CALL CENTER
BEST PRACTICES GUIDE

Best Practices: English Language Training for Call Center Agents

Call centers employ four million employees in US companies. In order for agents with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) to provide effective customer service, they must overcome language obstacles and avoid miscommunications. To achieve these goals, companies with call centers often provide employer-sponsored English language training.

Training makes sense for business. Companies that invest in employee training outperform the market by more than 45 percent—while companies that do not underperform by 22 percent.[1]

Developing agents' English language proficiency leads to:

- More responsive agent service
- Increased engagement with customers
- Better workforce retention rates
- Greater collaboration with co-workers
- Higher margins from faster resolutions

We can see call center language training programs have merit for businesses and employees. But once the determination is made to introduce English language training for agents, what's next?

Our Best Practices Guide shares 10 important steps toward reversing call center agents' hesitation while on the phone with English-speaking customers and building employee speaking confidence that will represent the business well.

1 Determine language training objectives

Several conditions might cause a call center to consider English language training for agents. And while every operation is different, there are some common occurrences that highlight the need to increase workforce language proficiency. Disengaged call center agents can have a negative impact on their team and company's performance. Employees who feel isolated from their co-workers have higher absentee rates. Resolving customer problems may be stymied by a greater level of agent mistakes. Limited English proficiency, often not initially detected, can become the catalyst for clarifying a call center's language training objectives.

2 Discover a champion

Someone in the business must lead the charge to show how LEP employees can perform below expected standards of customer service as a result of miscommunication. Often this will be an HR or L&D leader familiar with employees' level of English language skills. Another effective champion may be a line-of-business leader, one familiar with how agents with limited English proficiency are compromising customer service and sales. Each leader can contribute in some way to a language program's success, but having a champion to promote English language training and guide its acceptance is invaluable.

3 Monitor startup

Once a commitment to language training is made, take steps to see that the investment performs as expected. Look for ways to keep training on track to meet business goals and give call center agents their best chance to improve English proficiency. Make sure a coordinator or administrator provides learner orientation with clear instructions and goals. Decide from the start how and when employees are expected to take language training. Will it be on company time? Or away from work at their convenience? Finally, encourage learners by letting call center agents know that cooperation and achievement will be rewarded.

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④ Understand how adults learn

Call center agents must possess specific skills, including the ability to problem-solve, project empathy, and offer assurance. Staying on task while adapting to unexpected issues demands self-discipline. When managers see that an agent's English proficiency needs sharpening, pausing to recognize that learning can be complex and personal for adults increases understanding of how employees learn. Agents training to develop their English skills will want to know how their language-learning efforts connect to their overall job success.

⑤ Choose a scalable solution

Successful companies distinguish between current needs and future plans. How can a language training program keep up with a company's strategic growth? Choosing an online language training provider with the capability and experience to scale their language solution across teams, borders, and geographies ensures that every learner within a company can have access to the same learning advantages.

⑥ Address learners' immediate needs

Call center management already prepares for issues likely to arise on customer calls. Agents in English language training may need to learn vocabulary specific to the company's business segment. Finding a digital language-learning program that can adapt to company and learner needs means delivering targeted instruction based on real-world expectations. Customizing lessons specific to an industry reduces the time needed to bring LEP employees up to speed on conversational content they will need to perform their jobs well.

⑦ Meet employees where they learn best

Not all language learners are alike, so it's important to match beginning content with an employee's current level of proficiency. Use certified assessments to gauge where a learner's ability lies on a scale that includes beginner, intermediate, and advanced instruction. By starting with content that is not too easy and not too hard, call center agents will get off to a quick and confident start. Ongoing testing as employees progress indicates the next level of content each individual is ready to consume. Language learning is interesting and rewarding—but not easy.

⑧ Provide avenues for practice

Think about an instructor-led, 45-minute English language class with 15 learners. Experience and simple math tells us that once the training begins, learners will have only a few minutes to practice and speak English aloud during class. Online language learning for call center agents gives quick feedback on pronunciation, continuous opportunities to practice speaking the language being learned, and increased engagement in conversations with virtual native-speaking tutors. Presumably, call center agents will speak English all day. More chances to practice speaking the language supports greater on-the-job success.

⑨ Add language training to employee development plans

Is every agent developing their English proficiency to improve the quality of customer calls? Are some going to also use their sharpened skills in a chat or contact center where writing skills are as important as speaking and listening skills? By including language training in employee development plans, companies can specify the English language benchmarks employees will be measured against. Tying language training progress to employee goals, as well as business goals, provides a reliable performance yardstick.

⑩ Enable employees to learn anywhere

Today's technology-driven lifestyle and business environment has heightened employee expectations for instantly accessible apps and programs. It's no different for language training. Online language instruction should be reachable by learners regardless of their learning devices—whether mobile, laptop, or desktop. Language training is most effective when it is accessed regularly for 30 minutes or less. Small bites of learning can lead to big leaps in proficiency. Moving language training out of the classroom and into the hands of employees on the go is a proven method for increasing English language proficiency.

Conclusion

Overcoming language challenges faced by LEP call center agents requires a flexible, scalable training solution. For businesses, the solution should be easily adaptable so that targeted instruction aligned with business goals is possible. For call center agents, improving English language skills is both a personal and professional benefit—one that can be rewarding in the very call center that was forward-thinking enough to sponsor their training.

To learn about Rosetta Stone® solutions to improve employees' limited English proficiency, schedule a consultation by visiting:
http://corporate.rosettastone.com/consultation

1. ATD (Association for Talent Development)

Contact us for more information:

United States and Canada:
(800) 811-2755

Outside the United States and Canada:
+1 (540) 236-5052

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About Rosetta Stone
Rosetta Stone is a global leader in technology-driven language and learning solutions for individuals, classrooms, and entire organizations.

Our scalable, interactive solutions have been used by over 12,000 businesses, 9,000 public sector organizations, and 22,000 education institutions worldwide, and by millions of learners in over 150 countries.

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