

## CRITICAL INGREDIENTS FOR CALL CENTRE AGENTS' EFFECTIVENESS

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### Abstract

This study assessed the critical ingredients for call centre agents' effectiveness (skills/knowledge/ability/attitude, interpersonal skills, training and development, remuneration/motivation, teamwork) in managing customers and their needs. The study was undertaken in Durban, South Africa, and was conducted within a Public Sector service environment which comprised of four major call centres employing a total of 239 call centre agents. A sample of 151 call centre agents was drawn using the cluster sampling technique and a 63% response rate was achieved. These call centre agents were responsible for inbound calls only. Data was collected using a self developed, precoded questionnaire whose validity and reliability were statistically determined using Factor Analysis and Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha respectively. Data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The results indicate that remuneration/motivation, followed by teamwork, negligibly followed by training and development, interpersonal and other skills/knowledge/ability/attitudes are crucial ingredients for effectively managing customers and their needs. Based on the results of the study a model is designed and presents recommendations that, when implemented in call centre environments, have the potential to enhance agents' effectiveness in managing customers and their needs\*\*\*.

**Keywords:** Skills/Knowledge/Ability/Attitude, Interpersonal Skills, Training and Development, Remuneration/Motivation, Teamwork

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### 1 Introduction

Recent trends have displayed an increasing interest in the areas of services and services marketing (Hoffman & Bateson, 2006). Developing customer loyalty and building strong relationships is the central theme in managing customer markets (Donaldson & O' Toole, 2002). One of the key underlying principles in marketing is that every business should strive to retain and maintain a good relationship with existing customers as embarking on strategies to continually attract new customers to a business is often extremely expensive and very time consuming. Central to customer retention is understanding customers and their needs and managing them spontaneously and effectively. The need for such customer interaction triggered a mushrooming of call centres in many large business organisations, which serve as a means of

communication between the firm and its customers. Whilst the intentions were customer centeredness and the expectations were promising, the question on everyone's lips is whether the call centre is in fact an effective means of interacting with customers. Several factors (technology, infrastructure/sick building syndrome, customers themselves) may influence the effectiveness of call centres but a critical aspect to call centre success is their personnel. Human resources in general and skills/knowledge/ability/attitude, interpersonal skills, training and development, remuneration/motivation and teamwork in particular are instrumental in securing call centre effectiveness.

### **1.1 Skills/knowledge/ability/attitude**

There are critical skills that customer service employees should possess. These characteristics may include regular attendance at work, punctuality, taking pride in work, displaying confidence (Theron, Bothma & Du Toit, 2003), being affable and knowledgeable and willing to teach customers new things (Brown, 2007; Cavitt, 2010, Snow, 2007), showing friendly interest and willingness to help by carefully listening to problems (Carlaw, 2012; Obarski, 2010), being thoughtful and reassuring and following up with customers to enquire if they are satisfied with the outcome. Call centre customer service employees need to also have specific skills. These employees need to have professional telephone skills in order to make the first impression. Obviously a warm, friendly, sincere, courteous and tactful voice will make the customer's experience a positive one (Obarski, 2010) and being polite and calm is particularly imperative when dealing with frustrated consumers (Timm, 2008). The three part greeting which includes the agent providing his/her name, the department he/she works in and an effective greeting (Bailey & Leland, 2008; Obarski, 2010) is just as important as speaking clearly, naturally and distinctly (Ward, 2010), taking responsibility for the problem and having a facts database (Timm, 2008). Due to the high volumes of calls managed, such agents must be comfortable with using a pre-prepared telephone script, able to handle pressure, and have physical and mental strength to continuously ensure the delivery of quality service.

In call centres, when a customer calls the company's care line or help desk the call is autom

atically logged on a computer as is the conversation. The operator records the customers' name, contact details and problem onto special software. According to Theron *et al.* (2003), the agent may be able to help the customer immediately or may refer the customer. When customers dial into a call centre their calls can also be answered by an automated service called an Interactive Voice Response facility (known as IVR), welcoming them to the company's call centre. This IVR will inform the customer that their call is important and to please be patient in waiting for the next available agent. In the meantime, the customer has the option to listen to promotional deals or other offerings made by the firm (IBM, 2007). Many consumers find the waiting tedious and frustrating and options that are offered do not cater for their specific needs. Another common frustration is that there is a lack of consistency when calling a call centre as you do not know which agent will receive your call and if the agent is efficient. Certain operators are trained to handle certain types of queries; this is the main purpose behind the menu options in an IVR system so that the customer is channeled to the right agents. Interestingly, Theron *et al.* (2003) have noted a marked increase in call centres in South Africa but emphasizes that the country is falling short in terms of the people skills needed to implement and run such centres and the database technologies necessary to offer customer personalisation. Some reported weaknesses by customers regarding call centre agents include not being able to hear these employees/agents nor understand them, being cut off whilst being transferred, agents speaking down to customers, using jargon, putting customers on indefinite hold, passing the buck to another person or department to solve the problem, providing misleading or erroneous information and even being rude (Theron *et al.*, 2003; Ward, 2010), thereby leaving the consumer irate.

