational objectives are not pursued to the exclusion of business and other objectives. Therefore, when setting targets you should make sure that the performance objectives of the service being offered are clear at business, operational, quality and people levels.

7.116 People objectives, such as staff turnover, sickness/absence rates, training, and responses to staff attitude surveys, will put the purely operational targets into context. Contact centres should work in partnership with staff and their representatives to achieve a common understanding of the contact centre's goals and targets.

Key performance indicators

7.117 There are some generic key performance indicators (KPIs) that are accepted as key productivity measures in all contact centres. The indicators below all concern telephone calls but they can also be applied to textchat, which is a similar real-time dialogue:

- service level or the percentage of calls answered;
- average speed of answer;
- percentage of calls within a certain number of seconds;
- agent talk time, wrap time, average call duration and 'agent occupancy' time;
- percentage of time an agent is on a contact, on hold, on idle and available, or 'agent occupancy' in any given hour;
- total number of calls handled for the day, week, month and/or year;
- number of calls transferred, and proportion of enquiries dealt with in a single call without the need for caller to be called back or call again; and
- number and percentage of calls abandoned and unavailable (busy signal/engaged tone).

7.118 KPIs for contact centres will also look at:

- average duration of other contacts (for example, how long it takes to deal with an e-mail or key a coupon);
- response turnaround times for replying to e-mails, coupons, web forms or call-backs; and
- fulfilment despatch (for example, orders for literature despatched within a given number of days, and percentage of packs correct) and the quality of address details captured.

7.119 These targets should be realistic and achievable within reasonable timescales and the resources available. They should also be set in the context of the overall performance of the rest of the organisation in which the contact centre exists, and how they contribute to quality outcomes.

7.120 There is a general focus in contact centre application on measuring the quantitative inputs/outputs. However, attempts should also be made to measure the **qualitative outputs**, such as whether advice given was accurate and complete in terms of meeting citizen expectation and of contributing towards the intended behavioural or attitudinal change that lies behind the business case and contact centre remit. The attempts should gauge how much the contact centre has contributed to these (i.e. return on investment). (See also paragraph 7.124.)

7.121 This guidance provides a framework for setting standards and some generic performance benchmarks in Appendix C – Performance criteria: adoptable service standards. Other documents are also available, such as the *Merchants Contact Centre Benchmarking Report* (see **www.merchants.co.uk/benchmarking**) or *CCA Standard: A Framework for Best Practice* (see **www.cca.org.uk**), which may be of use when you are setting standards for your particular contact centre application.[3] As a general guide, KPIs and benchmarking are there to support understanding and to contribute to meeting objectives, not as an end in themselves.

Monitoring and day-to-day management

Management information

7.122 **Intelligent** reporting is fundamental. All reporting should be full, open, clear and accurate, and information should be presented concisely. This allows the client and the contact centre to monitor the success of the service. Reports should be formatted in a user-friendly way so that campaign information can be seen at a glance. Many organisations now produce electronic reports and distribute them by e-mail or put them on websites.

7.123 The contact centre management team is responsible for making sure reports are delivered accurately and on time. It should be specified and agreed in the SLA that reports can be supplied daily, weekly or monthly, depending on the service required, and that this may change. For example, daily reports will often be needed at the launch of a new service or at the start of a new publicity burst.

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[3] The CCA framework is designed to allow organisations the freedom to develop the best practice as they see fit within an industry-recognised structure. The CCA also has a Professional Programme, designed to promote professionalism within call and contact centres. Further details are given in Appendix F.

Daily/weekly contact centre reports

7.124 Each government contact centre will have slightly different reporting requirements. Some data will come from external services, such as statistics from inbound service providers (e.g. BT) or from web trends. Other data will come from the contact centres' automatic call distributor or internal databases.

7.125 You should request standard weekly reports from the contact centre that include:

- contact volumes by channel;
- contact volumes by medium (i.e. what generated the contact and by what channel);
- contact volumes by region/postcode;
- contact durations, including the average, maximum and total (by type);
- contact waiting times, including the average and maximum;
- lost/abandoned contacts during wait, on average and after what period of time;
- complaint volumes by channel;
- nature of complaints; and
- performance against service standards by channel.

7.126 Depending on the service being offered, the following information may also be requested:

- type of contact by degree of complexity (for example literature order, signposting or complex advice);
- written/e-mail/fax/SMS contact response times;
- repeat contact volumes and single contact resolution ratios;
- number of successfully completed transactions;
- literature stock levels;
- bulk fulfilment distribution report;
- volume of literature requested by title;
- volume of literature despatched by type;
- literature fulfilment response periods;
- audience profile; and
- any number of cross-tabulations for data captured.

Data from telephone network provider

7.127 Any telephone network provider used for government work should be able to provide online statistics. The exact form this information takes will vary depending on the service provider used, but will include the volume of calls to a number over specific intervals of time. It should include the number of calls that receive a ring tone but are not picked up, and those that receive an engaged tone.

7.128 This information can be used in various ways. If the contact centre is an in-house operation, it can be used to help adjust staffing plans and to assess whether investment in additional capacity is worthwhile. If the work is contracted out, the figures can be used to see if a supplier is meeting SLAs. Some network providers allow online changes to call routing, which can be useful if the work is split between different locations.

7.129 The information can also be used to provide a snapshot of the effectiveness of other forms of publicity faster than traditional contact centre reports can. Most network providers provide a geographic breakdown of calls, which can be used to compare areas with different media breakdowns or levels of PR. If the data is displayed using short intervals of time, it can be used to form a rough idea of the impact of individual television advertising spots in particular timeslots.

Other forms of data

7.130 Apart from numerical data, you should also take into account softer data such as agent feedback, account management feedback and information gathered from regular site visits.

7.131 Contact centres can produce a mountain of data in a single week. The project team should focus on the KPIs and look at data with a view to **establishing trends** and helping response forecasting, media evaluation, cost per contact, and amending/evolving the service, for example. **Remember, reports should not be an end in themselves.**

7.132 Using 'dashboard' applications to give a snapshot view of performance information and/or exception reporting can help the project team. This allows the team to spot a potentially negative development. However, reactions should always be tempered with a careful examination of the reasons why something has gone wrong, rather than immediately blaming something or someone. (See Chapter 9 – When things go wrong.)

7.133 Someone should be given responsibility for analysing data and producing an intelligent analysis/commentary that summarises the key findings for the decision-makers.

7.134 From the outset, you should give considerable time and thought to identifying the content and format of reporting requirements. Reports will need to meet the needs of all the stakeholders and you should make sure that period or cumulative reports are easily available, for example in response to a ministerial query or NAO request.

7.135 In terms of setting standards and reporting on them, contact centres should avoid the temptation to measure everything. Instead, they should focus on the really important drivers that affect the cost and quality equation, and the outcome from the point of view of the citizen and the overall policy objective. **You should <u>not</u> make what is measurable important; you should make what is important measurable.**

Measuring service quality

7.136 As mentioned above, many reports produced by contact centres focus on quantitative outputs. But quality is just as important. Industry trends suggest that contact centres are focusing more attention on implementing quality assurance practices, so customer satisfaction levels remain a primary focus.

'People build an image as birds build nests, from scraps and straws they chance upon.' (Jeremy Bullmore)

One poor 'straw' – whether a mishandled telephone call or a failure to reply to an e-mail – can undo the work of thousands of pounds spent on communicating an issue to citizens. One should ask if the citizen's experience has been worthwhile. Does the citizen have a better knowledge and opinion of the department than before they made contact?

7.137 Contact centre work is often central to any policy and its communication, and is just as important as any advertising medium or ministerial announcement. The 'cost of quality' should therefore be built into specifications at the beginning, showing the provider that you intend to use them and take them seriously.

7.138 The bare minimum can be misleading. Test calling, or 'mystery shopping', has its merits, but you should:

- do it regularly;
- keep proper records;
- do it in statistically significant volumes;
- do it at different times of the day and from different locations; and
- use it for exception testing of routes that may not often be used.

A good test call can make you think that all calls are good and a bad test call can make you think that all calls are bad. Some knowledgeable officials can stretch the system (unfairly) and even indulge in deliberate sabotage, so you should approach test calling from the viewpoint of the customer.

7.139 You should use a basket of methodologies that provide:

- independent, fair evaluation;
- a number of objective and consistent assessment measures that can be combined to give a broader view;
- regular and long-term measurement through establishing benchmarks and trends; and
- all of the different access points and routes through the service.

7.140 Here, we identify specific quality assurance practices that will contribute to the overall achievement of service excellence. Much is drawn from the NAO report *Using Contact Centres to Deliver Public Service* which focuses on calls, but the principles are generally the same for the other channels.

7.141 The NAO found that contact centres generally monitor quality of service in seven ways. These can broadly be grouped into those which measure the time taken either to answer or respond to a call, and those which assess the quality of the content of the response or its outcome (see Figure 5).

Call monitoring (boxes 1 and 2 in Figure 5)

7.142 Call monitoring is useful for coaching staff to improve performance. However, if it is used as a disciplinary or negative performance management tool, it may result in feelings of mistrust and suspicion on the part of staff. The main purpose of call monitoring should be its value as a development tool. This must be clearly communicated to staff.

7.143 Call-monitoring strategies:

- ensure that quality standards and consistency of delivery are maintained when giving information to customers;
- measure the quality of customer interaction; and
- help identify specific training needs.

7.144 The process of call monitoring can be carried out in one of three ways:

- double jacking;
- silent call monitoring; and
- call recording equipment.

(See Chapter 10 – Complying with the law, as this has implications for publicity.)

Figure 5: Seven ways by which contact centres measure service quality (source: NAO's *Using Call Centres to Deliver Public Services*)

	1 Listening to calls	2 Recording calls	3 Mystery shopping	4 Customer satisfaction surveys	5 Surveying customers	6 Customer complaints	7 Performance data from call management systems
Measures	Managers listen to a sample of agents' calls and give feedback on performance.	Calls are recorded and reviewed against set criteria, e.g. the agent's attitude and accuracy and completeness of information given to caller. Calls can be traced to agent and used to give feedback on performance.	Mystery shoppers call and use different scenarios to assess service quality, e.g. length of time in queue, agent's attitude and whether agent provides an accurate and complete response to the query. Calls are systematically appraised and, in the most sophisticated systems, traced back to agent to give feedback on performance.	Customers are contacted and asked how satisfied they are with the service they received. On routine queries, customers provide better information if telephoned soon afterwards. On sensitive issues, such as flooding, customers are more willing to respond well after the event.	A sample of customers is contacted, often some time after the call took place, and asked about various aspects of the service they received, and about the outcome – for example, whether they stopped smoking as a result of the advice given.	Customer complaints are monitored and followed up, particularly frequently reported problems, e.g. time taken, agent's attitude and call content.	Data is provided about length of time callers spend at each stage of the process, the number of calls receiving engaged tone, number of times callers redial and when callers abandon their calls.
Pros and cons	+ can provide agents with quick assessment of how to improve – only covers the agent's performance rather than the whole call	+ recording can be used to demonstrate agent's performance – will not cover service quality received before speaking to agent	+ covers whole call from dialling to hanging up and can be carried out independently of call centre – will not test unlikely or new queries from public as uses planned scenarios	+ provides a straightforward assessment of performance which can be benchmarked with other services – only assesses whether customer considers information was accurate and complete and cannot identify when they do not realise information was inadequate	+ can be used to assess final outcome of service by monitoring sample of customers over time – can only assess customer's view of accuracy and completeness of information	+ indicates areas where a number of callers receive poor service – customers only complain if they are aware of poor service – they may not realise information was inadequate	+ can provide very detailed information on flow of calls, usually in real time, and can be remotely transferred from contractors to departments – will not provide any qualitative assessment of the service delivered

Content and outcome of calls

- agent's attitude and approach to call, including tone and the clarity of their speech and the information they provide
- whether call was dealt with accurately
- whether call was dealt with completely
- whether any follow-up action, such as posting information, took place as agreed with caller

Time taken for calls

- time taken for call to be answered, including number of times caller has to redial
- time taken to speak to agent
- time spent on hold or listening to music
- total duration from dialling until call is completed
- time taken before caller speaks to agent
- number of abandoned calls

7.145 The following **good conversation indicators** can be assessed through call monitoring:

- initial greeting;
- customer acknowledgement;
- using courteous statements;
- displaying empathy;
- keeping the customer informed when keying in information;
- listening effectively;
- quality of voice tone and pitch;
- effective use of questions;
- adhering to a script (where appropriate);
- using positive words;
- re-affirming call outcomes/action;
- ending of call – offering additional help/thanking the caller;
- call resolution/outcome (i.e. was the overall outcome appropriate to the caller's needs?); and
- overall professionalism.

