The Call Center:
Not Just Another Office

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The Call Center—Not Just Another Office

As our lives keep getting busier, being able to just pick up a phone to ask a question or order something can be a lifesaver. Our need to accomplish more tasks in less time is part of the reason for steady growth in call center employment and facilities. By 2002, Datamonitor predicts that nearly two million people will be employed in call centers. In the U.S. alone, there are about 70,000 call centers in operation, and that number is expected to reach 78,000 within three years.[1]

The Internet fuels part of this growth as more representatives are hired to answer e-mail inquiries and assist customers who want to link over from a website to interact with a live person.

Call centers often mix traditional and alternative work practices. Many agents work part-time, flextime, or from home or satellite offices. Many also work in split shifts, coming in only during peak times of day, or peak seasons of the year.

The Human Connection

Over the past few years, call centers have been investing heavily in technology. The core of the customers' experience however, remains in the friendliness of the agent's voice and his or her ability to get things done. Call center agents need to come across as welcoming, perceptive and empathetic to build trust and brand loyalty.

Finding and keeping agents with the job and people skills to build good customer relationships has become the number one issue facing call center managers. In addition to the loss of experience that comes from agent turnover, the cost of recruiting and training each new agent runs from $5,000 to $18,000.

Haworth recently co-sponsored The Annual Call Center Trend Survey in cooperation with The Call Center Network Group. One of the key findings was that "It takes more than salary to keep good people…call centers that are more sensitive to their workers and the workplace environment have lower rates of turnover."[2]

This places many new demands on designers to create interesting, yet calm environments that attract and retain workers, integrate the latest technology and are ready for constant change.

Not all the same

Generally, most call centers fall within three basic types—Orchestrated, Traditional and Tactical Response. The model is determined by the nature of the work.

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[1] Kroll, Karen M. February 21, 2000. Bigger Role for Call Centers. Industry Week. 58.
[2] Annual Call Center Trend Survey 1999-2000. Workplace Change Enablers, in cooperation with The Call Center Network.
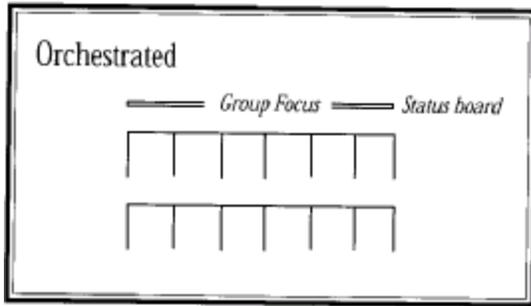
Orchestrated call centers are often used for customer service departments, especially in utility companies. In orchestrated call centers, agents are looking to an electronic big board or other type of visual display for information on incoming calls. Agents may be working in anything from basic carrels to high-tech custom stations. Orchestrated call centers typically have the following attributes:

- Limited interaction between service representatives
- Group may be queued by electronic means
- 16-30 sq. ft per person
- Simple, direct transactions
- Rows, front-to-back,
- High density
- Forward facing
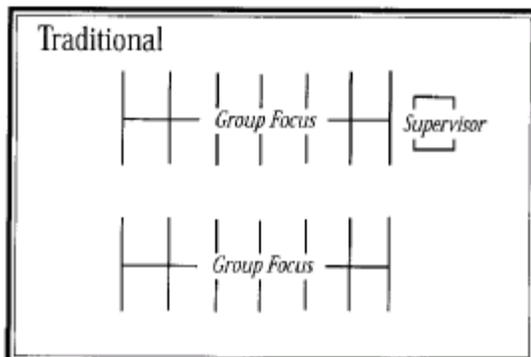
Traditional call centers are often found where agents use a scripted message and are not highly reliant on each other for help with problem solving. Traditional call centers typically have the following attributes:

- Limited interaction between service representatives
- Direct supervisory control
- 16-30 sq. ft. per person
- Simple, direct transactions
- Dual rows, end-to-end
- High density
- Representatives face inwards, towards each other
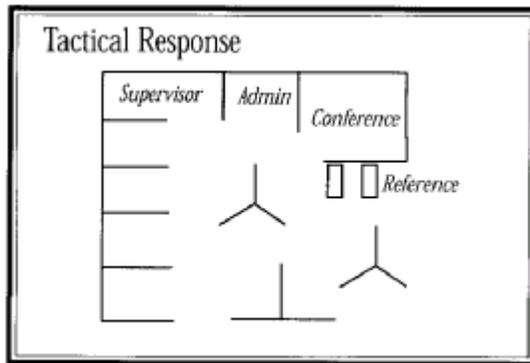
Tactical Response call centers are found where the work is specialized and each member of the team has different, but complementary skills and knowledge. These can be found in any type of business. The agents in these types of call centers can be highly trained and/or have professional degrees, such as in 911 or brokerage centers. Tactical Response call centers typically have the following attributes:

- High degree of interaction between service representatives
- Moderate to complex transactions involving multiple professional disciplines
- Team configurations
- Many types of activity and collaboration
- More workspace than the average call center

The Space mix

Once the basic type of call center is determined, there are other inter-related decisions to make about space use and facility performance objectives. All of these decisions impact human performance, as well as business and facility performance.

