IMPROVING SERVICE QUALITY USING LEAN METHODOLOGY

IN A CUSTOMER CALL CENTER

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A Thesis

Presented

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in

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by

Jocelyn Willis

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This thesis is dedicated to my beautiful daughter Anniyah. Thank you, for allowing

mommy to stay up all night working through this program and giving me time to study. I

know it hasn't always been easy, but you have been my biggest cheerleader through it all.

I dedicate this thesis to you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to acknowledge my parents, sisters, and cousin Toy; thank you guys for editing for me, cheering me on and encouraging me. This accomplishment I share with you all.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the voice of the customer by using focus groups of an organization's internal customers, their employees. Using text analytics, the responses gathered during these focus groups have been analyzed. Internal customers are the eyes and ears of an organization because they are usually the primary contact a customer has with an organization. Therefore, employees provide direct knowledge about the process and function of an organization to help improve its overall service quality.

Findings from this research show that customer satisfaction has a direct link to employee satisfaction. Improving the satisfaction of the internal customer also improves the overall satisfaction of an organization's external customer. By allowing the internal customer's voice to be heard, an organization can gain pertinent knowledge on why their employees are unsatisfied and ways to improve their satisfaction. Text analytics have proven to be beneficial in pinpointing data to assist with this effort.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> *Thanks, for choosing American Airlines. Your call may be recorded and monitored to ensure high quality service (para espanoles la marca nueve). Due to extreme weather at many of our airports, it is taking a little longer than usual to get to one of our agents. To avoid this wait, I may be able to help right here over the phone, and, of course, you can always try booking your flight on AA.com. Thanks, for your patience, now let's continue. In a few words, tell me what you are calling about.*
> *American Airlines Customer Service*

Background

This is a standard greeting that you may get when calling American Airlines' customer service center. Following the direction established by major airlines, businesses have chosen to direct their customer questions and concerns to toll-free phone numbers. Introduced to the United States (US) in the 1970s by a US airline, call centers have grown primarily because they are an effective way to service their customer's needs. According to J. Pearce,

> Like many revolutionary technologies, the call centre has a creation myth. This states that call centres as we know them today originate from the Automatic Call Distributor developed in 1973 by US firm Rockwell (the Rockwell Galaxy) to allow Continental Airlines to run a telephone booking system. (2011, p. 1)

Call-Center Growth

During the 1990s, call centers continued to grow with the help of tremendous technological advances such as the spectrum in Rockwall's new ACD system. The spectrum differed from the galaxy because it used computer telephony integration (CTI), which also was referred to as computer–telephone integration. This integration allowed both a computer and a telephone to interact with each other in assisting with a customer's request. When customers called into a call center, they were able to speak a command, which then routed the call to a specific representative, who would assist with their specific requests. Today, systems using CTI allow customer service representatives to not only send and receive customer calls from their computers; these systems also allow the representatives to know who is calling with a pop-up alert on their computer screens before being connected to the customers. This advancement alone in call center technology has helped with increasing the number of customer service representatives and their various job responsibilities in call centers today. It has been equally established that over three percent of US working population are currently employed in call centers/contact centers (Abdullateef, Mokhtar, & Yusoff, 2011).

Customers are now able to use call centers for assistance related to a range of questions regarding products, billing inquiries, purchases, and more. The growth of the call-center industry has been observed worldwide, providing significant employment in many countries. Call centers are becoming increasingly important in the global business environment (Li, 2016). Since companies rely heavily on call centers to address their customers' needs, customer service representatives have become the frontline contact between the company and its customers. These representatives not only must possess the

knowledge needed to answer a variety of questions, but they also must give customers a positive perception of the company.

> Call-center work necessitates dealing with the unpredictable nature of human interactions where continual readjustments and coordination of effort—otherwise known as emotional labour (Hampson et al., 2009)—increase time pressures (Deery et al., 2010), decreases autonomy (Wegge et al., 2006), and increases performance monitoring (Ball & Margulis, 2011; Deery et al., 2010; Varca, 2006). These are all aspects of the work environment. This environment affects call center agents both in terms of their commitment as well as in the way they perceive their ability to provide service quality to customers. (Rod & Ashill, 2013)

Employee Satisfaction

Employee satisfaction has a direct correlation with customer satisfaction; employees who are satisfied with their jobs can affect customer satisfaction and retention. Employee satisfaction among customer service representatives is important because they are the voice of the company in the eyes of the customer.

As suggested by the service-profit chain, providing employees with a superior internal working environment can lead to satisfied employees. These employees are both loyal to the organization and able to provide the customer with an excellent service experience, which results in satisfied customers (Chi & Gursoy, 2009).

Large organizations, such as the one being studied in this thesis, tend to use standard easy-to-present metrics in order to relay the quality of service being delivered by

their employees. The same features are used that track monthly the key performance indicators for their customer service representatives, who are working in a call center. The typical call-center performance metric is in the 90% or better range, which tends to look well on a graph and show a trend line closer to the 100% mark. Although this percentage is acceptable for the managerial staff, it does little to promote continuous improvement or an increase in the delivery of service provided to its customers. Those customers with questions and/or complaints aren't measured according to this standard scale and fall to the wayside of these standard metrics. Healthcare is a challenging field in which to work, for not every customer can be pleased because different customers require different levels of service.

In the retail industry, for example, if a customer buys a toaster for $20 and it unexpectedly burns up in six months, it is acceptable to throw the toaster away and replace it with a new one. However, if a patient has surgery and incurs side effects for days or even weeks longer than expected, not only can pain be an issue for the patient, but it can possibly have long term consequences. A customer, who calls into a healthcare call center, already doesn't feel well and may not know the right questions to ask because of a limited knowledge about his or her situation. This can lead to the customer receiving misinformation and having to call into the call center a second or even a third time. This creates frustration and stress, which may then be projected onto the newest customer service representative who handles the call. Even with the best results after a surgery or healthcare dilemma, this same scenario of misinformation can occur with a patient's need for accurate information and the ability of the call center staff to provide it.

Likert Scale Dilemma

Throwing a Likert scale into the equation—which is usually easy to administer, score and discuss—can create a bigger problem when trying to resolve an issue and explain the data without an explanation of the true problem. "Likert-scale questionnaires are the most commonly used type of instrument for measuring affective variables such as motivation and self-efficacy, given that they allow researchers to gather large amounts of data with relative ease" (Nemoto & Beglar, 2014). These scales don't provide a specific explanation of what needs to be changed for future improvement. Organizations are then left to monitor a trend line from the results of the Likert scale survey, not knowing what to do in order to increase that trend line to show an improvement in satisfaction for either their customers or employees.

New Analytical Tools

This thesis used a different analytical tool that focused on continuous improvement to show what could be done now and in the future for the metrics to show improvement overtime. Likert scales were unable to identify possible opportunities that an organization could try and be used to measure if they had been successful. The new perspective and set of analytical tools, called text mining, could capture the voice of internal customers to show what area of concern and interest they might believe would be worth pursuing when feeding into a continuous improvement performance model. A focus group could demonstrate a different way of monitoring the call center's performance and the impact of its satisfied employees to see if there was a better way to

gather data on long-term gains and customer satisfaction from an internal and external perspective.

Likert scales rely heavily on an ordinal level of measurements, which only shows that someone either agrees or strongly disagrees with a statement; therefore, the difference in the extent of that agreement is not identified. Researchers who use Likert scales usually have to go a step further and use that scale as an interval level of measurement. This requires a tremendous amount of additional work that organizations often don't have the capability to do. Therefore, patients saying they dislike, like, or are neutral on the questionnaires statements and through the data collected rely heavily on the variables within these statements and less on what the patient really thinks. Even with some Likert scales offering an open-ended question, the overall response rate for Likert scales is between three and four percent across various industries, and this rate lowers when an open-ended question is available.

The average amount of text entered on open-ended questions is typically 30 to 40 words, and only five to seven percent of respondents complete them on a Likert survey. For example: If 100 people are asked to take a 20-item Likert scale with one open-ended question, and only seven percent respond, the data would be seven percent of the total sample size. This still doesn't guarantee that all respondents answer the open-ended question, and, if they do, it doesn't guarantee the average of 30-40 words per respondent for that question.

This is why text analytics was such a powerful tool to use in capturing the voice of the customer (VOC) for this study. With a sample of 12 people in the focus groups

used for this study, 4,192 words were generated. On average, each person was able to

provide around 350 words of text, which was over 10 times the amount of text that could

be generated when using a Likert scale survey and extending the open-ended question

option. Furthermore, the focus groups conducted were driven by a set of seven seed

questions and statements, and this allowed the respondents to focus on the issues

considered to be important for improving the call center environment.

Any criticism of a small sample size is extremely shortsighted, given the reality of

thousands of Likert scale survey questionnaires where response rates are remarkably low.

The completion rate for open-ended questions on Likert scale surveys compares

minimally to the response rate of 12 dedicated respondents, who voluntarily sit through

hours of discussions with their peers. Here, the respondents are able to express their

concerns, expectations, and possibly solutions to the problems they see while working in

the call center. This is counter to having anonymous respondents answering questions

with standard answers and no way of elaborating on their true feelings about the

questions being asked.

Text Analytics Methodology

The text analytics methodology works with a ratio level of measurement, which is

more desirable than lower levels of measurements such as ordinal or interval levels. This

approach is far more sophisticated than what researchers can do with ordinal levels of

measurements. Text analytics and the creation of word clouds—like graphical displays of

relationships between important factors in this study—use Euclidean distances for the

analysis. Every word in the transcript is compared with every other word with distance

between words. Although there is room for interpretation when looking at the word clouds, the basis of information is more sophisticated. In addition, the amount of information being communicated in the picture provides a greater opportunity and approach for finding facts.

Translating the transcripts of the focus groups for this study was very time consuming, but the tradeoffs gained in value through this output was well worth the time and diligence in getting the transcripts as accurate as possible. Doing this type of translation on a small scale was also quite tedious; however, when done full time on a larger scale, the advantage of using specialized software and computer tools made the translation effort much quicker and less tiresome. In addition, transcripts could be generated from discussions with customers, internal and external, from across all lines of business. The results could then be communicated graphically—showing a wider range of audience information in a timely manner—to see the relationships that could then be acted upon now rather than in months down the line. This was the objective of continuous improvement—data gathered quickly for analysis, followed by a quick implementation of changes, and a prompt assessment of the impact of those changes that would show the use of the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle in real life operations.

Statement of the Problem

Although the growth rate in the call center is substantial, the attrition rate in this employment field is also high. One of the biggest staffing problems that call centers face today is staff turnover. Finding and then retaining qualified staff has a huge impact on the bottom line as well as the quality of service (Reynolds, 2015). The average turnover rate

in the call center industry is 30% to 45% (Khan & Du, 2014). In order to reduce this rate, it is important to recognize why it is this substantial at the beginning.

