INVEST IN THE RIGHT PROJECTS - GET A GRIP ON AGENT TIME UTILIZATION

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Abstract

Lost and misplaced seconds and minutes add up to hard dollars. Get a grip on how time is used in your contact center. Learn how to manage and optimize agent work states and use manned-time metrics to recognize opportunities for improvement.

Consultants, accountants and attorneys track their time carefully—it's important. No less important to your company's success is the time you and your agents spend working. Insights into what agents are doing and when they are doing it affects your staffing decisions and the priorities you place on improvement initiatives.

The article addresses both aspects of the work-states battle—how to define and use work states, and how to achieve agent cooperation and buy in to their implementation. Although it recognizes that every contact center is different, it provides an example of how you can assign specific activities to specific work states.

Along with its sister article on schedule adherence, "Big Brother or Big Picture?"(Response Design product code 10039), it provides a comprehensive picture of time utilization.

Invest in the Right Projects - Get a Grip on Agent Time Utilization

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Time utilization measurement. It's a bane for most contact center managers and definitely a pain for contact center agents. But, without it, we might as well close up shop and go home.

With this in mind, is it time for you to take a new look at your contact center's time utilization measurement? If you're not sure what I'm talking about, or don't know its absolute importance to contact center management, read on.

Time Utilization Definition

When we speak of time utilization in the contact center, we are typically speaking of how agents utilize the time available to them during their shift. Time utilization is typically measured by manned time (also known as sign-on time and log-on time) and schedule adherence. In this article, we will be discussing manned time and its foundational elements—work states.

The importance of time utilization
Time utilization measurement accomplishes multiple objectives. Without accurate time utilization measurement, it's nearly impossible to improve. Time utilization measurement in the contact center is integral in:

- Forecasting and staffing,
- Identifying the skill and knowledge needs of agents,
- Documenting the return on investment for automation projects,
- Determining charge back or budget monies for projects, and
- Identifying process improvement opportunities.

Time utilization is used for staffing. An accurate accounting of talk time and after call work time is one of the critical components in ensuring that the right number of agents are available to meet service level objectives.

The management team also uses the time utilization statistics to help diagnose what the skill and knowledge agents need. With this understanding, the supervisors are able to assist agents through needs-focused coaching.

Without time utilization measurement statistics, the management team is missing vital information to help it determine the efficiency of the contact center. For example, if agents are spending a long time in after-call work, is it because they have to get up to fax critical information to a customer? Would having a fax server improve the process efficiency and decrease the overall cost of the contact center? Remember that labor costs in the contact center can contribute up to 50% of operating costs.

The contact center is typically involved in a plethora of projects. These projects may be internal to the contact center or they may be assigned to the contact center by other departments. If you want to account for the amount of time you spend assisting others, then you must measure time utilization. This helps you determine what the impact of doing these projects has on service level, and you can identify the most effective way to accomplish the project. By tracking these projects, you can establish a viable charge back system so that others know the worth of the people on your team.

By tracking time utilization, the management team is able to determine when processes are causing inefficiencies. For example, let's say that the talk time increases significantly (beyond projections) after a change in customer information verification is implemented. When the team looks at the numbers, it is easy to spot some people whose talk time did not increase. But when their calls are monitored, the quality is high. What the team notices is that these "experts" have figured out a more efficient way of achieving the same goal. The team implements a process improvement effort to mimic the experts.

Indicator versus Diagnostic Metrics

There are two categories of metrics in the contact center—indicator metrics and diagnostic metrics. These categories apply to time utilization.

There is a good reason we separate the two categories. To explain why, I often give the analogy of "credenza reports." This alludes to the fact that, in the contact center, every piece of equipment spews out data at an alarming rate. So much, that I used to joke with my staff at the contact center that a truck was going to have to pull up to my office each morning to deliver the contact center reports.