Hoffman & Bateson (2006) identified seven categories of unsavoury behaviour from front line staff, namely, apathy, brush-off, coldness, condescension, robotism, rulebook and the run-around approach. In many instances the wrong people are placed in the 'firing line' when they do not want to be there and are really not interested in customers, leaving the customer very disgruntled. These behaviours emphasize the importance of finding the right person for the job based on the right knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA's) (Armistead & Clarke, 1992). Since much of the job of call centre agents involves liaising with customers via the telephone it is critical to understand what skills are needed to facilitate this form of communication in a way that focuses on relationships rather than transaction-oriented approaches (Fulcher, 2013). Furthermore, previously, inbound call centre agents were responsible for logging calls, referring customers and escalating complaints but today they are seen as the 'face of the company' and are responsible for solving

customers' problems, thereby requiring them to have broader business knowledge, critical thinking and problem solving capabilities (Payle, 2012). Even contact centre managers must have specific skills in order to be effective. They need to be proactive, begin with the end in mind, put first things first, think win-win, seek to understand more than to be understood, create synergy and practice self-renewal (Captijn, 2013). Therefore, considerable care must be taken in ensuring a strict selection process in which candidates with the appropriate qualities, interpersonal skills and competencies are selected. In terms of selection and recruitment, the main aim is for the firm to hire people whose culture matches that of the organisation and these staff will ultimately deliver to the customers (Townsend, 2002). Candidates should also be assessed on how they would handle a difficult customer. In this regard, Overland (2005) and Twentyman (2008) encourage the use of open ended interview questions that enable the candidates to talk about how they have coped with incidents in the past in order to obtain an indication of how they are inclined to handle future situations. In addition, in order to cope with negative employees, management must offer to assist the employee through training.

### **1.2 Training and development**

With call centres being a growing sector, agents can no longer have basic skills but are required to adapt to a dynamic, fast paced business environment characterized by technological advancements and demanding clients (Payle, 2012). Training should be done on an on-going basis, on various aspects of customer service and dealing with customers, for example, how to be more attentive (Vikesland, 2002). Fundamental to training is the need to monitor the progress of employees. This can be done by obtaining feedback from consumers about the level of service provided by a particular member of staff and sometimes calls are recorded for the purpose of providing feedback to the employee on how the query was managed. Shelton (2003) undertook an audit of the service delivery levels at SABMiller and found that the CEO's mission was to win the customer's favour and loyalty especially since Miller's marked share was declining. The CEO's turnaround strategy involved firing poorly performing executives and implementing a personnel rating system to ensure that all service staff worked to the best of their abilities, leaving no room for poor performance. SABMiller spent close to R154 million (7.15% of company payroll) on training interventions to improve the level of service delivery (Shelton, 2003). Employees can also be observed by management on how they behaved in resolving a consumer query or complaint (Grote, 2005). Management needs to also include staff in the assessment by regularly asking them if they are coping and comfortable with their roles. In the event of weaknesses, these can be resolved

through training or other forms of support (Brown, 2007; Cavitt, 2010; Snow, 2007).

Training is important in ensuring that agents work better rather than faster and answers “How can we do it right the first time”, thereby reducing cost and enhancing worker pride, customer loyalty and quality. Whilst saving time reduces cost, doing things right the first time creates the positive feelings of confidence and success that come from mastering a job. It also ensures repeat business and attracting new customers (Blem, 1995; Brown, 2007; Cavitt, 2010).

Townsend (2002) studied an important paradox within the call centre environment. He undertook and assessment of why firms engage in extensive recruitment and training when the call centre industry records high staff turnover and burnout rates. Townsend (2002) found that especially when dealing with inbound calls, there has to be a perfect job-fit as the environment can be highly stressful. In some instances the job cycle times can be very short, leaving agents to deal with a high volume of calls; but in other instances the call cycle times are longer, more complicated and emotionally very draining. Hence, there is a strong need for training to develop skills (Armistead & Clarke, 1992). Townsend (2002) also agrees that although a large amount of resources are spent to conduct recruitment and training, which can be utilized elsewhere in the firm, the technical skills of agents has to be harnessed in order to develop their emotional labour abilities fully.

Most training manuals and employee handbooks are devoted to explaining the technical skills needed to perform the jobs. Unavoidable communication difficulties with customers require contact staff with training and interpersonal skills to prevent a bad situation from becoming worse. Programmes can be developed to train staff to use prescribed responses in given situations. This approach helps staff to anticipate exchanges and how to respond accordingly (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 2006). A popular English editorial entitled Callcentrehelper.com (2010) concluded that the most common skills needed in a call centre setting include good PC skills, excellent keyboard skills, good telephone manners, excellent communication skills and the ability to work well within a team.

### 1.3 Remuneration/motivation

All individuals have needs and, motivation is the drive that compels individuals to take action to satisfy their needs but different individuals are motivated by different things. According to Theron *et al.* (2003), some people may be easily motivated by financial gain and others by more time off, recognition, being given flexibility, authority and decision making and opportunities for improvement.

There are three commonly used theories about motivation known as needs theory, incentives theory and expectancy theory (Armistead & Clarke, 1992).

**Needs theory** states that the behaviour of individuals is driven by their needs. Maslow separated the needs into five types, commonly known as Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow’s needs are in ascending order and the needs at one level must be satisfied before those of the next level can be addressed (Armistead & Clarke, 1992; Cronje, du Toit, Motlatla & Marais, 2006; Lamb, Hair, McDaniel, Boshoff & Terblanche, 2004). McClelland extended Maslow’s theory and said that needs are more influenced by social context and will vary from one culture to another. He suggests that needs which must be satisfied are:

- The need for achievement to meet targets.
- The need for affiliation to belong to the work group.
- The need for power to control and influence others.

