



7 Strategies to Improve Your Headset Return on Investment

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Providing Products & Services that Enhance Professional Communications

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Introduction

Each year nearly \$2 billion dollars are spent in headset purchases, repairs and maintenance by North American companies. The headset manufacturers' products are available through traditional distribution, specialty dealers, retailers, online catalogers, as well as being sold directly with telephony products, such as PBXs and ACDs and their proprietary phone sets.

The past several years has seen an increase in the categories of headset products available: VoIP, gaming, and Bluetooth® compatible headsets have broadened the market and the number of people who feel comfortable wearing headsets in both their professional and personal lives.

The majority of headsets are purchased by corporations – for Call and Contact Centers, Inside Sales Departments, Market Research, Collections, Purchasing, and Administrative Staff.

Considering the factors necessary for acceptance of headsets by the wearers – you have to analyze: comfort of the wearing style, crisp hearing of caller on the other side of the phone, customers easily hearing the headset user (there is nothing more frustrating than to have a customer complain they can't hear what your communicator is saying); durability of the headset, ease of maintenance, ease in working with manufacturer on warranty issues – it is no wonder that headsets are an extremely complex but vital piece of equipment!

Several major companies, such as Plantronics, Avaya and Jabra, have produced reports on increased productivity of employees where headsets are introduced. Expanding the use of headsets within the organization to "knowledge workers" –

those who use the phone more than 2 hours a day has lead to greater productivity by those who now utilize headsets in their workday. These numbers are a result of a comprehensive study by the Gartner Group. Headset usage has led to the lessening of back, neck, and head stress, as the cradling of a handset between neck and ear for prolonged use will eventually lead to physical ailments. Traditional medical doctors, chiropractors and holistic practitioners, recommend headset usage to those who depend on phone/computer to perform the job.

In Call and Contact Centers, the wearing of a headset is usually a condition of employment. In these centers, there are no handsets, so the headset truly is the human-technology interface.

Additionally, Professional Communicators, such as lawyers, accountants, realtors, managers, outside sales, administrative assistants who spend either time on lengthy calls or frequent telephone follow up will benefit from headset usage.

There are 3 types of headset users within each organization:

- Headset-Dependant: Call Center and Contact Center Professionals
- Headset-Intensive: Professionals who spent 4-6 hours a day on the phone
- Headset-Preferred: Professionals who daily have frequent or lengthy calls

Within each organization, all types of professional communicators are employed. If you are one of the managers chosen to procure, implement, or manage the headsets within your company, you may be overwhelmed with the vast amount of choices and technologies available. Valuable dollars are spent on headsets! This information about headsets conclusively proves you are adding to the bottom line and adding to the productivity and comfort of your employees. Offering this type of information to our customers is the impetus for this white paper.

Headset Product Analysis

A critical analysis of headset products used within the organization can be one of the first keys to improved ROI. Some companies adopt a single-product solution believing that would help to insure a higher return on investment. While that might make it easier for purchasing agents placing orders, the diversity of product in the market today allows for products to be application driven and therefore more readily accepted by the users.

Headset-dependant users in a Call Center environment have different criteria than headset-intensive users, such as warehouse managers and accounting staff or headset-preferred users. Administrative staff, managers, law and real estate professionals and mobile workers often benefits from yet another product.

Within the past 10 years, the technology of the headset industry has provided affordable headsets for all telephone, VoIP, and cellular applications. With the vast improvement and prevalence of VoIP in business-to-business applications, and the implementation of internet-based telephony networks, the industry has expanded the line for comfort, clarity, and productivity.

Wireless technologies have also become a major product line in the headset-intensive and headset-preferred users. The costs of the wireless technologies have become more affordable, more secure, and more adaptable to many applications in the organization. With over 30 million "knowledge workers" - professional communicators outside of Call and Contact centers, with 15-20 percent of those workers currently using headsets, there is room for more gains in office productivity going forward,

Headsets: Proven to Improve Productivity

There have been several major studies done in the headset industry to show the increase in productivity when workers who are telephone-dependant or telephone-intensive use a headset. The report done by H.B. Maynard was one of the first studies to show ***the vast improvement in productivity while substantially reducing physical discomfort*** when the traditional use of a handset was replaced with a headset. This report is courtesy of Plantronics.

