Contact centers, can you hear the voice of the customer?

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Introduction

In delivering a service to customers, contact centers rely on a set of defined actions or activities, delivered through technologies implemented by the contact center organizations. Recognized or not, every contact center has a set of business processes that run across one or more systems, designed to satisfy the customer need, or to serve a business-to-business purpose. At a basic level, these processes allow contact center environments to be viewed in a similar way to factories, meaning that advanced manufacturing methodologies can be applied to the design of the contact center.

Blitz QFD

One such methodology is quality function deployment (QFD), a Japanese-developed method that systematically links the needs of the customer with various business functions and organizational processes. QFD helps transform customer needs into engineering characteristics for a product or service, prioritizing each product or service characteristic while simultaneously setting development targets for the product or service.

In the contact center environment, it is more appropriate to use a software subset of QFD, known as Blitz QFD. Where QFD is a methodology for delivering quality from user demands to components, Blitz QFD is a methodology of defining those up-front user demands in a structured and traceable manner.

Blitz QFD Process

Identifying the customer

The first step in improving an existing set of business processes or delivering a new set is to ask who owns the current processes and, equally important, how they are measured. This means asking a number of questions. “Who is buying the system?” “Who else will be affected by the outputs that the system produces?” “Who will evaluate and bless the system when it is delivered and deployed?”

Answering these and other questions will identify a list of key stakeholders and process owners, all of whom should match up to processes that have been defined within the project’s scope of work. These stakeholders must be interviewed to discover their experiences of the system, the processes and the technologies in place. Any problem statements need to be coupled with high-level benefits that the stakeholders would like to see as a result of process re-engineering.

At this point, there will be a structure of stakeholders, along with key problem areas and potential benefits. Organizations can then use the Kano customer-satisfaction model to determine how satisfying each of these defined benefits would be for the key stakeholders. Using a Kano questionnaire will help define what the key stakeholders find exciting and intensely satisfying, normally satisfying, and, lastly, what is simply expected.

Go to the Gemba

Gemba is a Japanese term meaning “the place where the truth can be found”. Indeed, the Japanese police use gemba as a term for a crime scene. In quality management, gemba means the manufacturing floor, and the idea is that if a problem occurs, the engineers must go there to understand its full impact, gathering data from all sources. In the contact center, the gemba represents the processes that most closely influence an organization’s interactions with its customers.

By mapping processes and defining process requirements and waste close to the gemba, the ability to define and deliver a clean and waste-free process is greatly improved. Using process mapping and task-driven workshops, organizations must conduct their analysis as close to the gemba as possible by using efficient information gathering and analysis methods.

The processes used within the contact center can be considered in a hierarchical, three-level manner. The first-level process map encompasses a high-level view of the entire system in a single map, with each major process included as a box. The second level takes each of the boxes in the first map and breaks them down into sub processes. Any development work to be done on the existing system is designed and built from the third level. The maps will contain two different sets of processes: initially one showing current, existing processes and, at a later point, another showing how those processes will look post project.

The second-level maps of current processes should be used as a visual tool within a string of facilitated workshops, where stakeholders such as users, subject matter experts and technical experts work in a team to debrief each process map, self-documenting the customer’s perspective where it applies within the process. It is at this point where it is possible to flush out the waste encountered within every contact center, combining the skills and knowledge of the workshop participants with the visual tools of the process maps.

Defining customer needs

The information collected at the gemba should contain the following types of data: desired functionality, experiences, opportunities, strategic vision and backend activities. Each piece of documented information from the workshop should be collated and built into a master document.

This information must then be converted into a set of clearly defined customer needs. To do this, each item must be examined and grouped under a set of statements that can include criteria such as benefit to the customer; talks about the customer, not the product; technology and product independent; defines value to the customer; talks about solving problems; opportunities; look and feel; represents goals; objectives or enabling tasks.

Group, structure and prioritize

At this point, a set of basic customer needs will be established, relating directly to specific business processes and technologies. These needs have been gathered by conducting a horizontal analysis of existing processes. It is now necessary to verify and uncover the unstated customer needs by cross-checking these vertically, or functionally. To do this, organizations can use the KJ method of grouping, creating an affinity diagram of those customer needs not based around existing functional groupings.

The next step is to turn the affinity diagram into a hierarchy diagram with the functional groups going from left to right. At this point, each of the main groups should be split into sub-groups so there are three tiers of customer needs from left to right. The system-level concepts from the main group headings can now be examined down to very specific customer needs within the groups, removing duplication and seeking to determine what defines customer value across an organization’s business processes.

Using Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP), which uses pair-wise comparison to deliver ratio-based priorities, companies can then assign a priority to each group, sub-group and, ultimately, each individual customer need. Using this method, it is possible to determine the single most important customer need from a list of thousands, as well as allowing the priorities to be traced back to individual processes, which means that companies can prioritize systems and internal processes at the same time.

Deploy the most important customer needs

Having gone through this exercise, there will now exist a clearly defined and prioritized list of customer needs, detailing the most important process-improvement features to help address those needs. Using this information in conjunction with the maps showing current processes, it is easy to build new process maps that fulfill the customer needs defined by the key stakeholders from the gemba.

Using a number of simple tools that help to quickly define what is important to the users of business processes, organizations can reduce the inherent waste and lack of optimization that 99% of contact centers take for granted. Which begs the question, “Contact centers, can you really hear the voice of your customers?”

About the author

Paul Anderson works as a Senior Business Analyst for Sword Ciboodle. Paul holds a PhD in defining business requirements and process improvements in service-orientated software using an innovative Japanese product/process development tool, Quality Function Deployment (QFD). He has gone on to lead the development and evolution of these methodologies in practice with lean and Kaizen influences, and blends them with facilitated workshop techniques as part of Sword Ciboodle's project delivery framework.
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