



Citizen Contact Centers:

Americans In Touch With Their Government

A Guide for Government Executives

June 2005

About Pearson Government Solutions

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Executive Summary

Government officials face a dilemma: significant changes to federal programs that touch virtually every household in America – Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, Homeland Security and the Tax Code to name a few – are being contemplated, but the resources agencies need to interact with millions of affected Americans are increasingly constrained.

Fortunately, several agencies have found a way forward. By finding ways to interact with individuals on a personal level – from solving problems with benefit payments to addressing concerns about possible changes highlighted on the evening news – these agencies have found an efficient and cost-effective means of interacting directly with the public on the public's terms: the Citizen Contact Center. The experience of these agencies provides insights into how the Government-Public relationship is being redefined, and how agencies will continue to transform themselves in light of proposals for unprecedented change and daunting resource challenges.

Citizen contact centers have become a little-publicized success story for the Federal government, combining technology and trained customer service representatives (CSRs) to interact with individuals on a large scale in a manner that is accurate, consistent and centrally managed.

Not long ago, the public was limited to writing a letter or finding the telephone number for an agency switchboard operator. Today, the options have grown in many positive ways. The public can increasingly get the information they need, complete a transaction or chat with a government representative using websites, e-mail, voice recognition and response technology, faxes, support services for those with disabilities, or other methods of their choice. These multiple communications channels give agencies cost-effective ways to reach individual citizens, and give citizens the benefit of reaching government in a manner best suited to their particular problem.

Citizen contact centers, however, offer challenges of their own. They are complex operations that must

efficiently route and handle millions of inquiries each month – and the public's expectations are high. By learning from the experiences of agencies that have made the leap from ad hoc customer service to citizen contact centers, government executives can be successful. Key lessons learned include:

- ❖ Diverse populations require different modes of communication. To keep public satisfaction levels up and costs down, government managers are challenged to align their communication channels with the constantly evolving preferences of the public and the realities of their agency's budget.
- ❖ Quality CSRs are essential. Giving them the professional work environment they need to be productive, and keeping them motivated, will make or break the contact center.
- ❖ Agency executives and contact center contractors must form a true partnership. With a little forethought and a lot of collaboration, agencies and their contractors can position the agency to respond to the rapid influx of public inquiries generated by major program changes without sacrificing service quality. Some of the key issues that must be addressed in any successful contact center partnership include: the importance of script development and change management strategies, the relationship between workload projections and performance metrics, selecting the right contract type, managing the transition and troubleshooting inevitable problems.

Hundreds of millions of Americans receive Federal benefits, and many of them seek information on a range of issues, from cancer research to immigration policy, from prescription drugs to student loans. Given the magnitude of the challenges that lie ahead, it's imperative that Federal agencies and their industry partners work together to be successful. There's a lot riding on it.

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Americans In Touch With Their Government

A Guide for Government Executives

Introduction

As policymakers undertake a fundamental re-examination of the role of government in our lives, most people evaluate government's effectiveness by its ability to successfully interact with its citizens. While individual government programs expand or contract at the direction of Congress and the White House, the dynamic nature of government in general makes communicating with those affected by these changes one of its greatest challenges.

As daunting as it is, the government's mission is further compounded by changing public preferences on how to interact with their government, 21st century expectations for instantaneous response, and the realities of limited government resources.

This document takes a focused look at how government officials have turned to the private sector in recent years to build citizen contact centers that permit the public to get in touch with their government. It highlights several key lessons learned and offers substantive, practical advice government officials can use to avoid pitfalls and misconceptions as they seek to establish or better manage their contact center operations.

Government Program Changes Create Communications Challenge

We are now at a time when some of the largest government programs face significant change. For example, two of the President's most recently proposed initiatives – reforming Social Security and the federal tax code – affect virtually every household in America. This year we will see the first major overhaul to Medicare in 40 years in the form of new prescription benefit coverage. Concern over a burgeoning national debt – projected to increase rapidly in coming years – is prompting some in Congress to call for sweeping

adjustments to long-standing government programs many citizens rely upon for support. How well citizens understand these potential changes will, in many instances, have a profound affect on their lives. It will also shape public perceptions about how well agencies are managing their programs and whether the changes are deemed successful.

