



Case study: MANAGING DIVERSITY IN THE TRAINING ROOM

Chetna Consultancy Services
Business Progression through People Development

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INTRODUCTION

Voice and accent forms the cornerstone of most voice-based processes in the Indian BPO industry. This case study is the first in a continuing series that attempts to identify and address the challenges a trainer may come across in a training room scenario in this industry with a special emphasis on voice and accent.

BACKGROUND: OUTSOURCING CONTINUED..

Nearly 75% of most US & European multi-national companies now use outsourcing (source: Economic Times) or shared services to support their functions. What's more, this trend should continue over the next 12-24 months, according to a new report. The findings are based on interviews with CFOs and MDs of 127 Europe-based and 151 US-based companies (source: Economic Times). The trend of MNCs wanting to increase their outsourcing offers tremendous opportunity for the service providers with facilities in India, as they are cost effective and bring value to clients.

According to Price Waterhouse Coopers' Management Barometer Survey released this week, 72% of European multinational companies have outsourced functions over the past two years compared with 77% in the US. Additionally, 71% of European companies and 78% US companies plan to use these services in the next 12-24 months. Overall, 29% of European companies and the US expect to increase their use of outsourcing of financial functions, with spending expected to be nearly 16% higher than current levels. According to the findings of the survey, product sector companies (80%) are more focused on using these services over the next 1-2 years than service companies (63%).

Out of all these BPO services 60% of the business comes from voice based services. Voice based services, which is a high volume business has become increasingly commoditised over the years. This industry which employs more than 400,000 employees is expected to face a massive manpower shortage projected 500,000 by 2010, (source: NASSCOM). Hence the role of training and especially effective training is crucial to India realizing its potential in the BPO space.

THE CLIENT

Operating in this environment X is a BPO that primarily caters to a UK based clientele and their processes. A niche clientele expects tailor-made solutions and X specializes in delivering these solutions on a turnkey basis. ABC is a telecom major and the largest customer account for X; it handles the helpdesk as well as the 'post paid' department for the above client. Identifying the significance of the client X has structured special training programs that would equip the agents and help them provide services at the best global standards to ABC's customers.

Of late, the increasing attrition and an ever-shrinking pool of talent within Indian metros has resulted in X expanding its hiring footprint. X has now started recruiting aggressively in Tier-II and Tier-III Indian cities, as a result the following phenomena were observed across the organization:

- I. The Organization was now made up of a much more diverse work-force that was a far cry from the upper-middle class, public school educated skew that the organization had in its early years of operation.
- II. The widespread geographical footprint of the hiring had resulted in inconsistent hiring standards and entry-level standards were being diluted to meet manpower requirements for a business and an industry growing higher than 40%CAGR.

As a result, the Training room has in essence become the new **urban melting pot** for everyone wanting to participate in the BPO boom and XYZ was struggling to make this a far more effective experience for the new joinees.

THE CHALLENGE: CATERING TO AN AUDIENCE FROM DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS

As a trainer, one comes across a large milieu of trainees coming from various Socio-Economical and Cultural backgrounds; a trainer must always strive to address the needs of such a diverse audience. Unlike other Indian Industries the BPO training room is a unique one - since the industry hires without any rigid entry criteria about educational backgrounds etc. As a result a typical training batch might comprise of a college fresher as well as people in their mid 20s and 30s who are looking for a lateral career movement into BPOs. This Diversity in the training room manifests itself in many forms.

- Diversity of **Age** (*Generation Gap*)
- Diversity of **Ethnicity/Region**
- Diversity of **Socio-Economic** Background
- Diversity of **Gender**
- Diversity of **Skill level**
- Diversity of **accents**
- Diversity of **professional background**- (*previous industry experience*)
- Diversity of **years of work experience**

OUR SOLUTION:

The solution that we implemented for the client addressing the challenge that diversity presented is best explained when organized along the above-identified forms of diversity:

DIVERSITY OF AGE: GENERATION GAP

Initially there was a trend where young candidates were hired as employees, however as the BPO industry evolved it witnessed the entry of alternate profile candidates. Hence a trainer is bound to come across trainees of different age groups in the training room.

Age can both be an **enabler** or a **disabler** for learning in the training room. An effective trainer tries to make age an enabler of learning, for instance We consciously applauded older trainees on their willingness to learn and adapt, thereby securing higher commitment levels from the junior members and a sense of inclusion for the senior members.

Again there are times when trainees of an older age group get intimidated by the fact that the trainer is of a much younger age than they are. In such a scenario our trainer appreciated the wealth of knowledge and experience the trainees had at every juncture and went forth in imparting the course material. In this process the senior trainees get their due ego boost and turn out to be assets in the class rather than being liabilities.

To illustrate; Mr. A, age 55, was finding it hard to adapt with the class of trainees who were less than half his age. On the third day of a ten-day training, Mr. A was asked to speak about his passion in class and he narrated his trekking experiences. That experience turned out to be the common thread between the two age groups and helped the process of learning.

