Excellence in Call Centres: Access is a Corporate Responsibility

Warren J. S. Staples  
*Research Assistant, Centre for Management Quality Research, RMIT University, Australia*  
Email: warren.staples@rmit.edu.au

Professor John F. Dalrymple  
*Director, Centre for Management Quality Research, RMIT University, Australia*  
Email: john.dalrymple@rmit.edu.au

Katherine Phipps  
*Access Consultant, JMU Access Partnership, Edinburgh, Scotland, UK*  
Email: katherine.phipps@rnib.org.uk

**ABSTRACT**

This paper firstly examines the Australian Quality Council’s (AQC) Australian Business Excellence Framework (ABEF) and the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Excellence Model and how they address issues of access and corporate responsibility. It then proceeds to examine UK and Australian Disability Discrimination Legislation in conjunction with the results of UK and Australian studies on the provision of services for the hearing impaired by call centres.

**Keywords:** Business Excellence, Call Centres, Disability Discrimination, Hearing Impaired,

1.0 Introduction

The call centre industry is one of the most rapidly growing industries in the developed world today (Dalrymple and Phipps, 1999) and 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). Access is a fundamental component of service quality improvement. Increasing access at times and in locations that are convenient to the customer has improved accessibility to many services, by making them available when required. The ServQUAL (Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry, 1990) model of service quality recognises access as one of the determinants of service quality and, as such, is amenable to service improvement. Enabling technologies have also served to improve access in ways that are convenient to customers. An example of this is in the banking industry where ATM’s, telephone and internet banking has improved the accessibility of banking for many customers. The development of call centres has forced companies to rethink the way they manage their relationships with their customers. Whilst the call centre industry has improved access for those able to use conventional speech telephones, it does have the potential to exclude some customers, in particular the hearing impaired.

Australia, in common with many developed countries, has an increasing ageing population (ABS, 1993). According to the Royal National Institute for the Deaf (RNID) there are around 8.4M deaf or hearing impaired adults in the UK today. This amounts to around 14% of the population and these figures have remained fairly constant for the last 15 years (Phipps, 1998). Most hearing impairments develop with increasing age, around 54% of adults over 60 are hard of hearing or deaf, (RNID), and it is estimated that this rises to 70% in people over the age of 70 in the UK (Freeland, 1989: Phipps, 1997).
Some large companies that have established call centres as a means of service provision have also sought improvement through business excellence frameworks and models.

### 1.2 Business Excellence Frameworks

The AQC’s ABEF (AQC, 1999) focuses on seven critical success categories within an organisation and was introduced to help Australian companies meet the challenges of the global environment. 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 EFQM Excellence Model is a non-prescriptive framework based on nine criteria. The Model’s 9 components, represent the criteria against which to assess an organisation’s progress towards excellence. Five of these are ‘Enablers’ and four are ‘Results’. The ‘Enabler’ criteria cover what an organisation does. The ‘Results’ criteria cover what an organisation achieves. ‘Result ‘Enablers’(EFQM, 2001). The Model, which recognises there are many approaches to achieving sustainable excellence in all aspects of performance, is based on the premise that: Excellent results with respect to Performance, Customers, People and Society are achieved through Partnerships and Resources, and Processes. (EFQM, 2001). The EFQM is committed to researching and updating the Model and this ensures the model remains dynamic and in line with current management thinking (EFQM, 2001).

Although the AQC ABEF (AQC, 1999) and EFQM Excellence Model (EFQM, 1999) vary in their 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 both excellence models and frameworks. In the EFQM Excellence Model Impact on Society, relates to being a good corporate citizen and has an affect on the sustainability of a company. The ABEF also recognises the way a company contributes to its community beyond its core business through Environmental and Community Contribution.

One component of the ABEF examines the processes the company uses to supply quality products and services to its customers, and the processes used to improve those products and services. Both the AQC ABEF and EFQM Excellence Model recognise access as a component of service quality improvement. The AQC ABEF has a customer access sub-category under the Customer and Market Focus component which emphasises ‘the steps taken to ensure the customers have easy access to the organisation for comment and assistance and the types of contact used.’

