

Measuring Up to “Employer of Choice” Standards

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BY GREG LEVIN

» **“EMPLOYER OF CHOICE”[®] (EOC)** is a term used to categorize a company where job applicants are dying to come aboard, and where existing employees are dying to stay. It’s a trendy buzzword, indeed—like “world-class” or “best-in-breed,” but one that contains a little more teeth than the others, in that there are certain tangible characteristics and qualifications that EOC organizations share. In fact, to be truly considered an EOC organization, companies must complete a rather rigid certification process established by Employer of Choice, Inc.

Fear not. This article is not meant to scare you into thinking that your enterprise—nor your contact center—is inadequate if it hasn’t at least begun the grueling EOC certification process. On the contrary; this article is intended to help contact center professionals realize that attaining the official EOC stamp of approval isn’t nearly as important as understanding and embracing the key facets of culture, leadership and people that Employer of Choice, Inc.—and other HR experts—have found to enable

organizations to continuously attract, acquire and retain the highest caliber employees.

This is not to say that organizations that shoot for formal EOC certification are wasting their time. Achieving official EOC status shows everyone that the organization has met some rather lofty standards with regard to people management, and the EOC stamp certainly serves as a powerful PR tool that can greatly enhance employee recruiting and retention. But hundreds of other companies have built a strong reputation as excellent employers without ever even starting down the paved path to EOC certification. In other words, it is entirely possible to become an employer of choice without becoming an Employer of Choice[®].

Are You a Choice Employer?

Even if your organization opts not to strive for EOC certification, it’s a good idea to at least practice in your contact center what EOC’s ruling body preaches.

And what do they preach? The Herman Group—the parent company of Employer of Choice, Inc.—has conducted rigorous research on what has the biggest impact on job candidates’ and existing employees’ employment decisions. Following are the eight criteria cited by the majority of study respondents, along with several examples of how real-life contact centers have emulated such criterion.

1. Company. People want to work for organizations that are financially healthy, well respected and forward-thinking. While your contact center doesn’t have total control over how the public perceives your company as a whole, there is much you as a manager or supervisor can do to promote your center/organization’s strength and identity to capture the attention of applicants, and at the same time fortify the commitment of existing employees.

U.S. Cellular provides a prime example of how this can be done. Manny Torres, senior H.R. director of talent acquisition for U.S. Cellular, views the

recruitment stage as a way to sell its unique contact center environment and corporate culture to potential job candidates. The company relies heavily on the Web and alluring text/visuals to help attract attention and distinguish it from the competition. "There is a prominent [Web] page on our [online] Career Center that speaks to the uniqueness of how we operate our call centers," Torres explains. "We have an employment brand with a certain look and feel that complements our culture. We use that brand to send our postcards, email blasts, and college career and referral program sites all the time."

The online Career Center and Customer Care Microsite features a description of the organization's highly customer-centric service philosophy, details on each call center location and the agent position itself, a "call to action" (challenging applicants to embark on an exciting career), as well as an automated application page (featuring a series of questions to gauge applicants' experience/core competencies) that can be filled out online.

An outside advertising agency—TMP-Worldwide—was involved in every aspect of creating the center's Announce and Attract strategy. As Torres says, recruiting qualified agents is all about "marketing, marketing, marketing. ...What is your message? Why you[r center]? What do you offer to gain? Is your 'call to action' defined?"

2. Culture. Of course, merely telling the world that your contact center features a unique and progressive work culture isn't enough to be regarded as a choice employer. Candidates need to see that culture in action, or at least hear about it from satisfied employees. "Are employees empowered, engaged, accountable?" asks Roger Herman of the Herman Group. "Do they look forward to coming to work because of the relationships between co-workers?"