McClelland also suggests that the balance of a person’s needs does not change over time. If this is true then it has implications for recruitment, selection and career development. It indicates that there may be problems caused by the changing role of the service and support personnel in ways that may not match their individual needs (Cronje *et al.*, 2006; Lamb *et al.*, 2004). With regards to **incentives theory**, the philosophy is that the external factors influence motivation. Hertzberg highlighted two factors that are important (Armistead & Clarke, 1992; George & Jones, 2009):

- ✓ Hygiene factors which include aspects of the job which a person expects to find in the job, for example, working conditions, wages and salary.
- ✓ Motivation factors which include achievement, recognition, responsibility and money.

Hertzberg implies that the hygiene factors in themselves will not motivate but if they are lacking then a person will be de-motivated. Money is complex and can be seen as both a hygiene and a motivating factor. The **expectancy theory** concentrates on how people make choices in the way in which they behave. It suggests that based on valence (attractiveness of the specific outcome), instrumentality and expectancy, individuals will assess what they are required to do and make a rational assessment of what rewards will be gained from it (Cronje *et al.*, 2006). For example, people will perform well if they feel that they will be highly rewarded for their efforts (Armistead & Clarke, 1992).

In addition to understanding the importance that motivation exerts on the level of performance of individuals, management has to remember that unlike goods, services are produced and consumed simultaneously (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004). Also, motivation should be driven from the top down, but in the field of customer service, the individual service provider has to motivate him/herself in order to excel at the task of providing good service levels at all times. The success of firms often varies according to the overall spirit that exists among employees.

Management naturally wants to achieve a high standard of service amongst staff and aim to create a motivating environment where staff can be fully committed to the customer (Blem, 1995). Theron *et al.* (2003:161) suggest that staff should try these 5 steps to start motivating themselves:

- ❖ Put up quotations that you find motivating around your workstation so that they are visible throughout the day.

- ❖ Develop a strong self concept, because if you feel good about yourself this will impact on your performance.

- ❖ Set goals and do your best to achieve them.

- ❖ Read motivational books and messages that will make an impression on you.

- ❖ Have fun. The more fun you have, the more motivated you will be.

In addition, management needs to acknowledge and appreciate the extra efforts of staff. Public commendation and praise can motivate one to keep performing better each time.

#### 1.4 Teamwork

Service teams are important as it gives individuals the chance to learn from others to work towards achieving common goals. Teams also allow members to improve the value of their own KSA's in order to stimulate the flexibility of the team (Armistead & Clarke, 1992). It also gives managers the opportunity to act as coach to their teams. The achievements of the service team are to attain customer satisfaction and effectiveness in resource productivity. These will be measures of the effectiveness of the team, but the attainment of these achievements depends on:

- The clarity of what they are trying to achieve and who is involved in the process.

- The motivation of the individual team members and the system and process which allows the tasks to be done.

- The actions of the team leader.

According to Armistead and Clarke (1992), the composition of the service teams should include front line people and back room people, so that there is no danger of both groups becoming isolated. Teams do not simply come together and perform well. They go through four stages in their development to becoming an effective team. These four stages as outlined by Armistead & Clarke (1992) are:

- Forming whereby the team is simply a group of individuals without clear purpose of their tasks and duties.

- Storming arises as the team is often in conflict about the direction of goals and nature of leadership, and the role of individuals within the team (Adler, 2003).

- Norming occurs when the team becomes clear on tasks and goals and individuals start to become strongly committed to other members of the team (Fugaro, 2008). There is strong peer group

pressure for individuals to conform to the values of the team.

- Performing, the final stage, where the real work is done with the team members sharing and supporting one another (Adler, 2003; Fugaro, 2008). It would seem that the clearer the nature of the tasks, the greater the degree of shared values of the service team members and the more likely it is that a service team will perform well; each member must understand their role within a team (Fugaro, 2008). Adler (2003) supports the view of team building and stresses that innovative ways of doing business to improve productivity should also be a goal.

Rushmer (1997) uncovered several emergent themes in her research into team building which included the freedom to speak and get to know each other, accepting leaders within a group, pooling together efforts for the benefit of the team, team spirit, having fun and motivation and a sense of achievement in terms of the tasks and outcomes of the team. The role of the service manager as a team builder depends on their ability to act as coach to the team. A good coach adopts five roles, namely, teaching, supporting, leading, counselling and confronting (Tom Peters cited in Armistead & Clarke, 1992).

Kaye and Kleiner (1996) cited the work of John Wooden's pyramid for use as a teaching tool in their research. The cornerstone of Wooden's pyramid, according to Kaye & Kleiner (1996), was industriousness and enthusiasm because it is impossible to excel at something if you are not truly devoted to it. In addition, the characteristics of friendship, cooperation, and loyalty are also critical. The 'anchor blocks' of the pyramid are self control and integrity. Completing the second tier of the pyramid are alertness and initiative characteristics. The third tier which is the heart and soul of the pyramid entails conditioning, skill and team spirit. And finally, the two tiers completing the pyramid comprise of poise, confidence and competitive greatness. Kaye and Kleiner (1996) list ambition, adaptability, resourcefulness, faith, fight, patience, reliability, integrity, honesty and sincerity as the threads holding the blocks together. They liken coaching to face-to-face leadership that pulls people from diverse backgrounds together and treats them like equal partners. Wooden's coaching style respects individual uniqueness and abilities. A business coach must create an atmosphere that promotes individual growth and talent (Kaye & Kleiner, 1996).