All companies that aspire to business excellence must, as a minimum requirement, fulfill their statutory obligations. Any company that 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. Companies that provide goods and services through call centres may miss important market segments and opportunities if they fail to service this market. The UK Disability Discrimination Act (DDA, 1995) and the Australian Disability Discrimination Act (DDA, 1992) make it illegal to discriminate on the grounds of disability in the provision of goods and services. Given the Australian Disability Discrimination Act is both a relatively mature legislation and was more robust at the time of implementation it was expected that it would be further embedded in the procedures, practices and policies of Australian companies than may be the case with the younger UK DDA 1995. By investigating fundamental discrimination issues such as access, this research provides insight in to the embedding process of the two Acts.
1.3 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). The Act provides for there to be a Disability Discrimination Commissioner and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission is the body which is empowered to investigate and determine cases. In 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).

The UK legislation is less mature, and represents a stand alone system of regulation (Dalrymple & Phipps, 1998). The employment provisions and the initial rights of access to goods, facilities, services and premise were implemented on 2 December 1996. The provision as to changes in policies, procedures and practices, and the provision of auxiliary aids came into force in October 1999. The final removal of physical barriers is expected to be implemented in 2004. The UK legislation has recently been amended and strengthened.

At the time of the data collection the UK DDA had a Disability Commissioner to advise on issues, but it relied upon on individuals who have been discriminated against to bring forward cases. The Australian legislation establishes an organisation which is proactive and seeks out discrimination and attempts to remedy discriminatory practices. The UK legislation is less robust and provides only for an advisory body. However, in both cases, the legislation makes discrimination in the provision of goods and services, on the grounds of disability illegal. Call centres which do not make appropriate provision for deaf and hearing impaired customers and employees are, therefore, failing to fulfil their statutory duty. This research seeks to establish the level of compliance of a sample of UK and Australian call centres with the statute. Companies operating call centres discriminating against hearing impaired potential customers or employees through its policies and practices are 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 way companies operate (Staples & Dalrymple, 2000).

2.0 Methodology

Call centres were contacted by the researchers 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 TTY number and the hours the 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 (ACE-NRS) or Typetalk(UK).

This is a 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(see below). This method rates operator knowledge of how hearing impaired customers can access services.

**Figure 2.1 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
3.0 Results

Figure 3.0 Percentage of Companies with their own Textphone/TTY Service

Results were obtained from call centres of 52 Australian companies and 38 UK companies. The initial response from 7 of 38 UK companies was that their service was not applicable and they could see no reason for the Textphone user needing to contact them. 4 UK companies did not reply to this question on whether they had a Textphone service.

3 of the 7 UK companies, who did not initially believe their service was applicable, also did not answer any questions from the customer service section of the questionnaire. Whilst 3 did answer whether they had a textphone line available, all saying no, and 1 answering the query on accepting calls from typetalk, again saying no.

Two of the Australian companies that reported that they offered a TTY service could not provide the number. For one company the enquirer was told that they would need to be able to tell the operator what the call was about before they could be given an appropriate TTY number. The other said that the number was in the Whitepages telephone directory. Two of the UK companies that had no textphone number available stated that they have a line available, but have yet to get a terminal.

3.1 Calls from a relay service

Of the 40 Australian companies that did not have their own TTY service 9 (22.5%) reported that they would not accept calls from ACE NRS, while the remaining 31 (77.5%) reported that they would. This left 9 (22.5%) companies where the operators stated that they offered no service at all to TTY users. Although 4 suggested the company could be contacted via email and 1 company suggested that they could purchase a $100 piece of equipment as an alternate way to access the service. There were 6 UK companies (16%) where the operators stated they offered no service at all to textphone users, although 1 suggested that they did have a fax machine.
Conclusions

It is likely that each generation of elderly people will be more technologically literate than the one before, and thus will be more willing to use technology to aid them in communications (Phipps, 1998). 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 that outlaws discrimination against disabled people. Although the Australian Disability Discrimination Act 1992 is now over 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. The UK Disability Discrimination Act 1995 is younger in age, and was significantly weaker at the time of data collection. When comparing against the Australian results the UK results do not reflect this weaker legislative framework as strongly as might have been expected. The incremental process of implementation coupled with the media attention surrounding the Acts creation may help explain this.

Results suggest that while the business excellence journey of many Australian and UK businesses has begun through the use of business excellence models and framework they are only at an early stage. They also strongly suggest that for many call centres there is no strategy in place for providing access to services for potential hearing impaired customers. 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 centre 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. Two areas of further research is investigating employment in the call centre industry and the difference between the services reported and those actually existing.

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