Schedule Exceptions

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Abstract
So much energy goes into creating a daily plan for meeting contact center objectives only to be wasted when the plan is not followed or effectively managed once the day arrives. Monitoring and coaching schedule adherence and conformance results on a daily basis reinforces with agents the importance of following their portion of the plan. The same is reinforced with supervisors when you establish processes to ensure the timely submission of unplanned exceptions. The art of managing an efficient and cost effective contact center is ensuring that often much as possible, all goes according to plan.

Introduction
What do shrinkage overhead, adherence, conformance and exceptions have to do with each other? When you consider that personnel-related costs make up the largest portion of a contact center's budget, these factors directly impact one another. If not managed effectively, these factors not only affect costs associated with labor, but also the ability to service customers in a timely manner. The key to efficient contact center management lies with establishing processes to actively monitor these factors so that potential issues can be recognized and remedied quickly.

The Relationship between Exceptions, Shrinkage and Overhead
For the most part, an agent's primary purpose in an in-bound call center is to handle customer contacts. The more time each agent spends in a productive, call handling capacity, the fewer total agents are needed to meet staffing requirements based upon projected volumes, handling times and service level goals.

No one expects that agents will be productive 100% of the time. All agents require some amount of training, daily breaks, periodic meetings and vacation time. These activities, in addition to any activity that reduces the amount of time an agent can handle calls, are considered as exceptions to an agent's primary purpose. Exceptions to call handling productivity, also commonly referred to as shrinkage, must be taken into consideration when calculating the number of agents needed by adding a percentage of overhead to the base-line staffing requirement forecasted for handling calls.

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Exceptions = Shrinkage = Overhead

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If calculated correctly, the percentage of overhead should equate to the average percentage of shrinkage the call center experiences. It stands to reason that if overhead is calculated too high, you may hire more agents than are needed. However, if overhead is calculated too low, you may not hire enough. Therefore, it is important to periodically determine whether or not overhead percentages are in line with the actual shrinkage experienced for the entity being forecasted. Equally important is ensuring that the daily exceptions associated with non-productive activities are managed and controlled so that a program can be staffed as efficiently as possible to meet service level goals while minimizing costs and/or maintaining profitability.

Understanding the Various Types of Exceptions
Exceptions fall into three primary categories:

1. Planned
2. Unplanned Approved
3. Unplanned Other

Planned exceptions are exceptions that are part of an agent's initial schedule. Planned exceptions typically include breaks, pre-arranged team meetings and vacation time. It is ideal to include as many known exceptions in the initial schedule as possible because it enhances the accuracy of call handling projections and enables scheduled start times to be optimized. Most importantly, it provides leadership with the opportunity to care for any staffing shortages well in advance of the actual day.

Unplanned Approved exceptions include discretionary events that were not foreseen when creating the initial schedule. When approving exceptions that fall into this category, current staffing availability must always be considered so that efficient call handling and interval service level goals are not

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placed in jeopardy. Once approved, these exceptions should be communicated in advance of the actual event so that staffing availability lines are as accurate as possible. It is important to stress that an accurate staffing line is the only thing that provides managers with vision into coverage for future intervals. Without this, managers have nothing by which to make informed staffing decisions when events, such as call volumes and arrival patterns, change.

Unplanned other exceptions are ones that, by their nature, cannot be anticipated. There are two types of unplanned other exceptions. The first includes exceptions related to agent attendance (such as absences or tardies). The second type includes any other deviation an agent makes from his scheduled activities that has not been planned or pre-approved by his manager, such as going to break or lunch late because of a long call or an unscheduled log out. It is this second type of exception that should be the focus when monitoring schedule adherence and conformance.

The Role Exceptions Play in Schedule Adherence and Conformance Results
Schedule Adherence is the percentage of time agents performed the activity listed on the schedule at the time the activity was scheduled. As all agents will likely experience the inability to follow their scheduled activity times to the minute, it would not be reasonable to hold agents accountable for achieving a goal of one hundred percent adherence. Depending upon program average handling times, a more reasonable goal would be somewhere between 85 to 90 percent.

Schedule Conformance is the percentage of on-line time an agent actually provides that he or she was scheduled to provide. As with schedule adherence, there are occasions when an agent has periods of unscheduled non-phone time. These instances of lost time directly contribute to the total non-productive time on a program and should be considered when determining overhead percentages used in forecasting. To accommodate periods of unscheduled non-productive time, a reasonable conformance goal, such as 90 to 95%, be established, communicated and maintained.