Having undertaken an assessment of the attributes needed by front line staff in assisting them to execute their duties and responsibilities properly, it is obvious that this human resource component is one of the most critical aspects of customer service delivery. Another aspect which is also important is the customers themselves. A thorough understanding of how customers base their choice in terms of services provided, the levels of service delivery expected and building customer loyalty is imperative.

### **1.5 Aim of the study**

This study assesses the critical ingredients for call centre agents' effectiveness (skills/knowledge/ability/attitude, interpersonal skills, training and development, remuneration/motivation, teamwork) in managing customers and their needs.

## **2 Research design**

### **2.1 Respondents**

The population comprised of 239 call centre agents employed by this Public Service organisation within its four call centre's in the Durban area. Using Sekaran's (2003) population-to-sample size table, a corresponding minimum sample of 148 was needed, thereby confirming the adequacy of the sample of 151 call centre agents. The probability sampling technique of cluster sampling was used. According to Sekaran (2003), in cluster sampling, groups or chunks of elements that have heterogeneity among members within each group are chosen for study. The adequacy of the sample was determined using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (0.880) and the Barlett's Test of Sphericity (1765.538,  $p = 0.000$ ) for factors impacting on Human Resource, which respectively indicated suitability and significance. The results indicate that the normality and homoscedasticity preconditions are satisfied.

In terms of the composition of the sample, there were more females (57%) than males (43%). The majority of the sample were between 20-29 years (67.5%), followed by 30-39 years (20.5%) and then 40-49 years (10.6%), thereby indicating that the sample is predominantly young, which is typical of employment in a call centre environment. Black agents constituted the majority (55.6%), followed by Indian (25.2%), Coloured (15.9%) and then White (3.3%) employees. The majority of the agents were in service for 1-3 years (51.7%) with more or less an equal distribution of years of service in the other categories (1-11 months, 4-6 years and 7 years and over). The majority of the agents have a high school qualification (56.3%) followed by those with a diploma (36.4%), whilst only 7.3% has a degree. More agents are employed on a full-time (66.2%) as opposed to a part-time basis (33.8%).

In terms of call variables, the majority of agents take an average of 100-109 calls a day (21.2%), followed by 70-79 calls a day (19.9%), have a waiting time (length of time a customer waits on the line before his/her call is answered by an agent) of 0-5 minutes (55.6%), have an abandonment rate (number of callers that eventually disconnect) of 0-5% (86.1%), secure a talk time (duration of call) of 0-5 minutes (84.2%), a wrap-up time of 0-5 minutes (98.7%) and report a queue time of 0-5 minutes (96.7%).

### **2.2 Measuring Instrument**

Data was collected using a self-developed, pre-coded, self administered questionnaire consisting of two sections. Section A dealt purely with the biographical (gender, age, race, tenure, education and employment status) and operational data of call centre agents. Section B related to the sub-dimension of Human Resource and tapped agent's perceptions of the critical ingredients for call centre agents' effectiveness (skills/knowledge/ability/attitude, interpersonal skills, training and development, remuneration/motivation, teamwork) in managing customers and their needs. Whilst Section A was nominally scaled with precoded option categories, Section B required respondents to rate each item using the Likert Scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The questionnaire was formulated on the basis of identifying recurring themes that surfaced while conducting the literature review. These ensured face and content validity. Furthermore, in-house pretesting was adopted to assess the suitability of the instrument. Pilot testing was also carried out on twenty call centre agents to test the appropriateness of questions and their understanding thereof. No inadequacies were reported and the final questionnaire was considered appropriate in terms of relevance and construction.

### **2.3 Research procedure**

The research was only conducted after ethical clearance was obtained for the study and upon completion of the pilot study.

### **2.4 Measures/statistical analysis of the questionnaire**

The validity of the questionnaire was assessed using Factor Analysis. A principal component analysis was used to extract initial factors and an iterated principle factor analysis was performed using SPSS with an Orthogonal Varimax Rotation. In terms of the validity, 5 critical ingredients for call centre agents' effectiveness in managing customers and their needs were identified (3.960, 3.950, 3.456, 3.443, and 3.079). The items were also reflected as having a very high level of internal consistency and reliability, with the overall Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha being 0.925 with item reliabilities ranging from 0.920 to 0.926.

### **2.5 Administration of the measuring instrument**

The survey was confined to the call centre agents employed within the four call centre's in Durban,

South Africa. The online survey was administered to a sample of call centre agents in Durban, South Africa using QuestionPro. The agents were required to completely answer Sections A and B of the questionnaire and then submit their responses via QuestionPro return mail. Informed consent was obtained by an authorization letter that accompanied the questionnaire. All participation was voluntary.

## 2.6 Statistical analysis of the data

Descriptive statistics (mean, variance, standard deviation) and inferential statistics (correlation, t-test,

ANOVA and multiple regression) were used to evaluate the objectives and hypotheses.