Now, how many of you managing a contact center have the time it takes to faithfully review all these reports every day? I certainly didn't when I was managing a contact center. I would conscientiously stack the reports on my credenza to look at later. I told myself that the data in these reports must be important or why else would we be producing them? When the stack got so high that it became unmanageable, I would take some reports off the bottom and throw them away (they were dated by that time, you know). Little did I know that much of this data did not need a daily review. A lot of this data was only necessary if there was a defined problem and, at that time, I could pull the detailed reports to determine the exact nature and cause of the problem. I didn't necessarily need the details every day.

That's how I learned about indicator and diagnostic metrics.

Indicator metrics are those metrics that tell me if there is something in my contact center that needs attention. In a contact center, there are perhaps 10 to 12 indicator metrics covering topics such as customer access (service level, etc.), customer satisfaction, employee satisfaction, financial performance, and human performance. The specific metrics range from percent calls answered in so many seconds, to cost per call, to quality call monitoring scores.

Using indicator metrics, you can tell if there is something going on but you may not know specifically what is causing the problem. For example, if you see a dip in the indicator metrics for service level, the cause could be absenteeism, elongated talk time due to a change in scripting or poor forecasting. That's where a set of diagnostic metrics is important.

The role of the good contact center team is to know where to look for causes in the details. It is serious detective work. In several of my seminars, I conduct a "contact center murder mystery" exercise that has the participants looking at phone system reports to determine the culprit in a murder mystery. The exercise helps everyone understand the intricacies of diagnostic metrics and how one contact center's diagnostic metrics can differ from another due to different technology and processes.

Diagnostic metrics—talk time, after call work time, schedule adherence, idle time, etc.—need only be looked at when there is a defined problem (determined by the indicator metrics). This certainly simplifies the life of the contact center management team. No longer do they have to look at all the data all the time. They can be selective and look at the indicator metrics first, and then (if some are out of bounds), they can be selective with their detailed (or diagnostic) metrics.

In the realm of time utilization within the contact center, manned time is the indicator metric and work states are the diagnostic metrics.

What are Work States?

Telephone equipment for inbound and outbound contact centers (Automatic Call Distributors [ACD] and Outbound Dialers, respectively) allows agents to access different work states during the day depending on the activities they are doing. These work states have various names depending on the type of ACD or outbound dialer.

Typical work state designations include the following agent activities:

- Signing on the system,
- Being available to take the next call,
- Completing after call work,
- Talking with a customer,
- Being unavailable to help a customer (training, meetings, projects), and
- Signing off the system.

The Importance of Consistent Work State Usage

It is important to have a consistent work-state usage among all agents, since work states are foundational for many other contact center metrics and activities (e.g., productivity, manned time, and scheduling). Each agent must access the work states in a uniform manner or the statistics from the phone equipment will not be valid.

As an example, let's look at after-call work time. Along with talk time, this work state is used in staffing the contact center. Determining the number of agents necessary to meet a certain volume of calls requires the precise definition of call handled time. Call handled time is the combination of talk time and after call work time.

Let's say that some agents put themselves in after call work time to get up to get a drink of water. This clearly is not consistent with the definition of after call work time (the time an agent is finishing work related to a customer interaction). By going into after call work for a drink of water (or any other non-call-related function), the agent skews the handled time—making it higher than it should be. This will translate to overstaffing.

Or, let's say that contact centers don't allow any after call work time (even though the agents need it). Believe it or not, Response Design sees this fairly frequently in contact centers. This means that the handled time is going to be lower than actual and the center will be understaffed. Many contact centers don't allow any after call work because of budgetary reasons (it looks like you can handle the call volume with fewer people but in reality you are constantly battling your service level). Or perhaps there is a misperception that no after call work is required (you feel that you have automated your processes so efficiently that there is no reason an agent can't immediately move on to the next call).

The other reason it is important to have consistent usage of work states is the performance management of the agents. If one agent uses after call work to get a drink of water and another does not, then the time utilization reports from your phone system are bogus. You have no idea what the time utilization number means because you are not sure what activities are accounted for in the numbers. You may unjustly think that the agent with the higher after call work time doesn't have the skill to complete the work as fast as the other. What is really happening is that he or she is using the work state for inappropriate activities. It may turn out that when it comes to actual after call work activities, the agent is more efficient than the others.