Likert scale surveys do a good job in providing a report card that tracks a trend line over time without an expectation of what that trend line does in terms of improving customer satisfaction. Likert scales, however, keep us bound to what has been done in the past and showing that no change equals no change. When a big blip occurs on the quality wall, everyone jumps into action trying to figure out what caused the change. And, this change could be nothing more than a common cause variation as Dr. W. E. Deming teaches (Chiarini, 2011). When customers are being talked to and verbal transcripts are being captured, one begins moving into a different reality where an analysis can be prospective in nature.

The focus of this study was looking for something that had already happened (or was currently happening) and what would likely happen in the future if no changes were to take place. Things improved when changes started to be measured and were made based on the trends being observed. The problem being identified was improving the working conditions in the call center for the effectiveness of the staff handling inbound calls. It was a different way of listening to the VOC of ABC Healthcare in their inbound call center environment. The findings from this study found that listening to their voice could benefit other organizations by showing an alternate methodology that could be used in their own call centers, but this was not the purpose or expectation of this thesis. The data collected was done to understand the performance in ABC Healthcare's inbound call center.

For the purposes of this study—identifying the challenges faced by those employed in a call center—inbound call centers could in turn lower this retention rate and improve the overall quality of service received by those who interacted with the call center employees. Call centers were often compared with 18th century "sweat shops," since the employees had to deal with a constant flow of customer calls 24/7. As a result, stress had become a common concern for call center employees, as well as management, due to high demands and constant monitoring (Agnew, n.d.; Khalid et al., 2013).

Some stressors were identified by focus groups that consisted of inbound customer service representatives from a healthcare organization, named ABC Healthcare for the purpose of this thesis. These identified stressors were customer complaints, work overload, metrics, and supervisor demands.

What is stress? According to the *Merriam-Webster* online dictionary, stress is a state of mental tension and worry caused by problems in a person's life, work, etc. Another definition of stress from this same online dictionary refers to something that causes strong feelings of worry or anxiety. Call center workers experience different stressors due to a variety of causes.

This thesis aimed to identify specific stressors ascertained by ABC Healthcare's inbound call center representatives and ways to reduce them. ABC Healthcare has over 1,000 inbound customer service representatives across the US, who handle various types of healthcare inquiries from approximately 115 million customers. These customer service representatives receive between 100-200 calls per day in the billing and eligibility

department and have an average first call resolution (FCR) rate of 73% for the latest

quarter surveyed.

Purpose of the Study

With the growth of call centers, it was important for management to reduce the

negative stressors that their employees were facing. Identifying stressors in the call center

environment and being able to eliminate them could increase call center performance,

customer satisfaction, and employee satisfaction and retention. Providing a good physical

working environment was an important factor for influencing job choice (e.g., cleanliness

of the working place, lightening, adequate tools and equipment, and interpersonal

relationships); it enabled employees to carry out their jobs easily, comfortably, and

efficiently (Castro & Deluna, 2013).

This paper focused on identifying stressors and possible ways for call center

employees to work with management to avoid them. This could increase their overall job

satisfaction and their quality scores as well. Since customers' interaction with a company

was usually through the customer contact center, it was important that their interaction

with the customer service representative was positive. Having employees satisfied with

their work and eliminating identifiable stressors could ensure that interaction was more

positive than those who were unsatisfied.

This thesis aimed to cover learning objectives set forth by the quality assurance

programs by using independent research from primary sources. This independent

research came from privately held focus groups, which consisted of three focus groups of

four participants each for a total of 12 participants. Once the data had been collected and

interpreted, it was then analyzed, and conclusions were drawn to show how Lean methodology could be used in a call center to eliminate waste. The strategy of the focus groups was to engage and pique the interest of likeminded people who wanted the same results.

With the help of modern technology and text analytics, a word cloud, Pareto chart and cluster analysis were formulated, based on the response received by the 12 participants to show what stressors they viewed as a result of working in the call center. It was important to understand customer input and the methods in which users were then able to receive it.

In the past, customer input was collected from surveys and questionnaires on paper with pencils. With the new age technology, it was now possible to host focus groups, like the one used in this study, to have in-person interviews that allowed individuals' voices to be heard without any constraints.

Focus Groups

Focus groups allowed for stimulus statements that were unique to each focus group and based on group responses, which prompted discussion among the participants. This was a non-foreign concept with the growth of social media and company-based platforms, giving its customers the ability to leave feedback and comment according to their individual experiences with a company. Social media outlets—such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, to name a few—have given customers the ability to voice their opinions more freely and immediately.

During this focus group, internal staff members were the perceived customers of the company. They were asked specific questions (which can be found in the Appendices) to prompt responses. The participants also were allowed to expand on their responses, according to their own personal experience, which was recorded and later transcribed. An added value of internal customer focus groups was the call center staff seeing management in action and allowing their perspective to be heard. This could build value and a trustful productive relationship between management and the service delivery staff.

Focus groups are an entirely different strategy that requires much more investment of time from the participants and from the analyst who needs to translate the spoken recordings into text files. The focus group strategy provides much richer information and allows everyone to experience or be exposed to issues that a simple survey simply cannot explore effectively. So, there is a return on this investment where more effort is put into a focus group to obtain a return that provides a much richer data set.

This process is similar to the stream of consciousness, introduced by psychologist William James, who describes a person's thoughts and reactions to events that are a continuous process flow throughout that person's mind. These thoughts and reactions are uninterrupted and are a continuous flow of the person's deep thoughts and true feelings. As the focus group responses continue, each person is allow to have this stream of consciousness moment to reveal his or her true thoughts and feelings about the call center environment.

The aim of the focus groups for this study was to identify the stressors the customers perceived were caused by working in a call center environment. This thesis aimed to show how decreasing the workload of call center employees would also improve their overall quality of service, job satisfaction, and stressors, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Process roadmap. Developed by the author of this thesis.

Theoretical Bases and Organization

The methodology from a quality perspective is the tried and true PDCA cycle, developed by Deming (Chiarini, 2011). This cycle calls for planning for improvements, implementing those improvements, checking the impact of those improvements, and acting accordingly to either continue on this improvement path or introduce further improvements for a positive change. The PDCA cycle is part of Deming's 14 points, point 14 take action to accomplish transformation.

> How to begin? Follow the Shewhart Cycle, In Japan, it is called the Deming Cycle because it was Dr. Deming who introduced it. Some refer to it as the "PDCA Cycle," for "Plan, Do, Check, Act." Today it is a staple of the planning process. Explains Dr. Deming, "The Shewhart Cycle was on the blackboard for top management for every conference beginning in 1950 in Japan. (Walton, 1988)

Another method being used is text analytics, which is also proven to be an exceptional powerful application where the VOC is relatively easy to capture and act upon. Analytics is largely graphical in nature; therefore, a wide range of audiences can understand the relationships.

> The important principles explained here include Dr. Shewhart's rules for presentation of data (pp.86-92). Any conclusion or statement, if it is to have use for science or industry, must add to the degree of belief for rational prediction. The reader may reflect on the fact that the only reason to carry out a test is to improve a process, to improve the quality and quantity of the next run or of next year's crop. Important questions in science and industry are how and under what

conditions observations may contribute to a rational decision to change or not to change a process to accomplish improvements. (Shewhart & Deming, 1986)

Organizations strive to understand their customers' needs and wants. Many distribute surveys to gain insight and knowledge about the customers' perceptions regarding the organization. Using surveys—such those with a Likert scale that uses statements such as strongly agree or strongly disagree—can give them some data on their customers' perceptions but not in the grand scale. These customers are seen as an organization's "external customers." Their opinions about the products and services received by an organization can be seen as "critical-to-quality" (CTQ) indicators.

Voice of the Customer

This thesis aimed to use the VOC—in this case internal customers—to indicate key performance indicators (KPIs), which the organization should consider to be critical drivers for achieving performance goals that could lead to overall profits. At ABC Healthcare, the organization from which the focus group participants were chosen, its KPIs included an average handle time (AHT) of four minutes or less as well as a FCR of 90% or more. Of all the representatives in the focus group, 10 or 83% of the participants were meeting both of the call center's KPIs. All 12 participants were meeting one of the KPIs set forth by the organization. The call abandon rate goal for ABC Healthcare was one percent or less, whereas this goal was to be met in the previous quarter.

There are many studies that cover an organization's survey of their customers. However, rarely do organizations in these studies survey their internal customers, their

actual employees, to gain knowledge about what they need and want, which relates to how they interact and present their products and services to their external customers.

This study surveyed a healthcare organization's internal customers to gain knowledge of how they felt about their abilities to better serve their external customers. The study explored how the organization saw their customers' needs and wants (customer requirements) and how the VOC could be used to plan products and services that in turn would meet the needs of external customers' CTQ indicators. It also aimed to discover how the internal customers' needs and wants were as critical as understanding those of the external customer.

By implementing focus groups of 12 individuals in a closed setting, it not only allowed the VOC to be heard but also gave the organization an insight on how to increase performance and profitability. The external customers could provide valuable information on how to make the call center easier for its customers. This meant that information was quickly accessible, clearer to both the internal and external customer, and easier for the internal customer to understand—providing a better customer experience overall for the external customer.

Organizational Goal

The organization's goal for the customers was to get their questions answered in one call, also known as first call resolution, and to get their questions answered accurately so they didn't have to call back. It was also important that each customer was provided exemplary customer service during the call and that it was done in a timely manner. Listening to the VOC internally could provide valuable feedback on how these

goals could be accomplished, satisfying both the internal and external customers. These focus groups allowed the internal employees to voice their opinions on how to meet the customers' requirements set forth by organizational goals.

A focus group on these twelve individuals would give a pretty accurate depiction of the internal customer's wants and needs to better serve their external customers. The focus groups differed from surveys such as Likert style surveys that typically allowed customers to answer with pre-determined responses such as agree or disagree; whereas, a focus group allowed the true voice and opinions of the customer to be heard. This allowed customers, internal or external, to be descriptive with their responses and to give specific answers to open-ended questions rather than a set response.

This type of data collection method was comparably better because it almost guaranteed a 100% response rate from the participants, and Likert scales had less than a 20% response rate typically. According to the article, "Veterans' Voices: Use of the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) Survey to Identify My HealtheVet Personal Health Record Users' Characteristics, Needs, and Preferences," of the 617 surveys sent out to customers, only 100 were received (Nazi, 2010). That was a response rate of 17.2% versus a 100% response rate attained by conducting a focus group.