Adding to these challenges are the threats posed by terrorists and the new emphasis on homeland security. As the September 11, 2001 tragedy demonstrated, communication is at the heart of detecting, deterring and properly responding to a terrorist attack. Federal officials recognize that lives will depend on their ability to quickly communicate with local law enforcement, first-responders, health care professionals, and ordinary citizens, when responding to terrorist attacks in the future. For example, front-line workers and the general public will contact agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to understand the threat and recommended response in the event anthrax or another deadly agent is released. Likewise, new security procedures designed to keep terrorists from entering the country have resulted in urgent requests for information from individuals wanting to know their visa status, as well as how relatives abroad may be affected by the changes.

The list of challenges goes beyond those in the headlines. Routine changes are also placing greater demands on government agencies to communicate with their constituents. For example, the steady rise in college tuition has led to a corresponding increase in inquiries from students interested in learning what financial aid assistance is available, and whether they will be able to afford college.

Changing Expectations

While the need for information has increased, the changing demographics of the American public have led to new expectations about how information is delivered. No longer content to wait for the morning newspaper, the public gets immediate information from the Internet, cable news networks, e-mail, and other electronic formats that are quickly being assimilated into everyday life. Citizens want the same instant access to their government, not just through the telephone but also by way of the Internet and other communications channels. The public's expectations and preferences for interacting with the government are as diverse as the population itself and are constantly evolving. As government officials have learned, attaining high levels of public satisfaction while capitalizing on opportunities to reduce costs requires knowledge of how segments of the population want to communicate and of how those preferences are likely to change over time. It's simply not enough to push information out in a variety of formats.

Contact Methods by Age Group*		
Channel	30-49	65+
Phone	41%	41%
Govt. Website	33%	9%
E-mail	21%	8%
In-Person	19%	19%
Letter	13%	34%
Used Multiple Channels	22%	13%

* Methods used for last contact with local, State or Federal government. Source: The Pew Internet and American Life Project, E-Government Survey Data, August 2003. See www.pewinternet.org.

Resource Realities

Finally, while programmatic changes and public expectations are dynamic, most agency budgets are at best static, if not shrinking. The mission is growing but the resources are not. This creates a conundrum for agency executives: as the public learns of cuts in programs important to them, they inevitably ask for more information, but agency executives have fewer resources with which to respond.

The Solution: Citizen Contact Centers

As the realities of dramatic change to major government programs collide head on with shrinking budgets and other factors far outside the control of agency executives, many officials are partnering with the private sector to establish citizen contact centers.

Citizen contact centers have been a little-

publicized success story for the federal government. A decade ago, virtually every federal agency operated some type of a toll-free number and a website to allow the public to contact it. Today, agencies use specialized contact centers with multiple communication channels to respond to millions of contacts each month.

What is a Citizen Contact Center?

A citizen contact center is simply an operation or facility where customer service representatives (CSRs) respond to inquiries received in a variety of modes from the public on issues related to a specific government program. The days of government employees answering 1-800 line calls from their desks, when their other duties permit, are quickly disappearing. Instead, the public reaches state-of-the-art contact centers with highly trained CSRs dedicated to responding quickly and accurately to inquiries. These centers are usually established by the agency in partnership with a private sector contractor.

