Calling All Call Centres: Moving Towards Organisational Excellence?

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ABSTRACT

The call centre industry is a relatively new phenomenon within Australia. The sector has undergone a period of rapid growth and is a valuable source of employment for many Australians. Large organisations are increasingly providing customer service and support via call centres. As more organisations choose to conduct their business in this way many issues of access to services and service quality are raised. Since many of the organisations which have selected the call centre route to service quality improvement are large and prestigious private and public sector organisations, the Australian Business Excellence Framework (ABEF) may help bridge the gap between poor performance and excellence in service provision. This paper firstly summarises the requirements of the ABEF in the context of the Call Centre Industry. It then examines the results of a study investigating the provision of services and employment for the hearing impaired in call centres and reviews the shortfalls.

Key Words & Phrases: Call Centres, Hearing Impaired, Disability Discrimination, Australian Business Excellence Framework (ABEF).

Introduction

Access to Services
The importance of access as a component of service quality improvement has been recognised in many areas, with increasing access at times and in locations which are convenient to the customer. Examples of this are in the retail industry where many retail outlets have increased the number of hours they are open, which has improved accessibility to retail services. In other cases, there have been enabling technologies which have served to improve access in a way that is convenient to customers. For example, the development of autotellers and telephone banking have opened many banking services 24 hours, 7 days, providing convenient services with improved access achieved by extending the time period access is available. The ServQUAL (Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry, 1990) model of service quality recognises access as one of the characteristics for improvement. The development of call centres has also enabled companies to revisit the ways in which they manage their relationships with their customer base. The proliferation of call centres has the potential to exclude some potential customers such as the hearing impaired. This is not only poor business strategy, it is in contravention of the companies’ statutory responsibilities. There is technology available that is compatible with call centres which would enable deaf/hearing impaired people to access services. Enabling technology in the form of Teletypewriters (TTY) has been in existence for about 40 years allowing deaf/hearing impaired people to communicate via telephone. There would appear to be no defence in law for failing to comply, as technology is available that is relatively modest in cost, particularly relative to the total costs of the enabling technologies required to initiate a call centre service.

Access to Employment
During the past decade, unemployment rates in Australia have reached high levels when compared with the previous 40 years. In contrast, the Call Centre industry has been one of the highest growth areas in the Australian economy over the past five years. The industry provides valuable employment to approximately 100,000 Australians (Kjellerup, 1999). The nature of the Australian economy, in common with most advanced economies, has changed, moving towards a service based economy. In these circumstances, it would be particularly unfortunate if one of the growth...
areas for employment in the economy were to be beyond the reach of a segment of the population purely on the grounds of a disability.

**Australian Legislative Framework**

In Australia, the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA, 1992) is “An Act relating to discrimination on the grounds of disability.” The DDA made discrimination both in employment and in the provision of goods or services on the grounds of disability illegal (DDA, 1992).

Under the DDA “It is unlawful for an employer or a person acting or purporting to act on behalf of an employer to discriminate against a person on the ground of the other persons disability or a disability or any of that persons associates’ in determining who should be offered employment, or in the terms or conditions on which employment is offered’” (DDA, 1992).

“It is also unlawful in the terms or conditions of employment that the employer affords the employee, by denying the employee access or limiting the employees access to opportunities for promotion, transfer or training or any other benefits associated with employment or by subjecting the employee to any other detriment” (DDA, 1992).

The Act provides for there to be a Disability Discrimination Commissioner. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission is the body which is empowered to investigate and determine cases. In the case of Australia, discrimination on the grounds of disability is treated in the same way as discrimination in the grounds of gender or race.” (Dalrymple and Phipps, 1999).

Companies operating call centres discriminating against hearing impaired potential customers or employees through its policies and practices are, therefore, simply contravening the law.

The Australian legislation is now relatively mature and therefore it could reasonably be expected that the legislation would be embedded in the policies of companies and the ways in which they operate. It was hypothesised that this would be evident in the results of examining fundamental discrimination issues such as access and equity. This paper seeks to examine the DDA in the context of the call centre industry through Equal Employment Opportunity Policy (EEOP) and the provision of services to the hearing impaired.

**Business Excellence Framework**

The Australian Quality Council’s Australian Business Excellence Framework (ABEF) was introduced in 1987 to help Australian companies meet the challenges of the global environment. As can be seen from Figure 1.1, the model focuses on seven categories within an organisation that are interdependent and introduces business improvement methodologies.