## 3 Results

### 3.1 Descriptive Statistics

Agent's perception of the critical ingredients needed for managing customers and their needs effectively were evaluated using a 1-5 point Likert scale. The higher the mean score value, the more satisfied agents are with the specific sub-dimension or ingredient (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics - Sub-dimensions of Human Resources

Sub-dimension	Mean	Std Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Skills, knowledge, ability, attitude	3.91	0.6143	1.56	5.00
Interpersonal skills	3.90	0.6246	1.57	5.00
Training and development	3.69	0.6930	1.33	5.00
Remuneration/motivation	2.96	0.8757	1.00	5.00
Teamwork	3.65	0.7509	1.80	5.00
<b>Overall score</b>	<b>3.62</b>	<b>0.5928</b>	<b>1.87</b>	<b>5.00</b>

Table 1 indicates agents' perceptions of the extent to which the critical ingredients, needed for managing customers and their needs effectively, are met, which in decreasing level (based on Mean score values) are:-

- ✚ Skills, knowledge, ability, attitude (Mean = 3.91)
- ✚ Interpersonal skills (Mean = 3.90)
- ✚ Training and development (Mean = 3.69)
- ✚ Teamwork (Mean = 3.65)
- ✚ Remuneration/motivation (Mean = 2.96)

Whilst agents do believe that they have the skills, knowledge, ability, attitude, receive training and development and engage in teamwork, remuneration/motivation presents gaps and there is room for improvement in terms of all of the sub-dimensions of Human Resources.

In order to assess the areas for improvement, frequency analyses were conducted on each of the sub-dimensions. In terms of skills, knowledge, ability and attitude, 14.6% of the agents disagreed and a further 7.3% of the agents strongly disagreed that they have complete authority to make decisions to satisfy customer complaints. Furthermore, 7.9% of the agents disagreed and a further 6.6% of the agents strongly disagreed that they experience mental exhaustion and physical strain and that it does not hinder their communication with customers', implying that mental exhaustion does hinder communication between agents and customers. On a positive note, however, in terms of skills, knowledge, ability and attitude, 37.7% of the agents agreed and a further 49% strongly agreed that they fully understood the responsibilities associated with their job. Furthermore, 44.4% of the agents agreed and a further 42.4% strongly agreed that they focused on delivering quality service rather than quantity.

In terms of interpersonal skills, 9.3% of the agents disagreed and a further 7.3% of the agents strongly disagreed that they felt comfortable enough to inform the supervisor when they felt they were not coping with work pressure. Furthermore, 12.6% of the agents disagreed and 11.3% of the agents strongly disagreed that they felt comfortable with using a pre-prepared telephone script when taking a call. On a more positive note, in terms of interpersonal skills, 36.4% of the agents agreed and a further 51.7% of the agents strongly agreed that they give off their best with every call that they handle. A further 43.7% of the agents agreed and 43% strongly agreed that they were always courteous to all customers.

In terms of training and development, 17.9% of the agents disagreed and another 13.9% strongly disagreed that they found their jobs fulfilling in terms of opportunities for growth and advancement. A further 8.6% of the agents disagreed and 5.3% of the agents strongly disagreed that they have been provided with comprehensive manuals containing sufficient information to be able to handle complaints or queries efficiently.

In terms of remuneration/motivation which scored the lowest (Mean = 2.96), 21.2% of the agents disagreed and 25.8% of the agents strongly disagreed that they were pleased with the rewards and recognition that they receive when they have performed well. Furthermore, 24.5% of the agents disagreed and 28.5% of the agents strongly disagreed that management always gives its staff good incentives to motivate them to work harder. Finally, 23.2% of the agents disagreed and a further 17.2% strongly disagreed that they believe that their salary was market related.

In terms of teamwork, 12.6% of the agents disagreed and 5.3% of the agents strongly disagreed

that their team leader/manager uses effective techniques to encourage high achievement. Furthermore, 15.9% of the agents disagreed and 9.3% of the agents strongly disagreed that they were provided with continuous feedback to help improve their job performance.

There exists significant intercorrelations amongst the critical ingredients (skills/knowledge/ability/attitude, interpersonal skills, training and development, remuneration/motivation and teamwork) needed by call centre agents for effectively managing customers and their needs.

### 3.2 Inferential statistics

#### 3.2.1 Hypothesis 1:

**Table 2.** Pearson Correlation (r): Intercorrelations of the critical ingredients of Human Resources (N = 151)

Critical ingredient	r/p	skills/knowledge/ ability/attitude	interpersonal skills	training and development	remuneration/ motivation	Team- work
Skills/knowledge/ ability/attitude	r	1				
Interpersonal skills	r p	0.637 <b>0.000**</b>	1			
Training and development	r p	0.689 <b>0.000**</b>	0.696 <b>0.000**</b>	1		
Remuneration/ Motivation	r p	0.524 <b>0.000**</b>	0.442 <b>0.000**</b>	0.648 <b>0.000**</b>	1	
Teamwork	r p	0.635 <b>0.000**</b>	0.583 <b>0.000**</b>	0.742 <b>0.000**</b>	0.600 <b>0.000**</b>	1

\*\* p < 0.01

Table 2 indicates that the critical ingredients needed for effectively managing customers and their needs significantly intercorrelate with each other at the 1% level of significance. Therefore, hypothesis 1 may be accepted. Table 2 also reflects that strong relationships were noted between training and development and teamwork ( $r = 0.742$ ) and interpersonal relations ( $r = 0.696$ ) respectively.