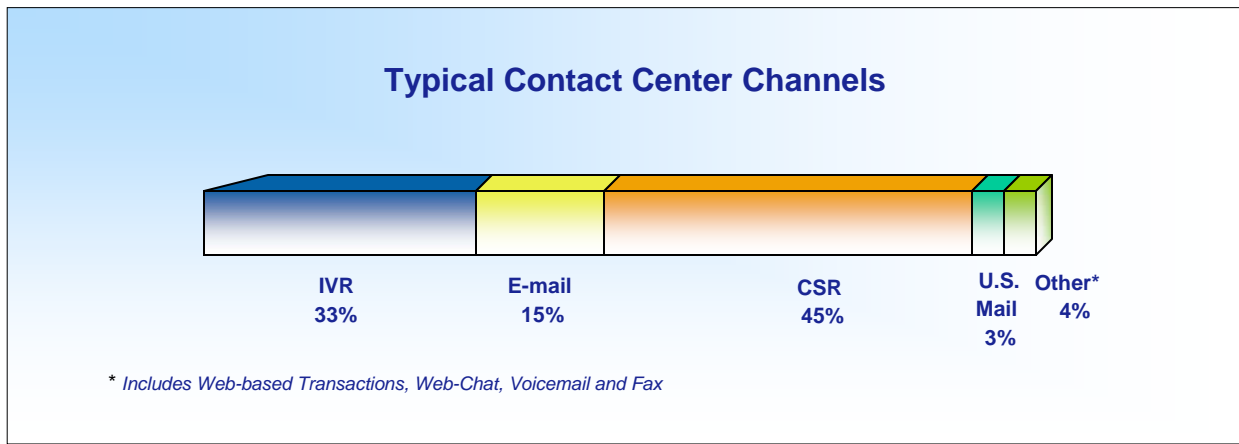
The responsibilities may vary, but the contractor typically secures one or more locations, provides the technology, hires and trains the CSRs, and is responsible for ensuring inquiries are responded to in a timely and thorough manner. The government agency typically provides the content from which either the government or the contractor composes "scripts." The scripts are both incorporated into the Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system and used by the contact center staff to respond to questions. The government then monitors the quality of the interactions between CSRs and callers and provides oversight and direction to the contractor.

Resource Realities

Citizen contact centers rely on sophisticated technology combined with well-trained CSRs to respond to inquiries from the general public. The largest centers are operated by a workforce of up to several thousand CSRs who provide service to multiple programs. Equipped with state-of-the-art tools, such as knowledge-based desktop applications and networked computers, the CSRs respond to thousands of contacts each day over the entire spectrum of contact channels, including:

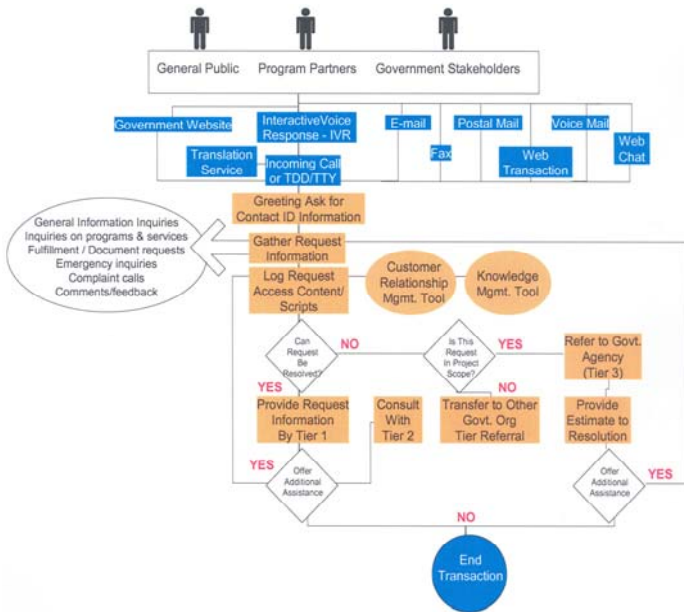
- ❖ Fax
- ❖ E-mail
- ❖ U.S. Mail
- ❖ Voicemail
- ❖ Web-Chat
- ❖ Web-Based Transactions
- ❖ Interactive Voice Response (IVR)
- ❖ Intelligent Voice Recognition (also IVR)
- ❖ Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) Services
- ❖ "Live" CSR-assisted Telephone Calls

Using these contact channels, CSRs can communicate in dozens of languages from multiple time zones, and around-the-clock as agency needs dictate.



How it Works

Inquiries received through multiple “channels” are handled by contact center staff. Sophisticated technology tools are used to respond to inquiries, manage complex center operations and monitor service quality.



Following a telephone inquiry through the contact center helps illustrate how modern centers use technology – and people – to improve agency service delivery while minimizing costs. It also illustrates the tremendous complexity involved.