Plan-Do-Check-Act-Cycle

Another method used in this thesis was the PDCA cycle, also known as Deming's continuous improvement cycle. As shown in Figure 2, this cycle used four steps as a model for quality improvement. This cycle, originally created by Walter A Shewhart, was

expanded on and published by Deming, who added specific examples making it more robust:

> The PDCA cycle is commonly named as Deming or Shewhart cycle. Deming popularized pdca during his lectures about quality control methods for Union of Japanese Scientists and Engineers in 1950s. pdca was immediately applied in Japan under Deming cycle name. However, Deming always referred to it as the Shewhart cycle according to his mentor in quality control–Walter Shewhart. (Pietrzak & Paliszkiewicz, 2015)

In the Plan stage, goals and methods are created using total quality methods to develop what management is trying to accomplish. The planning is done in the first stage of the cycle (Plan) and then implemented in the Do stage, when data is collected. Then, in the Check stage, that data is then analyzed and evaluated for measurement. This is also the stage where the success or failure of the original plan is determined. In the final Act stage, action is taken to either implement changes or start the process over for continuous improvement.
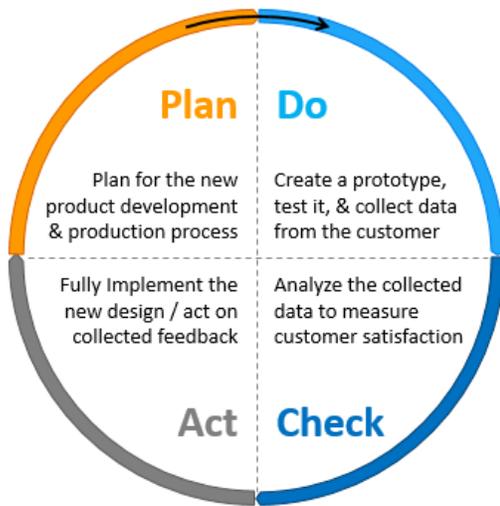
Figure 2. Deming's Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle. Adapted from "Japanese Total Quality Control, Reference TQM, Deming's System of Profound Knowledge, BPR, Lean Six Sigma Comparison and Discussion," by A. Chiarini, 2011.

Limitations of the Study

People experience stress differently. Although some ways to avoid and/or eliminate stressors are discussed in this paper, not every person experiences the same type of stress relief from every, if any, suggestion provided. This thesis serves as a guide about the most significant stressors one can experience in the call center—based on research and the focus group participants' responses—and ways to limit them.

Definition of Terms

Average Call Handle Time: The average time a customer service representative takes to handle a customer transaction. It begins with the initial interaction with a customer from the time the call is received, including holding time and talk time, to the time the call is completed.

Business Process Outsourcing (BPO): The outsourcing of jobs and/or job responsibilities from a company to an organization and then to a third party servicer.

Call Abandon Rate: The number of calls made by customers that weren't answered by a call center representative. The rate is measured by taking the amount of calls abandoned, divided by the total answered calls, and multiplied by 100 to get a percentage. .

Cluster Analysis: The idea of grouping together similar objects or ideas to show the differences between those objects or ideas, compared to other objects or ideas on a chart or graph.

Clustering: Data that is divided into groups that closely relate to one another. These specific groups are far apart from each other, and one typically has to identify the amount of grouped clusters.

Document Term Matrix: A matrix, which describes the frequency of terms that occur in a collection. The rows are illustrated to show the documents in the collection, and the columns illustrate the terms.

First Call Resolution (FCR): The idea of answering all of a customer's questions and concerns during one call to the call center without the customer having to call back again for the same reason.

R: A free programming language commonly used for environmental graphics and statistical computing.

Service Level: A set of established goals by an organization in order to measure the performance of their employees and systems.

Stop Words: Commonly used words in a document, such as "and," "the," "or," and "to," which are identified and removed in order to process a document and save room for additional space. When doing an analysis, removing these words has little to no impact on the final study.

Term Frequency Analysis: A method of analysis, which removes rare words, considered "noise" words, that aren't relevant for an analysis based on their frequency of appearance in a document.

Text Analytics: The system for processing information that is based on the text. This is usually done by a system identifying patterns and trends within the text through a process, known as statistical pattern learning. This process is also sometimes referred to as text data mining.

Total Quality Management (TQM): A management methodology to promote long-term success through customer satisfaction, via quality improvement. The TQM foundation relies on a cultural commitment from all members of an organization (American Society for Quality [ASQ], 2016).

Voice of the Customer (VOC): The customers' idea of what they expect they should receive or experience when interacting with a company.

Word Cloud: An image composed of words used in a particular text or subject, in which the size of each word indicates its frequency or importance (*Oxford Dictionaries*, 2017).

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The article, "Japanese Total Quality Control, TQM, Deming's System of Profound Knowledge, BPR, Lean and Six Sigma Comparison and Discussion," by Chiarini (2011), examined Deming's theory where managers learned from their employees, spending time listening to them and hearing reasons they thought they failed. Deming frowned upon performance check processes or ranking employees based on standards, but this was widely used among call center management staff.

Performance metrics had become an issue of concern for employees, which was also closely related to monitoring. This was a similar finding of the focus group participants who saw performance metrics as a cause for some of the poor customer service being provided for their external customers.

In the study by Aziz, "Factors Causing Stress: A Study of Indian Call Centers," printed in the *Journal of Human Resources and Adult Learning* (2013), 50 call handlers were interviewed, and the top five stressors these employees experienced were determined. Of the stressors identified, monitoring, angry customers, changing identities, performance metrics, and night shifts were among the top stressors. Scripted and acceptable speech being monitored by management was seen as the specific monitoring stressor experienced by all BPO workers in this study. Specific metrics identified in this study included average call handle time (ACHT), service level (SL), abandon rate or call abandon rate (ABN or CAR), first call resolution (FCR), and adherence to the schedules.

Some of the focus group participants expressed having an ACHT, causing them to rush customers off the phone at the time allowed instead of spending as much time as needed to answer all the questions these customers might have. This in turn could cause the customers to have additional questions following the completion of the initial calls and create the need for additional calls. This diminished the idea of FCR and could have negative reactions from customers.

Customer Satisfaction Studies

In a study of 168 call center managers, it was hypothesized that being able to resolve a customer request on the first call, also known as FCR, could lead to greater customer satisfaction. This hypothesis was proven in a survey given to these call center managers about the success of their specific call centers. It was also determined from this same Likert-based survey that knowledge management had a positive effect on customer satisfaction.

Although representatives don't always see the importance of being as data driven as their supervisors, being data conscious can lead to greater customer satisfaction. There is a direct link between customer satisfaction and employee satisfaction; when the customer is happy, it can positively affect the employee.

In a study of 400 shopping mall customers, it was found that customer service did not have the major effect that other research showed on customer satisfaction and loyalty. Customer service could explain 13.9% of the variance in customer satisfaction and 12.5% of the variance in customer loyalty. Customer service was influential when creating

customer satisfaction and loyalty; however, its effect on customer satisfaction and loyalty was not so powerful (Kursunluoglu, 2011).

With studies showing a lack of significance in customer service as it relates to customer satisfaction, it is important for employee satisfaction to be gained in ways other than through its link with customer satisfaction. Job satisfaction is important to focus on because it can lead to customer satisfaction and greater quality of service.

Employee Satisfaction Studies

In a study of 108 employees in a call center, it found that job satisfaction was among the most important determinant of the quality of service an employee provided to its customers. This study proved that higher employee satisfaction could lead to better customer interaction and satisfaction.

Of the focus group, one employee defined himself as being truly satisfied with his job in the call center. According to this same article that included 108 employees, employee satisfaction was a multidimensional variable. There were many factors—such as age, income level, status, and more—that determined if an employee was truly satisfied. This study showed that full-time employees were more satisfied with their call center employment than part-time employees. It also showed that female employees were less satisfied with their call center employment than males. This study closely resembled the focus group study taken in which 100% of the males in the focus group either were satisfied or very satisfied with their call center jobs; whereas, only 20% of the females expressed that they were either satisfied or very satisfied.

Employee satisfaction can be beneficial to an organization and its success. The relationship between employee satisfaction and an organization's performance has been examined in various studies. In the article, "The Relationship Between Employee Satisfaction and Organizational Performance: Evidence from a South African Government Department," by Mafini and Pooe (2013), 272 selected managers and staff, consisting of 150 males and 122 females, were chosen to participate in a quantitative survey. In this survey, 35% of the participants were at the management level, and 58% held a college degree or higher.

This study compared the employee satisfaction level to its organization's overall performance and found a direct correlation between the two. Five factors were examined through this quantitative survey: working conditions, ability utilization, teamwork, creativity, and autonomy. All five factors were proven to positively relate to the organization's overall performance.

Management Impact

Management can greatly impact the management of stress levels among its employees to improve employee and job satisfaction. Davenport (2015) suggests instituting manager-training programs to teach managers how to identify and deal with employee stress.

In his article, "The Good Stress Strategy: How Managers Can Transform Stress Into Fulfillment," Davenport examined results from a Towers Watson research study, which aimed to identify the sources of stress in a workday (2015). The three dominant stress drivers identified were: (1) the mismatch between job demands and resources, (2)

rewards not commensurate with effort, and (3) lack of control over the intersection between the work and non-work life. Focus group results showed how the lack of management intervention was a stressor in itself as it related to employee satisfaction. Participants expressed that customer abuse, which was another major stressor identified among the focus group participants, was not handled appropriately by management. This was a major concern among call center representatives since they interacted with customers a majority of their day and had a major effect on an employee's intention to quit.

Call Center Interactions

A study of 200 service employees in "Unfriendly Customers as a Social Stressor: An indirect Antecedent of Service Employee's Quitting Intention" (Walsh, 2011), identified unfriendly customers as a stressor, which caused job dissatisfaction and possibly resulted in a higher quitting intention. This study also identified how the negative interaction between employees and their customers could lead to employees distancing themselves from their job roles and ultimately their intention to quit.

Feelings of frustration and fatigue could be caused by the negative interactions that call center representatives experienced between themselves and their customers. The focus group participants also had identified this as a major concern among themselves and the empathetic attitudes of the supervisors when voicing these concerns. Among the focus group participants, 80% had identified their managers as only being data driven.

Other Identified Stressors

In a study of 137 call center agents in Pakistan by Khan and Du (2014), there were factors that contributed to turnover intentions in a call center. The hypothesis of this study assumed agents saw their workload, compensation, and benefits, as well as the job conditions of the call center, as the main contributors to their turnover intentions.

This study was completed with 105 males and 32 females. They were given a 28-question survey that was scaled using a Likert type scale. Respondents were prompted to answer questions pertaining to turnover intentions by answering with strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree. Based on the survey results, the only contributor that was strongly identified as a reason for the employees' turnover intention was their workload.

Multiple job roles that increased the representatives' workload were also identified as a major stressor among the focus group participants. These participants also shared how the workload and multiple job roles required of them caused them stress that led them to look for employment outside the call center. This was substantial because it contributed to the high turnover rates we saw in many call center environments.

