

Agents' Readiness in Taking Calls: Perspectives on Language Assessments and its Effectiveness

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ABSTRACT

The BPO industry is one of the most popular jobs of choice by many young people in the Philippines. Its popularity is because the salary is competitive and it does not discriminate by giving equal chances to jobseekers regardless of their age, gender, or educational attainment. As there are numerous BPO companies in the Philippines, some find it as an opportunity to enhance their communication skills before applying for the job of their dreams. With that, this paper aims to identify the different language assessment tools and tests provided during training and measure how effective it is to prepare the agents to take live calls through a qualitative research design. Aside from identifying the common opportunities for agents with less than 90-day tenure experience and the interventions done by their supervisors to meet the operation needs, this study also found out that clients should revisit the final assessment provided to the trainees as it does not measure the skills that it should measure. This leads to ABAY agents having difficulties in terms of taking live calls.

Keywords: *BPO; call center agent; communication challenges; language assessment; training; training effectiveness*

Introduction

The call center industry is one of the most popular jobs of choice for many young people in the Philippines (Don, 2015). Aside from giving equal opportunities to people, it also provides numerous benefits (depending on the account) on top of its competitive salary. As English is one of the country's official languages, many clients decided to start a BPO company in the Philippines. Filipinos being customer-centric are deemed to be perfect for the job. Due to the country's perceived affinity with American culture, these companies assumed that Filipino staff would already be familiar with the expectations and behavior of the stereotypical American client and their customer. However, Forey et al (2008) stated in their study that after getting hired, the training programs being provided to the recruits are not adequate since those who crafted the program lack understanding of the language support needed for the offshore agents. In addition, Belasoto in 2021 claimed that not all lessons essential to enhance communication skills were tackled during training. It was also found out that in the span of one to two months of training, trainers focused more on discussing product or account-related topics. Philippine English is used through all levels of society and has a wide range of uses in

the country making the language functionally native to Filipinos (Baustista, 2000). However, Tayao (2004) as cited in Forey et al (2008), claimed that Filipinos being mesolects or someone who exhibit divergences from the American accent but do not generally affect communication still struggles with relaying information or resolution to the customers as understanding product information has a different skill set from being able to explain the information to others. This fact was later supported by Mercado in 2012 (as cited in Bugay et al, 2020) as even graduates usually fail when engaged in a free-flowing conversation.

Although multiple studies have been conducted about call center agents over the decade, most of them focused on the agents' well-being, fluency, and accuracy of the target language, and how the mastery of the English language affects their Key Performance Indicator (KPI). Only a few ventured to tackle the agents' readiness in taking calls, as well as, the training proper they have undergone before actually interacting with the customers. Just as mentioned previously, although English is undeniably a part of the Filipinos' daily lives, problems still arise as it is believed that call center agents should have strong communication skills which can only

be achieved through exposure and using the language itself. Since agents' training only lasts for a month or two at maximum (depending on the company and account), it can be deduced that it is lacking in terms of language immersion. Aside from that, topics being discussed during the training should also be considered and tailored to the agents while being aligned with the client's goals.

Hence, this study will focus on how these agents perceive the training they underwent and how it helped during live calls. Specifically, this research aims to: 1. Identify the factors affecting the agents' readiness to take live calls, 2. Identify strategies that can be implemented during training to increase agents' efficiency while meeting the operation standards, 3. Analyze the effectiveness of the language assessments provided during training.

Method

As it is aimed, this research identified and analyzed the factors that affect agents' readiness and the effectiveness of language assessments during training. Qualitative research was employed to describe and categorize these factors. Qualitative research is descriptive in nature as it leads to presenting facts, concerning the status and nature of a situation (Creswell, 1994 as cited in Belasoto, et al., 2021). Participants were asked to participate in a focused group discussion (FGD) and one-on-one interview in which responses were

respectively recorded and transcribed. This served as the basis of the input to the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) program for BPO agents.

The study utilized five agents working in the BPO industry, who were purposively selected based on their tenure (less than 90 days), and three supervisors, of which two out of three are ABAY supervisors (leaders who handle agents who have less than 60 days tenure). Supervisor 1 is a graduate with a Bachelor's Degree in Secondary Education majoring in English and a LET passer. Supervisor 2 is an undergraduate with a Bachelor's Degree in Secondary Education majoring in Science and has been awarded multiple times as a top-ranking customer service representative during their agent days. This also applies to Supervisor 3 who, aside from being a top-ranking agent multiple times, has received awards as the best team leader.