After a Citizen Dials the Agency’s Toll-Free Number:

- ❖ Interactive Voice Response software helps determine the caller’s area of interest and routes the caller to either self-service information or to an available CSR with the expertise needed to most efficiently answer the caller’s questions – a process called “skills-based routing.”
- ❖ When a call is received, the CSR uses an advanced software application to quickly

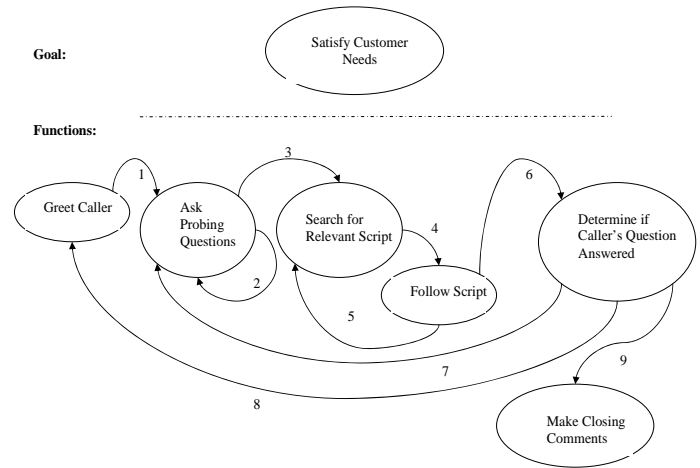
determine the information needed from the caller and to retrieve agency-approved “scripts” that answer the caller’s precise questions.

- ❖ The automated script system permits the CSRs to quickly select the appropriate response from among the thousands of pages of scripted questions and responses needed to accurately answer every conceivable caller question about the program. These scripts are prepared by government employees with subject matter expertise and are updated as program changes occur. CSRs are instructed to follow the government-approved scripts, except when paraphrasing is required to help facilitate caller comprehension.
- ❖ When calls require additional research or other information that is not readily available, CSRs access data systems, information on the Internet, and specialized software tools to provide information such as the agency office closest to the caller’s home and directions on how to get there.
- ❖ In many cases, callers’ questions require more expertise than a first tier CSR is trained to provide. In these cases, two options are used, sometimes in combination. The first option is to direct the call to a second tier of CSRs who have specialized expertise and/or access to more specialized databases than the first tier CSR. The second option is to transfer the call to a government program expert. When calls require transfer to either a second tier CSR or a government program expert, technologies are used to permit the CSR to provide what is known as a “warm transfer,” where the CSR stays on the phone with the caller until the specialist picks-up. This ensures that the call is connected or the caller receives alternative instructions from the CSR on how best to proceed. Gone are the days of being transferred into an abyss, with the caller hoping that he or she doesn’t get disconnected and have to start all over again.

Technology also plays an important role in managing the contact center operations. When agencies have more than one contact center location responding to callers at the same time, telecommunications software routes incoming calls to the location with the lowest workload at that precise moment. This type of multi-site operation is often referred to as a “Virtual Contact Center.” Balancing the workload in real-time helps ensure calls are answered quickly and that CSR productivity remains uniformly high across all of the agency’s contact center locations. The result is improved customer satisfaction and reduced staffing costs for the agency.

The centers’ quality assurance staff and managers also use technology to monitor a wide range of performance metrics on CSR quality, accuracy and speed of response. This information, collected at the individual CSR level, is used to provide feedback and identify additional training needs.

CSR Call Handling: A Complex Task



1. Caller responds to greeting
2. Caller responds to probes
3. Context of caller's question identified
4. Script for caller's question identified
5. Q/A in script leads to another question
6. Script completed
7. Caller not clear with answer
8. Family member put on call
9. Caller's question answered

Responding to inquiries regarding complex federal programs is a challenging and stressful job. Agencies and their private sector partners can create the conditions for CSRs to do it well.

Ensuring Success: Challenges and Lessons Learned

Agency executives are increasingly turning to the private sector to design, build and operate citizen contact centers. As agency executives and contractors involved in citizen interaction management know, doing it well is in many ways as much an art as it is a science. Their experiences provide valuable lessons on how to do this successfully and common pitfalls to avoid:

Lesson #1: Different Generations Require Different Communication Modes

Agencies are using citizen contact centers to serve a growing and increasingly diverse population. Government managers need to align their methods of communication with the public's expectations. That will be especially important as the population and the technology available to serve them change. For example, older Americans want live assistance. But younger Americans will insist on a variety of electronic alternatives – a sign of their increased comfort level with technology.