Defining Work States

The best way to move forward in defining consistent use of work states is to:

- Assemble a small team of people to accomplish the task,
- Determine what work states are available on your phone system,
- Brainstorm all the activities performed by your agents throughout their shift,
- Assign each activity to a work state (remember to keep after call work time for those tasks related to work required to finish a customer interaction or else you can significantly influence the efficiency of staffing),
- Receive input from the general population of agents and supervisors,
- Refine the definitions as necessary,
- Train the agents regarding work-state definition and how to use work states correctly,
- Develop an implementation schedule and start date, and
- Implement an incentive system for motivating desired behaviors.

Assignment of Activities to Work States Example

The following is an example of a contact center's assignment of activities related to work states. The work states available to this contact center (as defined by its technology) are "signing off the system," "talk time," "wrap up" (after call work), and "not available."

ACTIVITY	WORK STATE
Lunch	Sign off
Break	Not Available
Faxing	Not Available
Time off requests (going to see supervisor)	Sign off
Asking questions during a call	Talk time
Asking questions after a call	Wrap Up
Completing paper work related to calls	Wrap Up
Talking with a customer	Talk time
Training	Sign off
Receiving feedback from monitoring	Sign off
Performance reviews	Sign off
Team meetings	Sign off
Company meetings	Sign off
Special projects	Sign off

There is no right or wrong definition of activities. It depends on the processes of your contact center, your calculation for other contact center metrics and the technology you are using. The basic guidelines are:

- Since talk time plus after-call work time equals handled time, you should protect the work state used for after call work. Handled time is what is used to staff correctly.

- Work states may be used to assist in the calculation of individual productivity. You should not define any work state in such a way that it harms an agent's productivity metric. For example, if you assign "special projects" to after-call work, you could be harming system handle time. If you assign it to "not available," you could be penalizing an agent's productivity number depending on your productivity calculation.

The "Junk Bucket" Work State

This is my affectionate term for the one work state that is assigned all the miscellaneous activities. In the example above, this work state is designated as "sign off."

A contact center should have a system to code and track the activities in this junk bucket. This system can be manual or automated (either through the phone system or computer system). If you don't know what's happening in this bucket, you'll lose opportunities for improvement.

Let's say you notice the time required engaging in the activity "time off requests" is increasing. You are now well armed to make some decisions. You can determine the dollars this activity is costing you (time off the phone, service level, etc.) and you can make a business case for automating this activity.

Perhaps the time usage for the activity is high only for one or two individuals. This allows you to investigate their circumstances and assist them where needed.

Training and Motivation of Agents

Once the team has defined the work states, it should establish a start date and train the agents on work-state definitions. It usually helps to train the agents in small groups and to produce a job aid that can be placed in their workspace for quick reference (don't worry, agents quickly memorize the activities and their corresponding work states).

Many centers find it helpful to develop an incentive program that motivates desired behavior. One such program we have seen is to reward agents who are "caught" in the correct work state. For three or four days following the start date, appoint certain people to periodically evaluate if agents are in the right work state for the type of work they are doing. One way to do this is to utilize your phone system's real-time supervisor screen or the LCD on the agents' phone (if it tells you the current work state). Look at what the agents are doing and compare this to the work states. If they are in the right work state, give them a token of some kind. If they are in the wrong work states, do nothing.

Keep repeating this process until all the agents have been evaluated during an "incentive window." An incentive window can be two hours, four hours or an entire shift (depending on the resources you have available to "catch" the agents and reward them). Let the agents know the length of each incentive window so they can anticipate receiving a token. Be sure to evaluate each agent the same number of times during the incentive windows and during the entire incentive program.

As you repeat this exercise throughout the incentive program, the agents who did not receive a token will get the message without you having to say a word. No correction or discipline is necessary. Remember, management philosophy is to reward desired behavior, not punish undesired behavior. Long-term motivation for desired behavior should be evident in your metrics, standards and comprehensive reward and recognition program.