**Figure 1.1 The Australian Business Excellence Model**

Definitions of the Seven Critical Success Categories

Let us examine the categories of the ABEF in light of a company whose call centre is not providing access to potential hearing impaired customers and employees. This illustrates how the ABEF may be used as a tool for improvement and the interdependence of the seven success categories.

1. **Leadership & Innovation** – examines how leadership uses the principles underpinning the framework and how effective leadership is at creating an innovative environment. An organisation’s strategic direction has to be questioned if it is not employing enabling technologies to service hearing impaired customers. Does it mean to exclude potential customers and revenue? How is a company who denies access to services contributing to the environment and community? It is certainly not maximising community well being. Is this an example of good corporate citizenship?

2. **Strategy & Planning Process** – examines the way the organisation develops its strategies and plans and how it communicates and deploys them. Does a company understand its business environment if operators are not
trained to handle calls from hearing impaired people? There would seem to be issues of planning raised. Is this company developing and applying their resources in the best possible way?

3. Data, Information and Knowledge examines how the organisation obtains and uses data, information and knowledge to support decision making at all levels of the enterprise. How well does a company collect data and use it if it is not aware this potential market of hearing impaired customers exists? It may either be unaware of this subset of potential customers or aware and not have used the information in decision making.

4. People – explores the way in which all people are encouraged and enabled to make a personally satisfying contribution to the achievement of the organisation’s goals. A call centre not employing hearing impaired employees, who with minor investment in enabling technology could work just as efficiently as hearing employees, are acting unlawfully. Hiring hearing impaired employees may increase the awareness of issues such as access and help identify an opportunity for improvement.

5. Customer & Market Focus – addresses the way in which the organisation analyses its customers and markets, and how it reflects the needs of its current and future customers in all its activities. How can a company like this claim to know its customer and market? Call centres are widely considered an important element in Customer Relationship Management (CRM) since they provide access to information, assistance and expertise to customers in real time. Issues of CRM arise if customers are excluded because of their inability to use a conventional telephone.

6. Processes, Products and Services – examines the processes the organisation uses to supply quality products and services to its customers, and the processes used to improve those products and services. This category relates to the quality of products and services. How can a service be of high quality if it is inaccessible? Clearly an inaccessible service is really no service at all.

7. Business Results – the intent of business results is to demonstrate the performance of the organisation to date and, by using appropriate measures, to envision its success into the future. All of the six other categories discussed contribute to the results of the business. None can be analysed in isolation. A company which is failing to service a potential market due to its lack of knowledge of the market is not performing as well it might. The ABEF recognises the importance of both the bottom line financial performance and the contribution it makes to the community. Stakeholders may not be pleased to discover a company discriminating on the grounds of disability in the provision of services or in employment. All companies that aspire to business excellence must, as a minimum requirement, fulfill their statutory obligations. Any company which has a call centre as part of its service provision and is not making provision for the hearing impaired is not meeting this minimum requirement.

The framework aims to be able to provide the impetus for companies to implement a planned and structured approach to achieve competitive advantage, increased productivity and enhanced innovation capability(AQC, 1999). The ABEF is similar to both the Malcolm Baldrige and EFQM Business Excellence Model. The ABEF (AQC, 1999) and Baldrige focus on seven critical success categories within an organisation, while the European Foundation for Quality Management Business Excellence Model (EFQM, 1999) focuses on nine fundamental concepts that underpin business excellence. Although the models vary in the numbers of components, there is a common thread in them, which recognises that the financial bottom line is not the only measure of business performance. Social responsibility and being a good corporate citizen is emphasised by the three business excellence models and frameworks. This is related to sustainability.

The Development of the Call Centre Industry

It is widely held in the service sector, where customer relationships are often ongoing, that it costs significantly more to attract new customers than it does to retain existing customers. With this in mind CRM is being viewed as a more important activity for companies as a means of retaining existing customers and ensuring that they are satisfied. Call centres provide valuable information and feedback to companies on the performance of their goods and services. The call centre industry is one of the most rapidly growing industries in the developed world today (Dalrymple and Phipps, 1999). The growth of the industry demonstrates the commitment of
companies to their relationships with customers. It also reflects the desire of companies to improve access to their services, in a cost-effective manner, and retain satisfied customers (Bird, 1998).