As the technology advances and the population becomes more tech-savvy, the goal for citizen contact centers will not be adding legions of staff to take calls, but rather the utilization of all information channels working as efficiently as possible. Government agencies will increasingly become "information brokers" that help individuals solve problems on their own. Policymakers need to understand this trend and develop strategies to cost-effectively accommodate the changing needs of the public.

Cost Per Transaction

Telephone = \$12.56

E-mail = \$8.79

Web-Chat = \$4.62

Web Self Serve = \$0.76

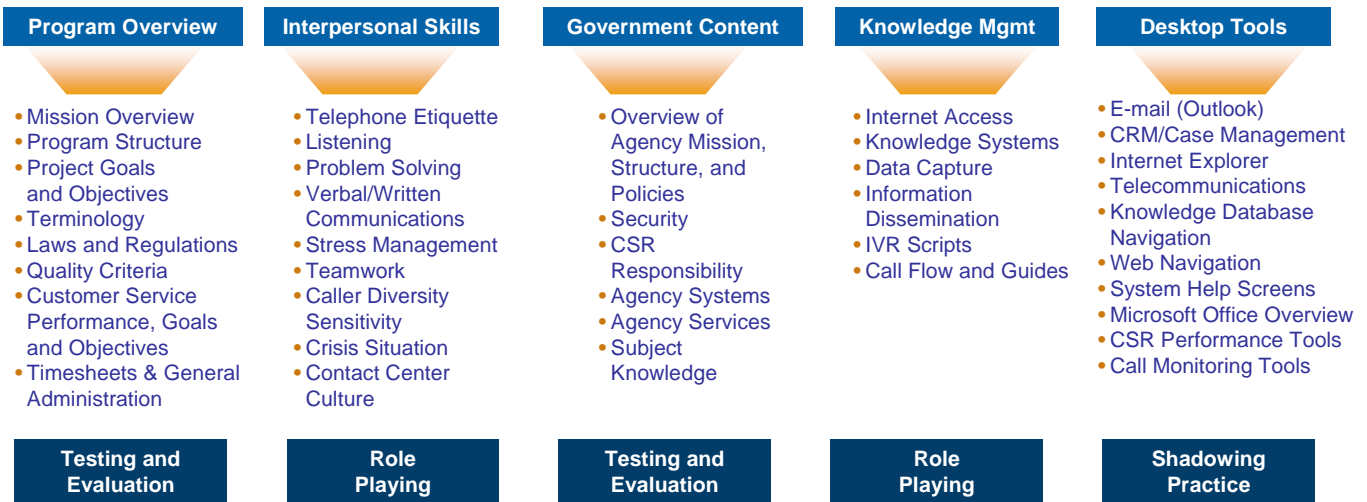
*Source: From Cost to Profit Center: Case Studies,
by Dr. Jon Anton and R. Scott Davis, © Oct, 2003*

Lesson #2: Quality Customer Service Representatives are Essential

Citizen contact centers are by definition about communicating with the public on programs, policies and procedures that affect their daily lives. The challenge is that each of these change frequently, generating many questions. To meet the citizen's and the agency's needs, managers must remember the so-called human factors involved in developing a quality customer service workforce. These include:

- ❖ *Hiring.* It is essential to recruit CSRs with knowledge of the challenges at hand. Pearson Government Solutions looks for people with specific skills needed for each unique challenge. In some cases, that is direct experience or education in the program area. In all cases, it is a willingness and aptitude for helping others with complex problems. For example, to help answer immigration inquiries, Pearson recruited U.S. citizens born in 14 different countries. They know from their own immigration experiences the importance of accurately communicating the government's application and problem resolution procedures – and they take great pride in doing it well.
- ❖ *Training.* All CSRs undergo a period of initial training covering program subject matter, customer service skills and technology. Once on the job, CSRs undergo periodic refresher training in these areas as well as on new and modified scripts. The training uses a mix of technology, role playing and "live trainers". Effective training involves teaching the CSRs about the program goals and how to evaluate the caller's needs – not memorization of scripted responses. This helps the CSRs respond accurately even when government-provided scripts change frequently. It's also important to carefully plan and schedule the training in order to ensure that CSRs retain the new information, and that the training costs and adverse operational impact of CSR time spent off-line are minimized.

