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Quality Initiatives: Telephone Auto-prompt Purgatory

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In Quality Digest, H. James Harrington relayed a disturbing tale about an experience he suffered while trying to book a simple flight to Canada (Evans, 2010, p. 42). The entire booking was done via phone through an automated voice prompt system which led Harrington down the proverbial rabbit hole. The initial call required five rings before the voice prompt system eventually picked up, after which was followed two dial menus, an extraordinarily long hold time, and eventually to an operator who only transferred him to another phone queue to begin the whole process again. This experience would leave anyone with a bad taste in their mouth, and is an incredible example of where quality control initiatives could drastically increase customer satisfaction.

The key point of this phone call was to procure a booking with ABC Travel Services, however, the way in which the prompts were setup meant that this was painstakingly difficult to accomplish. Since the initial customer request is simplistic, the method of interaction should itself be simplistic. Moreover, the prompts the customer is presented with have no apparent effect on the outcome of the call routing destination. At one point, Harrington is asked to input a twenty three digit long number, which would supposedly speed up the call process, only to have the operator ask for this number again. To add insult to injury, at the start of the call, the user is asked if their flight is domestic or international, the operator they are routed to, regardless of this choice, is domestic only.

Six Sigma could potentially be used in this instance to decrease process times and waste. The problem to be solved is customer dissatisfaction, the process is the telephone booking system, and the measure is the time it takes to complete the booking from start to finish (Evans, 2010, p. 88). Accuracy of data input should be on the heads of ABC Travel Service, not the customer. If data is input incorrectly, there should be an error checking system that is not relative to the amount of time the customer needs to input said data (e.g. taking the stress off trying to dial a 23 digit long number). Cyclic time should be decreased based on user input, not increased, thus decreasing cost internally through fewer misplaced calls, and increasing customer satisfaction.

This method will definitely increase the quality of interactions with customers. However, it places too much emphasis on the call flow and process rather than on making the customer happy about their experience. Yes, they are likely to be happier than the current call flow method, but it is not the best method of increasing customer return rate. More than likely, it will simply create a system that is less annoying then the current version, but not all that remarkable.

ISO 9000 is a group of guidelines focused on increasing product and service standards using a basic set of quality initiatives focused on requirements gathering (Evans, 2010, p. 78). These guidelines, when used effectively, could easily increase customer satisfaction with this telephone booking system. Primarily is ISO 9000s focus on improving “the quality of operations to continually meet customers’ and stakeholders’ stated and implied needs” (Evans, 2010, p. 78). In this instance, the stated needs of the customer are to book flights, the implied needs are that the bookings are clear and concise, taking as little time and effort as possible.

The issue with ISO 9000 is that it is too generalized, applying to many different quality standard initiatives. This may lead redevelopment of the flight booking system down a path that is more focused on requirements, than it is on making the customer satisfied with their experience. ISO 9000 is definitely an improvement over their current “no-care given” call booking system. However, it is not necessarily the best method of implementing a quality initiative improvement.

Total Quality Management (TQM) has the potential to resolve all of these routing issues by transferring the issue of what is happening to who it is happening to, that is, rather than focusing on the problem, focus on the customer. TQM is all about placing the focus on the customer and/or stakeholder, if the customer is satisfied with the outcome, than any problems resolve themselves (Evans, 2010, p. 23). In this particular instance, identification of the most important customer group comes down to the customer making the phone call. The customer needs to make a booking, they expect the process to be short and concise, if the interaction is not satisfactory they are quite likely to hang up and take their business elsewhere.

The call routing experienced by Harrington makes it feel as though the company wants to lose customers, or even that they have no care for customer satisfaction. As this corporation would like to keep its customers, and increase customer return rate, making their telephone booking system clear and concise should be a key factor in their flight booking system, which is exactly what TQM is all about. This means any prompt given to a customer should affect the outcome of the call. Nothing is wasted from the customer’s point of view. Moreover, hold times and transfers should never happen, or be as short as possible (preferably a call back mechanism should be in place so that the customer can get on with their life rather than waiting on a phone).

Reference

Evans, J. R. (2010). *Quality & Performance Excellence: Management, Organization, and Strategy* (6th ed.). Mason, OH, USA: Cengage Learning.