



Why government call centers continue to frustrate citizens



Introduction

Call centers are the mainstays of government customer service, handling thousands of citizen interactions on a daily basis. It is no surprise that government want to ensure their call centers are working as efficiently as possible, and meeting expected quality standards. This paper discusses the measurement of call center performance, and why, despite well-established metrics, call center interactions continue to be a source of frustration for citizens.

Measuring call center performance

Most call center metrics fall into one of two categories – efficiency or quality. Efficiency metrics are typically both objective and quantitative in nature, and allow government to maximize the accessibility of call centers for citizens. Examples of efficiency metrics are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Example call center efficiency metrics¹

Metric	Description	Rationale for metric
First Call Resolution	Number of calls resolved first time	Resolving a call first time decreases future load on the call center
Service Level	% of contacts answered in given time period, e.g. 75% of calls answered within 15 seconds	Allows accessibility of call center to citizens to be assessed
Response Time	% of contacts resolved in given period, e.g. 100% of contacts resolved within 48 hours	Measures how quickly citizens are getting resolution to a problem
Abandon Rate	No. of calls abandoned before being answered	If abandon rate is high, then no matter how good service is, call center is ineffective
Adherence to Schedule	Actual agent operational time v. Assumed agent available time	Call center staffing based on agent availability assumption. If operational falls below assumed, then service levels will fall
Forecasting Accuracy	Inbound calls forecast v. inbound calls received	Call center staffing requires accurate forecasts if desired service level to be achieved
Self-Service Efficacy	Self-service interactions completed without agent intervention required	Used to identify and improve where gaps in self-service functionality occur
Average Handling Time	Average length of time taken to handle a call	Although variance in call time will exist, average times allow operational time of agents to be forecast

1. Adapted from ICMI (2011) Seven metrics to watch for call center success. (<http://www.icmi.com/Resources/Metrics/2011/02/Seven-Metrics-to-Watch-for-Call-Center-Success>)

The limitation of efficiency metrics is that they do not capture quality – as noted in a previous ContactEngine study, it is entirely possible for a call center to be operating efficiently, but not effectively, due to issues with the quality of service provided.² Example quality metrics are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2
Example call center quality metrics³

Metric	Description	Rationale for metric
Adherence to Standards	Adherence of agent to standards, such as use of correct scripts, grammar, professionalism, accuracy of advice, etc.	Reduces risk by ensuring a standardised experience for citizens
Citizen Satisfaction	How satisfied citizen was with interaction outcome, as well as particular aspects of it e.g. professionalism of agent, speed of response	Can help to identify the drivers and inhibitors of citizen satisfaction
Net Promoter Score	Whether individual is likely to provide positive recommendation of government to others	Net Promoter Score considered a proxy for citizen loyalty

The combination of efficiency and quality metrics should theoretically ensure maximum call center efficacy. However, a Mattersight study found that 75% of people leave call center interactions frustrated, even if their problem was resolved.⁴ This would imply the existence of a significant deficiency in call center performance that current metrics are unable to identify.

The deficiency in call centers

The same Mattersight study provides insight as to the possible source of that deficiency, finding that the biggest frustration for people after waiting time is service agents not understanding needs, a problem exacerbated by the fact that 66% of citizens are frustrated before even talking to an agent.^{5,6} While waiting time is clearly not the source of deficiency – it is captured in existing performance metrics and is the result of a conscious trade-off between operational expense and waiting time reduction – the fact that citizens feel their needs are not being met is.⁷

2. See ContactEngine (2017) Curating Customer Loyalty. (<https://www.contactengine.com/insights/insights-into-improving-customer-loyalty/>)
 3. Adapted from ICMI (2011) Seven metrics to watch for call center success. (<http://www.icmi.com/Resources/Metrics/2011/02/Seven-Metrics-to-Watch-for-Call-Center-Success>)
 4. Mattersight (2015) Please hold for a reality check: the real reason consumers are fed up with call centers. (<http://www.mattersight.com/resource/please-hold-for-a-reality-check-real-reasons-consumers-are-fed-up-with-call-centers/>)
 5. Ibid.
 6. Sources of frustration include the complexity in navigating options to find the right department/person to speak to.
 7. The more call center agents available, the shorter the waiting time will be, but more agents result in higher operational expenses.