Some call centers have started building "decompression zones" into the workplace; giving agents the opportunity to take quiet breaks away from their workstations. Exercise rooms for a quick energy boost are also becoming common. Many organizations now have attractive cafés to supply meals and snacks at all hours. Some are adding onsite daycare centers as well. Others have lounges where agents can browse the Internet or watch TV. These amenities don't just help with recruitment and retention; they help agents come back refreshed for the next round of calls.

Training spaces are also getting more attention. In the US alone, $292 million a year is spent training new call center agents, an average of $6,572 per agent.[3] To make the most of this considerable investment, more care is being put into training spaces to keep agents alert and engaged with new material. Natural light, colors with an uplifting effect, and furniture that can be easily rearranged help make these spaces adaptable and stimulating.

Workstations at least 6' wide can also allow co-location of a new agent with a trainer in an actual work environment. Studies have shown that learning in the same type of environment where one will use the information helps memory.

Acoustics

The goal should be to provide the customer with the experience of being in a one-to-one conversation with the call center agent. Poor acoustics will lead customers to lose confidence if they can overhear other customers' credit card numbers being read aloud, or if they have to repeat or correct order information for the agent. Noise also increases agents' stress. In the Annual Call Center Trend Survey, 54% cited noise as a problem.

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[3] Annual Call Center Trend Survey 1999-2000. Workplace Change Enablers, in cooperation with The Call Center Network. 7.

Within the workstation, choose furniture that allows seated privacy between agents. The perceivable presence of coworkers and sense of being in a group is energizing to many agents. In some call centers, agents are also required to look to a visual display outside of individual workstations. For these reasons, taller panels are not often used in call centers.

The solution is to carefully consider all aspects of the environment as one envelope. The higher the density of agents in a space, the more challenging the acoustic task becomes. Look for a ceiling tile with high sound absorbency and use a carpet and pad to dampen footsteps. Choose sound-absorptive options for workstations such as fabric-covered acoustic panels or stacking pads.

It's also beneficial to offset workstations so agents are not directly opposite each other. Undulating patterns of offset workstations with curved work surfaces can create a more visually interesting environment, as well as a quieter one.

Planning for acoustic support will also help future-proof the call center for emerging technologies such as Internet-linked videos and voice-activated computing.

Integrating Technology:

It's critical to involve both information technology planners and interior designers at the beginning of any call center design project. Requirements for cabling amounts and types, monitor sizes, and the quantities and locations of power, voice and data outlets are key questions to settle very early in the space planning cycle.

When planning for technology, plan for change. Equipment upgrades will be frequent to keep the call center at a competitive service level. Be sure to choose furniture that offers easy access to cables for changes with minimal service disruption, and provides extra room for cable storage.

Flexible modular cabling is another option to speed up change—cables can be moved within modular furniture without having to remove and restring cables. With a system like Datathing™[4], changes that could have taken days can be done during an agent's coffee break.

Ergonomics:

Because call center agents spend so much of their day in one workstation, frequent, easy adjustability goes a long way to reduce fatigue, discomfort and the kinds of strain that can lead to lost-time injuries.

Especially when several different-sized people use workstations in shifts, a full-range of user-adjustability of both the chair and work surface is very important.   It is crucial that the chair fit the height requirements of the person using it. A chair of the wrong height will restrict circulation due to pressure from the seat pan or poor seated posture.

The chair arm rests should also be adjustable in height so that the agent may rest his or her elbows while working to relieve stress in the shoulders, arms and back while working.   A waterfall front edge on the chair helps avoid pressure on the backs of the legs. From a seated position, the agent should be able to comfortably reach essential reference manuals—without excessive stretching or twisting of the shoulders or torso.

A sit-to-stand work surface can give agents a physical break without leaving their workstations.   In addition to allowing them to stretch while standing, height-adjustable work surfaces also let agents move about their workstations more freely—avoiding static postures while conducting business.

At any work height, agents should be able to view the monitor without any glare from overhead or workstation lights. Workstations should allow enough room for monitors to be placed at least 25" away

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[4] www.datathing.com

from the user. The larger the monitor, the farther away from the user it needs to be to avoid eyestrain. The keyboard and mouse should be able to be placed on a stable surface adjacent to one another.

User-adjustable tools and storage elements are also helpful. When agents can place paper trays, diskette bins etc. exactly where they want them, it saves reaching and search time.

When the new space is first occupied, it's in everyone's best interest to provide some basic training in furniture adjustability, equipment placement and use, and proper postures. A correctly adjusted workstation allows the agent to sit with feet flat on the floor and knees and hips bent at a 90-degree or greater angle.   The back should be fully supported, adjusting the chair back height as needed. Agents should be able to place their hands on the keyboard or mouse, with upper arms hanging comfortably down at their sides. Elbows should be bent at 90 to 120 degrees and agents should maintain a neutral wrist positing (no bending).

Ongoing reinforcement of furniture adjustability through news bulletins, refresher workshops, and new hire orientations are helpful to ensure that the ergonomics planning and investment continue to pay off in reduced opportunities for injury.

With comprehensive planning that takes in work styles, amenities, technology, acoustics, and ergonomics, call centers can become pleasant and highly supportive work environments.