The answers to such questions are a resounding "yes" at places like Cablevision's Technical Support Group in Woodbury, N.Y, where agents are empowered to work together on a variety of committees that focus on improving such key areas as incentives, quality monitoring and centerwide communication. "Agents actively participate in many aspects of the center," says Peter Hall, managing director of the Cablevision contact center, "including how the center looks, recognition and incentive programs, celebratory events, as well as the development and delivery of weekly training topics." In addition, the company's product team regularly seeks input from the center's agents prior to the rollout of a new product or service, knowing that agents can impart invaluable information regarding customers' expectations and opinions. Further enhancing the contact center's positive culture is a heavy emphasis on fun. Barbeques, bands, deejays and games are commonplace, and inspire agents to consistently perform at high levels when the parties have ended. (FYI: The average tenure of agents at Cablevision is 3 and a half years.)

Canadian Tire Financial Services (CTFS) has a similar agent-centric culture in place at its contact center in Welland, Ontario. CTFS not only considers agent input when making crucial decisions—it heavily relies on it. During special monthly staff meetings, agents are asked to share their suggestions for improving the customer experience, the center's technology, the agent job itself, and the business in general. "We really try to make agents part of the business," explains Scott Williams, director of customer service at CTFS. "We have a very employee-focused culture; we do whatever we can to respond to their needs."

3. Leadership. According to the Herman Group study, employees want to work for leaders who are accessible, communicative and sensitive to internal and external factors influencing success. Few other contact center professionals exhibit such noble qualities more than Richard Moore, director of contact center operations for specialty insurance provider Assurant Solutions. Just ask his colleague, Cindy Hamilton. "He treats everyone with respect and common decency. He respects the uniqueness of each individual and that our associates have the passion to excel in their jobs. Richard has an open-door policy that always allows his team to express themselves and their ideas."

And Moore is into expressing himself, as well. Each morning, he emails a motivational quote to his 120 agents. One of his favorites is a quip from Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Every great and commanding moment in the annals of the world is the triumph of somebody's enthusiasm."

As Moore explains, "I place great value on words. A lot of inspiration can be found in them."

He places even greater value on his agents, keeping in constant contact with them through group meetings, one-on-one sessions, and informal chats. Moore lets agents know that his open-door policy doesn't have set hours, and extends to matters unrelated to business. "[When it's time to go home and] an employee is clearly upset about an issue and needs your time—whether it's personal or business—it doesn't matter. If it's upsetting them, it's impacting their ability to do their job. I've worked for managers who would ignore it and walk right out the door, or others who would say,

'Can we talk about this tomorrow?' That doesn't solve anything. You have to show that you're a human being and do a little bit of hand-holding. I have a responsibility to my team to be there for them."

And with Moore leading, agents want to be there for him; the center's turnover rate is well below the industry average of 19 percent—half of which is the result of upward movement within the organization.

4. Care of people. Respondents from the Herman Group study indicated that they covet organizations that respect a healthy work/life balance, emphasize wellness for employees (and their families), and that have flexible policies regarding where, when and how people work.

No doubt, those respondents would be tickled to work as an agent at one of Virgin Mobile Canada's two customer care centers (in Toronto, Ontario; and Riverview, New Brunswick). While many centers *claim* to be highly employee-focused, Virgin Mobile Canada adheres strongly to—and demonstrates through action—a "people first" philosophy, believing whole-heartedly that happy agents hold to the key to lasting business success.

"It just makes sense to us: if our people are happy and motivated, our customers are going to have a great experience," says Nancy Tichbon, director of customer experience for Virgin Mobile Canada. "And it goes without saying that if our customers are satisfied, our shareholders will be delighted. Thus, if we live by this value of people first, customers second, and shareholders third, ultimately, everyone wins."

Tichbon and her team believe in removing as many restrictions as possible to keep staff happy and performing well. For instance, there is no documented dress code to speak of, and staff

can eat, drink and even listen to their personal choice of music at their desk when not handling contacts. "People can even have purple hair in a Mohawk if they want," says Tichbon. "In fact, someone has one and it looks pretty cool! ...Creating a happy, motivated and engaged workforce starts with respecting people and treating them like professionals. ...We continuously spend long hours making sure our people are smiling."