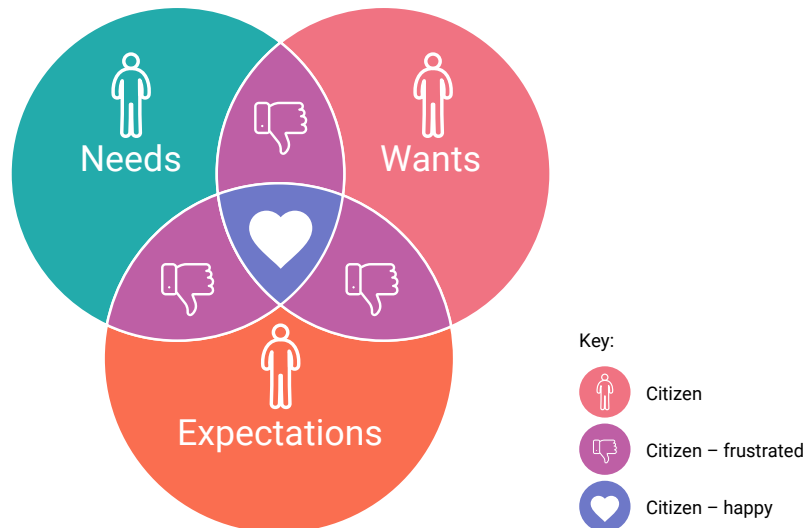
By definition, citizens need something when they call in, be it resolution to a problem, technical support, change of details, etc. If that need is successfully met, then it would appear paradoxical that the citizen could leave the experience feeling like their needs have not been met.

This paradox can in part be explained when the difference between a citizen's needs, wants and expectations are considered. For example, a citizen may need a problem resolved, want to feel valued and expect a call center agent to empathize with the frustration of the problem occurring. If the call center agent resolves the problem, but fails to empathize with the citizen, make them feel valued, or both, then the resulting dissonance will likely result in frustration.

To avoid citizens leaving frustrated, the role of government customer service agents is to ensure that each of a citizen's wants, needs and expectations are met, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Needs, wants, expectations



Meeting wants and expectations

A significant limitation of existing call center metrics, be they efficiency or quality metrics, is that they are focused primarily on ensuring the direct citizen need is met, and do not effectively capture the meeting of citizen wants or expectations – the closest metrics are NPS and Citizen Satisfaction, but these are at best a proxy for the meeting of wants and expectations.

The lack of metrics that capture wants and expectations is not surprising. Unlike the homogeneity of citizen needs, the heterogeneity that naturally exists in citizen wants and expectations makes it impractical to design processes and procedures around them, or to develop standardized metrics to capture performance relative to them. Government must therefore rely on call center agents to decipher and then meet each individual citizen's wants and expectations, which requires agents to be afforded the additional time and skills to do so.

Building time

Government could create more time for call center agents to speak to citizens simply by increasing the number of call center agents available, but this is likely an unappealing prospect given the long-term cost implications. An alternative way is to invest in technology, such as proactive communication to handle the more standard aspects of service and reduce call volumes.⁸

Although technological solutions are often seen as a way to reduce operational expense over the long-term through headcount reduction, this is arguably myopic given the findings discussed in this paper – the remaining agents would not be afforded any more time than before the technology was implemented, as shown in Option 1 of Table 3 (below). A better course of action is arguably to balance headcount reduction with an increase in the time remaining agents have to handle a call, such that they have time to not only fulfill the immediate need of a citizen, but do so in a way that meets their wants and expectations, as per Option 2 of Table 3.