Findings and Discussion

Centers only provide limited time for the agents to learn the ropes during training. With that, the discussion mainly focuses on the product and account itself. The data gathered it shows that the current roadmap or curriculum being utilized is sufficient and has the potential to achieve what the operation needs. Data gathered through interviews are analyzed and the following results are found:

Table 1
Summary of Agents' Overall Perspective on Assessment Provided During Training

Agentless than 90 days tenure	Exercises done during training	Effectiveness of the tools and assessment	Points for Improvement
Agent 1	Mock calls	Very Effective	Inclusion of the updates regarding the product
Agent 2	Mock calls, running mock calls	Very Effective	Inclusion of the updates regarding the product
Agent 3	Speaking/language practices	Very Effective	Language training
Agent 4	Rapid fire, round robin	Very Effective	Availability of account-specific tools
Agent 5	Mock calls, side barging, and rapid fire	Very Effective	Availability of account-specific tools

As shown in Table 1, exercises such as mock calls and rapid fire were done during the training proper in preparation before agents take live calls. In addition, all agents find the exercises and assessments very effective. It also shows that most of the participants, aside from Agent 3, want to include more account or product-specific discussion during training.

Table 2
Supervisors' Overall Perspective on the Effectiveness of the Training Proper

Supervisor	Agents' Common Opportunity	Intervention	Points for Improvement
TL 1	Tools utilization and active listening	Keyboard roleplay, providing scripts, live monitoring, and coaching	Availability of account-specific tools
TL 2	Consistency in using the required tools and showcasing the necessary behaviours of a good customer service representative	Live monitoring and coaching	A training curriculum to focus on very specific topics such as troubleshooting steps for technical support agents etc
TL 3	Tools utilization	Keyboards roleplay	Availability of account-specific tools

Table 2 shows that all supervisors agree that the training is adequate for the agents to learn the fundamentals such as; basic information about the account and the suggested call flow. Aside from TL 1, common opportunities provided are something that can be worked on over time (tools utilization and consistency in required behaviors) as agents continue to take calls every day. It also shows that roleplays, coaching and live monitoring are the most common drills done by these leaders to assess the agents. Lastly, as shown in the table, supervisors recommend including or allotting more time for account or product-specific discussion during training.

This study was able to learn that the training provided by the company is sufficient in terms of account and product-specific topics. As stated by Agarwal et al (2013), the resolution and how the agent handled the call are the key factors of having a good scorecard. Being able to assist the customer with their concern and to answer the queries they have would be much easier with the knowledge of the product and account itself. With that, it is safe to say that these are the factors affecting the agents' readiness. However, as product-specific tools are limited during training, it causes few opportunities for the agents (especially to those who are new to the industry) such as; dead air due to failure to utilize tools well and consistency with the required behaviors mandated by the clients. As mentioned, these opportunities can be rectified by the supervisors' guidance and intervention.

However, according to data, the roadmap currently in use is effective. There is no guarantee that the agents are being efficient as one problem that was mentioned during data gathering is active listening. Good productive and receptive skills are required in a BPO industry therefore, active listening being one of the most common opportunities for new hires poses a big problem. During the training proper, as mentioned by Agent

3, language topics were only discussed for three (3) days in only one day was allotted for active listening. Exercises on the module for the said topic are only composed of five different tasks with one question each. Having that said, assessment may be varied but it is not reliable as agents are only asked to answer one question each task. This is also done by group which only means that there is no assurance that everyone is listening during the implementation of the tests.

This opportunity regarding inactive listening causes communication breakdown on the agent's end during live calls as they will need to have the queries or statements repeated by the caller again to ensure that they have been captured correctly. The scenario provided often is the reason for negative survey returns that affect the agent's scorecard as the customer repeating themselves only shows that they have exerted more effort and the agent was not efficient enough to help them on the call. This is often disregarded by the ABAY supervisors since the agents are new to the account and they believe that it is something that can be corrected in the long run. Aside from the trainees gaining more experience in the said field, monetary rewards, recognition, and employee engagement (as cited in Kurata, et al. in 2023) are facilitated to motivate them to do better in a specific skill.

From a training perspective, one way to address this opportunity is for the clients to consider allotting more time for language-related topics. Proper assessment tools should be used as well to ensure that the agents will be able to apply the skill during live calls. As there is a time constraint during training, to ensure the acquisition of the skill, trainers can have supervisors intervene during training sessions having them help during facilitation of the said assessments. With more facilitators, the agents would be in smaller groups making it easier to pass the said skill and provide

feedback to them.

This study was able to identify that language assessments and the topics themselves are neglected during the agent training. Some agents may view the training as sufficient especially if these trainees are experienced. However, that is not the case for the newcomers. In their study, Belasoto, et al. (2021) found out that agents do not find the training effective as it focuses too much on the product. Centers are more focused on the product specifics as it is the sole reason for customers to call. Aside from that, the misconception of Philippine English led the industry to believe that language training is not

Conclusion

This research has revealed that language training in BPO companies is viewed as insignificant in providing quality customer service as customers are more concerned with the agent's knowledge about the product, resolution to their concerns, and efficiency in resolving their issues. However, the fact that agents are having problems regarding inactive listening suggests that there is still room for improvement with the said aspect in training. With that, this paper learned that (1) to find the balance between operation needs and agents' efficiency, the roadmap should be revised by including more communication skill topics, (2) clients should also look into the training final assessment as it fails to measure what the agent has learned during training, and (3) centers should revisit how agents are hired by the recruitment team.

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