Before September 1996, the Australian Call Centre industry was small and dominated by a selected few industries - telecommunications, credit cards, airlines and car hire taxi companies. Australia then had some 800 call centres in total containing possibly 10,000 employees. Since 1996 the number of call centres has grown from 800 to 5-6000 sites and employment has grown from 10,000 to 100,000 (Kjellerup, 1999).

The use of call centres in Australian customer service has only recently been adopted by medium sized companies. The early adopters were large companies (Johnson, 1998). The viability of call centres for many companies has improved with developments in telecommunications technology, lower barriers to entry and the improved customer perception of telephone services, often offered via toll free numbers (Phipps, 1996)

The Frequency of Occurrence of Hearing Impairment

In 1993, 18.1 per cent (3,176, 700) of the Australian population had one or more disabilities. Of these 999,800 persons, 31.5% reported a hearing impairment. The incidence of hearing impairment increases with age (ABS, 1993). However the proportion of people with a disability who have a hearing impairment only, remains relatively constant across age groups, showing that the rate of increase with age is similar to that for all disabilities. Add to the hearing impaired and deaf people those with speech disability and those who cannot use conventional speech telephones and this constitutes a significant market. Australia, in common with many developed countries, has an increasing ageing population. In 1993 there were 2,763,000 person aged 60 or more and, of those 21.1 per cent (581,900) had a hearing impairment. (ABS, 1993)

Companies that provide goods and services through call centres may miss important market segments and opportunities if they fail to service this market. Thus, we have a growing problem with disability resulting from hearing impairment, and hence the size of the market represented by the hearing impaired, and there is legislation which outlaws discrimination against these disabled people. This research targets the reality in the context of the call centre environment.

Methodology

Customer Service

A list of 88 call centres with more than 100 workstations was used as the sample. Call centres were contacted by the researcher on behalf of a deaf person to find out about how that person could access the services of the call centre. Each call centre was then asked:
- if they had a Teletypewriter (TTY) line,
- the number and the hours the TTY service was available
- If the company did not have a TTY line they were asked if they would accept a call from the Australian Communication Exchange-National Relay Service.

This is a National Relay Service which acts as an intermediary in relaying messages in each direction between a person operating a Teletypewriter (TTY) and a standard speech telephone operator. Calls were timed and Operators were given a rating according to a method devised by Phipps. This method rates operator knowledge of how hearing impaired customers can access services.

Operator Ratings: Phipps Method

Rating 1 - the operator had the information and could answer the questions immediately
Rating 2 - the operator thought there was a TTY service but had to find details
Rating 3 - the operator did not know if there was a TTY service available and needed to find details
Rating 4 - the operator did not know what a TTY was, and this had to be explained by the interviewer before the question could be answered

Employment

A list of 72 call centres with more than 100 workstations was used as the sample. Call centres were telephoned and a request was made to speak to the call centre manager. Each call centre manager was then asked:
- Do you have any deaf or hearing impaired employees working in the call centre?
- If yes, how many? And are they working in the telecommunications side of the business?,
- Are they aware of the Disability Discrimination Act (and the provisions in it pertaining to employment)?
- Can they forward a copy of their current Equal Employment Opportunity Policy?
Results

88 call centres from 52 different companies were sampled on the customer service questionnaire.

TTY
32 of 88 call centres reported having TTY’s (36.4% of call centres sampled had TTY’s). 12 of the 52 different companies sampled reported having TTY’s (23.1% of companies reported having TTY’s). As can be seen from Graph I these 12 companies came from the Automotive, Airline, Banking, Government, Telecommunications, and Taxis sector. Two call centres could not provide the TTY number but reported that they did have a TTY line.

Of the other 56 call centres that did not have TTY’s 9 (16.1%) reported that they would not accept calls from ACE NRS, while the remaining 47 (83.9%) reported that they would.

