



OHIO'S CALL CENTER SOLUTION

IACA MERIT AWARD APPLICATION | 2017

Innovation Description

The Ohio Secretary of State, Jon Husted's Office, made a significant change to our Business Services Division Call Center in January of 2016 by partnering with a nonprofit corporation. This change has resulted in a dramatic improvement in services provided to our customers as well as a financial savings for the office. This call center solution has not only helped our office and our customers, but could be a model for other states to implement for similar success.

To address issues of poor customer service, long wait times, limited hours and a high abandon rate, our office contracted with the Cleveland Sight Center (CSC), an Ohio nonprofit corporation, to answer our Business Services customer calls. CSC began taking our customer calls on January 2, 2016. The contract required specific call center metrics and hours of operation to ensure our customers would get the service they needed, when they needed it and without the long wait times. Within the first month the CSC met these standards and exceeded our expectations. The customers immediately noticed the improvement.

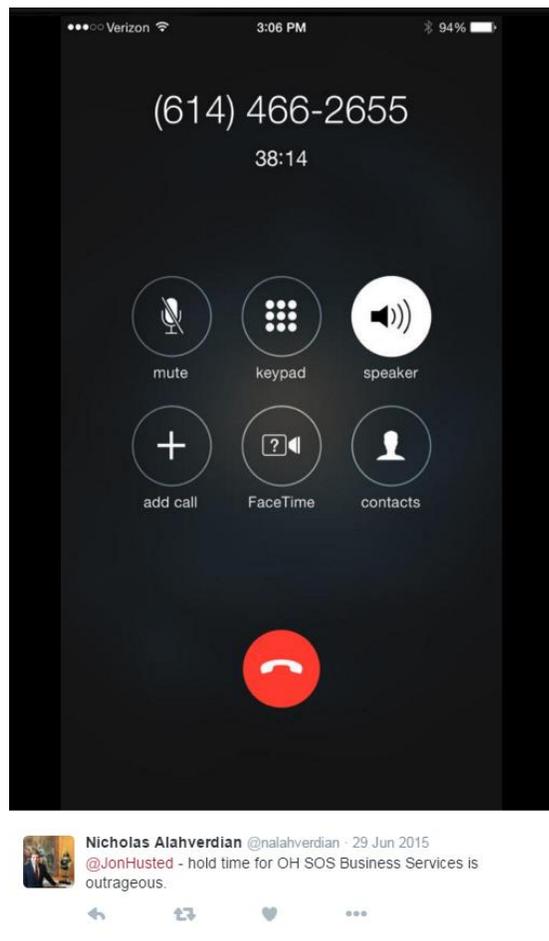
The Problem

The Business Services call center addresses questions related to business filings, uniform commercial code filings, as well as other matters such as minister licenses, notary commissions and apostilles/authentications. The call center agents are union employees in the same job classification as the employees processing business filings. The union employees who worked in the call center were often requesting to be transferred to a business filing position which offers more flexibility and no direct contact with customers.

Our call center began experiencing lower morale than other sections of the offices, as the employees became bored with their jobs and being connected to the telephone all day. In 2015 the service provided to our customers was very poor. The average wait time was 5 minutes and 18 seconds and the abandon rate was over 23%. There were times, especially during lunch hours when we had less staff taking phone calls, that the wait times were as long as 50 minutes. With such long wait times, by the time an agent answered the call, the customers were already upset, making the agent's job more difficult.

We had eight full time employees in the section, however, one employee had been out of the office a few times for extended periods of time on disability leave and two other employees had FMLA leave, resulting in frequent absences. The absentee rate was approximately 20%. We simply did not have enough coverage to handle the volume of calls being received by the office.

Although we were aware of the problem, monitoring numbers and considering solutions, it became more of a priority after a customer made a complaint on Twitter. Social Media is a tool that has changed the ways we communicate with our customers as Facebook and Twitter provide excellent platform for our office to share information with our customers, but it has also created a very public platform for customers to make complaints. On June 29, 2015, a customer made a complaint on Twitter which caused our office to take action. The image below is the tweet sent to the Ohio Secretary of State with an image of the customer's phone showing that he was on hold with our office for over 38 minutes waiting for us to answer his question related to a business filing.



We began coming up with options on how to immediately address the problem. In the short term, when a person was out of the office on leave time, we pulled another employee from the business filing process to assign to the call center so the section was fully staffed at all times. This helped the wait times, but would impact the processing time of filings, so it was not a long term solution. We considered the following options: (1) contract with CSC to handle our call center; (2) add four additional employees to the division and provide the same coverage hours; (3) expand coverage hours through overtime with the current eight employees; or (4) expand coverage hours through four additional employees plus an additional supervisor for a second shift team. Although extending the hours would be beneficial to our customers, it was not going to reduce the wait times during the days without adding additional employees. To solve the problem, and keep the section located in our office, we would need to likely hire additional employees to cover the typical work week as well as add four employees to cover evenings and weekends, plus a manager to supervise those times. Financially it seemed best to partner with CSC and have the services handled by their office.