Other top employers spend long hours making sure agents sit up straight, eat right and exercise. Wisconsin Power and Light (a division of Alliant Energy) implemented a formal wellness strategy to help fend off employee burnout, illness and injury while enhancing performance. As part of its "Keep Well" program, WP&L provides agents with quiet rooms filled with books, music, comfortable couches, and vending machines containing healthy snack options. The center also features a fitness room equipped with exercise machines that agents can use to let off steam during or following a particularly challenging shift.

The wellness program also focuses on workstation comfort and proper ergonomics. All agents work in large, 7' x 7' cubicles equipped with fully adjustable chairs, footrests/armrests and workstation tabletops. The center invites an occupational therapist in to work with each new training class and show each agent how to adjust their workstation so that it's ideally suited to their body.

Since implementing the Keep Well program several years ago, the center reports a steady decline in absenteeism and turnover, and a rise in productivity.

WP&L isn't the only contact center that strongly embraces employee wellness. At credit union service provider CUETS in Winnipeg, Manitoba, agents can participate in a program that includes a free membership to the local YMCA, free smoking cessation and weight loss programs, and free crisis counseling. Oh, and did I mention that CUETS has been named one of "Canada's Top 100 Employers" in 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2006?

Another way that top centers enhance employee quality of life—and retention—is by letting them work from home. ARO Outsourcing saw its annual employee turnover rate plummet from 45 percent to 10 percent after transitioning to a home agent contact center environment (nearly all of the outsourcer's agents work from home now). Numerous other companies that have embraced telework report similar success. And formal research further supports the positive impact that telework can have on an organization's ability to attract and retain staff. A study conducted by the International Telework Association and Council (ITAC) revealed that 25 percent of employees would change companies if the new company offered a telework option—some would even accept a lower wage for no commute.

5. Meaningful work. Employees want not only to be cared for; they also want to be challenged and intrigued, and to feel a strong sense of purpose in their jobs. Top contact center employers use their hiring and orientation programs to show candidates and new hires just how meaningful the agent position is. Many provide these prospective and new employees with realistic job previews—via videos of a typical day in the center, detailed tours of the operation, and interviews with veteran staff. These centers explain the

significance of each agent's impact on customer satisfaction and loyalty, and their contribution to the contact center and enterprise as a whole.

The most sought-after contact centers make agents' jobs even more meaningful by involving agents in interesting projects and off-line activities—often tapping individual agents' unique skills and knowledge to better the center. Georgia Power, for example, has a powerful mentoring program in place, where agents who are struggling in a particular area are matched up with an experienced agent proficient in that area. In addition to helping the protégé out with customer inquiries in real-time and addressing the protégé's concerns between contacts, the mentor helps to develop action plans for steadily improving the protégé's comfort level and performance.

Contact centers of choice also take care to frequently and formally recognize agents for the challenging and important work they do, and for the impact they have on the lives of others. Examples include adding deserving agents' names to the center's "Wall of Fame," citing agents' accomplishments in the departmental or corporate newsletter, sending agents to a seminar or conference of their choice, or lavishing the entire agent team with rewards, gifts, games and accolades during national Customer Service Week (the first full week in October).

6. Growth and opportunity. While employees certainly appreciate job diversity and recognition, they also want to know that there is ample room for advancement and financial growth in their contact center career. That's why leading centers have made a concerted effort to create captivating career and skill paths, where agents get to explore new opportunities, learn advanced new

skills, and earn additional income.

AMVESCAP Retirement's Retirement Resource Center (RRC)—a virtual operation comprised of centers in Atlanta and Winston-Salem, N.C.—implemented a multi-tiered career path that has helped transform a struggling center with high agent burnout and turnover into a high-performing operation with an enviable agent retention rate. The center cut attrition by 70 percent after implementing the career path, which features 15 different levels/positions ranging from Retirement Services Associate I all the way up to Team Leader II.