At the end of the incentive program, the agents can use the tokens at an auction where you "sell" anything from company products, incentive gifts, time off coupons, etc. (Just make sure that what you are selling is meaningful and motivational to the agents.)

Producing Reports and Monitoring Excellence

Once the work states have been implemented, produce a periodic report showing each agent's average percent utilization of each work state and his or her overall time utilization (manned time).

When the reports first come out, agent work state usage will vary greatly. Some agents may not be using the work states correctly; others may have insufficient job skill and knowledge.

Once the reports are produced, choose a couple of agents who you consider to be among the best. Compare their work state usage and manned time. Arrive at a preliminary performance standard for both. Communicate this standard to your agents. As you gather more and more data, as your processes improve and as your agents gain increased skill and knowledge, you can continually fine-tune these preliminary performance standards.

The goal is to utilize the manned time report for indicating if an agent is struggling with skill and knowledge and then use the work-state report to diagnose exactly why. This is accomplished by comparing each of the agent's performance to the performance standards you have set. If an agent is "an expert," then he or she should be performing within or above the manned time performance standard. This means that the indicator metric is not raising any red flags and there is no need to look into the diagnostic work state metric.

However, when agents are not meeting the manned time, standard supervisors must diagnose why by looking at work state utilization. If the agent is out of range for any particular work state, then the supervisor will have to ask which activities assigned to that work state are causing the poor performance. In this way supervisors have the time to coach to the specific needs of the agent. Often coaches spend all of their time climbing through data on a daily basis and ending up with little time to coach one-on-one.

Over time, you will see time usage become more and more consistent. When an agent goes out of bounds in a reporting cycle, the agent and supervisor may be able to attribute it to a special assignment (e.g., the agent may have been assigned to a special call list that required increased after call work). These "special events" or assignments should be documented, as they occur to help with diagnostics later.

The goal is to have agents as productive as possible without producing a "sweat shop" environment. Each contact center will have its own optimum percent utilization of each work state and its own standard for manned time. Management should constantly pursue interventions optimizing productivity (e.g., inefficient data gathering systems may be adding to increased after call work time) while always balancing this efficiency with effectiveness (quality).

Getting Buy-In

Half the battle in measuring time utilization is actually doing it—defining work states, automating reporting activities, and ensuring that reports are timely, accurate and believable. The other half of the battle is communicating the need to measure time utilization and helping people buy into the process.

Sometimes we forget that time utilization measurement is a common phenomenon. Outside the contact center you find consultants, accountants, attorneys and many other professionals measuring their time utilization. These occupations must account for their time so the proper client billing can occur.

Agents need to understand that they are not being "picked on" by being asked to account for their time. They also need to know that this measurement is not going to be used like a hammer but as an aid to continual improvement for them and the contact center.

If, however, the only message that the agents hear day after day is, "your talk time is too long," then it is clear what the primary objective is for the contact center—get your talk time down! This causes conflict if talk time and/or after call work time is discussed separately from the quality of the call and ultimately motivates undesired behaviors (e.g., agents rushing through a call without documenting the customer record correctly). Best-in-class contact centers always balance the need for high quality with efficient time utilization.

Do You Know What Time It Is?

Hopefully, by now you know it is time to ensure consistent usage of work states and optimized manned time.

If you're still not sure if this applies to you, take one last test. Ask 20 of your agents one morning what work state they would put themselves into if their only pen were to run out of ink in the middle of the day and they needed to get up from their desk to get a new one. If you get multiple work states as answers, get rid of all your previous time utilization reports (the data is corrupt) and schedule your time utilization team to meet immediately.

Believe me, it's time.

Kathryn Jackson, co-founder of Response Design Corporation (RDC) and call center expert helps professionals get more from their call center. Response Design is the how-to source for integrating the call center into the customer relationship. Its independent consultants use call center web seminars, contact center consulting, call center tutorials, call center benchmarking, world class customer service articles, and best-in-class customer service practices to ensure you get the most from your call center investment.