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ABSTRACT

This article provides a description of the changing needs and role of customer service employees, their competencies, job requirements, and training needs. Four key findings for developing effective training options are discussed. The data comes from an original research project funded by the Council of Logistics Management (CSCMP).

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, customer service jobs were essential when customers had a complaint. The complaint came in and they recorded pertinent information, evaluated the situation, and dispatched resources. During the crisis, they would monitor progress and dispatch additional resources as needed. Afterwards, they helped evaluate what caused the crises and developed contingency plans so that the problem did not reoccur. Their task was to make sure customers were satisfied.

In addition, they were responsible for fielding customer inquiries, taking their orders and answering their questions. The role of customer service has advanced from peripheral to an integral part of a company's product or service (anonymous, 1992; Lewis, 2000). As this area evolves, their goal is to assure the timely and accurate delivery of cargo or information to meet the needs of customers for efficient supply operations (Schary, 1992).

Customer service has been found to be highly important in promotion selection decisions (Daugherty, Kasulis, & Glenn, 2002) and it is the primary approach by which to penetrate, gain, and maintain market share (Zoheir, 2000). Customer service can be viewed as among the most important interfaces with the customer (Zoheir, 2000), as it evaluates operations to increase customer satisfaction and loyalty, while reducing the potential for crises. In this role, customer service activities will be combined with other logistics activities as new processes for order entry and fulfillment are introduced.

The activities of customer service representatives are being redistributed throughout the

organization. Information technology has influenced how firms think about the customer service function (Bitner, Zeithaml, & Gremler, 2010; Davis, Spohrer & Maglio, 2011; Lancioni, R., Smith, M. & Oliva, T., 2000; Lyons & Clarkin, 2012). The organization's ability to instantly share information means that customers' desires are shared with employees responsible for delivering the products or services when and where customers want them (Subramani, 2004). The customers' ability to contact companies and order merchandise on the internet has reduced the need to have someone manning the phone. At present, approximately 15% of B2B buyers already know what they want when they make an initial contact with the supplier. Some of the responsibility for addressing customer complaints is becoming part of the manufacturing employees' job. The adoption of the supply chain mentality is reflected by the degree to which customer service personnel communicate with customers and suppliers (Stank, Keller, & Daugherty, 2001; Tan, Lyman & Wisner, 2002). These statements are not intended to imply that customer service activities are decreasing in importance but to point to the fact that the customer service function is developing into two roles (Jasmand, Blazevic, & de Ruyter, K., 2012). The first will be responsible for order fulfillment or customer satisfaction. The second will serve as the firm's training function; assuring individuals are exposed to material and situations that enhance their managerial development. The first will be done by operating employees, third parties, and information technology. The second will provide the link between non-managerial and managerial jobs.

To better understand the nature of these changes, we undertook a multifunctional, multi-organizational job classification study, the first of its kind. In this study, the researchers took a sample of logistics jobs and established a baseline for evaluating job changes in the future as well as for current job requirements and training needs. Through interviews and additional surveys, we attempted to put the job classification findings into a broader context. This article focuses on the growth and development of a particular job family, the customer service representative.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part features the methodology used in the study. This is followed by a description of customer service employees, their competencies, job requirements, and training needs. The second part discusses four key findings to consider when developing a training approach.

METHODOLOGY

To gather data, the Common Metric Questionnaire (CMQ), a descriptive survey of logistics human resources practice, was used along with formal and informal interviews. From 43 logistics organizations, 632 responses to the Common Metric Questionnaire (CMQ) were received. The sample was a selected convenience sample. The 43 organizations included manufacturers, asset-based third parties, non-asset-based third parties, retailers, and financial institutions. Companies ranged in size from 15 to more than 100,000 employees. The researchers visited 65 sites in 20 states to gather data. They also conducted 35 formal interviews with top managers and more than 200 informal interviews with managers, supervisors, and operating employees. In addition, 192 companies responded to the descriptive newsletter sent to them by the researchers.

CMQ–Description and Administration

The CMQ boasts a validation database of over 100,000 observations on 8000 job families. The CMQ is comprised of more than 3000 items, although each subject was likely to address only a subset of that total. Responses to the CMQ reveal critical knowledge and skills for job performance, the frequency with which these skills are used, and the ways in which skills and knowledge were obtained. The responses also show job activities, such as attending meetings, lifting heavy objects, and interacting with people inside and outside the firm. These results fall into four domains, 80 dimensions, and 17 second-order factors. This detailed questionnaire helps determine competencies, job requirements, and training needs for each job family in the analysis. Questionnaire items also cover demographics, job basics, and knowledge requirements (Harvey, 1991).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the Common Metric System (CMS), a proprietary system coupled with the CMQ. CMS clusters the data into job families based on the responses the researchers selected for inclusion in the analysis. Initially, seven a-priori job families or clusters were identified: senior management, logistics information systems, warehousing, material and inventory control, transportation, purchasing, and customer service. Three researchers assigned each response to these fields, with a first-time classification interrater correlation of .95. Researchers then worked with the exception responses to achieve consensus, ultimately producing an inter-rater correlation of 1.00.