In a study of 100 call center workers, taken among BPO workers, stressors differed based on the employees' shift. This study by Ramanuj (2014) was completed with 50 night-shift workers, who were compared with 50 day-shift workers. A mixture of males and females were asked to self-record stressors they believed they experienced while working in the call center. The identified stressors experienced by call center workers were voice problems, eye strain, hearing problems, and pain in the neck and

shoulders—as well as mental and psychological stress. This study was compared with the focus group study where the employees were able to specifically identify what stressors they believed they experienced due to working in a call center environment.

Of all the stressors reported by the call center workers, mental stress and sleep disturbance were among the top. Forty-nine percent of the respondents acknowledged mental stress as a stressor they experienced from working in the call center. Thirty-three percent reported various factors causing this mental stress that included work timing, workload, repetition, and insufficient breaks and holidays. Night versus day shifts saw a significant difference in reported stress in areas such as digestive system problems. Sixty-four percent of night shift workers reported this stressor compared to 26% of the day shift workers who reported it.

Focus-group participants also have identified some of these stressors. Workload, repetition, and timing have been patterned among the studies, showing their significant influence on an employee's stress level. Although these stressors are replicated throughout call center studies, eradicating them altogether from the work environment is impractical. It is important for management and the overall organization to understand, identify, and assist their employees with the reduction of stress in the call center.

"The Influence of Stress Management Techniques on Employees' Retention: A Study on Call Center Agents in Malaysia" (Shobri, Razali, & Razali, 2013) suggests how organizational involvement in providing stress management training for its employees can positively increase employees' work productivity, retain employees, and minimize demotivated employees.

This study also suggested stress management techniques such as laughter, relaxation, exercise, time management, and life management as ways to accomplish the reduction of stress among employees. To prove this theory, a questionnaire consisting of 26 items was presented to respondents, who were inbound call center representatives, to complete, based on a five point Likert scale. Out of all the questionnaires given, 98 responses were usable for this study.

Fifty-two percent of the respondents were female while the remaining 48% were male, 52% were between the ages of 20-25, and 60% of the respondents had been working in the call center between six months to one year. These responses showed that relaxation was the number one technique in stress release, followed closely by exercise as being a significant technique in relieving stress.

In a similar approach to the one taken in this thesis, a group conducted two focus groups, which included both the internal and external customers. The first group was composed of internal retail experts, who helped with the development of mobile checkouts, and their external customers, who used these mobile checkouts, formed the second group. "The work helps the authors understand the emerging mobile checkout scenarios in the retail environment and customer reactions to these scenarios" (Aloysius, Hoehle, & Venkatesh, 2016, p. 467).

The information gathered from these focus groups not only helped to ensure the proper development of mobile checkouts but also provided customer reactions to the development, which was similar to the Deming's idea of the PDCA cycle. The "Plan" phase of the mobile checkouts was done by gathering information from experts via focus

groups then implementing the "Do" phase of the cycle. Once the mobile checkouts were used, the group went back to interviewing, via focus groups, their customers who used these mobile checkouts, which was the "Check" phase, to gain their insight. Once it was determined that the mobile checkouts were acceptable, they were updated, based on a few custom reviews to ensure greater positive feedback, which was the "Act" phase.

Additional Focus Groups

ABC Healthcare also conducted focus groups with their external customers in order to gain insight on what they did or didn't like about customer materials that were sent to them the previous year. A moderator sat down with three to four groups of five to seven people each, allowing them to review pieces of information that were sent out the previous year and to express their likes and dislikes. The moderator recorded each session, with the customers' permission, and later used text analytics to transcribe the feedback received from these focus groups.

This information was then discussed among the employees to see what feedback could or couldn't be taken into consideration and changed for the next year. Since some agencies required that certain disclosures and information be put into materials yearly, some changes couldn't be made, but many others could. Since this was done on an annual basis, customers were able to see that their suggestions were being heard, and more positive feedback was given regarding the materials being received year after year. This same concept could be used with its internal employees—gathering their feedback regarding processes and how to make the call center a more enjoyable place to work.

The focus group conducted on ABC Healthcare's internal customers for the purpose of this thesis was able to use the PDCA cycle to gain insight on their thoughts about working in the call center.

Plan

"*Plan* what you want to accomplish and define how you will know when it is accomplished. Do not proceed without a plan. Determine objectives (expressed in the measurable form) to be reached and methods to achieve them" (Pietrzak & Paliszkiewicz, 2015).

Do

"*Do* what have been planned. Carry out the test by implementing the methods according to the plan" (Pietrzak & Paliszkiewicz, 2015).

Check

Check how well you accomplished the expectations. Observe the effects. Examine the results achieved. Are the objectives from the plan reached? Look for the possible deviation from the plan; Test the plan accordingly to the information gained during the cycle. Is the reasoning underlying the plan still valid? Were any changes occurred? (Pietrzak & Paliszkiewicz, 2015)

Act

Act or Adjust. What lessons could be learned from the cycle? Adopt and perpetuate methods, which were successful in reaching objectives. If not determine the root causes and correct the implementation. Is it reasonable to

continue the plan? Are any adjustment needed in plan for the next cycle? Should

the plan be adapted or rethought? (Pietrzak & Paliszkiewicz, 2015)

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Design of the Investigation

Process Roadmap

The investigation design for this thesis was completed by assembling focus groups with three groups of four participants, consisting of customer service representatives from a well-known health insurance company. These representatives were anonymously chosen and interviewed, based on a set of pre-gathered questions. There were three focus groups of four different customer service representatives, with a total of 12 individual responses. The questions were prepared to prompt certain responses from these representatives, which not only sparked conversation but also their honest opinions regarding their current employment. The focus group questions, which can be found in Appendix A, were geared toward proving the initial hypothesis that customer service representatives would provide better service if they were satisfied with their jobs.

Population (Sample)

Focus Groups

The population chosen to be included in these focus groups consisted of randomly chosen customer service representatives, who all worked for the same healthcare inbound contact center. A supervisor was contacted and asked to provide 12 representatives who would be interested in participating in a focus group. They were all assured that the responses they provided would remain anonymous in order to prompt accurate and honest

results. No compensation or perks were given to any of the representatives, but they were

allowed to remain off the phones for the hour in which the focus groups took place.

The focus group was held in a small conference room with a maximum capacity

of seven occupants, with one round table and six chairs. The recording was done via an

iPhone device that was later played back over a period of a few hours per recording in

order to transcribe the response prompted by the participants. Each focus group recording

lasted an average of 69 minutes, including a short introduction, a brief closing, and the

actual response-to-question time. Since it was a call center environment, the manager

who provided the participants set a strict 60-minute stop-time for the participants.

Focus Group Participants

Of the 12 participants chosen to participant in the focus group study, three were

males, and nine were females. Eleven participants had worked in the call center for over

one year, and one had worked in the call center for less than one year. Eight of the 12

participants were between the ages of 20 and 25, two were between the age of 26 and 30,

and the final two participants were over the age of 30.

Treatment

During each focus group, the representatives were informed that their responses

would be recorded on an iPhone tape recording device. This device was shown to all

individuals and given permission by the participants before recording began. Each of the

focus group sessions was held in a conference room at the place of business, and doors

were closed for confidentiality. At the beginning of each group session, the author of this

thesis introduced herself and the group. She also explained what the group would be

asked and the process in which the information would be taken and transcribed into data for research purposes only. The facilitator also stressed the importance of giving honest answers and reiterated that all responses would remain anonymous and confidential. All individuals then were given the opportunity to introduce themselves to the group and give some background about their call center work experience. A list of questions was provided for each representative to follow along since some of them were more in depth questions, which required a moment to think of an accurate response.

<div align="center">Data Analysis Procedure</div>

Data from focus group participants was recorded and transcribed into text; each transcription took approximately two to three hours per session, totaling six to nine hours for all of the data collection. Data files used in the analysis were recorded as simple text and processed, using the R language for statistical computing and graphical analysis.

Using the R language, unnecessary words, which were those words that had no meaning to the analysis, were then eliminated and processed in a word cloud summary. The frequency table of the meaningful words that remained was used for an analysis and the creation of a cluster analysis, using a combination of word frequencies in relationship to the focus group stimulus questions that created those word frequencies. This gave a visual representation of the relationship of words generated from specific stimulus questions introduced in the focus group that was easier to understand and see versus a straightforward statistical cluster analysis.

The objective of these visual analyses was to summarize the data collected and help managers of customer care centers better see opportunities to resolve problems and

promote improvements in service delivery since these were the problems and improvements identified by the call center staff during the focus group sessions. The approach to conduct focus groups and collect a large number of total words, an exclusive substantial number of net words relevant for analysis, was an entirely different perspective on learning about why there were problems and what staff saw as possible remedies for those problems.

The reasons and the solutions were being gathered in the words of ABC Healthcare's frontline employees, which was valuable as a management resource. The participants would be able to see their words and phrases from the words gathered, and they would be able to appreciate the fact that their organization was considering their thoughts and opinions as a primary source of data for promoting excellence in call center services.

The managers and participants were excited to work together, following the focus group sessions, to come up with changes that could be made for increased satisfaction. The managers expressed how focus groups would now be implemented once a quarter as an ongoing effort to give the call center representatives a platform on which to express their likes and dislikes in the call center. After every focus group at the end of the quarter, managers would also have meetings in order to discuss the findings and continue with changes made in the previous quarter or to implement new changes.

The managers advised they learned that by allowing the representatives a chance to express their dissatisfaction, the awareness among staff could build rapport among

them and the management staff. The representatives enjoyed the idea of the managers listening to their voice and making active changes based on their recommendations.

The representatives appreciated the managers giving them a change to voice their opinions and actively listening to their concerns. The announcement by managers to continue focus groups on a quarterly schedule was welcomed and appreciated among the original participants and the remaining call center representatives.

ABC Healthcare Focus Group PDCA

A focus group was planned and executed with 12 employees of ABC Healthcare to determine what could be done in the call center to make it a better experience for them as the internal customer. Open-ended questions were strategically created to spark conversation and allow their voice to be heard and opinions to be expressed freely. Data was recorded during these focus groups in order to later analyze and come to conclusions.

Once all the focus groups were created and questions planned, the focus groups were then executed. All three separate sessions of focus groups were recorded and later transcribed to collect the expected data from the planning stage. All participants were able to voice their opinions with the help of the original open-ended questions to spark conversation.

The data collected and transcribed from the focus groups at ABC Healthcare was then turned into charts and graphs to identify the key issues that internal customers saw in the call center. Word clouds, Pareto charts and a cluster analysis were among some of the analysis done with the data collected to identify words associated with problems and issues expressed by representatives in the call center.