The study consisted of more than 2,000 telephone transactions at four firms over an 8-day study. The professional communicators included inside sales executives, technical support representatives, travel agents, and stockbrokers.

The results of the study reported an overall productivity increase of up to 43% over the control group (not given headsets). Employee time spent in telephone-related activities was reduced, repeated making or answering of calls were able to be made with little interruption, and time-intensive tasks, such as keyboarding were performed more quickly, efficiently, and with reduced number of keystroke errors and asking for repeat information on the calls. Those workers on the phone for most of the day placed an average of 16 more calls per day.

Finally, in long-term, ***workers equipped with headsets reported higher morale, lower fatigue during the critical 6th-8th hour of their work shift, fewer absences from phone-related physical complaints.***

A more recent study was commissioned by Avaya. The world's largest manufacturer of telephone equipment, PBX, ACDs, and phone systems have

designed most of their newer telephone sets with a headset-ready port. In 2007, a productivity study was done by E3 Consulting Corporation.

This study was conducted within routine job functions of a real-world national company with 3,500 employees and 150 offices nationwide. This company provides residential loans. The purpose of this study was to see how the use of a headset affected the loan processors' productivity.

The users were allowed to choose a headset style of their choice, and the control group was not given headsets. E3 tracked headset use, productivity changes, and user discomfort over a 30, 60, and 90-day period. After analyzing the results of data collected from both user groups, it was found there was a significant increase in productivity for the headset users. Loan closing data for the study period was gathered from the company records. ***For the headset users, the number of loans closed increased by an average of 23.4 percent.*** When asked for a subjective evaluation of their own productivity, the users felt that their personal productivity was improved by that percentage, if not slightly higher.

Most important to the headset wearers, they reported an average of 25 percent substantial decrease in back, neck, and shoulder discomfort in the performance of their duties. 67 percent of the wearers reported some decrease in the severity of neck, back, and shoulder discomfort. The control group, without the headsets, reported that discomfort either stayed at the same level or reported that it increased by 10 percent.

The results of the E3 Consulting study are clear: Using headsets significantly increased the productivity of the loan processors, resulting in faster closing times, while reducing the severity of physical discomfort of phone-related tasks.

With current economic conditions, loss of workers, and more expected from less employees, ***headsets are a way to improve productivity in critical times.***

Headsets: Proven to Improve the Bottom Line

Increases in employee productivity and increasing of physical comfort, which leads to lessening of health insurance costs and high absenteeism, are the bedrock of a high return on investment for headsets in your organization. ***The key is to insure your organization has the best product for each application that needs to be satisfied.*** The technology, safety, durability and manufacturer support of the 4 major manufacturers is firmly established in the industry.

Your choice of manufacturer can lead to greater ROI – depending on the headset products you use, the warranty period, the total cost of ownership over the course of time it is in use in your organization, the acceptance of the headset by your employees: its comfort, sound quality, and transmission quality. Over my 30 years tenure in the headset industry, I have personally sold every product on the market today and some that are no longer in existence. Every headset manufacturer has its own "sweet spot" – product category or type that seems to be a winner in performance and use. However, cost, performance, warranty, and total cost of ownership has to balance out each headset decision your company makes.

The necessity of headsets in Call and Contact centers slightly skews the ROI discussion, as headsets are the integral human-technology interface. However, even in these headset-dependant situations, comfort and user acceptance is critical to running a smooth operation. Headsets will continue to be an essential tool in the professional communicators' job performance.

The financial ROI (Return on Investment) on the purchase of a headset for employees in Accounting, Marketing, HR, IT, Engineering, Administration or Mid-level Managerial functions when compared to the increase in productivity and decrease in employee absenteeism due to fatigue and physical discomfort insures that within the next 20 years, the majority of all "knowledge workers" – professional communicators, will consider a headset as integral to their job as a the computer, calculator, or phone.

The widespread use of cellular and mobile applications where headsets are either mandated by law or common sense will continue to add the number of headsets that are needed by organizations as companies expand their mobile workers, telecommuters, and traveling executives and management teams.