Figure 1.1 Mean Time and Standard Deviation

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean Time (minutes)</th>
<th>Standard Dev.</th>
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<tr>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>2.06</td>
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Results – Employment
72 call centre managers from 43 companies were sampled on the Employment survey, while 8 declined to participate in the survey (see Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2 Reasons for not participating
- American Express – ‘the person you want to speak to is me and I am not interested in participating’
- ANZ – ‘no questionnaires over the phone have to send something in writing’, faxed written questionnaire and no response was received
- ANZ – ‘the bank has a policy not to be involved in surveys’, I asked if it could be completed via fax, letter or email and was told ‘we won’t be doing that for you either’
- NAB – ‘unfortunately not at liberty to participate in any surveys, new company policy’
- Qantas – ‘not at liberty to participate in surveys, new company policy’
- Telstra Telecard – ‘too busy at this time of year not going to be able to get that done’
- Westpac – ‘unlikely that anyone can spend the time at the moment’
- Westpac – ‘we don’t answer any research questions’, asked if better chance if written, ‘don’t do any research questions’

Of the 64 call centres sampled 40 (67.19%) reported that they did not have any hearing impaired employees while 13 (20.31%) responded that they were not aware of any but could not be certain. 8 (12.5%) responded as having deaf/hearing impaired employees. 7 of these call centres had only one hearing impaired employee while one reported that they had 3 hearing impaired employees. 8 of the 10 were reported as working on the phones with 1 a call centre manager and one in a quality assurance role.

Equal Employment Opportunity Policy
63 of the 64 call centres sampled or 98.39% reported that they were aware of the DDA.
7 of the 64 (10.94%) indicated that they would be unable to send a copy of their current Equal Employment Opportunity Policy (EEOP).

Six companies responded that it is part of company guidelines or policy not to distribute these documents externally. One company was uncomfortable with the possibility that a report might contain details of their company policy.

The remaining 57 call centres either indicated that it would be possible to forward EEOP or that they would investigate whether it was possible and let the researcher know. Various policy documents were received from 19 of 57 call centres which were from 16 companies. One company requested a written request stating the purpose for which the document was required. This option was then presented if a company declined to participate initially and in some cases it made no difference while in others it appeared to increase the likelihood of receiving a copy of the EEOP.

**DDA 1992 Awareness**

8 of the 19 policy documents received referenced the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA, 1992). 3 of these 8 EEOP’s received had a specific section addressing disability discrimination issues. These 3 were from the Banking, Telecommunications and Government Sector.

Two Centrelink call centres sent the same policy document and it was decided for the purpose of analysis that the policy would only be included once. Of the 18 documents received 16 state legislative awareness.

10 of the 18 policy documents received state awareness of discrimination issues in the provision of their goods or services. 1 other also implies awareness by stating that ‘this policy applies equally in dealings with members of the public’. The remaining 7 did not state awareness of these issues.

**Analysis**

Betong and Gaming (5), Airline (6), Government (9), Bureau (11), Telecommunications (11) and Banking (21) call centres make up a large portion (71.6%) of the sample. This is perhaps, to be expected given that the sample contains call centres with 100 workstations or more which are not small call centres by industry standards.

32 (36.4%) of the 88 call centre operators sampled reported having Teletypewriter (TTY) services available. This figure requires qualification, as the 32 call centres that responded that they have TTY’s were from only 12 organisations. Only 12 (23.1%) individual companies out of a total of 52 sampled reported having a TTY service.

There appears to be a link between the size of an organisation and the likelihood that it will offer TTY services. In banking and the airline sectors, the high public profile of the operators and corporate responsibility may explain the high incidence of appropriate practice. This may also help explain why 5 of the call centres declining to participate in the employment part of the survey were from the banking sector.

56 call centres operators from 40 different companies reported that they do not have TTY services available. Of those not reporting TTY facilities 47 (84.9%) reported that they would accept calls from the Australian Communication Exchange – National Relay Service (ACE-NRS) while 9 (16.1%) reported that they would not accept calls from the NRS.

Operator knowledge of the Australian Communication Exchange was low. A majority of operators seemed to have knowledge of a relay service existing but probably could not name the National Relay Service. Once the relay service was explained most operators responded that they would accept calls from it with a handful volunteering information about it before being asked. However, for many it had to be explained before the operator could answer.

A number of trends are evident in the operator ratings that highlight this. 28 of the 88 (31.8%) call centre operators sampled gained a rating 4. In real terms this means that roughly 1 of every 3 operators sampled is likely to have no idea what a TTY is. An even larger portion of operators (70%), which incorporates rating 1,2,3 are either unaware of what TTY and relay services are or could not give an immediate answer about whether their
company offers these services. On the other hand 26 of 88 (29.6%) of operators gained a rating 1 and knew immediately of the services provided by their company. However, this statistic requires further analysis as six of the rating 1’s were for Centrelink call centres. It was postulated that Centrelink as a government organisation would be a leader in areas of disability discrimination in the call centre industry and the results support this. For the purpose of analysis it is necessary to examine the non Centrelink organisations to gain a clearer picture of what is actually happening in the industry. The large number of Centrelink call centres sampled (9) and their better performance skew the results. If companies for which multiple sites were sampled and obtained rating 1 were excluded the results would be markedly worse.