7.146 Deciding on the number of calls that should be monitored depends on what service is being offered and on the number of calls being handled by the contact centre agents.

7.147 As part of the process, you should design a specific call-monitoring evaluation form which takes into account the call dimensions appropriate for your specific contact centre environment. Other staff could be involved in the process of call monitoring so that they gain an insight into the standard of calls required at your contact centre and so as to give them task variety.

Independent test calling or mystery shopping (box 3 in Figure 5)

7.148 To make sure the process stays bias-free, we recommend you use an independent organisation specialising in quality assurance practices to conduct the test calling. Ideally, you should agree the format with the contact centre service provider at the beginning to ensure fairness and so that the provider can maximise the feedback value.

7.149 Ideally, test callers should not be professional contact centre agents because they are less likely to give a true reflection of typical callers. It is also desirable for test callers to have a reasonable geographic spread throughout the UK and for contact to be made at different times of the day/days of the week.

7.150 When establishing a test calling strategy, you should consider the following:

- Ideally, test callers should not be professional contact centre agents, because they are less likely to give a true reflection of typical callers.
- It is desirable for test callers to have a reasonable geographic spread throughout the UK and for contact to be made at different times of the day or on different days of the week.
- Determine the purpose and objectives of the test calling strategy.
- Are test callers broadly reflective of the typical users of the contact centre?
- Establish specific customer scenarios that will test your contact centre's typical communication experience and an agent's ability to handle more in-depth requests and unusual activity (i.e. routes that are often not covered in the normal course of calls).
- Scenarios can test against agent help screens and scripts for more process-driven centres, such as literature fulfilment lines. For advice and counselling-based contact centres you should develop broader scenarios, as defined agent help screens may not exist.
- Evaluation forms should be standardised as far as possible to allow common approaches from different testers, and to allow results to be compared across different call scenarios and benchmarked against other services provided by that and other contact centres.
- Try to ensure that the name of the agent and time and date of the call are logged accurately in case of negative feedback, as this will allow the call to be traced back and action taken. Try to alert the contact centre to negative feedback as early as possible to allow for action to be taken promptly.
- Decide on how many contacts will be made per week and per month. For ongoing campaigns, we recommend you carry out test calling continuously so that levels of service can be tracked over the course of a year. Enough contacts should be made to give a robust sample of the overall contact volumes.
- Testing should evaluate the full contact experience of a user. You should therefore assess the time taken for fulfilment to arrive, and the quality and accuracy of the fulfilment received.
- Put a flexible reporting structure in place to allow results to be analysed across all variables. This way any emerging patterns in the data can be tracked, benchmarks can be set and problems can be acted upon.
- Inbound communication by methods other than the telephone (fax, e-mail, SMS, reply card, web forms) should also be tested for efficiency in a similar way.

7.151 Testing should be carried out against agreed SLAs. Examples of what test calling can try to establish include:

- the speed of call answering;
- if the caller was held in a queue, whether the call went to Automated;
- whether the correct opening salutation was used by the agent;
- whether key areas of the script were adhered to;
- whether address and delivery details were correctly taken;
- whether the right information was given to the caller;
- whether the caller was put on hold unnecessarily;
- when literature was received and whether it was correctly addressed and in good condition;
- comments or observations about agent performance; and
- the overall call experience (for example, was the agent polite, friendly, interested?).

7.152 COI can provide an independent test calling service that can act either in conjunction with services it manages or as a stand-alone service.

Customer callback strategies (boxes 4 and 5 in Figure 5)

7.153 The two methods above try to recreate the customer experience. However, there is no real substitute for actually asking the citizen directly. A callback strategy is where an agreed appropriate percentage of all customers who made contact and have given permission are re-contacted after an appropriate interval. This strategy has a number of benefits including:

- identifying customer satisfaction levels with the specific contact;
- identifying areas for improvement; and
- identifying customer follow-through (i.e. did they act upon the information gained?).

7.154 The percentage of customers you contact will depend on the overall call volume of your contact centre and what would constitute a statistically valid sample within that audience.

7.155 Contact centre agents could carry out the call-backs (which would give agents some skill and task variety). Alternatively, you may wish to use an independent third party to avoid any bias from the service provider. Contacts made by post or e-mail can be followed up by postal or e-mail customer satisfaction surveys.

7.156 If you would like to evaluate fulfilment, callback will need to be arranged for a later time to give the citizen time to receive and read/action the materials received.

7.157 It is very important that any questionnaires are free from bias and that more formal market research conforms to Market Research Society standards. You should also try to make sure surveys are not too onerous on the citizen.

7.158 Surveys can ask questions such as:
- whether the enquiry was dealt with quickly and efficiently;
- whether agents were helpful;
- when information was requested during the contact received;
- suggestions for improving the service;
- what citizens thought of the initial advertising that made them respond;
- what citizens thought of any subsequent fulfilment material; and
- whether citizens are going to take things further (likely conversion).

Complaints procedure (box 6 in Figure 5)

7.159 One of the ways in which contact centres can continue to improve is by listening and responding to the views of citizens. It is, therefore, important that:
- any complaint is treated as a clear expression of dissatisfaction with the service that calls for a response;
- making a complaint, by any inbound method, is as easy as possible;
- all complaints are treated seriously whether they are made in person, by telephone, by letter, by fax or by e-mail;
- complaints are dealt with promptly, politely and, where appropriate, informally (for example, by telephone). The citizen should be made aware of the time it will take you to deal with his or her complaint (for example, 'We aim to answer your complaint within two working days of receiving it. If it is not possible to give you a full reply within this time – for instance, because a detailed investigation is required – we will get in touch to tell you what is being done to deal with your complaint, when you can expect the full reply and who the reply will come from.');
- the response is undertaken in the right way (for example, with an explanation, an apology when the contact centre has got things wrong, or information on any action taken). The response should include details of whom to contact next if the citizen believes the complaint has not been dealt with properly; and
- complaints are used as learning opportunities to improve the service.

All contact centres should have fully documented complaints procedures.

Performance from call management systems (box 7 in Figure 5)

7.160 This method has already been covered, in reference to ongoing management information from the ACD, data capture and reporting, and the network provider.

Trackback

7.161 In addition to the methods detailed by the NAO, 'Trackback' is another method that can be used. This involves each contact being given a unique reference number (URN) which allows them to be tracked back through the system. You then choose a random sample of URNs in a month and ask the contact centre service provider to track the contacts back through the system to show the key stages of:

- contact received;
- contact outcome;
- data sent for fulfilment;
- letter/labels produced;
- packing instructions produced; and
- pack dispatched.

7.162 All of these activities are designed to let the project team 'walk the process' to understand how the service is being delivered to citizens. Example desired outputs are a good conversation or a positive e-mail exchange, which are hard to assess.

7.163 How frequently should you use these methods? All the time, for the following reasons:

- Ideally the samples used should be statistically significant.
- 'Dipping in and out' can be misleading.
- If you are not monitoring and your suppliers know this, standards will drop.
- Citizens expect quality **all the time**, so you should ensure quality is being delivered **all the time**, even if the issue is 'off the agenda'.

7.164 Use of a basket of measures should lead to a robust combination of data showing trends over time.

7.165 Project teams should highlight immediate problems to the contact centre service provider for it to solve. General results (whether good or bad) should also be shared for debate to help improve the service, **not** as a 'stick to beat them with'.

Improving processes

7.166 You should make sure there are mechanisms in place that allow for changing and improving processes and service quality. Contact centres are evolutionary and need to be designed so that changes, even radical ones, can be introduced quickly:

- Upsizing may become necessary for various reasons – for example, the existence of the contact centre creating its own demand, a departmental decision to increase marketing of the facility, or even a 'crusade' by a newspaper drawing attention to the service.
- Downsizing may become necessary – for example if demand is less than expected or a departmental decision has been made to cease marketing of the facility.
- The contact centre could be asked to add or remove areas of responsibility.
- New requirements could become necessary to handle incoming contacts through different channels – for example, e-mail and web transactions.

7.167 You should use the requirement specification to estimate and allow for any changes to demand and/or scope. You can then include contingency plans in any proposed in-house solution and/or contingency conditions in any contract awarded.

7.168 Change is largely due to:

- citizen demand; and/or
- an inherent desire to improve (but only if there is a need to do so).

7.169 You can use management information, agent feedback, customer satisfaction surveys and formal research to analyse citizen demand. These tools will allow you to:

- analyse root causes of the demand; and
- evaluate each event in an interaction with a citizen, and the possible routes and outcomes they create, to determine how best to improve that process. It is important not to accept 'folklore' about what can be done or what people want. You should find out for yourself by talking to agents, testing and research.

7.170 General improvement can be made easier by:

- benchmarking – to understand the industry and identify better practices; and

- keeping abreast of industry developments in process practice and technical development (through forums, site visits, journals and exhibitions).

7.171 Looking at contact centres in a wider context can give useful 'front line' information. This allows you to pinpoint process problems that are not to do with the contact centre at all, but may be creating contacts (possibly wasteful and unnecessary ones) because citizens are concerned or anxious. For example, if people are having difficulty completing a form, this can create additional call demand which could be resolved by changing the form rather than by amending the contact centre process. Look for the root causes of issues.

Financial transactions

7.172 Some government departments offer products or services in exchange for money. When this is being handled through a contact centre channel, it is important to ensure that transactions are correct and fully documented. Most monetary transactions involving contact centres will be carried out over the telephone or by post, although the web is an increasingly popular channel and should be included in any new transaction services.

7.173 There are several rules for handling monetary transactions, whether in-house or outsourced, and a full audit trail must be in place.

In-house

7.174 Payments can be taken during the call (using debit or credit cards or by direct debit) or by cheque.

Card handling

7.175 A number of providers can set up card handling services for you. As a general rule agreements should be set up well in advance and systems must be able to handle mandatory data fields as well as essential security checks. Note that many card companies impose a handling charge of up to 5 per cent of the purchase price.

Direct debit

7.176 The contact script and database should be set up to handle the fields needed for a direct debit service. More details can be found at **www.directdebit.co.uk**. Banks will provide quarterly updates on sort codes and account numbers so that you can check that the data citizens provide is correct.

7.177 Agents should be trained and briefed always to read back the details they have taken.

7.178 With paperless direct debits, a letter must be sent to the citizen within three working days of their call outlining the agreement and giving details of how to cancel it.

Cheques

7.179 Cheques are a much less common form of payment, but you should still have a process in place for dealing with them. The department will need to organise a bank account to handle all forms of payment and to allow cheques to be paid in.

Outsourcing financial transactions

7.180 If contact centre services are being managed by an outsourced supplier, it is likely that it will already have facilities in place for handling the three methods of payment outlined above. It may also be able to deal with coupons, vouchers, cash, and so on. These should be processed in a secure area with appropriate checking mechanisms – for example, security cameras – in place.