7 Strategies To Improve Your Headset Return On Investment

Now that we have discussed in generalities the importance of headsets within your organization – let's explore some specifics that will IMPROVE Your Headset Return on Investment –

1. ***Insure that each worker within your organization is using the proper headset.*** For example: Workers who would greatly benefit from wireless are given corded headsets, that may be helpful for calls, but become cumbersome to put on and take off when movement from the phone or office may prohibit wired headsets limitations. While wireless headsets are more costly, the investment in professional communicators' productivity tools will insure increased productivity – even for those who are mobile within their department or location.
2. ***Take advantage of the Manufacturers' Warranty Programs.*** This is the place where many customers lose out on valuable dollars. When you purchase headsets, you have already paid for the warranty period – it is a built-in cost with every product – but many times, customers do not proactively take advantage of the program. Most commercial-grade telephone headsets (corded) have a 2-year warranty, wireless product has a 1-year (Sennheiser has 2 year warranty on all corded and wireless products). Most products sent to the manufacturers are not "repaired" but replaced with re-manufactured products brought to the original , using parts that are salvaged from other customers' sent-in product. In some cases, the product that is returned to you is almost new – and you will be the beneficiary of superior performance on the newer equipment. Many customers have yet to capitalize on this and allow the 2-year warranty to pass. At least twice a month, headsets in need of repair

should be sent back to the manufacturer. Each manufacturer handles warranty replacement/repair directly with the customer. No matter what the size of your organization, establish a relationship with the Warranty Department of every manufacturer you are working with. These are the people who can prioritize your return product when time is of the essence. Headsets have an average life span of about 33 months, so if your headsets are not hitting that mark, it may be because the manufacturers' warranties are not being maximized. Analyze the cost of after-warranty repairs versus new product to determine which would be best for your organization. I have seen too many purchases that were necessitated by headsets waiting to be sent in for warranty repair or replacement while workers needed headsets to perform their job. While these orders benefit the distributor or dealer who takes your order – you may end up with more headsets than you need in the long-run.

3. ***Share the Responsibility of the Headsets with Your Employees.***

You are making a valuable investment in the productivity of your workers, and in return they are getting a tool that is a health and efficiency benefit to workers. For Call Center workers, many companies have employees "sign" when accepting the equipment. This makes them responsible for the headset remaining on site and in good working order. Having ALL employees sign a Equipment Responsibility Statement¹, especially for wireless and PC headsets is vital to insuring that your equipment is not walking out in employees purses and briefcases. Any product that a worker would think would be perfect for home use, should be protected from easy theft. This should not be seen as a punishment, it just makes it more likely that employees will take extra care for the product while they are using it. Insure that your HR Department keeps copies in employees' files. ¹*Templates for the Equipment Responsibility Statements can be provided upon request.*

4. ***Keep Track of Your Headset Inventories.*** Your headsets are valuable equipment. In Call and Contact Centers, assign one of the supervisors or administrative to keep track of inventory. When headsets need repair, do not allow them to be stored in file cabinets or desk drawers or boxes under the desk or in the equipment closet. I recommend if you have pockets of employees that are headset-dependant and headset-intensive, you maintain a 10 percent of stock that can be put in use when headsets need to be sent in for repair or new employees are hired. If you are not sure of the number of headsets in use currently, announce a "Headset Clean Up Day" and put out bins in departments where headsets are in use and have employees empty out drawers, file cabinets, and storage closets to get a handle on unused inventory and do a count of all in-use products as well. This would be a great time to evaluate if any of these unused products can be sent in for warranty service – or determine if you have older or non-compatible that could be used for trade-ins for newer units.

5. ***Never Throw Away Headsets...They can be used for Trade-In Credit for New Product or Accessories.*** When you accumulate a number of headsets that are far out of warranty, non-compatible with current phone systems, or merely not in use, ask your headset vendor for a trade-in credit for the product. Obviously, even a \$5-\$10 per complete unit trade-in credit would not only offset the cost of new products, but will help to add to the bottom line and affect the overall Return on Investment. Your headset vendor will work with you and your manufacturer to recover some value for your old product. In this industry, trade-ins are common ways to increase your buying power. You do not need to continue to buy the product you are trading in. Actually, you have more leverage over a new manufacturer anxious to earn your business. Even if there is no dollar value for the product, you can often get free accessories: ear cushions, mic screens, connecting and training cords for a lower price using the old product as trade-in credits.