Modular Training: Tailored to CSR Needs



CSR training impacts service quality. The most effective training programs are modular, tailored to CSR needs and carefully scheduled to facilitate CSR learning.

- ❖ **Job Satisfaction.** One of the greatest challenges for contact center managers is maximizing CSR productivity (the volume of inquiries handled) while maintaining job satisfaction and reducing CSR work-related stress. CSRs understand that the information they provide may have a significant impact on the lives of the individuals who contact the center. They feel the pressure to properly diagnose the caller’s problem and efficiently retrieve the correct answer. For this reason, a comprehensive human resources program is needed to help CSRs manage the challenge of that responsibility and the attendant attrition that commonly results.
- ❖ The challenges faced by CSRs don’t just come from a well-founded sense of professionalism. They come from external factors as well. For example, CSRs must stay current on late-breaking changes to the government-approved scripts, new features of the automated work environment, and techniques for providing high quality service. In addition, some callers mistakenly believe that the CSRs have access to government data systems containing all known information about their case or that the CSRs have the authority to approve government action on their case.

For example, immigration applicants may unwittingly believe that the CSR will be able to provide the exact date that a final agency decision will be made on their case. Likewise, some Transportation Security Administration job applicants hope to learn when they might be hired. In these situations, the CSR must take on the added task of educating the caller and attempt to alleviate their concerns and frustrations.

As a result, CSRs have one of the most stressful jobs in America today, and attrition is high. The industry-wide CSR attrition rate for government programs is an estimated 29 percent annually. However, with proper agency call center design – and careful management – attrition and associated impacts on quality and cost can be mitigated. Pearson Government Solutions has attained a CSR turnover rate of just 18 percent at its government contact centers. This low turnover rate provides two important benefits to the government: 1) higher quality – veteran CSRs are more knowledgeable and confident of the content than newly trained agents, and 2) lower training and operating costs – training costs, up to \$3,000 for each new CSR, are avoided, and a lower overall cost per call is achieved because experienced CSRs are more efficient than their less experienced colleagues.

Lesson #3: Agency Officials and Contact Center Contractors Must Be True Partners

The contact center environment requires a special type of partnership between agency officials and the contractors and vendors responsible for the day-to-day operation of the contact center. Agency officials are experts in the details of their federal programs. Contact center managers are experts in providing high quality service within the realities of mandated deadlines and constrained agency budgets. Neither can do the job alone. A true two-way partnership produces a citizen contact center that can respond rapidly and accurately to public inquiries even during spikes in interest caused by government program changes.

Script Development Must be Managed

Providing guidance and answers to complicated questions is no small undertaking. Agency experts are challenged to include enough detailed policy information to be meaningful while also ensuring that the CSR scripts are easily understood by the widest possible range of constituents. Done improperly, it results in caller confusion, extended CSR call handling times and repeat calls, all of which reduce caller satisfaction and increase agency costs.

When a change in an agency program or policy occurs, quick action is needed to put the change into effect. Agency experts must provide updated content and work with the contractor to develop the proper CSR scripts. Contact center managers must then tackle the logistical challenge of quickly bringing hundreds of customer service representatives located at facilities around the country up to speed on the new agency response. Through this type of partnership, agencies and contact center managers can improve the center's accuracy and consistency, reduce CSR work-related stress and attrition, and increase citizen satisfaction.

In one recent case, Congress established a new benefit leaving the agency little time to make required policy decisions. With policy decisions unresolved until the last minute, the contractor was given one week to train thousands of CSRs on the new agency policies.

Workload Projections and Performance Metrics are Linked

The government must be able to accurately project the number of queries expected from the public so that the contractor can deploy appropriate staff and resources. Miscues result in either too many CSRs or too few, creating underutilized resources or caller dissatisfaction.