Each level/position is described in detail (to ensure that all agents understand the job's functions), as are the requirements for a promotion from one level/position to another. To obtain the additional skills needed for a new level/position, agents may need to attend specific training classes and/or complete self-paced e-learning modules. For more advanced level/positions, they may need to acquire formal licensing. Agents demonstrate that they are ready for a new level/position via a combination of monitoring/performance results and written/certification tests. Team leaders regularly meet with each agent to discuss the progress he/she is making and to answer any questions about the criteria for each level/position.

With such a comprehensive career path in place, agents always have something to strive for, and importantly, a reason to stay in the contact center, says Thomas Ballard, the center's director. "It drives [agents] toward wherever they want their career to take them. We show them the light at the end of the tunnel—they are working toward something, and we give them a detailed, structured plan on how to get there."

Not all centers have the luxury of creating such an elaborate career path featuring so many formal level and position titles, but that doesn't stop them from creating growth opportunities for—and retaining—agents. Canadian Tire Financial Services has a skill path in place where agents can increase their pay in small increments by obtaining advanced skills and knowledge through on-the-job experience and continuous training. And once they obtain enough skill and knowledge, they earn the right to share it with their fellow agents as members of one of two elite corps in the contact center: 1) subject matter experts (who serve as help desk reps for colleagues); and 2) peer coaches (who assist supervisors with monitoring and coaching).

Some contact centers even encourage top agents to explore opportunities in other areas of the enterprise. At Supra Telecom, for example, select agents participate in the center's Apprenticeship Program, where they get to do stints in other departments—as well as other areas within the contact center—to learn more about the organization as a whole and to survey future career possibilities.

"Those who participate in the Apprenticeship Program get to learn new skills, and get a chance to see if they like another job or department before deciding to make a change," explains Frank Saviano, director of quality assurance and training for Supra Telecom. Saviano adds that agents who work in other areas gain a new respect for those departments, and for how the contact center and those departments impact one another.

7. Compensation and benefits.

While there isn't as much room for innovation in this area as there is in many of the others, choice contact centers do more than just follow the herd when it comes to compensating front-line staff. These centers go beyond merely adhering to compensation benchmark studies and/or paying agents exactly what nearby and competing centers pay theirs. Instead, centers with high agent engagement and retention give agents what they are worth to their particular organization—often paying an attractive premium for agents who:

directly generate/protect ample revenue daily

- have highly diverse skill/knowledge sets (can handle all call types, can mentor/coach peers, etc.)
- can handle all contact channels (phone, email, Web/chat) proficiently
- possess bilingual/multilingual capabilities
- are particularly flexible with regard to scheduling

Many centers, like CTFS (see “Growth and Opportunity section above) have implemented dynamic skill paths to help talented agents earn more money and remain challenged/engaged. Others have formal pay-for-performance plans in place, where they can earn additional income/bonuses by consistently achieving lofty goals and critical objectives.

8. Making a difference. Human beings want to feel that they are a part of something much larger than themselves. Being a contributing member of a successful contact center/enterprise can satisfy that need somewhat, but many employees want to have an impact on something even bigger: their community—local and beyond.

According to Herman of The Herman Group, prospective and existing employees often ask such questions as, “Does the employer facilitate opportunities for employees to volunteer their time and expertise to improve life for others—in the local community, around the country, around the world?”

The answer is a resounding “yes” at places like CUETS, which provides sponsorship and volunteer support for numerous charities, including Computers for Kids Canada and the local United Way. Agents are highly encouraged to participate in various employee-driven events with these organizations.

Philanthropy is alive and well at Assurant Solutions, too. Two years ago, the company announced its mandate to make a difference in the community, and partnered with the local affiliate of Habitat for Humanity, a non-profit organization that aims to eliminate poverty housing and homelessness by building and rehabilitating homes with volunteer labor as well as donations of funds and materials. Assurant and its agents have helped to build several homes since 2005.

“This was an opportunity to harness all of the energy and enthusiasm of our associates to support the community,” says Assurant’s Moore. “We also want to demonstrate to our associates that there are things beyond the day-to-day work issues that are important and that we value.” ◀◀

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