This data was later given to managers of ABC Healthcare to evaluate and discuss future changes that could be made in order to increase the level of satisfaction in the call center. Management had multiple meetings to review the findings and did additional interviews with some of the participants to come up with specific changes they would like to see made in the call center.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A focus group was completed with 12 customer service representatives in order to gain a better understanding of their thought processes about working in a call center (see Appendix A for the focus group questionnaire). From these questions, the representatives were encouraged to answer as honestly as they could in a group setting. A text analysis was done on the data collected and turned into a Pareto chart, word cloud, and cluster analysis. The Pareto chart (see Figure 5) showed that call, time, customer, and center were the greatest concerns of the call center representatives. These four words, which were used the most during the focus groups, accounted for 89.1% of the total data collected. Call was used 109 times, whereas time, customer, and center were used a combined 108 times during the focus group responses.

This outcome coincided with the main idea of the Pareto chart, which showed that 80% of a problem stemmed from 20% of the causes. Based on the focus group responses, these words would attest for 80% of the problems they saw in the call center. Call times or metrics, as explained by the response, were noted as high stressors among these representatives. Metrics were pre-set standards that call center representatives were held to in order to determine their success in the call center. Time, another major concern of the representatives, was an additional stressor they explained was a major motivator related to their lack of quality and attention to their customers.

One representative explained his concern as follows: "What causes the most stress to me is having wrap up times or talk times. I feel I have to rush through my call with the customer in order to meet the average talk time. I am not able to give the member my full attention as I am looking at the clock." This response prompted a 30-minute discussion around this great hurdle to overcome and the time constraints placed on representatives in a call center while providing great customer service for their customers.

Another representative explained it as follows:

If you are telling me to help the customer but then add, but help them in this timeframe, it's kind of contradicting what you're asking me to do, and it causes a great deal of stress. Like, eliminate average handle times, or the time I should take to answer a customer's call. Some calls are simple, and I can help them within a smaller amount of time, but what about those calls where it's an older person that I have to explain everything to them and they have lots of questions? Should I just answer one question and say 'sorry gotta go' or should you just eliminate the timeframe I have to help them? Sorry, I am getting stressed out just talking about it (laughs across the room).

A typical call center scorecard, similar to the one ABC Healthcare call center representatives are scored on, is illustrated (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Employee Metric Scorecard. Taken from: Call Center Reporting Software for Call Center Performance Management | VPI. (2016). *Fictitious name and statistics of a call center representative*.
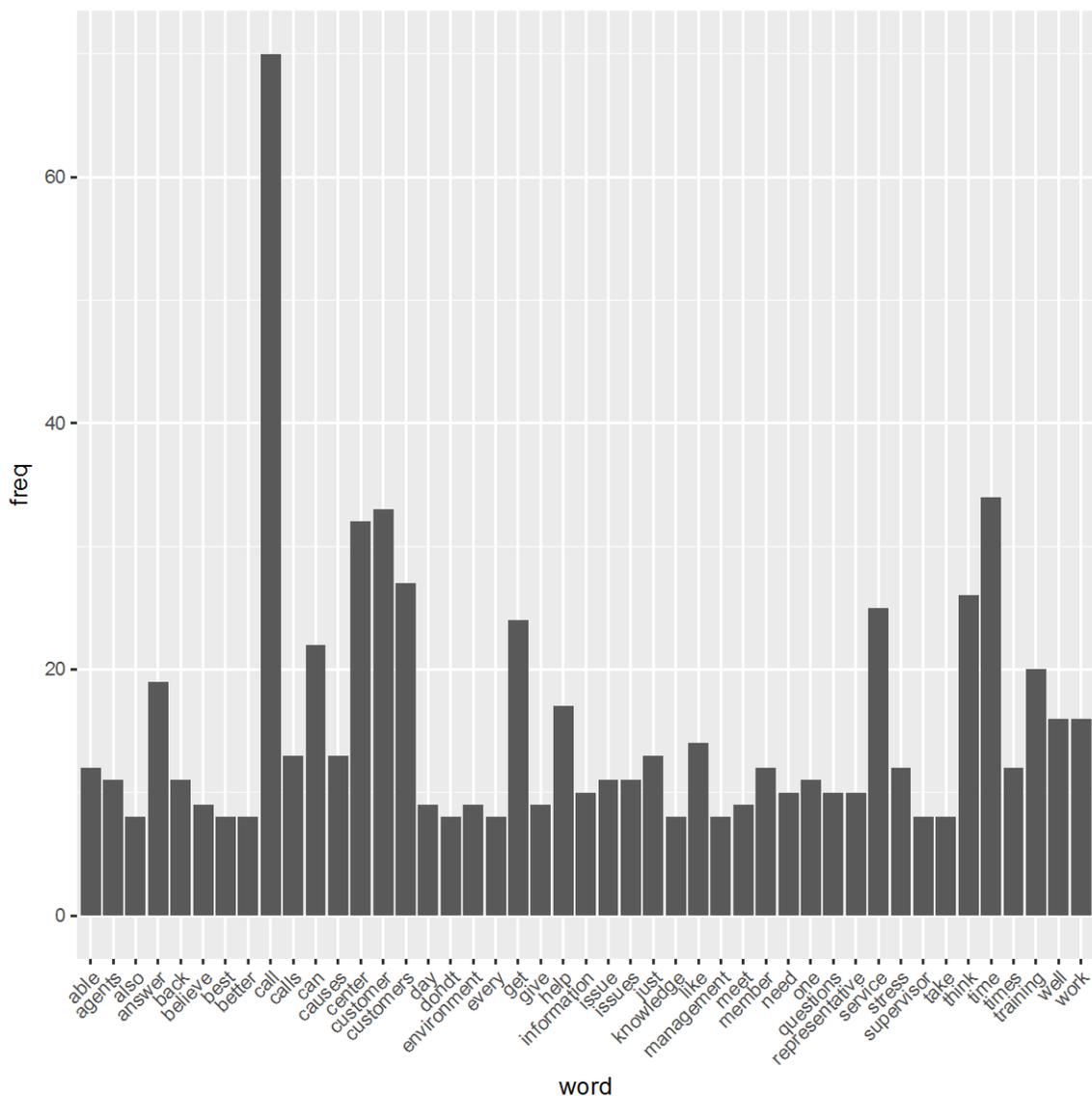
Figure 4. Word count chart. Prepared by the author of this paper.

A word count chart, as seen in Figure 4, was compiled with the total words used

by the focus group participants; a total of 4,192 unique words over the three focus groups

were used. After eliminating unnecessary words such as "the," "a," "to," and so on, 779

net words remained and was used to form this word count chart. The most significant

words, the top 45, were included on the chart, some including different variations of the

same type of words (see the Pareto chart in Figure 5 related to word frequency).
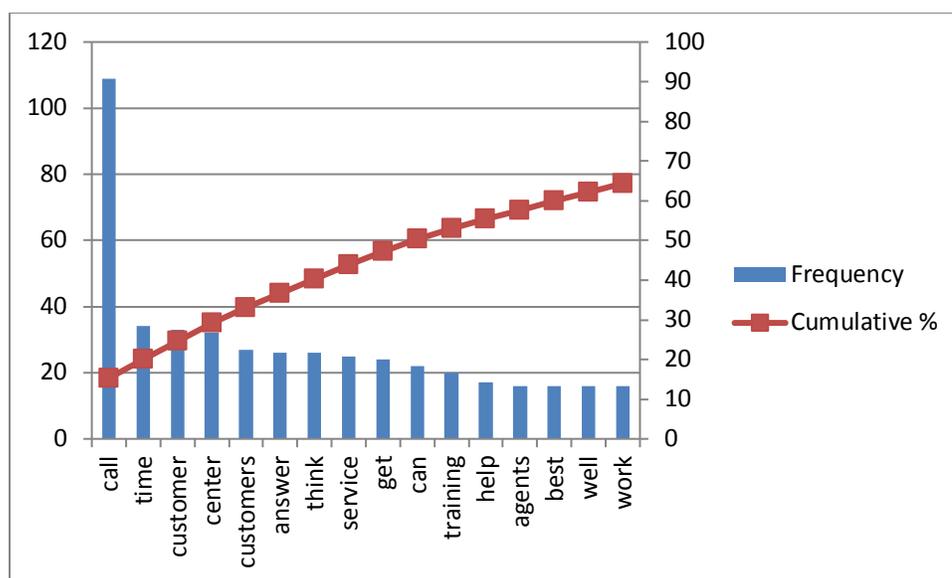
Figure 5. Pareto chart. Prepared by the author of this thesis.

The third analysis, a Word Cloud (see Figure 6), showed similar results as the

Pareto chart. When looking at the data from this type of analysis, one was able to gain a

better understanding of the main words or ideas used by the representative responses in

the focus group. By grouping the main words together, one could get a general overview

of what was seen as major concerns from working in the call center. Words like call

center, customers, training, time, and members stood out in this analysis.

This analysis also showed the most significant words, those who were pictured

the biggest, and similar words—those closest to each other—in the illustration. Words

furthest away from each other were those that were less likely to be affiliated, and

different significant words were color coated differently. The word clouds showed the

frequency of word occurrence by the size of the text. "Call," being the biggest word on the cloud, showed the most significant word used during the focus groups. Words like "work," "think," "meet," "time," and "supervisors" were those words closely associated with call when used in the representatives' responses to the focus group questions. The distance between words communicates how often the words occurred together or close together in the spoken transcript.

Figure 6. Word cloud. Prepared by the author of this thesis.

The final analysis, a cluster chart (see Figure 7), was completed to show the identification of clusters using frequency counts of words in relationship to the seven seed, or "stimulus" questions that were used to create and drive discussions in the focus groups. This was done to display the topics of discussion in the focus groups in

relationship to the intentional stimulus questions that were used to develop discussion content around issues known to be present in call center services delivery.

The strategy for the development of this chart was to list all of the words used in the focus group discussions after the exclusion of the unnecessary stop words processed in the document term matrix. These net, or "cluster words," were then identified using a series of frequency distribution sorting to come up with a number of clusters—seven— that accounted for the major areas of concern among the call center staff in meeting the needs of their customers. In effect, this was a form of Pareto analysis where the "most important few" were separated from among the "less important many" issues that existed in the call center's service delivery.

The seven clusters identified in Figure 7 were then sequenced in priority from highest to lowest frequency (importance) using the column cluster number. For example, cluster one, which concerned "customer problems," accounted for 75 cluster words out of the total of 212 cluster words identified for the seven clusters. The 75 words accounted for 35% of the 212 cluster words. That was to say that the cluster "customer problems" constituted a third of the concerns of the call center staff.

Cluster one that concerned customer problems was centered on the expression of concern with the calls themselves. Calls could introduce stress as shown by the frequency of 18 in question two, 12 in question three, 14 in question four, 14 in question six, and 17 in question seven. These results pointed to calls as being one of the main stressors for the call center staff and among the largest cluster. The second largest cluster, related to

customers, shows the greatest in question six, and question seven shows the greatest response to customer care.