7.181 Ask to see how the system works. If the supplier is doing similar work for another client, ask for a reference so you can find out how well it is performing.

Summary

- *Processes are an essential foundation of successfully run contact centres.*
- *You should consider all aspects of processes in the contact centre – from the scripts and call guides used, to the information you collect.*
- *The way you manage information will directly impact on the service you are providing.*
- *Qualitative and quantitative standards, targets and key performance indicators will help you to measure the productivity and effectiveness (in terms of outcomes) of your contact centre.*
- *Processes and performance should be constantly monitored against them.*
- *You should make sure that mechanisms are in place for continual process improvement.*
- *Financial transactions require specific processes.*

8. System technology

This chapter looks at technology and how it can affect your contact centre. It discusses:

- technology implementation;
- open architecture;
- contact centre technology;
- customer relationship management; and
- future-proofing contact centres.

8.01 The system technology used in contact centres can vary from minimal to very sophisticated. However, the principle is the same: technology should **support** the people and processes, not drive or limit them.

Technology implementation

8.02 Technology implementation has grown in contact centres and this has been driven by the need to make new communication channels available to customers. Many contact centres are specialising in multi-channel access where they can give a consistent service across a choice of access mechanisms. These access mechanisms (listed below) all need suitable supporting technology to underpin them:

- standard voice calls;
- e-mail;
- website interaction (e.g. web collaboration, including ‘show and tell’ and ‘call-me’ functions);
- textchat;
- fax;
- post;
- voice-over-IP telephony; and
- video.

8.03 A technology and telephony strategy is critical. Decisions on appropriate technology can be difficult. You do not necessarily need to have much technical ‘how it works’ knowledge, but you should have a basic understanding of ‘what it does’ – the features, applications and business benefits of each system – to make sure you are not being sold inappropriate or expensive solutions.

8.04 Some departments may need to invest in the latest technology due to the requirements of the contact centre they are establishing. On the other hand, many departments choose to outsource the activities that rely on the latest technology to private companies. The advantage of this is that it reduces capital costs and you avoid paying for bespoke systems that will date swiftly.

8.05 It can be difficult for contact centres to upgrade their technology and add new services because of the lack of open standards or the high cost of systems integration. Therefore, when looking into taking on new technology, you should bear the following in mind:

- Is it suitable for your purposes?
- Will it allow your contact centre to take on the new technology solutions at minimum cost and with minimum disruption to existing services?
- Will it integrate with legacy IT systems, if required?
- Will it allow easy integration between multiple sites of a contact centre?
- Wll it allow easy integration of new applications, management information and computer telephony integration packages into existing contact centres?

e-Government Interoperability Framework (e-GIF)

8.06 Integration with legacy systems and future government systems should be via xml in accordance with the e-Government Interoperability Framework (e-GIF) standard. Adherence to e-GIF policies and specifications is mandatory

8.07 Better public services tailored to the needs of the citizen and business, as envisaged in the UK online strategy, require the seamless flow of information, across government.

8.08 The e-GIF sets out the government's technical policies and specifications for achieving interoperability and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) systems coherence across the public sector.

8.09 The e-GIF defines the essential prerequisites for joined-up and web-enabled government. It is a cornerstone policy in the overall e-Government strategy. They set the underlying infrastructure, freeing up public sector organisations so that they can concentrate on serving the customer through building value-added information and services.

8.10 The main thrust of the e-GIF is to adopt the Internet and World Wide Web specifications for all government systems.

8.11 The benefits of the e-GIF are that by using a pragmatic, Internet-based approach for reducing cost and risk, it frees up public sector organisations to concentrate on serving the customer through value-added information and services.

8.12 The e-GIF framework details the technical policies and specifications governing information flows across government and the public sector. It covers interconnectivity, data integration, e-services access and content management.

8.13 The latest version 6 (**www.govtalk.gov.uk/documents/e-gif-v6-0_.pdf**) contains the high-level policy statements, management, implementation and compliance regimes which should be adhered to.

Open architecture

8.14 An open architecture allows the systems to be connected easily to devices and programs made by other manufacturers. Open architectures use off-the-shelf components and conform to approved standards. A system with a closed architecture, on the other hand, is one whose design is proprietary, making it difficult to connect the system to other systems. The great advantage of open architectures is that anyone can design add-on products for them.

8.15 In designing your contact centre solution in this way you will ensure that the solution enables future:

- choice – you are not bound to a single platform vendor for the life of your system. You can mix and match components, software, and solutions from best-of-class vendors in your desired category.
- speed – open systems mean easier integration of multiple applications without the need for system redesign or change control procedure.
- scalability – services can be more easily ramped up or down or alternative contact centres can be stitched together to ensure call volumes are managed.
- cost savings – open systems architectures promote competition and innovation among vendors who supply the hardware and software you will need. They also allow you to select and make savings on training, as you are not linked to one specific contract supplier.
- system development – investment in equipment is protected for a longer period than for closed architectures since a greater amount of solutions/services are available around open platforms, therefore extending the life of standards-based solutions.

Contact centre technology

8.16 You should consider the following main areas.

Call switching and distribution management

8.17 Hunt group calls are automatically switched to the next free agent. This is only appropriate for very small systems as it has limited logging and analysis of information. This method is also known as a rotary hunt.

8.18 Automatic Call Distributors (ACDs) are at the hub of most contact centre systems. They route all calls to free agents efficiently. ACDs differ from normal 'switch' distribution in that they can be programmed to use skills-based routing to direct calls to the most appropriate agents. They support equalisation of the workload across the team and use a queuing system that can be configured to various thresholds. These systems often use noticeboards showing call and agent status; however in many forward-looking centres this is no longer the case, and the emphasis is on quality and query resolution rather than the pressure of time and queues. ACDs have traditionally suited organisations with large call volumes, but new developments make them suitable for smaller centres. As a technology, ACDs are advanced and proven. They should be capable of integrating with the existing switch, rather than replacing it.

Softswitching

8.19 Softswitch is the concept of separating the network hardware from the network software. In traditional telephony circuit switch networks, hardware and software are not independent. Softswitch technology is increasingly replacing traditional ACID and 'hunt' technology. Softswitch architecture takes a different approach to next-generation voice and data services by directing the switching activities of media gateways, which convert voice and signalling from analogue PSTN and SS7 to IP packets. Softswitches perform different levels of call processing but their general function revolves around call control and routing, signalling intelligence, service creation and inbound number recognition.

8.20 The International Softswitch Consortium says a softswitch should be able to:

- control connection services for a media gateway and/or native IP endpoints;
- select processes that can be applied to a call;
- provide routing for a call within the network, based on signalling and customer database information;
- transfer control of the call to another network element; and

- interface to and support management functions such as provisioning, fault, billing, etc.

8.21 For more information, visit **www.softswitch.org**.

Telephone Call Automation/Interactive Voice Response

8.22 Automated/Interactive Voice Response (IVR) is a constantly developing area with various technical options. Good use can reduce costs substantially and benefit both the citizen and the organisation. Poor design or inappropriate use of IVR (with its impersonal nature) can lead to poor perceptions of government services.

- IVR takes away the human contact element that is often instrumental in creating the first impression the citizen will get of the organisation.
- Citizens may not always be sure what they wish to talk about or which department they need to speak to. Customers who choose the wrong department will then need to be re-transferred.
- A number of ministers prefer not to use IVR; however this in itself is not a good reason, and they may be thinking of fairly basic technology as opposed to more modern applications.
- On touch-tone, too many layers can create confusion and citizens can become lost in the structure. Speech recognition solutions can in part obviate this.
- Some members of the public do not have touch-tone phones. Having layers of numbers in the IVR prevents them using this kind of system. Again speech recognition solutions can be appropriate here.

8.23 IVR can be used in the following ways:

- to provide a short information statement (for example, for a publication ordering service where, ideally, you offer a few options at each level, or make speech options clear);
- as back-up for agents during busy periods (often people will be happier to deal with an IVR than to wait for an agent);
- at the beginning of the call, to help direct customers to the most appropriate agent or service through a set list of options;
- to identify the caller ahead of the call, being answered, where the caller has alpha numeric identity numbers (for example, when the caller needs to provide security clearance);
- in more rigid transactional-type applications;
- where specific statements have to be given consistently with no departure; and

- where the subject is of a highly personal nature, and the respondent may feel uncomfortable talking to another person and prefer the anonymity of an automated solution.

8.24 There are two main types of IVR, as detailed below.

Speech recognition[1] (voice-activated IVR)

8.25 This system relies on the caller speaking down the telephone in response to automated questions. Previous speech software has worked by simply recognising a sound made by the caller, and this sound or silence triggers different options in the script.

8.26 In the past few years, technology has moved towards understanding these sounds as real answers (for example, yes or no answers, address details and numbers). This newer technology allows the system to be even more sophisticated and helps prevent too many options at each stage.

8.27 Applications where speech recognition could be used include:

- data collection (e.g. name and address collection, or 'Please say your five-letter account number.');
- call routing (e.g. 'Please say the name of the person or department you want to speak to.'); and
- information delivery (e.g. 'For which railway station do you want to know details of disabled access facilities.').

8.28 Crucial to the success of a speech recognition application is a well-designed dialogue, and well-tuned grammars (a grammar simplistically being a list of expected responses).

8.29 Accuracy of systems and ability to deal with accents have improved enormously and, while occasionally speech recognition will misrecognise a caller response, a well-designed application will have built-in correction and confirmation routings.

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[1] As opposed to **speaker verification**, which is the term given to biometric identification of the caller according to the characteristics of how they speak (similar to fingerprint or iris recognition). The main application of speaker verification technology is in the security industry. Applications of this technology are restricted by the necessity of getting callers to 'enrol'. Some callers are unwilling to enrol due to concerns about infringement of their civil liberties.

8.30 Speech recognition can be better received than touch-tone but takes more skill to set up and alter. That said, outsource providers do offer customisable 'off-the-shelf' applications using bolt-together modules that can be cost-effective and swift to set up.

Telephone-tone-operated IVR

8.31 Almost all telephones now offer tone dialling (dual-tone multi-frequency (DTMF)). This is where each button on the dialling pad has a different electronic output. This has enabled IVR to move into operating multiple routes for each question. For example, this system could give a caller an option list such as:

Press 1 to receive information on winter fuel
Press 2 to request an application form
Press 3 to check the situation of your current application
Press 4 for all other information
Press 5 to speak to an agent.

8.32 Touch-tone is a mature technology that callers are familiar with, it is relatively inexpensive to set up and fast to alter. However, it is unpopular with some of the population (e.g. the elderly) and callers can avoid it by not pressing keys and hoping they will be transferred to an agent.

8.33 If using automated services, the following should be considered:

- It is important to ensure the IVR script is not too long or too complex. You should not offer more than three or four options at any one level, and there should not be too many levels, particularly for touch-tone where these 'layers' can cause confusion and callers get lost in the structure.
- Mixing touch-tone and speech recognition solutions can be confusing and involve transfer of the telephone between the ear and hand. It should be avoided.
- If 'on hold' times are significant, you may want the IVR system to play information announcements to callers. You can use this opportunity to remind them of any available self-service options and to tell them when the less busy periods are, so that they can choose to call back at those times. More sophisticated systems give the caller average waiting times.
- Always test the usability of new IVR dialogues in trials with citizens to obtain feedback before launch. Repeat usability tests at least once a year.[2]

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[2] You should review any proposed dialogue against the *Dialogues 2000 Dialogue Engineering Style Guide for Interactive Voice Response Dialogues* (available from the Dialogues 2000 team at **www.ccir.ed.ac.uk/old/d2000**). The guide covers industry best practice in requirements capture, dialogue representation, the composition of voice messages, the recording of voice messages and the usability evaluation of services.

