

Case Study Call centres in the financial sector - just putting you on hold....

Unibank

Unibank was founded in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) during the late nineteenth century and by 1990 had become a traditional national high street bank with branches in most towns and cities. Its main business is in personal banking and financial services for individual customers and small businesses. It has subsidiary business units which handle personal insurance, mortgages, and share dealing, but these are managed separately from the high street concern.

The development of Unicall

By the mid 1990's all traditional banks were feeling the pressure of fierce competition in financial services, intensified by the arrival of new entrants such as supermarkets and other well known brands. With an eye to the growing commercial success of direct line banking organisations, Unibank decided to enter the telephone banking sector, and has recently been able to improve shareholder value by switching a significant proportion of its general account management and enquiry activity to a dedicated call centre, named Unicall. This resulted in the closure of many smaller, unprofitable branches and the consequent need for redundancies. Unibank attempted to redeploy existing employees where possible, but also needed to recruit new staff to work in the call centre. True to its origins, and mindful of the relatively high employment rates in the UAE, Unibank decided to relocate Unicall just outside Al Ain. However, none of this was achieved easily, since the employees and customers expressed concern and dismay at the closure of so many small local branches. Thus it is true to say that currently staff morale is low, that there is considerable anxiety and discontent with the new arrangements.

The work at Unicall

At present Unicall employs 200 staff and operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week on a 4-shift system. The majority of staff work on the daytime shifts. Staff work at sets of 4 desks, wear headsets and microphones to take calls and operate terminals with access to all the required account and product information. Supervisors are responsible for each shift and there are three call centre managers and a deputy manager, one of whom is always either available at the centre or can be contacted by mobile phone. Pay scales are standardised: there is a starting rate of 72,000AED which applies to newly recruited staff during their six month probationary period, after which they are placed at the bottom of a 4-point scale which rises by increments to 92,000AED. Employees proceed up the scale by annual increments until they reach the top point, after which further increases are dependant on promotion to supervisory or managerial work. Supervisor's grades start at AED85,000 and rise similarly to AED105,000. There is no performance management system in place and as yet the idea of an appraisal scheme has not been

developed. Unicall is located in pleasant, airy open-plan offices which are nicely decorated and have good basic facilities including a snack and sandwich service, a rest room, and a kitchenette for the preparation of hot drinks and snacks; thus the “hygiene “ factors are fairly good.

Problems with Unicall

The history of Unicall has been mixed. After a patchy first six months, it seems to be picking up business very rapidly as customers begin to see the advantages of this service. While this is encouraging, it has led to a new range of problems. The existing number of Unicall staff is now clearly inadequate for the growing demand for the telephone banking service. Recruitment is under way but this is likely to place existing induction and training programmes under strain. Complaints are beginning to be heard from customers who are being “put on hold” for anything from 30 seconds to 5 minutes during busy periods (especially early in the evening and at weekends)

There are also problems associated with the use of the computer system itself; these centre on the apparent inability of some staff to extract accurate information about relatively simple enquiries, or the length of time that such interrogations take. Monitoring systems which measure the number and duration of different types of call add to these complaints, with enquiries relating to standing orders and direct debit arrangements appearing to take up to 50 per cent longer than they should, according to the authors of the software. There have been customer complaints about rudeness, staff’s apparent inflexibility when dealing with complex account problems and the fact that different operators seem to give different answers to the same questions. There are additional knock-on effects for customers who prefer to visit their local branch. Here the problem seems to be that branch staff themselves have to telephone the call centre in order to deal with certain very simple transactions such as opening new accounts, and that they too are often kept “on hold” to the annoyance of clients and their own considerable frustration.

The call centre staff are also beginning to complain about aspects of the work. Unibank carried out a staff survey 6 months after the start of the operation and again after a further 3 months and the findings of the second survey reflect the increased pressures by revealing a higher degree of discontent than that noted in the first survey. Workers say that they often feel very isolated from their colleagues, which leads to a certain unhealthy rivalry both within and between shifts. Many feel that they are like ‘battery hens’ working in an intensive manner, with little control over the number and types of calls which they receive and limited opportunity to recover from one call before receiving the next. They are also under constant surveillance, with calls being monitored to determine the productivity of the operators and to check the accuracy of the information given and general quality of their work. This causes some resentment and it appears that operators often find informal ways to control the number of calls they receive and the time between calls. Some groups have worked out a method by which calls can be redirected to

one of their number, thus allowing them all to appear busy while only one is actively taking calls. This way they take it in turns to give themselves an informal break from calls while still giving the appearance of working. On occasion, this has been used to 'soak' new or unpopular members of staff who find themselves the victims of such redirection, not realising that they are the only person on their team who is actually busy and appears to have a backlog. Supervisors are aware that this is happening, but find it very difficult to detect.

Some of the redeployed staff remain unhappy about the type of service they are being asked to give and find it too impersonal. On the other hand, some of the new recruits, especially in the younger age groups, believe that they work better and more effectively than other staff, and are beginning to feel that the standardised pay structure does not recognise or reward their individual skills and efficiency. Some are concerned about their employability and want formal recognition for their skills which would be transferable to other similar employers, of which there is an increasing number in the region. Indeed Unicall has already lost a number of its staff to other local call centres which have a more varied clientele and better career prospects.

Unicall and Uniline, the future strategy

Unibank remains aware of the way in which the banking and personal finance sector is likely to develop and management recently decide to expand the service at Unicall to include the provision of mortgages and insurance, thus providing more of an integrated 'one stop shop' service. Furthermore, work has already started on the development of an online banking system, 'Uniline', in parallel with the telephone service. Unibank has been somewhat late in the realisation of the importance of online banking, and thus finds itself at something of a disadvantage here. The new operation, Uniline, is located in the same set of buildings as Unicall, and urgently needs programming staff and others with knowledge of banking and financial services that can help both to develop and run the initial trials of Uniline. It is also clear that if the local labour market is unable to supply this type of expertise at a competitive rate, then the bank will have to consider alternative approaches.

A particular resourcing strategy that the Bank are actively considering in respect of Uniline, is to widen the recruitment pool to consider applicants from outside the UAE from countries such as India, Bangladesh and the Philippines, although they recognise that there may be challenges in managing and accommodating staff from outside cultures.

There have been rumours about the possibility of further job losses, this time at Unicall. This is because competitors in the banking and financial services industry continue to outsource work abroad, and because Uniline is likely to take over more of Unicall's business.

Editors:

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