Cluster three, which showed the type of problems in the call center, greatly centered on time, for call center representatives saw time as a barrier to helping their customers to the best of their ability. "It seems like the most stress I experience in the call center personally is when we have average handle times. If you are telling me to help the customer but then add, but help them in this timeframe, it's kind of contradicting what you're asking me to do and it causes a great deal of stress" (Focus Group, Response Group 1, Respondent 4).

Cluster four included the word "service" as the main contributor to service opportunities. Cluster five included words "think" and "answers" as contributing to common scenarios. This indicated that the call center staff might desire common scenarios or a common response models for commonly received questions they might encounter. Cluster six saw additional training as a factor in not being able to service customers adequately. "I believe that better training and resources should be provided to the agents, the supervisors should undergo the same training as the agents on top of the regular supervisor training" (Focus Group 3, Respondent 1). In the final, seventh cluster, "work stress" was identified solo on how the representatives viewed the call center. "What causes the most stress to me is having wrap up times or talk times. I feel I have to rush through my call with the customer in order to meet the average talk time. I am not able to give the member my full attention as I am looking at the clock" (Focus Group 1, Respondent 3).

Focus Group Discussion Question Frequent Words	Quest #1: What do you like best about working in the call center?	Quest #2: What seems to cause friction or "stress" in the work or responsibilities you need to accomplish?	Quest #3: Are these issues caused primarily by the call center work environment or by other outside issues?	Quest #4: What are three most significant problems you face in the call center, and what do you think is the source (or root cause) of these	Quest #5: What do you think you can do yourself to either eliminate or reduce the negative impact of the problems you have identified?	Quest #6: What specific thoughts do you have about what the customer needs, and how they experience the call center?	Quest #7: What opportunities do you see we can study further to create a level of excellence in customer care in the call center?	Frequency Total by Word	Percent of Total Words	Cluster Word Count	Cluster Word Percent of Total Cluster Words	Cluster Number	Cluster Title
call(s)	7	18	12	14	2	14	17	84	14%	75	35%	1	Customer Problems
customer(s)	1	10	2	10	8	18	18	67	11%	36	17%	2	Customer Care
time(s)	1	17	1	8	1	11	9	48	8%	28	13%	3	Type of Problem
center	4	3	12	6	0	7	6	38	6%				
get	2	1	3	1	2	10	9	28	5%				
service	1	2	0	2	1	1	20	27	4%	20	9%	4	Service Opportunity
think	0	2	0	6	4	11	4	27	4%	11	5%	5	Common Scenarios
answer(s)	1	3	1	1	1	12	7	26	4%	12	6%	5	Common Scenarios
issue(s)	0	2	2	5	3	4	8	24	4%				
working(ing)	7	3	9	1	2	1	1	24	4%				
can	0	3	1	2	7	8	2	23	4%				
cause(s)	0	8	7	5	0	1	0	21	3%				
help	3	6	0	3	3	4	2	21	3%				
training	0	2	0	5	11	0	3	21	3%	16	8%	6	Training
member	2	7	3	3	2	2	0	19	3%				
stress	0	14	3	0	0	0	0	17	3%	14	7%	7	Work Stress
well	0	0	2	8	2	4	1	17	3%				
agent(s)	0	1	0	3	3	4	5	16	3%				
like	5	2	0	0	2	2	4	15	2%				
supervisor(s)	0	0	0	3	4	1	7	15	2%				
able	3	1	0	1	0	3	6	14	2%				
representative	0	5	1	0	0	3	5	14	2%				
just	0	3	1	1	1	4	3	13	2%				
						TOTAL WORDS	619			212	100%		

Figure 7. Cluster chart. Prepared by the author of this thesis.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATIONS

Representatives who work in a call center have to deal with many different distractions throughout the day. Adding to those distractions are pre-determined metrics they must meet in order to retain their employment. These distractions and metrics are major stressors, not only for the representatives but also on the overall quality of service they are able to provide for their customers. Reducing, if not eliminating, these stressors and metrics is the answer to increasing the overall quality service representatives are able to provide for their customers. Managers are at the forefront of providing this stress reduction and lowered metrics in order to assist their representatives.

According to many of the focus group discussions conducted in the study that was the focus of this thesis, representatives did not feel the presence of managerial support in their day-to- day activities in the call center. One participant commented:

I would say pressure from the supervisors to be the best team as well as the strain they put on us with the different metrics. The root cause of these problems I am sure is to be the best customer service center as well as maybe performance guarantees promised to the customers we serve. I understand the idea and why they want us to answer quickly and help the customers quicker as well but it defeats the idea of customer service if you ask me if we are just rushing customers on and off the phone. (Anonymous Focus Group participant, 2016)

In the article, "The Good Stress Strategy: How Managers Can Transform Stress Into Fulfillment," author Thomas Davenport suggested how management should be trained in dealing with their employees' stress. "A well-conceived manager-training program can significantly improve managers' ability to recognize and deal with the stress causing factors that plague many work units" (2015, p. 9). In this same article, Davenport noted that in a Monster.com survey, employees thought their offices did "nothing" to alleviate their workplace stress (2015).

The focus group participants in the study that was the focus of this thesis concurred overall with this article and believed management support was a major void in the workplace. This study suggested how managers could be a major influence on their employees, helping to reduce their stress in the workplace as follows:

Managers, however, can modify stressors and introduce stress-buffering conditions into the workplace. By doing so, they can transform much of what employees experience as damaging stress (or distress) into a more productive form (referred to as eustress). This transformation can not only reduce the unhealthy effects of stress but also increase employee satisfaction and productivity. The term fulfillment can be used for the outcome of positive stress.

Not only could management have a positive impact on employees and how they handle their stress, but exercise could be another alternative. Regular exercise was associated with the emotional resilience to acute stress in healthy adults. De Wit noted, "These findings provide modest support for claims that regular exercise protects against

the negative emotional consequences of stress and suggest that exercise has beneficial effects in healthy individuals" (Childs & de Wit, 2014, p. 1).

Other studies, such as "The Influence of Stress Management Techniques on Employees' Retention: A Study on Call Center Agents in Malaysia," noted that employees could address stress issues with physical exercise. Physical exercise would entail employees performing some type of activity in order to keep physically fit and maintain their general health (*Science Daily*, 2012; Shobri, Razali, & Razali, 2013).

This same study also showed that not only did exercise assist with the relief of stress, but simple techniques such as laughter and stress management could also help. According to Ferdinand (1988), a variety of techniques could be applied, including laughter, relaxation, and exercise. A number of researchers also pointed to the benefits of time management and life management (Ferner, 1995; Tyrer, 1987; Shobri, Razali, & Razali, 2013).

Customer service representatives must have control over how they deal with stressors in the call center. By teaching stress management techniques, it gives them options on how to positively change their moods, especially when dealing with their customers. In order for customer service representatives to correct their stress levels in the call center, they must be able to recognize certain stressors that may affect them.

An important step in managing stress, before it becomes chronic, is recognizing precisely when and where it occurs (Hernandez, Morris, & Picard, 2011). A customer service representative must realize when his or her stressors are being triggered and take the necessary action, stress management techniques, to identify and eliminate stress. The

VOC is an important factor in determining quality service, but what about the voice of the employee? One of the main ideas stressed during the various focus groups conducted was the idea that the employees are not being heard.

The role of the employee in Lean performance improvement is of great significance. Kaizen, known as continuous improvement, is a great method that can be used in the call center environment. Focus groups, such as the one done for this thesis, are a great way for the customer service representative's voice to be heard and to implement this idea of continuous improvement. Since they are the front-line voice of the company, employees' concerns should be taken into consideration and used to make continuous improvement opportunities.

The focus groups from ABC Healthcare received positive feedback not only from the internal front-line employees but from the managers as well. The front-line employees appreciated their managers wanting to know more about how they felt and what changes they wanted to see and the managers appreciated the effort put forth by their employees to raise their awareness on issues they saw firsthand in the call center. The managers allowed the employees' time off the phone to voice their opinions and they also commended them for their honesty and willingness to participate in the following month employee meeting.

Organizations could also get involved by providing workstation alternatives to the representatives to relief stress. In a study of 31 call center workers, males and females, it evaluated the effects of a sit-stand desk on their overall productivity. This approach not only looked at how to assist with workers' productivity, but it also aimed to promote

health and physical activity in the work environment, which also could promote stress reduction:

Intense physical activity can also be considered a stressor since it activates the same systems involved in responding to an external threat (Hackney, 2006); bouts of exercise increase heart rate, blood pressure and levels of cortisol. Thus, regular activation of stress systems by physical exercise may produce beneficial adaptations such that these systems are able to respond to acute stress more effectively, for example with reduced vigor or shorter duration. This idea has been termed the cross-stressor adaptation hypothesis. (Sothmann, 2006; Childs, Wilt, 2014)

Workers in this study were able to use the sit or stand desk to change the position in which they were accustomed for the duration of the workday. The study found that while using sit-stand desks had shown promising results for reducing sitting time in the short term (Neuhaus et al., 2014a; Torbeyns et al., 2014; Neuhaus et al., 2014b; Chau et al., 2014a), their effects on productivity were equivocal (Karakolis & Callaghan, 2014). For example, Pronk et al. (2012) found that office workers in a health promotion unit reported feeling more productive, energized, focused, and less stressed as a result of working with sit-stand workstations. (Chau et al., 2016)

Call center ergonomics is not only about using sit or stand desks to improve employee health. In the article, "Changing the Way We Work: Elevating Energy Expenditure with Workstation Alternatives" (Tudor-Locke, Schuna Jr., Frensham, &

Proenea, 2014), other forms of workstation improvements have been tested. This study examines four different types of workstation alternatives, replacing an office chair with a stability ball, using a sit-stand desk, adding a treadmill desk, and lastly incorporating a pedal desk:

> Study participants have reported that sit–stand/standing workstation alternatives were easy to use, enjoyable, comfortable, did not negatively affect productivity, or were perceived as having improved productivity by at least some of the workers sampled, and improved perceptions of energy, health, happiness, and stress. (Tudor-Locke, Schuna, Frensham, & Proenca, 2014)

The sit-stand workstation wasn't the only alternative the participants enjoyed. Edelson and Danoff reported in the study by Tudor-Locke, Schuna, Frensham, & Proenca, that typists felt less stressed while working on a treadmill desk versus a traditional seated condition, but, otherwise, there were no statistical differences in perceived arousal or body complaints (2014).

In addition to workstation alternatives, studies are looking into the concept of employees working from home full time and the effects it may have on the overall productivity and stress levels. Particularly in the call center, this idea of working from home is growing substantially due to the cost savings experienced by businesses that are allowing their representatives to work from home either full time or part time.