- Monitoring IVR call statistics, such as abandoned interactions and where in the script abandonment took place, will highlight IVR implementation problems.
- Ideally IVR should always give access to an agent as an option, particularly if the caller is in difficulty.
- IVR is not suitable in situations where there is likely to be an emotional aspect to the call (for example, counselling services).
- IVR should **not** be used to mask poor live delivery.

Benefits of IVR

8.34 There has been considerable public resistance to IVR,[3] and certain sections of the public will react less favourably to its adoption. It can perpetuate the myth of faceless and bureaucratic government. On the other hand, a well-thought-out system can provide speed, convenience and consistency.

8.35 The benefits of IVR include:

- *call handling capacity.* IVR systems can handle many hundreds or even thousands of calls simultaneously. Some applications require such capacity that it would not be feasible or cost-effective to use a live agent call centre, no matter how desirable it would be for the caller;
- *expense.* IVR systems are much cheaper than live agent call handling;
- *unpredictable call flow.* If the call flow is likely to be peaky or unpredictable, then it may not be cost-effective or possible to handle calls using live agents, as this would require agents to be sitting idle waiting for an unexpected event to cause a large call volume (e.g. emergency information lines, or service update lines); and
- *time of call.* IVR is available 24x7x365. If the caller is calling when a live agent is not available as the call centre is shut, and they have a simple requirement, a well-designed IVR application that can satisfy their objective will benefit them.

8.36 As far as other channels are concerned, automated response systems can be set up for faxes (fax backs), e-mails (bounce backs), SMS or web forms. Such automated responses should assure citizens that their request is in the system and manage their expectations of when they should expect a personal reply. You should give thought to these communications, which can often be mechanical in nature. Intelligent e-mail systems exist that can compose suitable responses based on key

[3] In the NAO report *Using Call Centres to Deliver Public Services*, research indicated that when given the choice between IVR or human answering, almost 80 per cent preferred human answering. Of these, 33 per cent thought it was never acceptable to have an automated service. However these attitudes change over time.

words from a knowledge bank. However, somebody should always check these before they are sent to citizens.

Web-enabling the contact centre

8.37 The web is an increasingly popular channel. The challenge for many contact centres is how to integrate web-based interactions:

- *e-mail management.* Handling high-volume e-mail traffic requires investment and a dedicated e-mail management system designed to provide knowledge bases, key word search, answers to frequently asked questions, automatic receipting and management of service levels;
- *'call me' buttons.* Website requests can be made through 'call me' buttons, which prompt an agent to call the citizen. Multiple 'call me' buttons can be posted onto different sections of the website to direct enquiries to the most appropriate person (see Outbound calling at paragraph 7.64);
- *textchat.* This is basically 'real-time' e-mail where there is a text-based dialogue between the citizen and agent using similar knowledge-based data as above;
- *collaborative browsing (co-browsing)* This is where agents and customers can browse the same page. Agents can share static and dynamic web content with customers, navigate them around the web by pasting pages to them and help them complete web forms or transfer downloadable files; and
- *Computer Telephony Integration (CTI).* This is about integrating computer equipment with telephone and network equipment so that the two technologies can share information. From an inbound point of view, CTI allows you to pre-identify the citizen through caller line identification (CLI) or the use of IVR. This means you can automatically search databases and display customer records on agents' computer screens when calls are delivered to them. This is known as 'screen popping' and has increased productivity gains for many organisations. From an outbound point of view, CTI allows predictive dialler systems to be used. A predictive dialler dials numbers on behalf of the agent and only puts through calls that are answered. The main aim of predictive dialling is to increase a centre's contacts by eliminating undesirable calls (e.g. engaged, no answer, or a telephone answer machine) and therefore improving agent productivity.

Customer relationship management

8.38 Although it is included in the systems and technology section, it should be noted that good customer relationship management (CRM) is **not** a system. It is a management philosophy which looks at what data/information you have on the citizen, how this can be analysed and how it can be acted upon to develop the organisation's 'business rules' for longer-term communication strategies that service the citizen.

8.39 This analytical CRM element should not be confused with the operational CRM engines that act as enablers to such service programmes. Many organisations have found to their cost that implementing a CRM system alone does not enhance customer experience.

8.40 A true CRM system is designed to support the collection and analysis of customer-relevant information and make it available to the appropriate people within the organisation across all channels. CRM systems aim to deliver a single, integrated view of the customer, which allows customer contact rules to be developed that can trigger event-based specific strategies for servicing customers. There are many vendors operating in the CRM market and selecting a system can be expensive. You should always consider systems with a full understanding of the long-term contact strategy you want to use. Many outsourced service providers will already have these systems in place, and this may be worth considering in your procurement strategy.

Future-proofing contact centres

8.41 Changes within the industry happen quickly and contact centres need considerable capital investment to keep up to date. No contact centre can be completely future-proof and contact centre managers must make decisions on which new technologies are important to the overall aim of the contact centre. These decisions may involve the managers looking at both internal and external solutions to deal with new technology.

8.42 Another task within initial contact centre planning should be to assess whether or not there will be a requirement later in the project lifecycle to invest in newer technology so that further cost and contact efficiencies can be made.

8.43 Any technological change brings additional activities and costs that need to be considered. These include changes in staffing levels, training requirements and upgrades to various operating systems.

8.44 Outsourcing the contact centre can be beneficial here. The outsourced service provider will have investment plans for technological change and they are usually tied to specific contact centre applications. The alternative is an in-house bespoke solution that could require significant capital outlay for improvement.

8.45 Outsourced activity that is part of general IT and/or telephony provision can be limiting. Your organisation could become locked into outdated systems, so you should build provision for a technology refresh into any such arrangement.

Summary

- *Whichever system technology you choose, it should support the people and processes, not drive or limit them.*
- *It is important to use open architecture and solutions that allow multi-channel access.*
- *You should give serious consideration to the various contact centre technologies that are available, and consider how the options you choose can be future-proofed.*
- *It is important to understand what systems can achieve, not necessarily how they work.*

9. When things go wrong – prevention and resolution

This chapter explains the steps you can take to reduce the risk of poor or inadequate performance by:
- planning for the worst;
- dealing with problems; and
- having a back-up or contingency plan in place.

9.01 Inevitably, contractors and suppliers will make mistakes. This is particularly true of the service industry, which deals with intangibles and where the primary resource is people. It is difficult to manage and maintain consistent levels of service.

9.02 However, you can minimise the chances of things going wrong by:
- making sure there is a clear specification, and that everyone understands it;
- specifying a quality plan, and making sure it is adhered to;
- carrying out independent monitoring;
- monitoring statistics on a daily basis; and
- seeing for yourself – do not just assume that things are being done.

Planning for the worst

9.03 When placing a contract, you should state clearly what will constitute a service failure and what you expect your service provider to do about it. If errors occur, the provider should determine the cause and put the problem right within an agreed timescale. If the problems are serious or persistent, you should make it clear that you will seek compensation for:
- any costs you incur in the course of putting things right. The contractor certainly should not charge **you** to put things right;
- any costs incurred through genuine loss caused by the service failure itself, for example lost leads, fulfilment not sent out, lost stock (i.e. reprint costs). These can be more difficult to assess; and
- time costs incurred by you/your team in putting things right. Again, these can be difficult to assess.

9.04 You should expect to negotiate before arriving at the final figure. Compensation should represent a genuine estimate of loss and not be punitive. Contractors may complain that this is unfair and hostile to them, but service failures are breaches of warranty or condition and the buyer is entitled under law to seek damages and, in the case of serious breaches, to cancel the contract.

9.05 You should also remind suppliers that any attempt to conceal a problem or hide its full extent will be dealt with severely.

Dealing with problems

9.06 No matter how thoroughly you plan, problems will still occur. These steps will help you assess the situation and begin to resolve the issues:

- Confirm the full extent of the problem. Do not do anything that might escalate the situation until you have all the facts.
- Find out how long the problem has been going on.
- Find out what is causing the problem – you want reasons, not excuses.
- Do not assume you know where the problem lies until you have checked yourself. There may be more than one party at fault.
- Assess the likely damage caused by the problem – for example, unfulfilled leads, unsent mailings, calls not answered.
- Share the problem, and work with your supplier to solve it.
- Set a timescale for resolution.
- If appropriate, remind the supplier that you will be seeking compensation, but be careful not to let this interfere with sorting the problem out.
- Confirm everything in writing. Use specific words such as ‘complaint’. Sometimes service providers’ own quality procedures don’t kick in unless it is absolutely clear that you are making a formal complaint.
- If the problem turns out to be the service provider’s fault, ask them to provide an explanation in writing along with a suitable apology.
- Finally, do not make it personal. Focus on the organisation, not the individual.

When it gets serious

9.07 If the supplier fails to make improvements within the timescale you have agreed, you should:

- spell out exactly how much compensation you will expect. For example, if your tests reveal an error rate of 10 per cent, tell the contractor that you will assume a 10 per cent error rate across the board and claim compensation on that basis;
- get senior management involved on both sides (but note this does not mean you can wash your hands of the problem);
- hold payment on any invoices you are currently processing from that provider. Let them know you are doing this, and that invoices will not be paid until quality targets are met;

- be careful. Do not make threats, veiled or otherwise, about taking away all or part of the business from the provider unless you are prepared to carry them out.

9.08 Ideally, a contractor will not let things go this far, but it is useful to know what to do if the situation begins to escalate. Throughout, try to make the contractor understand that you simply want it to reach the level of performance required – and agreed – and that if it could do this consistently, such issues would not arise. Try to maintain good working relationships.

Back-up and contingency planning

Disaster recovery

9.09 Despite best planning, external problems out of the control of the contact centre will occur. Although it may be impossible to prevent these problems occurring, they should be considered as a threat to the running of the contact centre. Contingency plans should be established, during the set-up of the contact centre, to minimise the disruption they may cause.

9.10 The following are a few examples of elements that can go wrong along with some appropriate measures that can be taken and some recommendations of timings against which these should be undertaken.

Problem	Measure taken	Timing
Failure of main internal telephone switch (i.e. server or ACD).	Have stand-by server available (operate two servers) with information about service requirements pre-programmed.	Within 10 minutes of problem identification.
Contact centre site power failure.	Where possible use site standby generators to re-establish power. If not available, set up message on network detailing problem and resolution time.	Within 2 hours.
Emergency evacuation of contact centre (unplanned, i.e. due to serious incident).	Where possible, switch contact centre services to an alternative site. Alternatively, play out message informing citizens that contact centre is closed and the period it will be closed for.	Within 1 hour.
Failure of PC network.	Contact centre staff to handle requests capturing data by hand, to be re-inputted once PC network re-established.	Immediately – data input within 24 hours.
More contacts received than forecast.	Depending on volume of contacts, increase staff numbers to handle additional calls. Use IVR to handle requests over and above volumes which can be handled by agents; utilise additional site or agents from another service.	Within 3 hours.

9.11 However, if a suitable technology solution is in place that allows for applications to be shared between sites by use of a Wide Area Network, resolution times can be swifter.

Emergencies

9.12 Emergencies can arise either when clients need to set up a new service to cope with an event, such as an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease, or when an existing service is faced with unexpected demand. Protocols should be considered and put in place.

9.13 The National Co-ordination Centre in the Cabinet Office can advise on dealing with crises. Using its roster, COI has and can set up contact centres at short notice, or offer additional support to existing services.

Summary

- *All contracts should make it clear what constitutes a service failure and what you expect your service providers to do to resolve such problems.*
- *Problems should be dealt with in a logical and thorough fashion and the focus should be on resolving the issues, not on assigning blame.*
- *Contingency plans should be put in place and thought given to developing protocols for emergencies.*

10. Complying with the law

Because of the large amount of legislation and codes of practice that impact on contact centre provision, this chapter cannot cover every aspect of it. It focuses on four key areas:

- health and safety;
- data protection and suppression;
- monitoring and tracking (specifically call recording and the use of cookies); and
- confidentiality.