The mean time for a call to enquire about the services for deaf and hearing impaired customers took 3.46 minutes, and the standard deviation was 2.06 minutes. 3.46 minutes is quite a long time to be on the phone enquiring about what should be very standard information for call centre operators. 65% of calls took longer than two minutes.

Operators who did not know about these issues detained the caller for about 2 minutes more than those who did. A difference of two minutes between ratings 1 and 4 suggest a need for operator training. In the time a poorly trained or untrained operator can handle one enquiry of this type a well trained operator can handle two. In an industry where calls are made and received by the hundreds and thousands, a difference of two minutes per call could have a significant financial impact on a company.

While 29.6% of operators gained a rating 1 because they had the relevant information to hand and could answer the questions immediately this figure may actually be misleading. An operator may respond immediately but the answer given could be inaccurate and may not reflect the service actually available.

Many of the large organisations, specifically the banks, airlines and telecommunication companies have had call centres established the longest and are the pioneers of the Australian call centre industry. The results suggest that Centrelink, Banks, Airlines and Telecommunication companies are more aware of the issues of access for hearing impaired potential customers. They also strongly suggest that for many call centres there is no strategy in place for providing access to services for hearing impaired potential customers.

Employment Survey - Analysis

64 out of 72 call centre managers contacted (88.89%) participated in the survey while 8 (11.11%) declined.

Of the 64 participating 63 were aware of the DDA indicating that companies are aware that the DDA exist. The one call centre manager who did not state DDA awareness said that ‘it hasn’t come up we haven’t had a hearing impaired person here’, ‘why are you asking these questions?’ This highlights the sensitive nature of the material being investigated and this may explain the low response rate to requests for a copy of the companies EEOP.

4 out of the 8 (50%) of companies who reported hearing impaired employees sent their EEOP’s when requested. This is a higher response rate than the companies who did not have hearing impaired employees so there seems to be a relationship.

It is difficult to determine causality in this relationship. Is a company more likely to send a copy of its EEOP if it has a hearing impaired employee? Or is it more likely to employ a hearing impaired employee because it has a good policy and is aware of the DDA issues?

It was expected that from the sample of 64 call centres of 100 or more work stations that over 100 people would be employed in each call centre. In total the population of call centre operators we are enquiring about in the employment survey is about 6500.

To only have 10 hearing impaired employees (0.15%) for a population of 6500 is not representative of the disability in the wider community. The rate of hearing impairment in Australia is thought to be around 5-6%(ABS, 1993) so this is a surprising result.

It was hypothesised that companies’ work practices will not exceed their written policies and that by investigating the practices and policies of the call centre industry it will be possible to determine whether the now relatively mature DDA 1992 is embedded in the practices and policies of Australian companies.

The results suggest there is a gap between knowing that the DDA exists and in
recognising the implications it has for the way the company’s call centre operates. The awareness shown in the EEOP’s is surprisingly low and perhaps failure to comply is partially based on lack of understanding awareness of the legislation.

Further studies will investigate the difference between the service that is being reported by operators and the service that exists. If an operator responds to an inquiry by stating that they do not have a TTY line when in fact they do then effectively it is the same as the organisation not having a TTY.

Call centres operators are the gate-keepers to information about the company. Unless they are trained to be able to provide accurate information about how deaf/hearing impaired customers can access their services the company is not fulfilling its statutory responsibilities and does not fulfill the requirements of business excellence models.

Conclusions

Although the Australian Disability Discrimination Act 1992 is now nearly 8 years old and should be embedded in the policies and procedures of companies, particularly those that aspire to business excellence, evidence from the call centre industry suggests this is not the case. Exceptions to this can be found in the provision of services in the Airline, Banking, Government and Telecommunications sectors but there is still considerable scope for improvement. Improvements also need to be made in employment policies of call centres, particularly in the recruiting of disabled employees. Further research is warranted investigating employment in the call centre industry and the difference between the services reported and those actually existing. Results suggest that while the business excellence journey of many Australian businesses has begun through the use of the ABEF they are only at an early stage.

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