 In an experiment that covered over a nine-month period, 252 call center workers were identified. Those employees with even-numbered birthdays were allowed to work from home and were compared to those with odd numbered birthdays, who remained

working in the office. These representatives were allowed to work at home four days a week and were asked to come in just once a week. This study found that the performance of those working from home increased 13% over the nine-month experiment. It also found that those working from home expressed a greater work satisfaction while working from home, compared to those being in the office.

These workers expressed how the quieter environment at home, compared to being in the call center, was one of the reasons their job satisfaction had increased. Surveys taken after the experiment concluded showed more positive attitudinal outcomes from those working at home, when compared to those working in the office. This experiment also estimated that it saved about $2,000 a year per employee with the option for employees to work at home. The experiment was so successful, this company agreed to open the work from home option to all of their employees following the conclusion of the study. In summation, the organizers of the experiment noted:

> We found a highly significant 13% increase in performance from homeworking, of which 9% was from working more minutes during their shift period (fewer breaks and sick days) and 4% from higher performance per minute. We found no negative spillovers onto workers, who stayed in the office. Home workers also reported substantially higher work satisfaction and psychological attitude scores, and their job attrition rates fell by over 50%. Furthermore, when the experiment ended and workers were allowed to choose whether to work at home or in the office, selection effects almost doubled the gains in performance. (Bloom, Liane, Roberts, & Ying, 2014)

Call centers overall do show a higher significant amount of stressors, but with the help of management and simple steps taken from call center representatives, reducing the amount of stress experienced can be accomplished. When implemented correctly, stress management techniques, employee and management education, technological advances, alternative equipment, and support of the representatives are shown to significantly increase employee satisfaction.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

EMPLOYEE FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

APPENDIX A

Focus Group Questions

Employee Satisfaction Survey

1. What do you like best about working in the call center?

2. In your day-to-day work activities what seems to cause friction or "stress" in the work responsibilities you need to accomplish to satisfy your customer requests for assistance? Feel free to suggest changes you think will help you meet the needs and/or expectations of your customers.

3. Are these issues caused primarily by the call center work environment or do outside issues impact your ability to put forth your best effort as a call center representative?

4. Let's talk for a moment about the two to three of the most significant problems and issues you face in the call center. What do you think is the source (or root cause) of these problems or issues?

5. What do you think you can do yourself to either eliminate or reduce the negative impact of the problems and issues you have identified? While identifying these suggestions please be specific (i.e., better training, technical updates, etc.)

6. You have mentioned these suggestions in question 5. What specific thoughts do you have about what the customer needs, and how they experience the call center? Share your thoughts about the time it takes to get answers, and the ability of call center associates to quickly get answers to customers. What do you think about the ease or difficulty in meeting customer expectations for the less common requests that take more time to resolve or obtain correct and up-to-date answers?

7. Please tell us about a time you experienced great customer service as a customer calling into a call center. What made this experience exceptional or remarkable for you? Can you suggest some ways we can create the same kind of quality experience for our customers using our call center? What specific opportunities

do you see based on your example that we can study further to determine if we can create the same level of excellence in customer care with our call center?

Thank you for your time and suggestions to improve our call center experience for our customers, and to make our call center an enjoyable place to work for our call center associates.

APPENDIX B

EMPLOYEE FOCUS GROUP COMBINED RESPONSE

APPENDIX B

Focus Group Combined Response

Employee Satisfaction Survey
(respondents 1-4= R1-R4)

1. *What do you like best about working in the call center?*

   Focus Group 1 Response
   R1. I like that every call is different and that I have the ability to solve problems for members.

   R2. I enjoy talking to new people every day and helping people make their job easier.

   R3. I enjoy working with all the different types of people.

   R4. I enjoy the variability of each call, some members are nice and others not so much. So I guess I like the fact you basically never know what you're gonna get when you answer each call.

   Focus Group 2 Response
   R1. I honestly don't like anything about working in the call center.

   R2. The best thing about working in the call center for me is that I get to talk to so many different people every day. Some people are really nice and you feel a sense of accomplishment when you are able to help them or solve their problems for them.

   R3. I enjoy working with the people.

   R4. I like helping people.

   Focus Group 3 Response
   R1. Working in a call center enhances my skills to multi-task as I talk, type, and do my research at the same time.

   R2. Building relationships with the customers.

   R3. Assisting the members.

R4. What I liked best about working in the call center is the work hours, since we were providing services from 8am-5pm across the country, I was able to start as early as 5am.

2. *In your day-to-day work activities what seems to cause friction or "stress" in the work responsibilities you need to accomplish to satisfy your customer requests for assistance? Feel free to suggest changes you think will help you meet the needs and/or expectations of your customers.*

Focus Group 1 Response
R1. Stress is often a result when the plan rejects coverage and the member is demanding us to cover their prescription. This is stressful because I want to allow the member to fill their prescriptions but I can't go above the plan's decision. Stress is also a result of other advocates giving out misinformation to members. This is stressful because the member's call back wanting the misinformation honored per our mistake and honoring the misinformation is not always an option which leaves the member very upset.

R2. The greatest hurtle when trying to assist customers request promptly and efficiently would be system issues. There are systems and process changes that occur often without proper communication. I would recommend that business mangers learn the dept. they are making business decisions for that way they can ensure they are making appropriate updates.

R3. What causes the most stress to me is having wrap up times or talk times. I feel I have to rush through my call with the customer in order to meet the average talk time. I am not able to give the member my full attention as I am looking at the clock.

R4. It seems like the most stress I experience in the call center personally is when we have average handle times. If you are telling me to help the customer but then add, but help them in this timeframe, it's kinda contradicting what you're asking me to do and it causes a great deal of stress. Like, eliminate average handle times, or the time I should take to answer a customer's call. Some calls are simple and I can help them within a smaller amount of time but what about those calls where it's an older person that I have to explain everything to them and they have lots of questions. Should I just answer one question and say sorry gotta go or should you just eliminate the timeframe I have to help them? Sorry, I am getting stressed out just talking about it. (laughs across the room)

Focus Group 2 Response
R1. The turnaround time of two minutes of being on a call and documenting was stressful. If the time exceeded two minutes we either got an alert or leadership coming up to us with questions.

R2. The pressure of trying to take a certain amount of calls back to back without putting anyone on hold or having a break in between calls to document what you did to help the caller. That causes a tremendous amount of stress on us advocates.

R3. It could be a factor of things: One being stress by trying to meet high expectations to achieve incentive goals and meet the customers' need in a timely manner and two the lack of members understanding their benefits that causes the representative to complete the call with a negative outcome.

R4. Production, they score us based on how much time I spend on a customer instead of the quality they received which I think is not fair to the us as representatives.

Focus Group 3 Response
R1. I believe that the call center's average handle time per call causes the call center agents to have friction or stress, because most of the time they are focus on the call times instead of the service they are providing the customers.

R2. The hold or wait time to speak with a customer service representative causes friction, I think they should hire more representatives at least during the peak season so our customers don't have to wait on hold so long. They usually wait a while and by the time we answer they are frustrated and take it out on the representative.

R3. Back to back calls, I would suggest having at least a 5 minute break within each call, that would give me time to regroup for the next call that comes in.

R4. What causes friction or stress in the work responsibilities is the lack of training and sometimes lack of teamwork. Without the proper training and assistance from fellow colleagues, it can make for a stressful day at work. Another example is the customer that you're helping. Sometimes they call in screaming and yelling at you as if you were the cause of their issue.

3. *Are these issues caused primarily by the call center work environment or do outside issues impact your ability to put forth your best effort as a call center representative?*

Focus Group 1 Response

R1. This stress is caused by outside impact as we are in the middle of the plan and the member serving as administrators of the benefits. The call center work environment causes other stress which is a result of in house mistakes which upset our members.

R2. Primarily call center work environment, although I'm sure other departments experience this as well.

R3. Yes they are caused by the call center work environment.

R4. All stress I experience comes from the call center and the other departments we work with in order to meet the customer's needs.

Focus Group 2 Response
R1. Primarily by the call center work environment.

R2. The call center environment definitely.

R3. My first point is influenced by management level within the call center. My second point stems from either the sales representative not being fully honest about the benefits or the employee doesn't read the Member Handbook to have knowledge of what is covered or what is not covered.

R4. 100% caused by the call center environment, I literally feel sick to my stomach every day I have to pull into the parking lot for work. I get an instant headache as well as stomach ache and anxiety, I don't get this feeling doing any other outside activities. **(agreed amongst the room)**

Focus Group 3 Response
R1. Yes, the issues are caused primarily by the call center work environment.

R2. Primarily it is due to the call center work environment, it goes back to my previous answer of needing more coworkers to cut down waiting time for patients.

R3. Just the environment in itself causes all my issues with the actual call center (laughter)

R4. Mainly caused by the call center environment, every now and then you come to work upset about something going on in your personal life but for the most part you can control those emotions until you get that first unruly customer.

4. *Let's talk for a moment about the two to three of the most significant problems and issues you face in the call center. What do you think is the source (or root cause) of these problems or issues?*

Focus Group 1 Response

R1. Coverage is a key issue I deal with at the call center. Being the administrator of the benefits is not easy when a member is on the phone wanting something that is not a part of their plan. People are under the impression that because they have insurance, everything is covered, and that unfortunately is not the case leaving me with an angry and confused member. This is a significant problem because I am dealing with medicine and the livelihood of others although I am not at liberty to decide coverage for them. Also dealing with other's mistakes is a root cause of many problems I deal with on my calls. Most times I am able to apologize and accommodate the member but sometime I am not and in that case it makes my job extremely difficult.

R2. One of the greatest issues I personally think is the quality of the training which causes inconsistency in knowledge. Also, there are a lot of under motivated individuals. I believe that the environment the call center gives this you're a number not a person vibe which causes employees to be less enthusiastic about coming to work.

R3. The metric the company/managers set. They expect employees to only be on calls for a certain amount of time not keeping in mind all calls are not the same.

R4. Call times as well as resources. I think the root of all the problems in the call center is management, they put forth these call times as well as don't offer appropriate resources we need to do our jobs. I think we need more training as well as the elimination of call times. I think if managers were forced to actually do our jobs and see their own call times they would understand how tedious it is to even have these things in place.

Focus Group 2 Response

R1. Sales agent not fully explaining to our customers what they signed up for i.e.(plans, benefits, co-pays).

R2. I would say pressure from the supervisors to be the best team as well as the strain they put on us with the different metrics. The root cause of these problems I am sure is to be the best customer service center as well as maybe performance guarantees promised to the customers we serve. I understand the idea and why they want us to answer quickly and help the customers quicker as well but it defeats the idea of customer service if you ask me if we are just rushing customers on and off the phone.

R3. Resources – I think the call center can benefit from additional training, incorporating on the floor coaches, cross training etc. Also recognition – Managers can boost the morale by implementing team building engagements to show support to the reps.