10.01 You will need to take into account both UK and European legislation relating to contact centres, as well as various industry codes. The main regulatory instruments that impact are:

- the Data Protection Act 1998;
- the Telecommunications (Data Protection and Privacy) Regulations 1999;
- the Consumer Protection (Distance Selling) Regulations 2000;
- the Telecommunications (Lawful Business Practice) (Interception of Communications) Regulations 2000;
- the Regulation of Investigating Powers Act 2002 (RIPA); and
- the Human Rights Act 1998.

10.02 The relevant codes to be aware of are:

- the Advertising Standards Authority CAP Code (the British Code of Advertising, Sales Promotion and Direct Marketing); and
- the Direct Marketing Association Code of Practice.

Health and safety

10.03 There are many issues to consider, and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has developed some useful guidance designed to protect those employed in contact centres. The information is relevant to:

- contact centre employees;
- managers;
- health and safety officers and representatives;
- union, occupational health and human resources personnel; and
- local authority enforcement officers.

The full document is available at **www.hse.gov.uk/lau/lacs/94-1.htm**.

10.04 A further document on reducing the psychological risks associated with working in contact centres was produced by the HSE and is available at **www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrhtm/rr169.htm**.

10.05 Work has also been undertaken by the CCA and the Industrial Relations Society (IRS) on the right to request flexible working and work-life balance for contact centre employees.

Data protection

10.06 The Data Protection Act 1998 states that **all data activity must be registered by the data controller**. This can include data relating to consumers and businesses, and to all records held.

10.07 Data should be:
- obtained fairly and lawfully;
- processed fairly and lawfully;
- adequate, relevant and not excessive; and
- accurate and up to date.

10.08 Data should not be:
- processed in any manner incompatible with the purpose for which it was obtained; or
- kept longer than necessary.

10.09 Appropriate security measures should be in place, but data subjects must be able to access data relating to them. Data subjects have the right to object to the processing of data relating to them which may be used for direct marketing purposes, and you must ensure that data subjects are aware of this right. You can achieve this by subscribing to the mailing, telephone, fax and e-mail preference services and including an 'opt-out' in any promotional materials which allows citizens to opt out of any further communications. To send SMS or e-mail to citizens you require their explicit consent – i.e. 'opt in'.

10.10 Where data is collected from data subjects themselves, the subject should be told who the data controller is, and what is going to be done with the data. You should also pass on any further relevant information, such as letting subjects know if you plan to pass the data on to third parties.

Security

10.11 The Act also sets out guidance on ensuring and maintaining security. You must take appropriate technical and organisational measures against unauthorised or unlawful processing of, accidental loss of, damage to or destruction of personal data. The data controller must:
- choose a data processor with sufficient guarantees in place;

- have a formal contract or evidence in writing stating that the data processor can only act with instructions from the controller in relation to data, and that it must comply with obligations equivalent to those imposed on the controller; and
- comply with the Telecommunications (Data Protection and Privacy) Regulations 1999. These are mainly concerned with networks, but also cover all direct marketing by phone. The Regulations prohibit centres from contacting individuals who have objected by registering with the Telephone Preference Service.

10.12 The following checklist will help ensure you are complying with the main requirements of the Act:

- Assume that what you are doing is covered by the Act.
- Consider the data protection implications, and make a formal note of any issues.
- Think about your current and future data capture needs.
- Capture only the data that you need.
- Consider any sensitive data implications.
- Make sure the service provider is bound by the provisions of the Act (i.e. that it has a proper contract) and is secure.
- Make provision for data access and amendment.
- Where appropriate, use 'opt-in' as best practice.
- Seek professional advice from the Information Commissioner or other competent sources.[1]

Suppression

10.13 The section on data protection above describes opt-out as a means of suppression. Contact centres also need to look at how they relate to the various preference services, and have adequate procedures in place for de-duplication, bereavement suppression and changes of address. It is also good practice for contact centres to develop their own lists of 'do not mails' to avoid calling or sending material to people who have been the victims of practical jokes. The Royal Mail's Universal Suppression File can help with this. The Direct Marketing Association also offers various tools and COI can advise in this area.

[1] Contact the Information Commissioner on tel: 01625 545745 or fax: 01625 524510, or visit **www.dataprotection.gov.uk**.

Call recording and monitoring

10.14 Automatic call recording equipment can provide digital transcripts of conversations. This can be extremely useful when meeting compliance requirements, managing customer disputes and evaluating conversation quality. However, the recording, intercepting and monitoring of calls are governed by a number of different pieces of UK legislation. We strongly advise you to seek departmental legal advice, as failing to comply with the relevant legislation can have serious consequences.

10.15 If calls are being recorded for audit or coaching purposes, you are legally obliged to tell callers. Oftel guidance states that 'Every reasonable effort must be made to inform all parties to the telephone conversation that it may be recorded.'[2] This does not have to be done at the point of contact: you can include the information in promotional leaflets, in the announcement systems while callers are queuing or in advertising. However, this could have significant implications for government where recording could be seen as a potential barrier to calling. On some lines, for example confidential counselling services, recording will be totally inappropriate at all times.

Cookies

10.16 Cookies are small files that enable websites to 'remember' information about users. This information is then delivered to the client, which can store the data in one or more flat files on its local hard drive.

10.17 Within the UK, the Information Commissioner has decided that the use of cookies is permitted, but only if individuals are given clear and comprehensive information in advance about how the data will be processed and the right to opt out. Some departments are very cautious about the use of cookies, but this need not be so if these guidelines are followed. Moreover, cookies can be very beneficial to the citizen, allowing a personalised service to be delivered and facilitating ease of access on subsequent visits.

Confidentiality

10.18 If you are describing your contact centre as 'confidential', you must take steps to ensure that it actually is by:

- making sure all staff have signed appropriate confidentiality agreements;

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[2] Oftel Requirement under the Privacy of Messages condition of the Self-provision Licence (SPL) and the Telecommunication Services Licence (TSL) – Sections 7.3 and 7.4.

- ensuring that, wherever possible, the number does not appear on the citizen's telephone bill. This may not always be possible, as some mobile tariffs will charge for the service. In this case, citizens should be warned;
- avoiding call recording as an option for measurement of quality;
- only using caller line identification (CLI) for appropriate purposes, or disabling it altogether; and
- minimising data collection.

The Caldicott guidelines

10.19 The Caldicott guidelines aim to protect the confidentiality of callers to helplines. The guidelines state that a caller's personal details should not normally be passed on to a third party. However, there are occasions where confidentiality can be breached. There is some disagreement between Oftel and Caldicott on this, but the general standard would be to accept the Caldicott guidelines.

10.20 Instances where citizen confidentiality can be breached – i.e. details can be passed on to a third party with or without the citizen's consent – should be determined in advance by the department, and citizens should be made aware of the policy. Situations where this might be appropriate include a caller making a terrorist threat, threatening to kill or harm themselves or others, or admitting to a serious crime, for example child abuse.

10.21 Key points of the Caldicott guidelines:

1. Every proposed use or transfer of caller-identifiable information should be clearly defined and scrutinised. Continuing uses should be reviewed regularly by an appropriate guardian.
2. Do not use caller-identifiable information unless it is absolutely necessary and there is no alternative.
3. Access to caller-identifiable information should be on a strict need-to-know basis.
4. Everyone who handles caller-identifiable information must be aware of their responsibilities and obligations to respect caller confidentiality.
5. Every use of caller-identifiable information must comply with the law.

Summary

- *You should seek to understand the impact of, and adhere to, the key UK and European legislation and the relevant codes of practice.*
- *Special consideration should be given to health and safety, data protection, confidentiality, suppression and call recording.*

Appendix A – Contact Centre Annual Return Form

GENERAL INFORMATION, FINANCIAL YEAR ______ TO ______

Contact centre name/title ______

Contact centre project manager
(Primary person responsible) ______

Address ______

E-mail ______

This report compiled by ______

Contact centre opening times
- Mon to Fri
- Sat
- Sun

Length of contract and/or time service has operated

Average number of agents employed on the service
- Full-time
- Part-time
- Casual

Total number of agents trained to handle this service (agent pool) – full-time equivalent (FTE)

Is the service provided by (tick as appropriate)
- Dedicated
- Bureau
- IVR
- All

Agent attrition rate over the period
- Full-time
- Part-time
- All

Service telephone number(s) ______

Service textphone number(s) ______

Service e-mail address(es) ______

Related website address ______

Service postal reply address ______

Any other access points ______

Telephone number for queries ______

Total number of workstations available

Is the service offered on more than one site? ☐ Yes ☐ No
Number of sites ______

Does the service mid-call transfer? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Average length of a completed call in seconds
- Interactive
- Non-interactive

Does the service offer fulfilment to contacts? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Average time from contact handled to fulfilment being despatched

MONTHLY PERFORMANCE FIGURES

FINANCIAL YEAR ______ TO ______

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	**Total**	**Average**
Total contacts handled														
Total calls offered to ACD (contact centre)														
Total calls handled (all calls)														
Total calls handled by IVR														
Total calls handled by live operator														
Total calls abandoned														
% calls abandoned														
% calls answered within 10 seconds by live agent														
Total hoax/non-interactive calls														
Total post (coupons/white mail) handled														
Total e-mail/web form contacts handled														
Total interactive TV contacts handled														
Total inboard SMS contacts handled														
Number of outbound calls made														
Total number of fulfilment packs despatched														

Please note below any stated core service level targets (quantitative/qualitative) and your view as to how well you feel your service achieved them

Appendix B – Example job descriptions and agent profiles

Inbound team leader

Reporting to	Inbound team manager
Working hours	37.5 hours per week on a rota system in line with customer demand/requirements
Function of role	The team leader will be expected to create and maintain a motivational environment and to achieve inbound targets. They will be responsible for ensuring their team's overall performance meets business objectives. Their key responsibility is to manage all operational and production aspects of a team of 10–15 agents, monitoring calls, coaching and developing individuals, dealing with disciplinary issues and maintaining all quality control procedures. The team leader will ensure maximum efficiency of the team through delivery of customer service skills coaching and sharing of best practice.
Skills and experience	2–3 years' customer service experience Minimum 1 year's supervisory experience Organisational and problem-solving capabilities Strong verbal communication skills Evidence of having participated in process reviews leading to performance improvement
Core competencies	Must provide evidence of the following:

- *Customer service.* Has the ability to see things from the citizen's point of view. Should be able to anticipate and meet needs and develop strong relationships.
- *Concern for quality.* Shows concern for getting things right first time, aware that accuracy is essential and focuses on the important details in their desire to deliver high-quality professional services and maintain the reputation of the organisation.

- *Developing people.* Evidence of genuine intent to foster and encourage the learning and development of others. Reinforces a culture of empowerment by delegating complete authority and responsibility for actions.
- *Drive for success.* Has the drive to do things better and to identify, set and strive for challenging goals. Understands and works round limitations to deliver the right solution.

Outputs/deliverables

- Ensure all individuals in the team and the team itself consistently meet/exceed all targets and performance measures.
- Coach, develop, motivate and review individual performance in order to meet quantitative and qualitative targets.
- Monitor and give constructive feedback on performance and progress.
- Take prompt action to rectify under-performance.
- Encourage the team to work together by creating a sense of collective responsibility and by personal influence/persuasion.
- Establish a clear course of action for both short- and long-term goals.
- Develop a thorough understanding of the contact centre remit and service requirement, as well as a working knowledge of office systems and procedures.
- Undertake any other task that is deemed to be a business need.
- Be on time and flexible, and dress smartly. Act in a professional manner and promote the service's values at all times.