6. ***Employ Headset Hygiene and Maintenance Programs to Prolong the Life of Headsets in Your Company.*** There are many ways to prolong the life of your headset inventories. First of all – proper hygiene practices should be used. Headsets are the only communication product that is actually "worn" by your employees. This means hygiene is an integral part of keeping the headsets in peak condition and your employees comfortable with the continued wearing of these products. First, never have employees share headset tops. In this age of super influenzas and easy transmissions of germs, each employee must be given their own headset top. If cords or amplifiers connected to the phone set are to be shared, the quick disconnect allows for easy changing of tops for shift workers in the organization. Wireless headsets are not really adaptable to sharing. Good hygiene includes that ear cushions and microphone covers be changed every 6-8 months. If you are using voice tubes or voice tube tips that are made to be changed, these should also be changed out every 6 months. Sanitizing wipes should be used on the headsets every month or so – this will keep your equipment clean and free from transmitted germs. When an employee leaves – the headset should be put through a complete cleaning and changing of cushions and mic screen or voice tube before being assigned to a new wearer. If you are in charge of vast amounts of headset users in a Call Center, ask your vendor to package ear cushions, mic screens, and sanitary wipes into small kits that can either be handed out to employees on a regular basis – or can be sold in your vending machines!
7. ***Investigate All Headset Technologies Available – Keep Your Buying Options Open.*** Each of the major headset manufacturers has a wide portfolio of products in corded, wireless, PC-compatible, and cell phone compatible units. In this day and age, most companies have product from more than one manufacturer. While your Call Center users may like the fit and feel of product from one manufacturer, your knowledge workers who utilize more wireless technologies may prefer a

wireless unit from a different manufacturer, and your PC or mobile users may use a combination of both. You should keep abreast of any new products that are on the market. Ask your vendor or the manufacturer of newer products for samples to be sent to your company – you might find a product that is more accepted by your users, works better with your current phone system, or has different features than you currently have. In some cases, the purchasing of a new phone system, changing from traditional telephony to VoIP, or users looking for more comfort or better acoustical performance is the perfect time to look at alternative products to what you currently have. No one wants to wear the same pair of shoes for 5 years or buys the same car time after time. Often the purchase of a different style or manufacturer's product is a morale builder for those who wear headsets 6 or more hours per workday. Having been involved in the design, marketing and sales of headsets for almost 30 years, I have seen the tremendous improvements in products and technologies – take a serious look at vendor's recommendations for new products. Your satisfaction in purchasing products that fit all the applications in your organization should be their Number 1 consideration – not just "pushing" a particular product line. Ultimately what you buy and who you buy from is your choice – be sure you are receiving superior customer service, working with knowledgeable account executives who have experience with all the major headset manufacturers and who will take on the pivotal role in the relationship between manufacturer and you.



Conclusion

Headsets have become a major productivity tool in the corporate world in which we all work. The technologies of headsets will continue to keep pace with the needs and the various applications where productivity, comfort, and efficiency are demanded of our Professional Communicators.

The purpose of this white paper was to give information on a product that we are all becoming more and more dependant upon. I hope that the strategies outlined for enhancing your headset return on investment as well as the information on headset analysis and the productivity studies have been useful to your company in adding to the productivity of your workers and an increase to your bottom line.

If you need further information or have questions about headset analysis, choice, maintenance, or implementation, please do not hesitate to inquire. With a strong commitment to the headset industry, we are here to provide you with answers and options!

About the Author: Melissa A. Vokoun has 30 years' experience in the headset industry. She is currently the President of NuVo Communications. She has worked with every major manufacturer in the design and marketing of products since the early 1980s and continues to bring passion and innovation to the industry through her work at NuVo Communications. She can be reached at: melissa@nuvocommunications.com and welcomes your questions and concerns.

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