R4. Some employees don't receive proper training which in turn gives out the wrong information to our customers. I would also say management pressures, they pressure us to have our average call time low as well as the call we intake high on a daily basis.

Focus Group 3 Response
R1. Most of the problems and issues in a call center are customers that are very angry, and wants to speak to a supervisor. Some of the supervisors do not have the same knowledge as the agents, so it gets frustrating for the agent and customers to have to explain their issues over and over again.

R2. I would say again the wait time for our customers as well as communication between departments. I think if we better communicated processes and procedures among departments it would help a lot.

R3. Having a better direction on where to go to locate information that I may not be aware of. There are so many systems that I have to maneuver around to find one piece of information so having everything on one site would be helpful.

R4. Some of the source or root causes of the problem or issue is the management or how the department is ran as a whole.

5. *What do you think you can do yourself to either eliminate or reduce the negative impact of the problems and issues you have identified? While identifying these suggestions please be specific (i.e., better training, technical updates, etc.)*

Focus Group 1 Response
R1. Within the issue of coverage it is important to explain their plan in regards to what is and what is not covered. Educating the member is best thing possible for us and them. In regards to in house mistakes that result in problems for our customers, training, coaching, and shadowing can be done to prevent excessive mistakes.

R2. There are multiple of things I try to do. I come to work with a smile on my face every day hoping to help make someone else's day. I offer to assist with training sessions and new hires, as well as manage huddle sessions to improve employee knowledge.

R3. Probably better training for some different situations and how to handle the member so I don't spend a large amount of time trying to figure out what is needing to be done. Or possibly ignoring the metrics required for wrap up and talk time with the customers and just focus on the customers.

R4. The only thing I can think of is coming into work with a positive attitude every day and try not to think too much into the metrics set forth for us by management. Maybe if I think positive in what I perceive to be a negative environment it could help me overall with my customer service.

Focus Group 2 Response
R1. Proper training and better communication from leadership.

R2. I feel as though as we can do is continue to complain, until our supervisors and superiors get on the phone with our customers and take calls day in and out like we do, they won't understand. I can try my best to make like a cheat sheet of the commonly asked questions by customers in order to answer them quicker but even then, customers usually have multiple questions which require research.

R3. Implementing new processes and guidelines for promotional/incentive goals and HR sending out communicate to the effect of "Please Read Your Handbook" or "Get to know your benefits" during the Annual Open Enrollment season.

R4. I can eliminate some of these issues myself if I were trained properly as well as if our supervisors encouraged us and gave us more positive feedback. I can't change another agents knowledge but management could.

Focus Group 3 Response
R1. I believe that better training and resources should be provided to the agents. The supervisors should undergo the same training as the agents on top of the regular supervisor training.

R2. Yes better training, better call directories, and pay employees more money to deal with these upset customers would be my suggestions.

R3. Training and technical updates would help I think.

R4. What we can do to eliminate or reduce the negative impact is to address the concerns as a whole to let management know what the issue is. We can also give feedback on what we need training on, what information we may be missing, and be a part of the training program.

6. *You have mentioned these suggestions in question 5. What specific thoughts do you have about what the customer needs, and how they experience the call center? Share your thoughts about the time it takes to get answers, and the ability of call center associates to quickly get answers to customers. What do you think about the ease or difficulty in meeting customer expectations for the less common requests that take more time to resolve or obtain correct and up-to-date answers?*

Focus Group 1 Response
R1. I believe the customers experience with the call center is effective as we are open 24/7. One thing I can suggest is a caseload as members can call multiple times and speak with multiple different people who may or may not give them different answers to the same questions. If we operated with a caseload the member could work with 1-3 advocates throughout their problem which in my opinion would make it less polluted and easier to accomplish a solution versus endless amounts of individuals having access and creating frustration/confusion.

R2. I believe when a call goes smooth the caller believes the company is well ran. When you have a call with a customer who has an issue that we cannot assist with due to lack of knowledge or system issues they believe the company isn't well ran. Depending on the issue the call center rep may or may not be able to provide information promptly which causes lack of trust in the company. I believe depending on your knowledge of your internal "tools" for response time.

R3. I have not mentioned these suggestions. I think all customers need to have that one on one feeling, where they feel we are solely focused on them and we make them feel like a person not just another caller.

R4. I think customers view the call center similar to how we view them, as annoying. I think they call in with the expectation of not being helped or getting a rude customer service rep. Usually it doesn't take long to get answers to the customer if the rep is knowledgeable, but we are always hiring new people because many don't last. So with this in mind, it can take quite some time to get the correct answers to customer's questions. As far as myself as a rep, I think if the resources were updated more frequently it wouldn't take much for me to provide the correct answer to even a complex customer request quickly. I just have to have the right resources as well as time to get the job and answer the questions to the best of my ability.

Focus Group 2 Response
R1. Some callers get the run around because we don't have enough information about what happened previously or what was discussed with the sales agent. So by the time you find out what really happened the customer is already irate.

R2. I think customers hate the call center, you get some who are nice because that is their nature then you get those who are just angry at the world and take it out on the call center representatives. The request we do get and answer quickly I think balances those request which require a lot more research and time and effort from the representative.

R3. My thoughts are to always provide a positive outcome in a situation that may negative impact a customer. Often times there are long wait time due to lack of staffing or staffing having a lack of knowledge of the request that could results in longer research or possible reach out for help by a peer or a lead/coach whichever the company uses as the point person. Again, I think there should be a coach on the floor that have the knowledge to get answers quick or to be able to transfer to that special line.

R4. We need to listen to the customers more closely to find out what we can do to meet their needs. Instead of giving out a wrong answer to a customer we should learn to use our resources. Reach out to our team and leads for help on how to handle situations.

Focus Group 3 Response
R1. Sometimes the new information are not passed on by the supervisors/managers to the agents right away so the agents are not aware of any new updates, issues, etc.

R2. Not all calls are long and not all calls are bad experiences with the customers. I think we do the best we can to meet the expectations of the customer. As long as we can remain positive while on our calls, the relationship we build with the patient and meeting their needs keeps the experience with the call center a success.

R3. I think they need answers and they need them quickly, if every representative was trained properly and all updates as suggest before, everything being on one page, was done I think we could meet this need of the customer and change their perception of the call center overall. Because right now I think customers see us as slow agents who are dumb and can never answer their questions without either putting them on hold or asking for additional help from someone else. That's just my opinion.

R4. Most of the time, customers are calling in to either get information or there is something wrong with their account. If we are unable to answer their question time and time again, we are giving them the impression that we do not know our job well. So it would be ideal in a perfect world to have as much information as we can, almost like a question and answer sheet.

7. *Please tell us about a time you experienced great customer service as a customer calling into a call center. What made this experience exceptional or remarkable for you? Can you suggest some ways we can create the same kind of quality experience for our customers using our call center? What specific opportunities do you see based on your example that we can study further to determine if we can create the same level of excellence in customer care with our call center?*

Focus Group 1 Response
R1. I can't recall a time where I have experienced exceptional customer service when calling into a call center.

R2. I called Tmobile because I had an issue with my bill. The representative I spoke with was kind and understanding. she took the time to listen to my issue and provided ways to fix it instead of listening to respond. Most calls centers only require basic customer service skills not focused on soft skills. Most of the time it is not what you say, but how you say it. Long story short my issue was honored and resolved. Having a company that is willing and able to provide the assistance you are looking for builds trust and makes you want to further do business.

R3. I can't recall a time either, I think most call centers only give mediocre service but working in a call center I kinda understand why.

R4. I recently called Time Warner, which I guess is now the new Spectrum, about a bill I received. It was $10-15 more than my usual bill. The customer service representative seemed like he already knew I would be calling (laughs). He apologized sincerely for this and explained some of my services cost were increased but he would credit my account for the overcharges and suggested me calling back in a couple weeks to renegotiate my bill since Spectrum would have better offers available for me that Time Warner didn't have. I thought this was excellent customer service because I not only got my bill lowered, which of course I was happy about, but I also got the reason why it was increased as well as an incentive to call back later to get it lowered even more. The agent was upbeat, attentive and seemed like he really wanted to help me. That's what I call great customer service.

Focus Group 2 Response
R1. I can't think of anytime I received great customer service but what I would like to experience is someone who is patient and able to answer my questions without me feeling rushed off the phone.

R2. I have never called any call center and received great customer service honestly. They are just like me when answering my questions, robots who spit out the quickest answer just to get me off the phone and meet their goals and metrics.

R3. I would say when I called in to cancel my gym membership and the customer service was allowed to back date the request to give me a full refund. Of course it was remarkable that I was able to get a full reimbursement, but what stood out is that the rep offered it. It depends on the plans and product whether or not I can suggest ways to satisfy a customer, but in general it's always options that are available.

R4. One time I called AT&T to order internet and cable, the representative was very nice however when I received my 1st bill it was over $570.00. There were many mistakes, I noticed they put me in a 2 year contract when it was supposed to be month to month. I also do not have a home phone but he included that service in my package which I did not want. I was told there was a free promo for HBO, Cinemax, and Showtime for 3 months but again the rep actually charged me for it all. I had to call customer service and speak to supervisor to get resolved. Finally after an hour on the phone he stated he would call me back in my time zone the next day to resolve issue. The supervisor kept his word, called me back and removed all charges in error. The supervisor apologized and let me know the representative that signed me up was in training and would get additional training to ensure this problem would not happen again. I thought this was excellent customer service because that call could have turned into me cancelling my service overall and me being angry. But with the supervisor being so patient and kind and ensuring I got all the false charges removed and letting me know the agent would get additional training, it calmed me enough to keep my service and even become satisfied with the service overall. Accidents happen so I was understanding and patient which I think we as representatives should learn to do and be towards our customers.

Focus Group 3 Response
R1. Whenever I call AT&T, most of the agents never need a supervisor assistance to resolve issues. I believe the management gives them the authority to waive fees or give credit to the accounts if needed or based on the situations. I feel the agents are very confident on what they do. I believe that more company should give the agents authority to do more things for the customers without any supervisor's approval or assistance.

R2. When I call OptumRx for an issue and they went above and beyond what was asked to satisfy my needs. That really impressed me because that's not common at call centers all over. I understand we can't meet all issues but as long as we exercise all options the effort is never questioned for the most part.

R3. My greatest customer service call in general is being able to get the answer at that moment on the call rather than having me wait minutes on hold for an answer. I can't pinpoint one at this moment but honestly if and when I do call customer service I am easy to please if you just give me the answer and quickly. That's why I am so adamant about us being able to do the same for our customers.

R4. A time I experienced excellent customer service was when I called United Healthcare, they had all the answers to all the questions I had. I was not placed on hold for them to get information or they didn't have to reach out to the supervisor for help. The customer service was exceptionally great and I was able to get the assistance I needed from them with my issues quickly and efficiently.