Customer service agent

Reporting to	Inbound team leader
Working hours	Shift hours on a rota system in line with customer demand requirements
Function of role	The agent will be expected to support the delivery of excellent customer service. The aim should be to give customers the best possible experience within a defined framework.
Skills and experience	Suitability for this role will mainly depend on competencies.
Core competencies	Must provide evidence of the following:

- *Customer service.* Has the ability to see things from the citizen's point of view. Understands what good customer service is, and is courteous at all times. Delivers what is promised in line with the service expectation.
- *Concern for quality.* Takes pride in completing a task well, is concerned about getting it right and checks that everything is OK. Focuses on the most important elements of a task in order to deliver the best possible outcome. Wants clear procedures to follow and standards to reach. Is dedicated to maintaining quality and getting things right first time.
- *Learning from experience.* Applies lessons from past experiences to new situations. Shows a genuine interest in feedback, even when it is critical. Open to suggestions on development needs.
- *Team player.* Shares all relevant and useful information with others in the team and keeps everyone up to date with the latest developments. Proactively co-operates with others to achieve targets set for group, participates in teamwork and supports team decisions.
- *Others.* Patience and empathy.

Outputs/deliverables

- Deliver using a standard process, action or outcome to ensure all customers are satisfied.
- Fulfil individual targets to maximise contribution to team performance.
- Adhere to company standards in order to present a professional image to internal and external customers and citizens.
- Identify and communicate issues in order to provide continuity of service and consistency of output.

Appendix C – Performance criteria: adoptable service standards

Performance criteria for any individual contact centre service will differ from others because of the nature of the remit of the service, citizen demand and available resource, for example. However, there should be some attempt at a common approach so that the citizen receives a relatively comparable standard, whichever government service he or she interacts with.

Cabinet Office guidelines

When setting up performance criteria for an individual contact centre, it is advisable to consult the Cabinet Office guidelines for performance information systems.[1] These detail three key areas which you should consider when setting your own guidelines:

- the system;
- the measures; and
- where to go for help.

You can use the following checklists to review existing performance measurement systems or to help you design a new system. The first list examines the aim and function of the overall system, while the second list should be used to check that individual measures or indicators are sound.

The system

The performance information system should be:

- focused (for example, is performance information focused on the core aims and objectives of the organisation?);
- appropriate (for example, is the right information being presented in the right way for each group of users?);
- balanced (for example, do measures cover all significant areas of work in the organisation?);
- robust (for example, can the system survive changes in personnel and changes in the structure of the organisation?);
- integrated (for example, are the results of the performance information system monitored and used as part of the business planning and management process?); and
- cost-effective (for example, are the resources put into collecting performance information proportionate to the benefits it brings to the organisation?).

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[1] *Choosing the Right Fabric: a Framework for Performance Information* describes the features of an effective performance information system and of good performance indicators. The framework is supported by the NAO, the Audit Commission, the Office for National Statistics, HM Treasury and the Cabinet Office. The features are summarised in the following checklists.

The measures

Each measure should be:

- relevant;
- supportive of positive change;
- attributable;
- well-defined;
- timely;
- reliable;
- comparable; and
- verifiable.

Targets should always be realistic, and setting them too high can create cost inefficiencies and motivational issues. Targets should be sensibly balanced between quantitative and qualitative and focused on positive outcomes for the citizen as much as, if not more than, on resource efficiency. There is evidence to suggest that too much emphasis on targets and measurement can be detrimental to a contact centre service.

COI's performance criteria

As an example, below is a short extract from COI's framework agreements. These suggested service levels are currently used **as a minimum** on all contact centres managed by COI. Moreover, whilst these are set within COI's framework agreement, there is negotiation on specific contracts to amend/add to them as appropriate, depending on circumstances. There are other targets relating to account management performance, systems availability and turnaround times.

Extract from COI framework agreement

The contractor must have methodologies in place for measuring and regular reporting against key performance indicators within a set timescale, to ensure that:

- *on live agent services, unless otherwise agreed, at least 85 per cent of calls are answered by a live operator on the caller's first attempt;*
- *where automated overflow is provided, the proportion of calls diverted to it is minimised. Ideally this should amount to no more than 15 per cent;*
- *on combined live/automated or IVR or sole automated or IVR services, at least 97 per cent of calls are answered on the caller's first attempt;*
- *calls are answered within a maximum of 10 seconds;*
- *under no circumstances does a caller receive a continuous ringing out tone;*
- *in the normal course of events, coupons, e-mail and fax responses are processed on day of receipt;*

- *90 per cent of all fulfilment, either physical or electronic (for example, replies to e-mails/SMS text messages), is sent/despatched within one working day of receipt of the response and 100 per cent within two working days of receipt of the response. Any delays must be notified immediately and fully explained. It is the responsibility of the service provider to prove that the reason for delay is beyond his control. The service provider must provide plans for dealing with the backlog;*
- *where response handling and fulfilment are split, all leads are passed on by the response handling facility to the fulfilment operation within one working day of receipt within an agreed specified format;*
- *independent monitoring of the service and/or outbound customer satisfaction is carried out in order to confirm the quality level being provided by the service provider. Unless otherwise agreed, this is set against the following satisfaction scale and minimum quality target expectations:*

	Desirable range			Unacceptable performance	
	1 Very satisfied	2 Satisfied	3 Acceptable/ no real view	4 Unsatisfied	5 Very unsatisfied
Initial level	10%	60%	24%	4%	2%
End of first year	15%	60%	20%	3%	2%
End of second year	20%	60%	17%	2%	1%

- *the service provider should also have in place methodologies for monitoring and reporting on the quality of the service offering end-to-end (i.e. call handling* ***and*** *fulfilment) and, when asked, provide the campaign manager with this data so it can be compared with the results of the independent monitoring. The service provider's staff feed back any operational issues through the appropriate channels so that services can be adapted/improved to meet customer requirements;*
- *all dealings with customers are carried out with a due sense of social responsibility. Contact centre representatives must be appropriately trained and act in a professional manner when dealing with customers on COI's behalf. Contractors will have appropriate procedures in place for recruiting, vetting, training, retaining and monitoring staff to ensure that the right people are used for the project.*

For more information and advice, contact COI or your own departmental advisers. You could also contact the organisations, such as the CCA, listed in Appendix G.

Appendix D – Timescales

The process of setting up a new contact centre application will vary according to size, complexity, whether insourced or outsourced and what, if anything, already exists. The longer you can spend planning, setting up and testing a contact centre, the better. However, in a crisis, a simple contact centre can be set up in a very short time. Below is a typical critical path, showing how a contact centre can be set up either using OJEU or COI-rostered companies. Using rostered companies can cut the time taken by around two months. OGC also allows mini-tenders and shortening of the OJEU procedures such as GTC, S-CAT and G-CAT.

It should be noted that shortening time-frames will often put pressure on being able to deliver the service required from the go-live date and, therefore, any work not completed (for example, not having all reporting in place) will need to be completed following commencement of the project, which could cause problems later on.

If a full OJEU process is needed, there will be an additional three stages at the start:

- one week for drafting and agreement of OJEU notice setting out requirement;
- 37 days from appearance of OJEU advertisement for prospective suppliers to submit an expression of interest (EOI); and
- one to two weeks for sifting the expression to create the tender shortlist – this can be longer or shorter depending on how many EOIs are received.

However, other activities, such as development of the brief, can run simultaneously.

Action	Timings
Write tender specification and agree with client. Decide on tender panel. Propose and agree tender shortlist (usually 5 to 8, unless small project). Despatch tender to agreed companies.	Usually takes 1–3 weeks from start to finish depending on complexity
Companies work on tender response. It is likely that during this period there will be a question and answer session. Contact centres should supply a tender for each member of the tender panel.	Usually 3 weeks (4 if very complex, 2 if very simple)
Receive tenders back. First stage review and evaluation against criteria. Decide shortlist for site visit (3–4).	Usually 2 weeks
Visit shortlisted contact centres: • pitch by account management team • tour of facilities • Q & A followed by tender wash-up meeting.	Usually 1–2 weeks (depending on ease of arranging visits for tender panel)
Make recommendation to client, engage in post-tender negotiation, notify appointment to successful company. Letters to unsuccessful companies offering feedback, if required.	Usually less than 1 week, unless protracted negotiations or changes to specification mid-stream

Action	Timings
Account management team confirmed, systems programming team notified of forthcoming set-up. Initial project meeting with all parties to develop scripting and finalise requirements, functionality, response fulfilment, management and reporting. It is also suggested that you arrange weekly implementation meetings. Script, helpscreens, reports and functionality on all channels approved. Systems programming commences. Systems programming continues, agent training programme devised. Systems programming continues, 'deliver to' telephone numbers supplied. Other channel mechanics put into place. Systems programming complete, end-to-end testing commences, fulfilment activity set up and approved. Telephone lines opened and tested, and closed again.	Set-up activities vary according to the complexity of the brief and the company's ability to react speedily. Usually, set-up times will vary between 6 and 18 weeks, although in an emergency simple systems can be set up within a few days and automated systems within a day or so. There should be progress checks at each stage, and the tenderer should have provided a critical path for each of the stages within its response to tender.
Internal agent training commences, test contacts commence. Pre-launch project team meeting to identify any outstanding issues. Fulfilment data transfer tested. Agent training complete, end-to-end testing complete.	
Go live. Contact centre fully operational.	
Place OJEU notice of award of tender, if appropriate.	Subsequent

Set-ups can be speeded up by:

- single tender actions (generally not recommended, as this impairs value for money and requires high-level approval);
- simplifying the system;
- replicating other existing systems (though tendering a service is a good opportunity to take stock and upgrade/enhance); and
- putting pressure on the service provider (though this may prove counter-productive in the long term).

Appendix E – NAO recommendations

In large part, COI's guidance has been prepared to address the five key recommendations in the report *Using Call Centres to Deliver Public Services*. These recommendations are, therefore, reproduced in full below. They relate, primarily, to calls and call centres, but are largely transferable to the full contact centre environment.

1. **Ensure that planned improvements in efficiency and quality of service are achieved.** Call centres usually require a significant investment, particularly in IT, the recruitment and training of staff and a commitment to a new way of delivering services to citizens. Alternative ways of providing the service and alternative ways of setting up call centres will have different impacts on costs and benefits, for example: operating the call centre on a single site or a number of sites; having the call centre in-house or managed through an outsourced contract or a combination of the two, for example, to deal with overflow work; the number of hours the centre is open; and the balance between using automated response systems and agents to take calls. All costs should be carefully considered against the intended benefits in a well-developed business case. If a call centre is subsequently established, its performance should be reviewed against the business case to assess the extent to which intended benefits are being achieved so action can be taken if they are less than planned. **Departments should identify the full costs and benefits of setting up a call centre in a business case and then routinely monitor the costs and performance of the call centre against the original business case to ensure that planned improvement in quality of service and efficiency are being achieved cost-effectively.**

2. **Adopt a portfolio approach to assessing quality of service.** Call centres use a range of measures to varying degrees to assess the quality of service which customers receive. One measure alone is unlikely to provide a full assessment of quality and most call centres use more than one. The tendency is to focus on the speed with which calls are answered and customers' perception of how well their enquiry was handled, rather than the quality of advice given. There is also a risk that some indicators can have an unintended effect, for example: where call centres have a target to answer calls within a certain number of seconds this may result in staff devoting less time to each call to be able to answer calls more quickly. It is important that people should feel that they had the opportunity to speak to another human being and that their call was given serious consideration. **Departments should have a balanced mix or portfolio of indicators which give a more comprehensive, regular assessment of quality, including the reliability and completeness of the advice which call centres provide.**