Our bargaining unit contract required a few steps. We presented our idea to the union leadership and they were given time to present alternate ideas to us. We worked with them and considered the options presented. In our review we spoke to other state agencies working with CSC, as they are the only call center on state term contract, and the reviews were all positive. In considering the finances, the service to our customers and the impact on our staff, it was determined that outsourcing the call center was the best decision. The solution will save the office approximately \$200,000 each year and will dramatically improve services to the customers.

Solution Description

The Cleveland Sight Center, located in northeast Ohio, offers comprehensive services to over 14,000 individuals every year who are blind or have low vision. The services provided include daycare, preschool, life skills training, job training as well as assistance in obtaining a job and implementing technology to adapt to a position as a blind person. They began offering customer service training in 2008 and because of the success of the training program; they decided to open the in-house call center in 2012 employing 5 agents. Now the call center employs over 60 individuals. Nearly all call center employees have a work-limiting disability and having this option provides them with competitive employment rather than a sheltered work environment. The center also provides an opportunity for

upward mobility as the five supervisors also have work-limiting disabilities. Due to the many benefits and comradery in the call center, the turnover rate is much lower than a typical call center.

The contract between the Ohio Secretary of State (SOS) and CSC set forth clear requirements some of which are: (1) CSC must be responsible for provisioning and operating a telecommunications system capable of handling at least 15,000 calls per month; (2) CSC will provide an automated survey that will allow callers to rate their satisfaction after the call; (3) CSC will answer calls on all days the SOS office is open, plus evenings until 8 p.m. and Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.; (4) CSC will accommodate Limited- English Proficient individuals; (5) CSC and SOS will implement a VPN system so that SOS software applications may be accessed by the agents while on the calls; (6) CSC will provide SOS with a secure online portal where SOS may listen to recordings of calls and run reports; (7) CSC must answer calls within 60 seconds of the call entering the queue; (8) The call abandonment rate must not exceed 5% monthly when call volume does not exceed contract standards; (9) The average self-rated customer satisfaction score will be greater than 80%.

CSC set forth the training plan which took approximately 2 months prior to going live, but training continues on a daily basis. The SOS provided materials and the CSC developed an online class for the agents to take and a test which they must pass to begin taking calls. The class and test were approved by the SOS. As part of the solution, one of the SOS call center agents was promoted to a call center coordinator. He remains in the SOS office and communicates on a daily basis with the call center. He worked closely with the CSC during the training and now to help monitor calls, answer questions and communicate information between the two offices.



Cleveland Sight Center Employees

Effectiveness

The call center went live on January 2, 2016 and the results surpassed our expectations. Our customers were receiving the information they needed without having to wait. Because of this new service, we were able to answer more calls which meant the number of calls handled in 2016 was 20,000 more than 2015. Even with this significant increase, the call center metrics were excellent. CSC was able to answer the calls within 43 seconds and the abandon rate dropped from 23.4% to 1.8%.

CALLS HANDLED

2015	109,094
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2016	129,005
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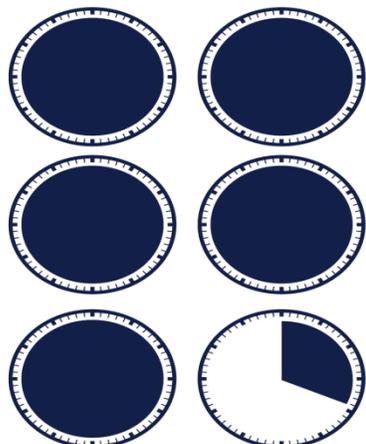
ABANDON RATE

2015	2016
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23.4%	1.8%
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AVERAGE HOLD TIME

2015	2016
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5 MINS 19 SECS



43 SECS

The data is clear, this system was working, but even more we began hearing many compliments from our customers. Our customers appreciated the extended hours of operation. There were occasions when customers informed us that they were filing a business online in the evening, after they worked their day job, and they needed help and were able to contact our call center allowing them to complete the filing. This is helping entrepreneurs in Ohio to start a new business, in the time they have available. Other customers reached out to thank us for the improvement in the wait times.

“Hello, I wanted to take a second to compliment one of your employees, Stephen. From the second he answered the phone, he was extremely helpful and polite. I have been calling SOS offices in multiple states today and this is by far the best experience I’ve had! I cannot tell you how much I appreciate the no wait time. I expected to wait at least 25 minutes because that was the norm for other states, but Stephen picked up right away and helped me.” Sarah Hoffman, Eavenson, Fraser, Lunsford & Ivan.

Not only are the call center metrics important, but the content of the calls is equally important to our office. The call center coordinator is involved in monitoring calls on a daily basis, addressing questions on a live chat service with the agents and visiting the CSC quarterly for in person training. The Director of Business Services reviews calls and provides written feedback to the CSC for their weekly quality assurance sessions. The SOS is also keeping CSC informed on all changes, system issues and potential changes to typical processing times to ensure the agents are fully informed when answering questions. Much of the success of this project has been related to the constant communication between the CSC and SOS.