Inaccurate projections can have other implications as well. Many government contracts include performance targets that the contractor must meet to be in compliance. When overall workloads unexpectedly double or triple in volume, and the specific contact channels are overwhelmed due to improper sizing, enforcement of performance metrics takes a back seat to expanding and stabilizing the operating environment. Agencies who partner with contractors that have demonstrated workload projection and scheduling skills can see significantly improved results.

Pearson frequently cross trains CSRs on various agency contracts, enabling them to fill-in when an agency experiences seasonal or unexpected inquiry peaks. This approach reduces staffing costs for the agencies and ensures that qualified CSRs stay fully employed and ready for service.

Pick the Right Contract Type

Once an agency has decided to partner with a contractor, a critical decision is selecting the right contract type; one that provides for the appropriate level of agency direction and oversight but that does not place so many constraints on either partner that it cannot be successful. If workload changes are unpredictable due to the nature of the program or frequent legislative mandates, the contract should allow for adjustment. Likewise, if the agency intends to control portions of the process (e.g., background security investigations) or contact center infrastructure – items that impact overall center performance – the contract must be structured accordingly. Agency managers need to ensure that the contract they choose allows for flexibility if needed and establishes the proper incentives to quickly address workload changes.

Type of Contract	Best Used When	Factors to Consider
Fixed Price	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inquiry channels are known and changes, if any, are predictable at time of solicitation • Inquiry volumes are known and changes, if any, are predictable at time of solicitation • Single contractor responsible for end-to-end operations, infrastructure and issues impacting end-to-end performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fixed-Price contracts for multiple call center components constrain agency ability to establish and enforce end-to-end performance metrics for center operation • Fixed-Price contracts establish funding predictability due to workload predictability. Unplanned workload changes must be made with care; they can be costly and impact process improvement investments made by the contractor • Agency projections of inquiry workload and expected frequency of script changes must be reasonably accurate; they impact staffing levels and training requirements
Time & Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inquiry channels are estimated at the time of solicitation, but may change somewhat during performance • Inquiry volumes are estimated at time of solicitation, but may change somewhat during performance • There is potential for shift in control of infrastructure components during contract period • Performance Measures may not be established at time of solicitation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • T&M contracts give agencies flexibility to quickly accommodate unplanned changes that are within the contract scope
Cost Plus Fixed Fee and Cost Plus Award Fee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inquiry channels are estimated at the time of solicitation, but may change significantly during performance • Inquiry volumes are estimated at time of solicitation, but may change significantly during performance • Agency retains responsibility for infrastructure components that impact contact center performance (i.e. CSR script software computer terminals, facility, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fixed Fee and Award Fee determinations are based on attainment of pre-established performance metrics • Metrics must be appropriate and easily revised as workload requirements (i.e., channels, volume, training, etc.) change • Metrics must be appropriately measured using procedures mutually agreed upon in advance

Transition Properly

Federal managers often face extreme time pressures for getting their contact center operations up and running. Typical pressures include legislatively mandated deadlines, delays in awarding the contract vehicle, and a desire to minimize costs. Whatever the pressure, the urge is often to make up for lost time by compressing the transition period. Agency executives should resist this impulse at all costs. Although the transition time required must be determined on a case-by-case basis, federal managers planning large contact centers should typically plan for a six-month transition period and work toward an early cut-over date if all goes well. They might also consider pilot programs that handle a limited number of inquiries during the transition, increasing the traffic volume and making adjustments as the program progresses.

Keep Stakeholders Informed

Whether they are helping the American public obtain federal benefits to which they are entitled or providing vital health, safety or other information, government contact centers exist in support of high-profile federal programs. Keeping executive branch officials, Congressional leaders, the constituent population, and the federal audit community informed of how the center is operating is critical to building trust and support. Site visits should be encouraged so that all stakeholders can see the center in operation and develop a better understanding of the issues and challenges CSRs face.