3. **Ensure that reliable information is available and regularly monitored to give assurance that services are delivered cost-effectively.** Twenty-four of the 133 call centres [examined in the report] did not have information on their costs and a further 36 could not provide information to calculate their costs per call minute. Without such information, call centres cannot determine whether their costs are reasonable; for example: by benchmarking their performance with other call centres providing similar services, or considering options for reducing costs by re-engineering existing ways of working or by amalgamating with other call centres. **All call centres should have access to reliable cost information and indicators, which show the unit cost of delivering each of their key telephone services to the public.**

4. **Manage call centre resources to handle peaks and troughs in the volume of calls.** The volume of calls which centres receive are significant, often in excess of one million annually, and they will vary in number depending on the time of the day, week and also year. Some call centres are better at deploying their staff and using software to be able to handle fluctuating workloads than others. **For call centres to be able to deal with the calls they receive they need to use appropriate software to forecast the likely volume and incidence of calls and determine the most cost-effective balance between automated response systems, flexible staffing, IT support, and outsourcing part of the work, to meet different levels of demand.**

5. **Provide better information for the public on the services which they can obtain by telephone.** The public need to know what services they can access using the telephone and how to get in touch with them. Departments already advertise their services in a number of ways, such as leaflets and on the internet. There is, however, no single directory of helplines, call centres and contact centres available and information on where to call is not easily accessible. One way this could be provided is by publishing details in telephone directories and directory enquiry services. **The Cabinet Office should work with departments to ensure that the public, including those without access to the internet, can easily access up-to-date phone numbers for call centres and the services they provide.**

Appendix F – CCA Standard: A Framework for Best Practice©

Mention has already been made of the CCA and there is growing representation among its membership of government bodies. One of its main activities is the CCA Standard Framework for Best Practice©, which is an operating guide designed to help organisations deliver increased levels of efficiency and customer service. It is supported by the DTI and is for use both as a self-evaluation checklist and as a methodology towards independent external assessment leading to CCA accreditation.

The CCA Framework is designed to allow organisations the freedom to seek what best practice means for them within an industry-recognised structure. Focussed on six key areas of activity the Framework recognises people as the industry's key resource and has been further developed to provide an emphasis on customers. Not only is it designed to be used as a model for new call centre construction but it also serves as a key activity checklist for established call centres, especially those undergoing change processes.

The Framework is designed for self review supported by specialist documentation issued to members. External independent evaluation is also possible leading to Accredited Membership of CCA and enhanced member benefits. Accreditation demonstrates a commitment to quality of operation for both staff and citizens and positively impacts on retention, service and cost control.

The CCA has kindly agreed to let this be reproduced here for information. More details are available through its website **www.cca.org.uk**.

1. Your people

1.1 Employees at all levels are given mandatory training and development to support them in their role so as to enable achievement of their own and the organisation's objectives.

1.2 Training effectiveness is measured and the outputs acted upon.

1.3 A Performance Development process is in place and employees' personal development plans are the norm.

1.4 Individual employees are aware of their personal and/or team objectives and organisational goals together with the means by which they are monitored.

1.5 Employees at all levels are encouraged and supported in achieving recognised Industry Qualifications and in ongoing learning.

2. Communication within the call centre

2.1 Processes are in place to gather employees' views, disseminate information and take appropriate action.

2.2 A documented process is available to resolve inter employees and employee(s)/management disputes.

3. Culture

3.1 A legally compliant recruitment Policy exists.

3.2 There is a commitment to provide an honest forecast of potential for progression or development.

3.3 A Development Planning process is in place covering all employees.

3.4 Measures are set for attrition and attendance. Plans are in place to achieve or maintain these.

3.5 Employees' benefit and welfare processes where they are in place are communicated to all employees.

3.6 Where rotas exist, the need for them and the process for their establishment is communicated to all employees.

4. Policies & legislation affecting your operation

4.1 A process is in place to ensure that developing legislative requirements are brought to the attention of management.

4.2 Managers and Supervisors are trained in the application of current legislation and are mandated to apply it.

4.3 All employees are aware of the organisational commitment to the regulations imposed as a result of memberships of industry associations.

4.4 All employees are aware of the requirements of the Data Protection Act.

5. Service performance & organisational efficiency

5.1 Standards have been set for key activities related to the call centre and are measured.

5.2 Standards are understood by employees and plans are in place to achieve/maintain the standards agreed.

5.3 Customer Complaints are logged and reviewed. Action is taken to eliminate recurring complaints.

5.4 A complaints handling process is in place with target response times. Plans are in place to achieve/maintain targets.

5.5 A process is in place to gather customer feedback. Measures are set for satisfaction and plans are in place to achieve/maintain targets.

5.6 Arrangements are in place to manage call centre internal relationships with other business areas and to identify, review and resolve issues as they arise.

5.7 Contingency and resiliency plans are in place, are kept up to date and are practised.

5.8 Forecasting and business planning are in place to manage the impact of activity on the operations.

Appendix G – Information and useful contacts

The following organisations, associations and resources were involved in or informed the development of this guidance.

COI Direct and Relationship Marketing
Marc Michaels
Director of Direct and Relationship Marketing
COI
Hercules House
Hercules Road
London SE1 7DU
Tel: 020 7261 8391
Fax: 020 7928 0645
E-mail: marc.michaels@coi.gsi.gov.uk
Web: www.coi.gov.uk

or

Robert Irons
Deputy Director of Direct and Relationship Marketing
Tel: 020 7261 8334
Fax: 020 7928 9704
E-mail: robert.irons@coi.gsi.gov.uk

CCA
20 Newton Place
Glasgow G3 7PY
Tel: 0141 564 9010
Fax: 0141 564 9011
E-mail: cca@cca.org.uk
Web: www.cca.org.uk

CM Insight
The Old Warehouse
Church Street
Weybridge
Surrey KT13 3DG
Tel: 01932 268100
Fax: 01932 268109
E-mail: info@cm-insight.com
Web: www.cminsight.co.uk

Direct Marketing Association (DMA)
DMA House
70 Margaret Street
London W1W 8SS
Tel: 020 7291 3300
Fax: 020 7323 4165
E-mail: dma@dma.org.uk
Web: www.dma.org.uk

Institute of Direct Marketing (IDM)
1 Park Road
Teddington
Middlesex TW11 0AR
Tel: 020 8977 5705
Web: www.theidm.com

National Audit Office (NAO)
157–197 Buckingham Palace Road
London SW1W 9SP
Tel: 020 7798 7000
Fax: 020 7798 7710
Web: www.nao.gov.uk

e-Government Unit, Cabinet Office
Stockley House
130 Wilton Road
London SW1V 1LQ
Tel: 020 7270 3000
Web: www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/e-government

Office of Government Commerce (OGC)
Trevelyan House
26–30 Great Peter Street
London SW1P 2BY
Tel: 020 7271 1318/1366
Fax: 020 7271 1430
Web: www.ogc.gov.uk

Merchants Call Centre Benchmarking Report
www.merchants.co.uk/benchmarking

The Enterprise Computer Technology Forum
Web: www.ectf.org
E-mail: ectf@ectf.org

Guidance for Design of Web and Accessibility
Web: www.w3.org/wai or
www.rnib.co.uk

Department for Work and Pensions Contact-centre Advisory Team (C-CAT)
1st Floor
236 Grays Inn Road
London
WC1X 8HL
Tel: 020 7211 4727
E-mail: ccat@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Welsh Language Act
National Assembly of Wales
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff CF99 1NA
Tel: 029 2082 5111
Fax: 029 2089 8560 (Press Office)
029 2082 3001 (Publicity Office)

Appendix H – Glossary of terms

Where possible, this guidance has sought to avoid jargon, but it is inevitable that you will encounter a large number of terms and acronyms relating to the contact centre industry.

This glossary of terms has been compiled largely from, and reproduced with the kind permission of, *Contact Centre Forum* magazine, but has been expanded and adapted from other source information.

Abandoned call A call that has arrived at the ACD but hung up before an agent has been free to answer. Also called a lost call.

ACD Automatic Call Distributor. A telephone system that automatically offers the next call to the agent who has been waiting longest. These systems are very sophisticated, and you can configure them to give priority to different callers and to send certain types of call to specific groups or individuals. ACDs can also provide a wealth of information on calls, agents and groups.

Agent group So that the ACD can route calls appropriately, agents are placed into agent groups. These determine which type(s) of call they will be offered.

Agent ID The individual code used by agents to log into the ACD system. This enables the system to track their performance.

Agent position This is a commonly used unit of measurement in the contact centre industry, also know as a 'seat'. It refers to a single workstation, usually comprising a computer linked via a network to the business's systems, a telephone/headset and the physical furniture required to allow the agent to work at the workstation. An agent position differs from a person employed in a contact centre: there may be more than one actual human agent per agent position, due to shift working, part-time staff, management and support staff, etc.

AHT Average handling time. The average time spent on a call and any follow-up work. AHT equals talk time plus wrap-up time.

Analogue A type of voice transmission where the telephone system transmits an electrical current which is analogous to the human voice, i.e. the louder the voice, the stronger the current. It is still used in many telephone systems and most homes, although the trend is now moving towards digital systems.

ANI Automatic number identification. Also called CLI. A feature which enables the caller's own telephone number to be forwarded at the same time as their call, so they can be identified.

Annual monthly trends The percentage increase or decrease in calls over a 12-month period.

API Applications programming interface. A piece of software which connects the telephone system to the host computer system and allows them to communicate with each other.

Architecture The overall design of hardware or software. 'Open architecture' means it is generally compatible with major applications.

ASA Average speed of answer. The average length of time calls spend in the queue.

ASCII American Standard Code for Information Interchange. Pronounced 'askey'. Describes the binary code for text.

ATB All trunks busy. When all telephone lines are being used at the same time, other callers will hear an engaged or busy tone.

ATT Average talk time. The average length of time an agent speaks with a caller, from answering to hanging up.

Available Describes an agent who is logged into the ACD and waiting for an inbound call. Also called idle or ready.

Back office The contact centre is the front office; the fulfilment area is the back office. All activities resulting from contact centre requests (such as billing, ticketing, brochure fulfilment and statement requests) take place here.

Blending Using the same agents for both inbound and outbound calling. Agents make outbound calls during troughs in call volume.

Blockage When all trunks are busy, i.e. all exchange lines are in use (engaged) and are therefore blocked to other callers trying to get through. This is usually measured as a percentage of time.

Call data Information on calls.

Call-me button An e-services technology which allows a customer to click on a button on a website which schedules a call from an agent at a specific time that suits the customer. Also called a 'click and talk button'. Alternatively, buttons can offer immediate access to the contact centre using voice over IP.

Call screening Where an auto attendant or IVR system interrogates the caller first to determine the best call handling options to use before transfer.

Call seconds The number of seconds exchange lines are occupied. Calculated in sums of 100: 36 centum call seconds equate to one hour or one erlang.

Caller tolerance The length of time callers are prepared to wait for an available agent. Can be high or low.

CBT Computer-based training. Where training takes place using a computer and a pre-written program. This is particularly useful where there is only one right answer and one right way of doing something.

CLI Calling line identity. A feature which enables the caller's own telephone number to be forwarded at the same time as their call, so they can be identified.

Click and talk button See **Call-me button**.

Closed architecture A system or software design which is only compatible with other products from the same vendor.

Co-browsing See **Page pushing**.

Collaborative browsing See **Page pushing**.

Contact management Software programs that record the outcome of each call, whether inbound or outbound.

Cost per call This is calculated by dividing the number of calls handled into the full cost of the entire contact centre operation. This can be compared with the revenue per call to work out the overall profit or loss.

Cost per call minute This is calculated by multiplying the average length of call (in minutes) by the number of calls and dividing this figure into the full cost of the entire contact centre operation. This figure can be used to benchmark performance against other contact centres.

Cost per call second The same as cost per call minute, using seconds instead of minutes.