Table 3
Using technology to build time⁹

					
Before Technology	7 hours / 420 minutes	6,000	7 minutes	0 minutes	100
Option 1	7 hours / 420 minutes	4,000	7 minutes	0 minutes	67
Option 2	7 hours / 420 minutes	4,000	7 minutes	2 minutes	86

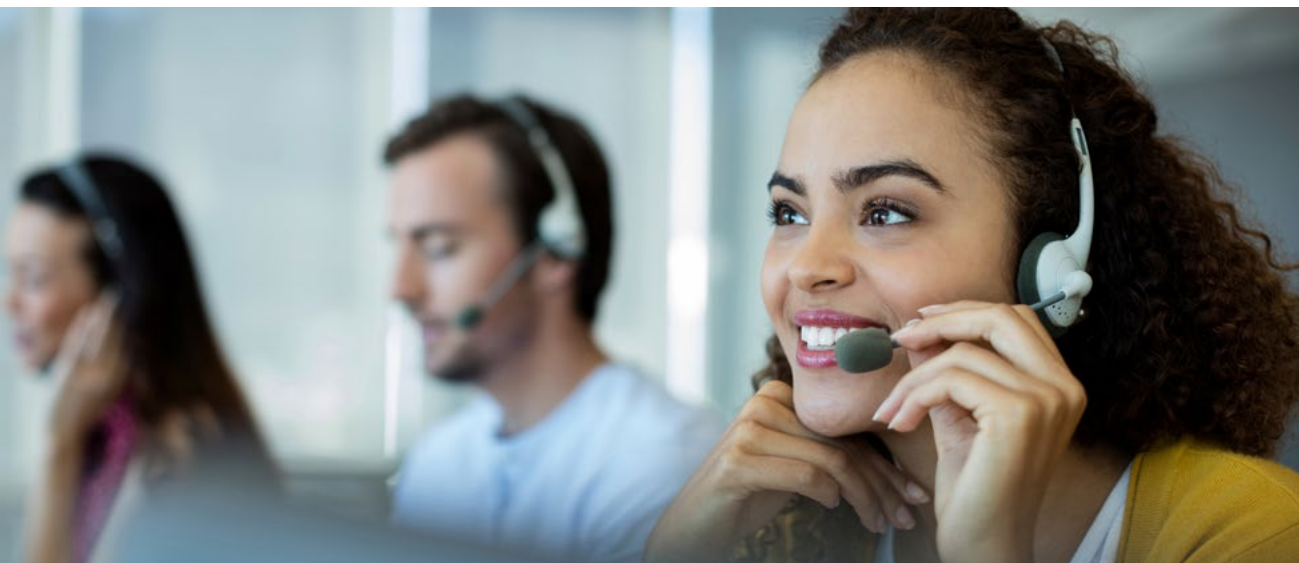
KEY:

-  Working Time Per Day
-  Calls Per Day
-  Time Needed to Resolve Immediate Issues
-  Additional Time Per Call
-  Number of Agents Required

Building skills

There are two non-mutually exclusive approaches government could take to building skills to decipher and meet citizen wants and expectations. The first is to update recruitment processes to include a focus on hiring people with the required communication and people skills. The second is to upskill existing staff through training, a convenient upside to which is that it will build the workplace self-worth of agents, which research has been shown to increase overall performance. Investing in training could therefore not only improve the citizen experience, but also the performance of those agents in delivering that experience.

8. Providing that such technologies are simple, reliable, and intuitive for citizens.
 9. Numbers presented in table are for illustrative purposes only. Balancing of resource need not be immediate, i.e. headcount could be reduced over time to optimise balance of operational headcount expense with observed benefit of additional time to serve customers.



Conclusion

Call centers play a vital role in citizen service, which in turn plays a vital role in the overall citizen experience. Improving call center performance can therefore provide significant benefit for government, but this does not simply mean improving existing efficiency and quality metrics – government must also look to improve the meeting of citizen wants and expectations. Apart from building time and skills, there are several approaches government could take to doing so:

- **Embrace the new breed of customer engagement technologies that enable citizens to be served proactively, before they need to call in.**
- **Update employee performance measures that are explicitly linked to efficiency metrics to include measures of how well they have met citizen wants and expectations.¹⁰**
- **Afford agents more flexibility in how they speak with citizens, while maintaining adherence to minimum standards.**
- **Empower agents to improve – encourage them to identify aspects of the citizen's call center experience that can be improved, and involve them in designing the improvement.**

Fundamentally, meeting a citizen's wants, needs and expectations requires having a call center that is accessible, making it quick and easy for them to speak to the right person, and for that person to possess the necessary people skills.

10. Would require quality-assurance to assess performance relative to measure.



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