Troubleshooting At Your Citizen Contact Center	
Challenge	Questions to Ask
Performance Metrics Not Met	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Were metrics appropriately set up-front using accurate workload projections • Were metrics continuously updated to reflect changes in operating environment • Are delays in development and approval of "scripts" adversely affecting CSR response accuracy and consistency • Are Quality Assurance efforts monitoring accuracy and consistency using scripted responses identical to the official government-approved scripts CSRs are required to follow
Inquiry Answer Time Too Slow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is network capacity adequate for actual inquiry volume in <i>each</i> channel • Is CSR staffing right-sized for workload • Is inquiry workload balanced across all facility locations in real-time
Average Handling Time Too Long	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are actual caller demographics consistent with those modeled; some caller groups require considerably more time than others due to variances in speech rates, language spoken and familiarity with information being provided • Is scripting system adequate (i.e., does it prevent inadvertent CSR entry errors; is it fast and easy to navigate; is script content complete and easy to understand; does it include directed, probing questions to help determine appropriate agency response) • Is script change management strategy adequate (i.e., are script changes being made in controlled manner with ample time for advance training) • Are IVR and alternative "self-service" options available and known to the Public
Satisfaction Scores Slip	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assuming network and staffing are right-sized, do CSRs have access to all relevant information needed to assist callers and handle inquiries • Is additional CSR training required in customer service skills, agency script content or recent script changes • Are hours of operation and multi-lingual services adequate • Are customer satisfaction scores skewed by caller disappointment with the government-approved response they received (i.e. "shoot the messenger" syndrome)
Contact Center Too Costly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is contract type appropriate to agency situation • Are workload projections accurate and continuously updated, avoiding need to hire and train staff on short notice in response to unexpected workload spikes • Are procedural hurdles such as security clearance background investigations taking longer than expected, increasing the number of CSR staff on payroll who are precluded from providing direct support to the public • Are hours of operation properly set (i.e., is live support 24x7 really needed or would less costly 16x7 with increased IVR/Self-Service options be adequate) • Is contact center virtual; balancing workload across staff located in different geographic locations to maximize staff productivity and reduce total staffing needs • Are CSRs properly incentivized and offered a professional work environment, minimizing costs associated with absenteeism and attrition

Government agencies must contend with an extremely broad range of citizens across a variety of demographics, languages, and cultures. Individuals contacting the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (CIS) may be speaking one of a dozen languages other than English. Callers to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) tend to be older, less comfortable with automated or Internet responses and want to speak to a live person on the other end of the telephone. Those in search of financial aid from the Department of Education are likely to be younger and more comfortable with Interactive Voice Response or Web-based communications. And, as the baby-boom generation continues to age, the number of inquiries coming into CMS will increase dramatically – as will the costs of providing human voices to answer their questions. Federal agencies will have to accurately gauge the technological sophistication of the aging population if they are to balance the need to support callers while living within the reality of constrained federal budgets.

Getting It Right

- ✓ *Study Demographics and Preferences*
- ✓ *Establish a True Partnership*
- ✓ *Size Operations on Projections*
- ✓ *Pick the Right Contract Type*
- ✓ *Reduce CSR Stress and Attrition*

Conclusion

For more than a decade government officials have labored to transform government by improving their service to citizens. Citizen Contact Centers are one example of their efforts that is proving to be a tremendous success.

This transformation is coming none too soon; the stakes are high and getting higher. Millions of Americans receive federal benefits, and millions more seek information on a range of issues, from cancer research to immigration policy, from prescription drugs to student loans and other issues that hit close to home. As the baby boom generation retires and ages, the number of inquiries will increase dramatically.

The stakes are equally high for government agencies and their industry partners. The U.S. Comptroller General recently told Congress that the federal government's current fiscal policy is "unsustainable." Long-term commitments for Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and other federal programs will "drive a massive imbalance between spending and revenues that cannot be eliminated without tough choices and significant policy changes," he reports. These tough choices and significant policy changes will affect many Americans — and will generate concern and anguish among many more. As agencies tighten their belts and reshape the entitlement programs they oversee, addressing the public's concerns won't be easy.

The good news is that government agencies are becoming skilled at communicating with the public, providing complex information quickly and courteously through whatever venue the public chooses. Given the magnitude of the challenges that lie ahead, it's imperative that agencies and their industry partners work together to get this right. They must take advantage of the many hard-earned lessons learned to build on today's success. They must develop trust through effective communication. If they do that, government executives will accomplish this transformation, despite rising workloads and limited resources.



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