CRM Customer relationship management. Where companies use a variety of methods and contact strategies to build lasting and profitable relationships in order to retain the best customers and generate profitable revenue. CRM is a business concept rather than a set of technologies, and indeed thought needs to be given to the understanding of different audiences, their needs and the differential communications real CRM would entail. However, technology plays a strong supporting role, through providing agents with relevant sales and customer information in real time, as well as providing a single view of the customer throughout the enterprise.

CSTA Computer-supported telephony applications. The language computers and telephone systems use to communicate with each other. Standards are set by ECMA.

CTI Computer telephony integration. Where the computer and telephone interact with each other, enabling you to give commands to the telephone through your PC and vice versa.

DDI Direct dial inward. Where you can dial directly into a company and reach an extension without going through a switchboard.

Delay announcements Recorded messages played to callers in a queue.

Diallers See **Predictive diallers**.

Distributed collaborative learning Learning together through the internet without necessarily physically being together. Also called e-learning.

Domain A unique area within the worldwide web containing documents which can be viewed by anyone, anywhere in the world.

Double jacking Where two people are connected at the same telephone terminal/turret and can both participate in the same call. Used extensively when training new agents.

E-business All business conducted via the Internet.

E-commerce Trading in which the transaction, including payment, takes place over the Internet.

E-mail Messages sent via the Internet.

E-learning See **Distributed collaborative learning**.

Erlang A formula created by A K Erlang, a Danish engineer, to measure telephone traffic. One erlang equals one fully occupied call hour (36 centum calling seconds – 3,600 seconds – equal one hour).

Erlang B A formula created by A K Erlang to calculate the number of exchange lines needed to accommodate a specified call volume. The formula assumes callers will not try again if they get an engaged (busy) tone.

Erlang C A formula created by A K Erlang to forecast call volume and call handling, taking random call arrival into account. The formula assumes calls will queue when no agent is available to answer. This calculation is used extensively in contact centres for call forecasting, staff scheduling and setting service level targets.

Exchange lines Telephone lines or trunks.

Extended Erlang B This version of Erlang B assumes callers will retry if they get an engaged (busy) tone.

Extranet Like an intranet, but access is extended to specific users outside the company, for example special customers or suppliers.

Fax back This is where customers call a voice response machine using their fax line and request information by keying in the appropriate numbers. The relevant information is then sent direct to their fax.

FTE Full-time equivalents. The number of agents needed expressed in terms of the total person-hours required divided by the number of hours a full-time agent would normally work. Useful when calculating salary budgets and seeking approval for hiring.

Golden number A telephone number for which a premium might be paid because of the memorable nature of the number, e.g. 0800 1234567.

Headset A hands-free telephone set with ear- and mouthpiece.

High value-add work Offers the agent to interact with the customer in a less structured way to add value to the call and to the business. Examples include technical helpdesk queries, help and suggestions with booking holidays, sales advice and cross-selling new products.

Hybrid ACDs Telephone systems that can operate as both ACDs and PBXs.

Idle Describes an agent who is available and waiting for a call to come in. ‘Available’ or ‘ready’ may also be used.

Inbound All calls received by the contact centre.

Intelligent routing A system that routes callers based on a number of parameters including information on the caller, queue status, agent status and the demand at the current time.

Interflow When calls are flowed out of the ACD to another answering source, for example when all agents are busy and calls have stacked up past the desired parameters, or for night service arrangements. Once interflowed, calls cannot be brought back into the ACD. Also referred to as overflow.

Intranet A network of networks that uses the Internet but is contained within a controlled environment, for example, internal company information that can only be viewed by employees.

ISDN Integrated Services Digital Network. An all-digital network that can carry both voice and data. Usually leased in bundles of 30 trunks.

IVR Interactive voice response. Where an inbound call is answered by a recording which asks the customer to press buttons on the keypad in response to a menu of options. The numbers selected may instruct the system to search for specific information – for example a bank balance – which is then converted into speech.

IWR Interactive web response. Enables customers to transact business over the Internet, interacting with a company's database, then transfer to an agent in the contact centre to continue the transaction over the telephone or via webchat.

KPIs Key performance indicators. The competencies, skills or targets that are key to good performance. These areas require regular monitoring to ensure performance standards are met.

LAN Local area network. Enables computers to share files and resources. Can also link computers with other devices such as printers and faxes.

Line utilisation An ACD report showing each exchange line and its occupancy during the period covered.

Low value-added work Consists of activities where the agent acts as an interface between the back office systems and the customer. Examples include taking utility meter readings, account balance enquiries, change of address notifications and timetable enquiries.

Mainframe A computer which houses various applications. Often acts as the company database.

MIS Management information services. ACD reports providing data on agents and agent groups, inbound and outbound calls, and exchange lines.

Music and messaging on hold Where callers in the queue are played messages and music with the aim of encouraging them to hold for longer. Can also be used when callers are put on hold during their call.

Occupancy The percentage of time an individual agent is actively occupied during talk time and wrap-up time. Occupancy does not include ready time. It can also be calculated based on an average of all agents.

Outbound All calls made by the contact centre.

Outsourcing Where an external company is contracted to provide contact centre services.

Overflow When calls are flowed from one agent group to another so they can be handled more quickly.

Page pushing Where a contact centre is web-enabled, page pushing allows the agent to control the browser's screen, taking them on a tour of the client's website or even other websites, by pushing pages onto the browser's screen. Also called **web collaboration**, co-browsing or collaborative browsing.

PC-based ACDs Software program which enables automatic call distribution. Also called adjunct processors or soft ACDs.

POTS Plain old telephone services. A single-line, no-frills telephone service which allows you to make or receive one call at a time.

Predictive diallers Efficiency-enhancing technologies for outbound contact centres, which work on a principle of automatic dialling and call presentation to agents, saving the time needed to dial the number, then wait for the call to be picked up. Predictive diallers also filter out no-answers and answerphone messages, providing the agent with only live contacts. However, they have also been the source of many complaints from the public regarding 'silent calls', and can cause issues with staff that can increase attrition.

PTO Public telephone operator. Also called a network provider.

PSTN Public switched telephone network. The public telephone network, or PCN personal communications network.

Queue Where calls are held when no agents are free.

Queue time The number of seconds a call waits in the queue before handling.

Ready Describes an agent who is logged into the ACD and available and waiting for a call to come in. ‘Idle’ or ‘available’ may also be used.

Responders Mainly referred to in this document as citizens. These are people who have interacted with the contact centre.

Ring time The length of time between dialling and the call being answered either by a live agent or the ACD delay announcement.

Screen popping Where integration between the computer and the telephone (CTI) enables the system to attempt identification of each call and search the database for a match. If there is a match, the relevant data will be displayed on the agent’s screen just before they pick up the call.

Server In a contact centre context, this is a new system architecture. Each agent has an intelligent PC (called the client) which is connected by a LAN to the server. This houses all the major software programs such as the database, so files can be sent and shared.

Service agency A bureau which can handle contact centre requirements. Agencies can provide either the complete operation, or an intraflow facility.

Service level The percentage of calls you expect to handle within a set number of seconds. For example, you could aim to handle 80 per cent of calls within 20 seconds.

Simulation Intelligent routing systems have made the Erlang C formula less effective. Workforce management companies are therefore developing simulation programs which mimic the operation of a contact centre and can predict the number of agents required to meet the desired service level objectives.

Skills-based routing Where calls are identified and then routed through to the most appropriate agent. For example, calls from non-native speakers could be routed to a language line.

SMS Also known as text messaging, these are written messages sent from or received by mobile phones.

Speed of answer The time between a call arriving at the ACD and being answered by an agent.

Switch The generic name for all telephone systems.

Talk time The time in seconds an agent is talking, from answering the call to the caller hanging up.

Teleworking Working from home, either full-time or in addition to centre-based work.

Textchat See **webchat**.

Top and tail recordings Pre-recorded greetings and goodbyes. These have the advantage of sounding fresh and enthusiastic all day.

Trunk Each telephone or exchange line is called a trunk.

Unavailable Agent status when logged on to the ACD but not available to take calls, for example during paid breaks or coaching sessions.

Virtual contact centre A contact centre consisting of a number of agents at separate physical locations which act and can be managed as a single contact centre. This implies that the contact centre systems can 'see' all agents as if they were at the same premises and can route calls to them accordingly. Virtual contact centres allow economies of scale, and also support single workers at home, or even multiple physical contact centres in different countries.

Voice mail Enables callers to leave a message which can then be reviewed, copied, stored, annotated and forwarded to one or more people. Sometimes called voice messaging.

Voice over IP The ability to make calls and send faxes over Internet Protocol (IP)-based data networks such as the Internet at the same time as being online. This overcomes the problem of tying up your only telephone line while browsing the web.

Voice processing A generic term for a range of applications including IVR and voice mail.

Voice recognition Technology that converts speech into data that can be understood by the computer system.

Web browsing Where documents on the world wide web are universally accessible via the Internet. Such documents are contained in a unique address called a domain name.

Webchat Allows browsers to initiate live 'text conversation' with an agent, each typing their messages on screen (similar to the old telex system). Also called textchat.

Web collaboration Also called **page pushing**, collaborative browsing or co-browsing. Web collaboration enables the agents to take control of the browser's screen, taking the browser on a tour of the client's website or other sites.

Web-enabled When the browser clicks a 'press to talk' icon on the web page this initiates a call directly into the contact centre through a process called voice over IP. The agent's screen will automatically 'pop' with the web page the browser is viewing as the call comes through.

Wrap-up The time spent completing work associated with a call after the caller has hung up.

Appendix I – Extracts of key figures from DTI report, The UK Contact Centre Industry: A Study (May 2004) pertaining to Public Sector contact centres

Interestingly the NAO report of 2002 reports some 131 call centres in Government. The DTI report produced less than 2 years later puts this figure of 274 – representative of the push for more and easier access to public services. The true figure is likely to be higher as not all government based contact centres will view themselves as such.

Below are extracts from the report that pertain to what they have defined Public Service contact centres.

Public service contact centres 274 (5,2% of UK centres)
Public services agent positions 14,620 (3.0% of UK agents)

Broken down as follows:

Agent Position	10-50	51-100	101-150	151-200	201-250	251-500	501-1000	1000+
Centres	219	31	10	6	4	6	2	1

So there are generally smaller centres

Agents	4,590	1,971	1,089	1,032	888	1,800	1,450	1,800

Media size + 35 agent positions (against industry median of 42)

Public Services inbound minutes per year	906 million (2.1% of all traffic)
Public Services outbound activity	3,898 FTE (Full Time Equivalents) estimated as some 26% of activity

Public Services ability to deal with e-mails 67% YES 33% NO

Public Services: average agent starting salaries £13,000 (industry average = £12,520) however this will vary by region:

Average competent agent salary	£14,000 (industry average = £13,362)
Average team leader salary	£17,384 (industry average = £17,225)
Average management salary	£25,125 (industry average = £25,200)

Public services average length of service (months) 51 (industry average = 39)
Age of contact centre

Pre	1980	1980-84	1984-89	1990-94	1995-96	1997-98	1999-2000	2001-2003
Public sector	20%	40%	7%	4%	7%	7%	24%	28%
Average	31%	7%	9%	13%	9%	10%	12%	10%

Public services agent annual attrition rate	9.8% (industry average = 14.5%)

The figures above are drawn from a number of sources reproduced in the DTI report and will date rapidly given the growth in the Government sector, however they are a useful benchmark at present. It is recommended that those involved in contact centres read the full report to understand both the context in which they work and the issues faced generally by the contact centre industry.

The report lists the following issues as key for Government:
eGovernment initiative; cost management, process improved and “joined-up government” and cites this as a major growth area for UK contact centres because of the instruction to offer internet and phone access to citizens.

Appendix J – Acknowledgements

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