

A data deluge is drowning the field service force

When businesses first opened call centers they thought they'd be excellent for service. They were. Little did they realize that they'd be making a rod for their own back too! Such are the levels of service that customers expect today, that many companies feel it is a game they cannot win. Service delivery certainly rises. But service demand rises even faster.

For the attention has turned from parameters like customer response times, which were implemented in the call center, to the process of service delivery on the ground. Pól Sweeney, CTO, Vidus, warns that it is not just in the call center where service may be faulted, but at the point at which the company meets the customer in the field.

Working out of the office is radically different from working in the office. That may seem blindingly obvious. But when it comes to equipping the field service force many companies simply ignore that most obvious point. And the consequences are serious. For with bad management and poor control of those in the field, service quality will be compromised, costs will shoot up, customer satisfaction will slip, and in industries where service delivery is all, market share will fall, inexorably, away.

Which is not to say that companies from telcos installing broadband to energy companies installing state-of-the-art boilers do not recognize that they have a problem with service delivery in the field. The challenge that confronts them is how to equip the field force to become more efficient and effective.

So, they turn to consultants and IT vendor partners for help. But here it starts to go wrong. For almost with one voice these guys respond by saying roll out mobile data devices, from phones to laptops, from palmtops to PDAs. The theory is clear. If you connect the mobile force to data resources in-house, they will work smarter and deliver better. But the theory is flawed. That is not enough. What is missed is the management piece because, to again state the obvious, working out of the office is radically different from working in the office.

Missing – the management link

Think about the kind of environment the field force works in, the kind of people who are attracted to this job. If they are delivering services to individual homes and business premises, they will not have the on-hand support available in the office, nor will they have the benefit of a manager near-by. They are also likely to be more self-motivated – that is more independently minded. In other words, in the field, all of the basic managerial questions are different: how they work, where and when, and with what controls?

What is more the field is in the front line of contact with customers. That is why getting it right is so critical. These managerial questions simply cannot be left in limbo. And, in the case of companies like energy providers, service in the field is also a question of safety. Companies are liable if things go wrong and lives are risked. Plus, what of the money that will be wasted on the way? Poor in-house management will struggle to cater with angry customers, probably by sending out a member of the field force again and again and again. The result is not only waste but a frustrated field force to boot.

Seeing is delivering

So, how can quality control and careful management be rolled out to the field? How can the field force and the business as a whole be empowered to provide an integrated service for customers, leaving them happy? And further, how can management utilize and predict availability of the field force to best advantage? The key is visibility – being able to see what the field force is doing, to support them in doing it, and enforce what they should be doing too.

Take an example, the installation of broadband. The first thing to note is that broadband is a high value service. It is not just an IT commodity but, say, the first step to new online opportunities for a business. So, on the one hand, customers want to know when the service engineer is going to come. Most companies can give a date, but fewer can give a time – and that makes all the difference in a competitive market. On the other hand, the business needs to ensure that the service works as the customer actually wants it to. This requires more than simply plugging it in: the service engineer needs to be prompted to ensure they leave the technology tested and activated. They could be asked about billing and warranties, or for first suggestions as to how to use the technology best. Alternatively, if something is not quite right or more is required,

that must be fixed fast. All in all, the field force need a portfolio of skills, information and support on hand, as well as flexibility with time to deliver high value services, in order to empower the field force to provide a superior standard of customer service.

This means that they need to be flexibly managed too. It is no good simply sending the field force out at the start of the day with a list of jobs to be done. Management needs to be reactive in real-time as the unpredictable demands of the day unravel and disrupt the best laid plans. Even with a small field force that is complex. But when you reach a field force of hundreds, if not thousands, the logistical problem is impossible without full scale automation. That requires not just mobile devices, but ones that are intelligently integrated with centralized and predictive scheduling engines. That means not just gathering information at the start of the day, but throughout it, and feeding it all into a system that can make many of the decisions about who, how, where and when in real-time. Take availability of resource as an example. We believe that for a large field force, 95 per cent of the logistical management decisions need to be made without human interaction if service is to be delivered efficiently and effectively. The chances of getting engineers to the right place at the right time can increase threefold with predictive resourcing capabilities. Knowing where the engineers are at all times of the day, what their skill-sets are, what work they are undertaking and where is key, for example, to understanding how engineers' schedules can be interrupted and re-scheduled for emergency work if required.

Savings that no one can afford to miss

Such automation represents massive benefits, not least in cost savings. We estimate that driving up the percentage of logistical decisions that are made automatically from 50 per cent to 95 per cent, brings cost savings of around 50 per cent as a result: jobs will be done on time, to an agreed process and with the level of quality that customers want and expect. That translates into substantial figures: millions of pounds for a large organization, easily enough to make the difference between profit and loss. Alternatively, better work in the field means less hassle in the call center – the thing that 21st century customers hate above all else.

The field force represents a challenge. It is one that is deeper than might be first thought, for to repeat again, working out is not like working in. The issue is not just one of pushing data out to those who work in the field. It is rather the much greater one of management: being able to answer and act on how people in the field work, where and when, and with what controls. In fact, the evidence is that simply pushing more data at those who are already detached from the company, pushes them further away.

In other words, the business process piece is key. It needs to be flexible to respond to the events of the day, and this in turn means it needs to be automated, for even with a small field force, the logistical operation will not yield the service customers expect if done 'by hand'. But got right, the field force is a source of operational cost cutting, and improvements in customer satisfaction and quality of service. These are the differentiators upon which companies delivering services in the field succeed or fail. The challenge is not just to push data out, but to bring the field force in.

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