#### 3.2 Influence of Biographical data

The influence of the biographical variables (age, race, tenure, gender and employment status) on agents' perceptions of the critical ingredients needed for

managing customers and their needs effectively was assessed using ANOVA and t-tests (Table 3 - Table 4).

#### 3.2.1 Hypothesis 2:

Agents varying in biographical profiles (age, race, tenure, educational qualifications, gender, employment status) significantly differ in their perceptions of the critical ingredients needed for effectively managing customers and their needs.

**Table 3.** Biographical variables and the critical ingredients needed for managing customers and their needs effectively

ANOVA									
Critical ingredient for managing customers and their needs	Biographical Variable								
	Age		Race		Tenure		Educational Qualification		
	f	p	F	p	f	p	f	p	
Skills, knowledge, ability, attitude	0.760	0.470	2.186	0.092	1.635	0.184	1.421	0.245	
Interpersonal skills	0.217	0.805	1.864	0.138	2.993	0.033*	0.526	0.592	
Training and development	0.079	0.924	1.735	0.162	2.857	0.039*	2.118	0.124	
Remuneration/motivation	0.709	0.494	2.299	0.080	1.268	0.288	0.135	0.874	
Teamwork	0.318	0.728	0.694	0.557	1.452	0.230	2.070	0.130	

t-TEST									
Critical ingredient for	Biographical Variable								



managing customers and their needs	Gender		Employment status	
	t	p	t	p
Skills, knowledge, ability, attitude	-1.360	0.176	1.568	0.119
Interpersonal skills	0.296	0.767	0.887	0.377
Training and development	-0.210	0.834	0.609	0.544
Remuneration/motivation	0.104	0.917	0.556	0.579
Teamwork	-0.396	0.693	0.083	0.934

Tables 3 indicates that agents varying in biographical profiles (age, race, tenure, educational qualifications, gender, employment status) do not differ significantly in their perceptions of the critical ingredients needed for effectively managing customers and their needs, except for the influence of tenure on perceptions of

interpersonal relations and training and development respectively. Hypothesis 2 may therefore, be partially accepted. In order to assess where these significant differences lie with regards to tenure, mean differences were analysed (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Tenure – Mean differences

Critical Ingredient	Tenure Categories	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Interpersonal skills	1 month - 11 months	23	3.9068	0.55430
	1 - 3 years	78	3.9487	0.57971
	4-6 years	25	3.5886	0.83025
	7 years and over	25	4.0743	0.49850
	<b>Total</b>	<b>151</b>	<b>3.9035</b>	<b>0.62457</b>
Training and development	1 month - 11 months	23	3.8116	0.59523
	1 - 3 years	78	3.7201	0.68032
	4-6 years	25	3.3333	0.82916
	7 years and over	25	3.8133	0.58198
	<b>Total</b>	<b>151</b>	<b>3.6854</b>	<b>0.69297</b>

Table 4 indicates that agents who are working for 7 years and over in the call centre believe strongly that interpersonal skills and training and development received are imperative for effectively managing customers and their needs followed by similar views of new agents (1 month to 3 years). Agents who are 4 to 6 years in the call centre are not convinced that agents have the right interpersonal skills and the appropriate level and amount on training needed for effectively managing customers and their needs.

### 3.2.2 Hypothesis 3

The combined critical ingredients (skills/knowledge/ability/attitude, interpersonal skills, training and development, remuneration/motivation and teamwork) significantly account for the variance in effectively managing customers and their needs (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Multiple Regression: Critical ingredients for managing customers and their needs

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.903 <sup>a</sup>	0.815	0.814	0.25588
2	0.946 <sup>b</sup>	0.895	0.894	0.19320
3	0.975 <sup>c</sup>	0.950	0.949	0.13435
4	0.990 <sup>d</sup>	0.979	0.979	0.08622
5	1.000 <sup>e</sup>	1.000	1.000	0.00000

Model Dimension	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	0.774	0.113		6.850	0.000
Training and development	0.772	0.030	0.903	25.613	0.000
2 (Constant)	0.790	0.085		9.249	0.000
Training and development	0.566	0.030	0.662	18.934	0.000
Remuneration/motivation	0.252	0.024	0.372	10.647	0.000
3 (Constant)	0.268	0.072		3.698	0.000
Training and development	0.398	0.025	0.465	16.129	0.000
Remuneration/motivation	0.222	0.017	0.329	13.393	0.000
Skills, knowledge, ability, attitude	0.314	0.025	0.325	12.612	0.000
4 (Constant)	0.210	0.047		4.512	0.000
Training and development	0.286	0.018	0.334	16.238	0.000
Remuneration/motivation	0.190	0.011	0.280	17.420	0.000
Skills, knowledge, ability, attitude	0.259	0.016	0.268	15.758	0.000
Team work	0.215	0.015	0.272	14.522	0.000
5 (Constant)	-2.325E-15	0.000		0.000	1.000
Training and development	0.200	0.000	0.234	1.531E8	0.000
Remuneration/motivation	0.200	0.000	0.295	2.662E8	0.000
Skills, knowledge, ability, attitude	0.200	0.000	0.207	1.698E8	0.000
Team work	0.200	0.000	0.253	1.963E8	0.000
Interpersonal skills	0.200	0.000	0.211	1.758E8	0.000

Table 5 indicates that the combined critical ingredients account for 100% (Adjusted  $R^2 = 1.000$ ) of the variance in effectively managing customers and their needs. Table 5 also indicates that these dimensions impact on effectively managing customers and their needs in varying degrees as indicated in the Beta values which are as follows:-

- Remuneration/motivation (Beta = 0.295)
- Teamwork (Beta = 0.253)
- Training and development (Beta = 0.234)
- Interpersonal skills (Beta = 0.211)
- Skills, knowledge, ability, attitude (Beta = 0.207).