Originality

The concept of outsourcing services from a government agency is not a new concept; in fact this is the second time this office has contracted with a company to handle the business services call center. This project, however, is quite unique. The partnership this has created between the Ohio Secretary of State and an Ohio nonprofit corporation employing individuals who might otherwise be unable to work is improving the lives of many, our customers and the employees of the call center. The employees of the call center truly enjoy their jobs and it is quite apparent in their tone when answering calls. The absentee rate is very low at the CSC as well as the turn-over rate.

With the money being paid to the CSC for this service, they are able to utilize these funds to hire additional employees and provide additional services to their clients. In addition to the 60 call center employees, they also have approximately 90 more employees of the organization, 500 volunteers and they are serving 14,000 people each year. The decision on whether or not to lay off employees and contract with an outside company to replace those positions is often a controversial decision to make. In this case, although eight employees did lose their job, many more people received employment and services, and that will continue to grow over time.



Ohio Secretary of State, Jon Husted, touring the Cleveland Sight Center

Significance

The change was significant. Call centers are known historically to have high turn-over rates and low morale. These issues impact the tone of the call center agent and their willingness to be helpful to a customer. There is also a stress on the employer when needing to train each new employee for 6 – 8 weeks, only to have to start the process over again within a few months or a few years when that person leaves their job. Finding a partnership with a nonprofit organization helping individuals who would struggle in another work environment without proper technology, accessibility and the close friendships that exist at CSC will help ensure employees will remain happy in their jobs and providing excellent service.

This solution will continue to improve over time. The goal of 2016 was to implement the solution and ensure the contract requirements are being met. The goal of 2017 is to decrease the average call length and improve the knowledge of the agents in the subjects being addressed on the calls. The more confident the agents get with the information, the shorter the calls will be which will improve service to the customers and reduce our monthly bill. In January of 2016, the average call time was 6.9 minutes. By December of 2016 the average call time dropped to 5.1 minutes. This reduction in time shows the increase of knowledge. By continuing to evaluate calls and provide additional training, the knowledge will continue to increase. Also, the CSC is providing helpful information to the SOS on ways we can improve communication with our customers. They have made suggestions on edits to our website to make information clearer or more accessible for our customers. As we continue to make these modifications there will be less of a need for our customers to contact the call center.

Transferability

Call centers are an issue in all jurisdictions. It has been a topic of conversation in past conferences, email exchanges among the IACA members and during conversations had during networking events. Even the customers report to our office of the typical wait times they experience in other offices. Call center problems do not seem to be unique to business registry offices, but in review of industry standards for appropriate wait times and abandon rates, it became clear these problems are

not unique. Many of the issues might be related to the repetitive work, handling calls from upset customers and having a job with less flexibility than others.

This solution can be replicated by other jurisdictions. The model of partnering with a nonprofit could be used in other jurisdictions. The components, including the training process of having an online class and test, as well as the ongoing training and feedback from the SOS, should be replicated by other jurisdictions. CSC has other contracts with other state agencies, but this is the first time they have worked with an office where the agency had a call center coordinator. This position has been invaluable to the CSC and they will now require a similar liaison for all future projects.



CSC could do this service for any jurisdiction. Although they are an Ohio nonprofit corporation, they are not limited to just work with our office. With the base knowledge they already have on business registry issues from this project, it would be easy to begin contracts with other jurisdictions, providing the same service. CSC is located two hours away from the SOS office, so it is not necessary that we be located in the same city. Although, I do think the face to face contact was helpful when initiating the contract and developing a training plan, but these could be accomplished on the phone, by

email and/or video conferences. Working with the CSC has been seamless. They are responsive, capable and knowledgeable about call center solutions.

Lessons Learned

Although this project went very well, and no unexpected issues arose, if we had an opportunity to do it all over again, I would hope to have more time to implement the solution. The direction from the Secretary after receiving the tweet which complained of the 38 minute wait, was to move forward quickly with a solution. We did not want to rush the process on making a decision, so that part took time to research and discuss with the bargaining unit, but once the decisions was made we only had two months to go live.

The training portion was quick, and although the agents all passed the test prior to answering calls, they were not always confident with their answers and they relied heavily on our Call Center Coordinator to confirm information. It was great to have the coordinator on live chat with the agents, answering all of their questions, but each time the agents had a question they put their customer on hold, contacted the Call Center Coordinator and waited for his response. This resulted in longer call times and higher phone bills. But, the agents handled it well when they were not sure of the answer. Instead of giving out wrong information, they obtained the correct information for the customer and they were able to respond with confidence so the customer felt comfortable with the information provided to them.

If another jurisdiction considers outsourcing the call center, I would strongly encourage considering a partnership with a nonprofit, rather than a for profit agency as the same employee issues that occur in your office will occur in another for profit corporation's call center. The passion these agents have for their job has been one of the main reasons this is such a huge success. Also, the appointment of a Call Center Coordinator is essential. He is the one who must ensure that the call center is kept informed of all changes, all issues in the office as well as ensuring the agents are answering questions accurately and timely.

Overall, despite a quick timeline to implement this solution, the project has been a huge success, and we expect these results to continue to improve overtime.