The pre-classified responses were then included in a cluster analysis by job family. A job was retained in a classification only if its joint correlation with the other responses was .70 or higher. In this way, researchers were able to classify all 632 observations into 22 job families: one for broad responsibility senior management, two for logistics information systems; six for warehousing, four for transportation, two for purchasing, three for customer service, and four for material and inventory control.

CUSTOMER SERVICE EMPLOYEES JOB DESCRIPTION

After the firm's sales force, customer service representatives are the most important customer contact employees. Research has shown that customer-focused capabilities are directly related to an organization's performance (Islam, Yang, Lokman , & Mia, 2012; Zhao, Droge, & Stank, 2001). How they deal with customer questions or issues influences whether a relationship is established, maintained, or ended. Customer inquiries are the catalyst that drives customer service representatives' jobs. Because of these inquiries, customer service representatives are involved in evaluating and offering suggestions for improving operations. This process may result in the modification of short-term objectives as promises are prioritized to minimize disruptions. Addressing customer issues requires the input from all departments and organizational levels. Success requires teamwork as customer service representatives are not supervisors and can only suggest actions.

Customer service representatives are under constant pressure. This pressure is the result of

having to rely on others including those in inventory, marketing and production to provide information they can then pass on to customers. The diversity of contacts increases the likelihood for mistakes in communication. Customer service representatives must exercise skill in communicating to ensure that everyone understands what is taking place.

CUSTOMER SERVICE EMPLOYEES COMPETENCIES

This job family encompasses four main competencies. First, they must apply project management techniques and interpersonal skills to develop a common knowledge base used to coordinate the communication network. Customer service representatives coordinate communication within and between firms. They assure that information is shared with everyone who has a stake in the issue. They gather, store, and communicate information used to make an effective decision and maintain the relationship (Moyano-Fuentes, J., Sacristán-Díaz, M., &Martínez-Jurado, Pedro J., 2012; Wu, 2007).

Second, they use the firm's computer resources to address customer complaints, issues, and questions. This skill is critical to customer service representatives' jobs. Without an adequate information system, customer service representatives could not provide the level of service which customers demand. If customer service representatives do not know how to extract information from the firm's information network, the information system's capacity is not fully used. Competent customer service representatives apply their knowledge about the firm's databases to efficiently extract data and turn this data into useful information.

Third, customer service employees must maintain a thorough understanding of the firm's practices and how they affect customers. They must know how their organization operates. This knowledge is the heart of their jobs. Their ability to answer customer questions or solve their problems is dependent on their knowledge of the firm's principles, policies, and procedures. Without this knowledge, customer service representatives may damage relationships rather than save or enhance them.

Lastly, they must maintain a calm professional demeanor in the face of adversity and under a variety of conditions. The ability to remain calm when confronted by distressed customers is central to customer service representatives' jobs. How they respond affects the likelihood of maintaining a relationship with the customer.

CUSTOMER SERVICE EMPLOYEES JOB REQUIREMENTS

These employees must possess the knowledge and skills that will allow them to perform their jobs competently. These job requirements are precursors to competence. They come from the job classification questionnaire and include the knowledge and skills that the respondents say are widely used and absolutely critical to performance.

Customer service representatives' primary job is to insure customer satisfaction by taking customer orders, answering questions, and monitoring manufacturing processes. When hired, customer service representatives should have excellent communication skills and be comfortable

with operating computers and other standard office equipment.

CUSTOMER SERVICE EMPLOYEES TRAINING NEEDS

Customer service employees identified several knowledge and skill areas that are necessary, if not critical, for them to accomplish their job's main mission. These knowledge and skills areas are segmented into equipment, interpersonal, and knowledge areas. The primary source of this knowledge is on-the-job experience. We will consider the implications of this in the next section of the paper.

Customer service representatives require extensive computer training. Customer attitudes are influenced by the timeliness and completeness of responses. Computer expertise is necessary because any delay reflects negatively on the firm and can create frustration and anger on the part of the customer. Computer training should focus on how to extract information effectively from personal and shared databases. Knowledge about how and where information is stored enhances customer service representatives' ability to satisfy customer information needs. Closely related to computer proficiency is telecommunications proficiency. Customer service representatives should have a complete understanding of the firm's telecommunications system. Their handling and directing of calls increases the customer's perception about the firm's competence.