The results indicate that remuneration/motivation (Beta = 0.295) followed by teamwork (Beta = 0.253), negligibly followed by training and development (Beta = 0.234), interpersonal skills (Beta = 0.211) and skills, knowledge, ability and attitude (Beta = 0.207) are crucial ingredients for effectively managing customers and their needs.

#### 4 Discussion of results

In terms of the sub-dimension of skills, knowledge, ability and attitude of call centre agents, the study found that agents did not agree that they had complete authority to make decisions to satisfy customer complaints. Agents also reported that mental exhaustion and physical strain hindered their communication with customers. The finding was supported by research conducted by Armistead, Kiely, Hole & Prescott (2002) who reported that agents understand the strong need by management to monitor time pressures and the tightly controlled nature of the work undertaken. However, the workload was found to be tiring and uneven and caused their energy to wane as the shift proceeded. Heathfield (2012) concluded that employee empowerment is a great tool and strategy for accomplishing work, customer service and employee motivation.

In terms of the critical ingredient of interpersonal skills of call centre agents, the study found that agents were not comfortable enough informing supervisors when they felt they were not coping with the work pressures. Research by

Grandey, Dickter & Sin (2004) found that customer service providers are typically subordinate to their consumers and their interactions with members of the public tend to be routine and scripted, thereby constraining opportunities for personal expression. SAB Miller has instituted an Internal Management Process (IMP) which allows call centre agents to meet managers on a monthly basis to discuss performance and annual performance reviews (Best Employers: SA, 2008). Employees should always feel comfortable to let management know if they are not coping (Best Employers: SA, 2008; Brown, 2007; Cavitt, 2010; Snow, 2007). Furthermore, it was noted that agents reported that they were uncomfortable using pre-prepared telephone scripts when taking a call. Research found that it is essential for all call centre agents to work out a telephone script which they can use to answer the phone, welcome a caller, enquire what the problem is or direct the call to a specific person (Deery, Iverson & Walsh, 2002; Theron *et al.*, 2003). However, Kahn (1990) found that people can disengage themselves by performing tasks at some distance from their preferred selves. Performing their roles as scripts causes agents to become physically uninvolved, cognitively unvigilant and emotionally disconnected. Furthermore, Reference for Business (2012) cautions that although telemarketing is cost effective and easier to execute because the entire dialogue is scripted, the human element in customer relationships is critical in making the effort successful, suggesting that scripts are not always successful in resolving customer queries.

In terms of the critical ingredient of training and development of call centre agents, the study reported that agents found that their jobs were not fulfilling in terms of opportunities for growth and advancement and that they further disagreed that they were provided with comprehensive training manuals and information to be able to assist them in handling complaints and queries efficiently. Similarly, Frenkel, Tam, Korczynski & Shire (1998) found that training for job proficiency and meeting standards of customer service takes precedence over training for career development. Thompson, Callaghan & Van den Brock (2004) also concur that work in the call centre is stressful due to high performance standards demanded and there are fewer training and development opportunities and if training is undertaken, it is usually used as a form of control. Call centre work is characterized as being monotonous as therefore lacks career opportunities (Garavan *et al.*, 2008). However, contrary to these views, McLuhan (1998) found that a combination of human resource strategies embracing motivation, reward systems, training and development and career progression has helped in the transformation of the call centres into environments which have no difficulty in attracting and retaining staff. In the current study it was also found that a strong relationship exists between training and development

and teamwork and interpersonal skills respectively, thereby implying that training call centre agents can generate multiple benefits in terms of enhancing agent effectiveness.

In terms of the critical ingredient of remuneration and motivation of call centre agents, the study found that agents were displeased with the rewards and recognition that they received when they performed well. This finding is ironic as the findings of this study reflect that agents perceive remuneration/motivation to have the greatest impact on the effectiveness of agents in managing customers and their needs. Agents also believed that management did not always give its staff incentives to motivate them to work harder and many agents believed that the salaries that they earned were not market related. In this regard, Wallace, Eagleson & Waldersee (2000) discovered that recruitment of highly motivated employees meant that the organisation did not have to invest skill and time to develop their skills. When their motivation was depleted, they were encouraged to leave and were replaced with new, fresh and motivated agents. Furthermore, Mahesh & Kasturi (2006) emphasized that reward and recognition from external sources is critical to improving agent's performance. Armistead *et al.* (2002) found that salary was the best aspect of the agent's job followed by people contact.

In terms of the critical ingredient of teamwork amongst the call centre agents, the study found that agents disagreed that the leader/manager used effective techniques to encourage high achievement. They also disagreed that they were provided with continuous feedback to help improve their job performance. Similar findings were obtained by Thompson & Wallace (1996) who noted that due to strict control measures enforced in the call centre (management strongly enforces decisions and channels information downwards) team members have little impact on team management or on organisation of work. This happens despite the finding that teamwork is important to agents and enabled improvements in work performance (Armistead *et al.*, 2002). Furthermore, team leaders and supervisors play a vital role in managing the performance of agents.

