

CHOOSING "THE BEST" IN A CUSTOMER CONTACT ENVIRONMENT

Lixivium Consulting set out to discover whether "top" performers in the Call Centre industry possess unique characteristics that set them apart from everyone else. Anecdotal evidence from many Call Centre Managers seemed to indicate that their so called "best" performers seemed to do things differently from everyone else, or at the very least, had innate characteristics that made them special. Thus, we set out to discover what this certain ingredient was. It was our belief that if we could accurately identify the core characteristics of top performers and map these in an assessment tool, then recruitment could be made more effective by matching a potential candidate to this profile.

To this end, we gathered data from a wide cross section of Call Centres. Participants were selected from both urban and rural settings, Government and Private Organisations, and from small and large call centre environments. We ended up with a sample of approximately 200 participants whose job descriptions included both inbound customer service through to outbound telesales.

Each participant anonymously completed the Customer Contact Styles Questionnaire. The Customer Contact Styles Questionnaire (CCSQ) has been developed to measure *competence* among individuals working in service oriented roles. Competency characteristics have been found to successfully differentiate between superior and average performers. Competencies can be thought of as characteristics which indicate ways of behaving and thinking. The competencies measured by the Customer Contact Styles Questionnaire are known as trait and motive competencies and form a central part of personality. These competencies (unlike knowledge and skill-based competencies) are rather difficult to develop and as such, it is best to select employees with these characteristics.

In search of the competencies which typify top performers, Lixivium Consulting gathered a range of performance data. This data was chosen to meet the following criteria:

- Considered an important indicator of job performance by the company
- Able to be standardised so as to yield valid comparisons among participants and
- Measured on a continuous and unobtrusive basis.

The data included both quantitative and qualitative measures of performance, such as occupancy rates (and absenteeism), sales rates (where applicable), script adherence and call quality. Interestingly, each organisation had different measurements of performance. This seemingly trivial piece of information becomes critical in interpreting the results discovered by Lixivium Consulting.

In the overall sample (all organisations combined), the most predictive characteristics of job success (or top performance) included the scales of *Competitiveness, Energetic, Detail Conscious, Conscientious, Analytical, Structured and Results Oriented*. Each relationship was positive, such that higher scores in these competency areas translated into better performance. However, the relationships between performance and the competency areas were only modest, and somewhat disappointing. On closer inspection of the data, a more interesting outcome was revealed. The predictive value of the competencies varied widely *within* each of the organisations sampled. What was found to be indicative of top performance in one organisation was of little significance in other organisations. This rather perplexing dilemma is perhaps best understood by carefully analysing each organisation, and understanding exactly how they define job performance. As previously mentioned, each organisation used different measures of job performance. Some organisations only utilised quantitative or "objective" measurements, whilst others emphasized more "qualitative" measures. An understanding of the predictors of job performance in a particular organisation necessitates an in-depth understanding of the domain of job performance itself. The construct of job performance is one that is defined by the demands of the job, the strategy and mission of the organisation etc. Therefore, jobs that are similar in terms of their titles may actually yield very different definitions of what constitutes good or poor performance (as found in the present study). Conclusions regarding the predictive value and hence utility of any test, such as the CCSQ must be preceded by a careful analysis of what overall performance means in a specific setting (or specific organisation). Caution must therefore be observed before making generalisations across different contexts where the definitions of job performance vary. It would seem that tests (e.g. CCSQ) must be matched with the definition of performance adopted by the organisation to provide the best tool for personnel selection.

In addition to analysing the way in which an organisation defines performance, consideration may also be given to the personality characteristics of existing staff members. It has been suggested, that the critical issue in predicting the performance of potential employees is the extent to which the personality profile of an individual is consistent with the profiles of others in particular organisation. The argument is not whether the individual is more or less competitive, conscientious etc. than some large normative population collapsed across many organisations, but whether the individual is more or less competitive, conscientious etc. than people who work in the proposed team of the potential employee.

Conclusions and Implications

The main conclusion from the research undertaken Lixivium Consulting is that the predictors of job performance depend heavily on the way in which an organisation defines performance, and the behaviours that they value and reward. Job performance can mean quite different things, depending on the organisation, and the emphasis placed on particular behaviours. It would be unwise to utilise one instrument indiscriminately across different call centre environments – such a practice would be likely to result in widely different success rates. If your goal is to predict who is most likely to perform well or poorly in a particular job role, it is important to start with an analysis of job performance as conceptualised by the organisation(s) in question.

The overall validity of selection strategies has improved significantly over time by the incorporation of more job relevant competencies. The present research suggests that further improvements can be made when these competencies are matched to both the *occupation* and the *organisation*. Indeed, what seems to be needed is a fit between the individual and the organisation.