Low adherence and/or conformance scores are the result of two primary issues. The first issue, and perhaps the most obvious one, is created when agents simply do not follow their schedules. Not following the times of scheduled activities affect adherence results. Having excessive unapproved and unscheduled instances of log off or non-productive phone activity affects conformance. Establishing adherence and conformance goals and holding agents to meet these goals can remedy this issue in a relatively short period of time. The second issue, however, is one that reflects more on operations and the support organization responsible for updating the schedules than it does the agents themselves. When schedules are not adjusted to reflect the numerous exceptions that take place on a daily basis, adherence and conformance results suffer. Beyond the impact this second issue has on results, it also lessens the effectiveness of adherence/conformance reports being used as a coaching tool.

Both adherence and conformance results should be reviewed daily at a program, supervisor and agent level. Failing to do so could result in considerable losses of agent productivity over time placing program service level goals and contact center costs/profitability in jeopardy. By frequently reviewing results and coaching those who fall below the communicated thresholds, Contact centers can establish a level of accountability for both agents and the supervisors who manage them and send the message that these measurements are important to the success of the entire organization.

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Attendance and Adherence: Coaching the Correct Behavior Issue

Individual agent adherence and conformance results should only measure the time between when an agent logs in to the time he or she logs out for the day. Often an agent logging in late is associated with an adherence/conformance violation when in reality the true issue is the agent's tardiness. Agents should not be penalized for both an adherence/conformance violation and an attendance violation for the same event. It is the responsibility of each supervisor to actively identify agents who were tardy or "no-call-no-show's" and to make the corresponding exception entry within the day of the occurrence. There are several methods for identifying these events including reviewing payroll time punches and ACD login/logout reports; however, just increasing general awareness on behalf of the supervisors to ensure agents are coming in as scheduled will make a significant difference.

By making timely exception entries for attendance violations, team leaders help to ensure that adherence/conformance results are accurate and that their coaching efforts are focused on the correct behavioral issues.

Developing an Exceptions Submission Policy

The primary objective for setting adherence and conformance goals is to measure a program's ability to follow the plan (a.k.a. schedule) and to ensure the accuracy of staffing lines required for proactive intra-day decision making. Adherence and conformance goals are not set to measure how well we update schedules to reflect actual agent activities. If this were the case, it would be easy to meet adherence and conformance goals by simply submitting all exceptions after the fact.

To ensure schedule exceptions support your center's true objectives and are not entered just too arbitrarily meet established adherence and conformance goals, it is recommended that the following guidelines be taken into consideration when developing an exceptions submission policy for your organization:

1. When creating the initial schedule, include all planned exceptions.
2. All unplanned in-office exceptions that were not part of the initial schedule require approval prior to the event taking place.
3. Staffing availability lines are to be consulted when approving in-office unplanned exceptions to ensure program service levels will not be placed in jeopardy.
4. Unplanned Other Exceptions that are attendance related, such as terminations, sick time and tardies, should be submitted no later than the day of the occurrence.
5. Unplanned Other Exceptions that are not attendance related, such as agents logging out late for break due to long calls and other off-line activities under 15 minutes in length, should not be submitted as these only serve to mask schedule adherence and conformance issues.
6. Implement an "in-charge" desk or a "buddy" supervisor program to ensure timely exception submissions in the event an agent's supervisor is not available.

Conclusion

Exceptions – activities that take agents away from productive call-handling time – add up to increased overhead costs, and when not monitored, can jeopardize a contact center's service levels. By establishing processes to care for exceptions and by implementing policies that encourage daily schedule adherence coaching, you empower supervisors to more effectively manage shrinkage for their teams. When shrinkage is in control, overhead costs are reduced, resulting in a direct benefit to the overall efficiency and profitability of the organization.

About the Author:

Rebecca Wise began her career in workforce management in 1990 at AT&T Universal Card Services, where she participated in the selection and implementation of the TotalView system. In 1995 Rebecca joined IEX and held positions in both training and international sales support until she took a senior management position with the Convergys Corporation in 2000. Rebecca supported a team responsible for providing forecasting, scheduling and intra-day management services for the technical support services division of Convergys until September of 2003 when she re-joined IEX as a Sales Engineer. In this capacity she provides TotalView technical expertise and contact center consultative support to members of the regional sales management team and their prospective customers.

About IEX

IEX, a Tekelec company, is a leading provider of innovative productivity solutions to contact centers. TotalView Workforce Management solutions significantly reduce operating costs while enabling superior service. More than 2,500 centers with more than 630,000 agents worldwide work with IEX to improve planning, enhance performance, streamline tasks and integrate data. More information can be found at http://www.iex.com.

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