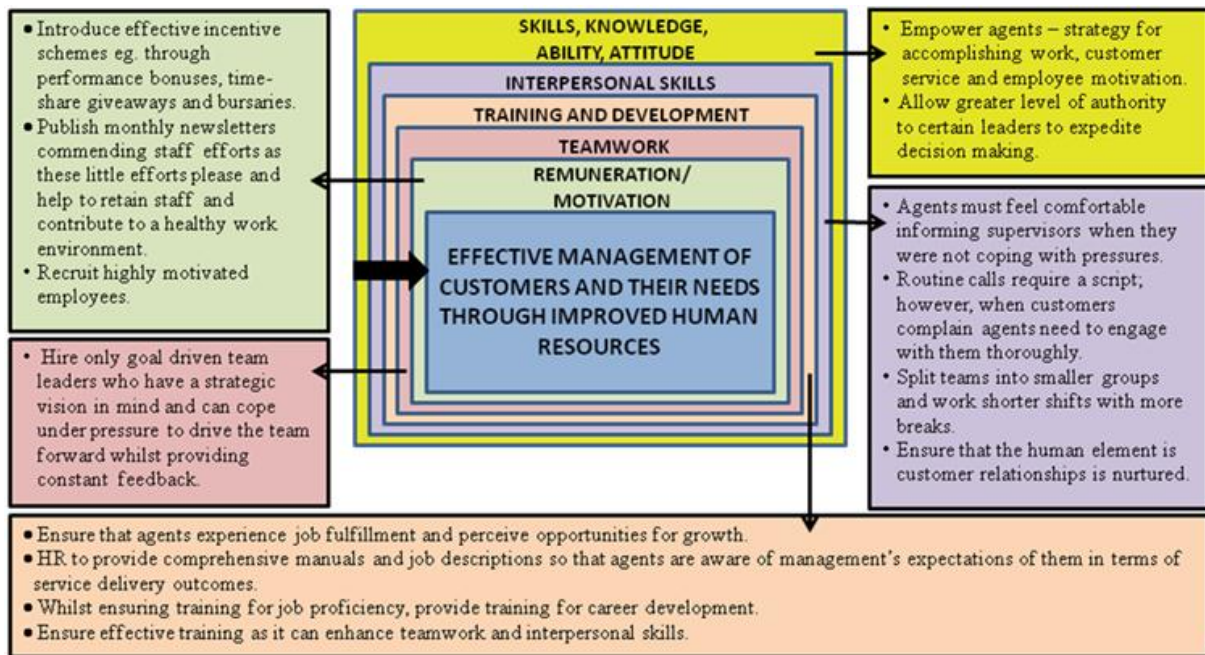
## 5 Recommendations and conclusion

If managed correctly a customer call centre can contribute to customer satisfaction and retention in the long run, but many organisations fail to capitalize on their operations and reap the long term rewards. Call centre agents are critical in the service delivery process and their skills, knowledge, attitude, ability, motivation and training are imperative factors to be managed by the organisation. These agents serve as the face of the organisation or the point of first contact between the customer and the organisation and as such need the necessary support and training

from management to be able to empower them to perform their jobs proficiently. The research also indicates that the stringent control policies and monitoring within the call centre environment coupled with the high stress levels often leads to high turnover rates. There is no doubt that loftier thoughtfulness needs to be given to Human Resource issues within call centres in order to improve the overall effectiveness of its operations. Figure 1 depicts the impact of the critical ingredients (skills/knowledge/ability/attitude, interpersonal skills, training and development, remuneration/motivation and teamwork) on the management of customers and their needs based on the results of the multiple regression analyses, with remuneration/motivation being at the innermost part of the figure indicating its greatest impact yet the analyses of the descriptive statistics reflect that these call centre agents are least satisfied with remuneration/motivation in the organisation. Likewise, based on the results of the

multiple regression, skills, knowledge, ability, attitude lies in the outmost segment as it is perceived to have the least impact on managing customers and their needs. Hence, as one moves from the outermost segment to the innermost segment, the impact of the ingredients on managing customers and their needs increases as indicated by the black, block arrow. The model presents recommendations for enhancing each of the critical ingredients so that each could have a positive and rippling effect on the other thereby, ultimately enhancing the management of customers and their needs (Figure 1). In addition to taking cognisance of the recommendations, it is imperative to note that the management style of the employees and the characteristics of employees themselves are central to confirming a healthy work environment that supports performance and effectiveness. Creating the right work environment to enhance call centre effectiveness is as much the employees' responsibility as it is management's.

**Figure 1.** Recommendations to improve the critical ingredients of Human Resources in order to effectively manage customers and their needs



## 6 Recommendations for future research

This study was undertaken within a public service call centre organisation and hence, the results of the study have internal validity in this institution. In order to enhance generalisability, it would be advantageous to undertake a similar study in other call centre environments in a variety of service environments in both the public and private sectors. This study also includes a call centre environment where only inbound calls are made and hence, it would be useful to assess similar dimensions in an out-bound call setting as speaking to someone who has chosen to interact with you is completely different from speaking to

someone who was not expecting your interaction. It will also be interesting to note if there are similarities with regards to the human resource gaps experienced by inbound and outbound agents within the public and private sector service organisations.

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