DIVERSITY OF ETHNICITY/REGION:

A wide spread business has a mix of various ethnicities and is present across many regional boundaries. A trainer needs to be well equipped and informed about various ethnic diversities and should have practical ideas to work effectively with them.

A real life example might just make the scenario easier to understand. In a class of twenty odd trainees, mostly freshers in the industry coming from different parts of the country. Two of the trainees were hesitant and apprehensive about mixing up with the class. Their body language and disposition was unlike the others. Being a trainer it was a challenge to make these two agents open up and participate in the class. After we had a heart to heart conversation in a coffee break with them we realized that they were missing their respective hometowns and the new surroundings were seemingly alien to them. Once given an avenue to talk about their lives back in their home towns, and their upbringing, making an attempt to know them and letting them know that they have the entire class as their friend, they felt better and this helped in doing away with the closed frame of mind that they were in.

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DIVERSITY OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND:

A meritocracy-based organization does not discriminate and is open to employees from all walks of life and varied socio economic backgrounds.

Trainees coming from a lower middle class background, from smaller towns- away from the metropolis undergo a cultural shock, which many a times manifests itself as an inferiority complex within them. Consequently, they shy away into corners, backbenches and do not participate in class activities. It is up to the trainer to draw them out of their shell and help them to open up and participate. The sooner a trainer is successful in doing so, the better it is since at this juncture the entire class stands on a similar pedestal.

Yet there are times when the economic background also come in-between effective inter-personal interaction amongst trainees. This can prove to be detrimental, as the trainees need to interact with each other to come up the learning curve and work in teams in the future. This is best addressed by creating common grounds that transcend all economic groups. For example discussions about cricket, youth icons, the entertainment industry have no association with an economic class. Two seemingly diverse trainees find a common fondness for Tendulkar's batting style or Aamir Khan's performance in "*Rang De Basanti*"

DIVERSITY OF GENDER:

Trainees, especially new hires coming out of non co-ed educational systems find it hard to adapt to the new gender mix in a BPO. It's a trainer's responsibility to make a trainee comfortable and feel a part of the session and not feel alienated. It could turn out to be an eye opener to the world of co-eds, and the sooner it happens, the better it is. A trainer can take this as an opportunity to emphasize on the virtues of teamwork and the unique perspectives each gender can bring to various tasks given to them.

Activities and useful games help trainees to interact and do away the feeling of exception and this wins over the problem of gender diversity. Important to note that a trainer might take extra precaution in deciding the type of activity he/she intends to involve the trainees. Through honest conversation and playful exercises trainees can learn powerful and effective ways to improve relationships with the opposite gender. This will increase our understanding of differing male and female styles of communication, the specific challenges each gender faces in the workplace, and develop a new cooperative model for team building with women and men.

There are situations where certain remarks and comments do not abide by the professional ethics and construe gender harassment. In such scenario it is a trainer's duty to make sure that a line is drawn - and drawn hard and clear, so that such occurrences do not surface further.

DIVERSITY OF SKILL LEVEL

Once a sound awareness of diversity issues has been established, the most commonly asked question is "what's next?" **Skill building** is critical to the success of any Diversity initiative, and the most essential skill is communication. A trainer can only assume certain criterion and proceed imparting the course material. A trainer needs to work towards creating a fair amount of rapport and should eliminate all possible negative vibes in the classroom.

Agents/trainees are generally a mixed bag coming from different backgrounds. Some of them would grasp information immediately whereas others would find it hard to follow in the first instance. A trainer needs to bear in mind that each trainee would have a different learning curve and adapt accordingly.

DIVERSITY OF ACCENT

Surveys reveal that a bulk of the outsourced business comes from the United States Of America, hence trainees with some amount of work experience pick up the American twang and hence their pronunciation of certain words become unacceptable for an UK process like the one here. Hence rather than downloading the desired sounds and forcefully make trainees come up with them, it turns out to be a better option to educate them with reason. As a trainer it is important to introduce the Manner of articulation and the place of articulation, which automatically reduces a number pronunciation based questions from the trainees. Common problems such as the roll of ' r 's or the ' tt ' sounding like a ' d ' sound gets taken care of.

As a trainer it is important not to pass judgment on the intellectual quotient of a trainee but to identify the area of concern and look closely into it. There is an obvious accent difference when an agent shifts from an American or Australian process to a UK process. They often come with arguments regarding certain pronunciations, here a trainer needs to address the issue with relative factual inputs and avert from downloading information.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, Re-iteration of the fact that a training room has diverse participants who need to work together effectively as a cohesive unit and what needs to be unquestionably addressed is that as coaches, teachers, instructors, trainers, one must one must always strive to address the needs of such a diverse audience by customizing one's training content and delivery style.

A little empathy also goes a long way in helping trainees develop the skills required by the organization irrespective of where they come from. These foundations of respect for diversity and the uniqueness of every individual is the building block for teamwork and effective interpersonal interactions.

It is only when we respect those different from us is when we open ourselves to the wealth of knowledge that everyone has to share.

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Students do not learn much just sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing prepackaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write reflectively about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves. - Arthur W. Chickering and Stephen C. Ehrmann

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