Interpersonal skills training should focus primarily on improving critical thinking ability. Closely related to this skill are project management and organizational skills. Properly armed customer service representatives can prioritize inquires, coordinate parallel customer inquiries, and manage the inquiry process. The skills exhibited by customer service representatives communicate to co-workers and customers the importance the firm places on professionalism. Public speaking and written communication training will increase employee confidence in their ability to clear communication (Thai, Cahoon, & Tran, 2011; Yazdanparast, Manuj & Swartz, 2010; & Wu, 2007)

Customer service representatives' knowledge training should focus on the factors that influence the delivery of merchandise to customers. Transportation modes, local and regional geography, and the manufacturing process are necessary parts of the knowledge base required. Ideally, customer service representative should be trained about every aspect of the organization if they are to perform their tasks competently.

DEVELOPING A TRAINING APPROACH

For logistics jobs, the primary training system is on-the-job experience, even for skills and knowledge regarded as critical to job performance. On-the-job experience is informal, uneven, and can foster poor work practices, inadequate job knowledge, and a limited range of job knowledge. On-the-job experience translates well to performing the job, if the content of the training is accurate and complete. Unfortunately for those firms that rely on this approach, the content is often inaccurate or incomplete. New employees learn shortcuts that defeat efficiency and effectiveness, undercut customer service, or creates safety hazards.

In the case of a customer service representative, assuring that the organization is relying upon

OJT not OJE is critical. Simply moving someone into this position because he/she is more familiar with the company is inviting problems that, at the very least, can damage customer relationships. As such, it is necessary to think of the expenditures on training at this position as an investment in the future of the organization not as an expense for the quarter in which it is incurred.

Best Practices: Key Skills To Develop

The outstanding firms in the research used systematic training to build extraordinary logistics and manufacturing organizations. Two firms in the research have used comprehensive training programs for decades. Their performance has been consistently outstanding. Their performance is sustained by relentless training, so no one ever gets left behind. Specifically, the best practices of these organizations focused on communications and interpersonal skills, two key skills for customer service representatives.

In addition, training in supervisory skills helps supervisors maintain their skills and work with their subordinates better. It also prepares these employees for promotion to supervisor. Unfortunately, our findings show that many logistics organizations are inconsistent in providing such training at the supervisory and operating levels. Not all firms provide supervisory training to managers, assuming that a college degree or job experience will suffice. In most degree programs, supervisory skills receive only cursory attention, if any, and on the job experience may as easily teach and reinforce bad supervisory practice as good. The best practice organizations involved in this research made supervisory training available to employees early in their tenure with the firm and required it when promotion was imminent.

Making It Work: A System Wide View

These firms also followed a principle emphasized in this research: training should begin by developing a common, consistent view of the logistics system for all employees. The logistics organization has control over the information and people to put this principle into practice. Too many firms do not, meaning that employees at all levels perceive different logistics systems. A point of clarification–this does not mean that every employee should see the logistics system in the same way. A variety of perspectives can be valuable to the development and improvement of logistics systems. Rather employees should see the same system; they should work from a common set of facts about the system.

Training goes beyond new employee orientation, although it certainly should be part of orientation. Often, long time employees lose sight of their role in the system as the system changes. If firms want adaptable, flexible employees, then they must maintain a concrete, fact based view of the system among those employees. Clearly, outside training organizations will not provide the content for this type of training, although they may facilitate creating the common view.

Comprehensive training serves multiple purposes. First, it creates a foundation for other training. The organization can readily define training needs in terms of the system. Second, it eases communication. If all employees are discussing the same system, they will have fewer

confusing conversations. They will speak the same language about the same issues if this kind of baseline training is performed. Third, training helps employees recognize the importance of the tasks they perform on the job.

Training Sources and Partnerships

The implications are that logistics managers should devote full time to training. That, of course, is impossible, so the development of training partnerships and relationships becomes very important. Where logistics managers play an important role, aside from assuming some training duties and assuring their own training, is in institutionalizing training in the organizational culture.

Training should be offered to employees through a variety of sources including community colleges, universities, training firms, web-based training, associations, and consulting firms. No one source is likely to provide everything, but properly blended, the training can become part of the work life of employees at all levels.

Training programs vary greatly in cost, time commitment, level of content, and instruction. As such, training programs and systems should be held accountable for their results. The results should be measured and the feedback should be used to improve the programs. Just as firms work closely with other suppliers to improve goods and other services, measurement programs should be used to help build stronger training partners, better training programs, and more effective training systems.

CUSTOMER SERVICE EMPLOYEES SUMMARY

Customer service representatives have a direct impact on how the firm is perceived by its customers. Their ability to answer customer questions, coordinate departments, and solve problems requires outstanding communication skills. Their role in organizations means they experience a lot of stress, but more importantly, incompetent customer service representatives influence the stress levels of everyone with whom they talk. They must be knowledgeable about a variety of issues and how these issues influence their ability to satisfy customers. In essence, their role is to gather and record information for the organization. How well they are trained influences the quality of the information they can gather and the image customers have of the firm.

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