Customer Satisfaction Case Study:
The Links Between Telework and Customer Satisfaction

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Introduction

With the continuing increase in telework, the ways in which employees connect with internal and external customers is changing. Following inquiries and feedback from other federal agencies and organizations, GSA's Telework Program Management Office (PMO) set out to understand and increase awareness of the links between telework and customer satisfaction.

Three questions GSA's partner organizations have commonly asked are:

1. What best practices result in customer satisfaction?

2. What challenges do mobile workers face in giving excellent customer service?

3. What benefits does mobile working bring to the agent, the customer, and to the organization?

Approach

In an effort to find answers to these three questions GSA took a two-pronged approach. First the agency PMO looked at qualitative data obtained from five work groups that indicated on the GSA Mobile Work Forum that they were enabled by telework to better serve their customers. The conclusions drawn from this qualitative data study are from an employee perspective only; the PMO did not poll customers for their views. Additionally, the PMO did not include control groups, which could limit the study's findings.

Second, the agency PMO reviewed quantitative data derived from work-group interviews. Quantitative data is being collected on an ongoing basis from various customer satisfaction surveys and will be reported in a companion paper.

A small team was formed to develop interview questions (listed in Appendix 1) and meet with the five GSA work group members who interact directly with external customers. The interviews were designed to:

• Surface best practices for developing customer satisfaction while teleworking

• Identify any customer satisfaction challenges encountered

• Solicit the perceived pros and cons of telework as it relates to customer satisfaction.

The interviews were conducted over the phone and took approximately a half-hour each. One to three people conducted the interviews, taking turns to facilitate and take notes.

Findings

1. There are distinct best practices for improving customer satisfaction while teleworking that benefit organizations.

- Plan mobile work carefully. Use a calendar and task lists to keep track of meetings and tasks.

- Train employees and managers on how to provide excellent customer service in a telework environment.

- Ensure management support and encouragement of teleworking

- Provide the right tools for each employee to do his or her job as a mobile worker.

- Take advantage of the latest technologies that facilitate communication and responsiveness with customers, including instant messaging, Google features (Calendar, Documents, Sites, Voice), and online multi-party meetings.

- Obtain feedback from employees voicing concerns about telework, as it can provide useful improvement information.

"Telework is seamless to our customers. They are not aware if we are in the office or at home when we communicate with them"

- There should be no difference in the level of support provided to a customer if an employee is in the office or working remotely. For this reason do not allow employees to indicate on voicemail or an email out of office notice that they are teleworking.

- Develop uniform customer service standards.

- Establish clear performance expectations, goals, range of employee flexibility, and limits of accountability.

- Baseline current customer satisfaction measures as a means to gauge improvement in future years.

- Share best practices and lessons learned within the organization on customer service while in a mobile work environment.

- Establish links between employee satisfaction (e.g. Q12 surveys) and existing customer satisfaction surveys as a means to identify successful mobile working practices.

2. There are consistent challenges faced by teleworking employees as they support high levels of customer service.

- There is a perceived lack of manager support for mobile work

- There is a concern among managers that employees will be more easily distracted working in a less formal environment and less focused due to multitasking. This challenge is coupled with a concern arising from the inability of managers to physically see their employees doing work.

- An inconsistent digitization of files negatively impacts customer service, when employees are not

able to access everything that a customer needs, while they are working in a remote location.

- Issues with some of the technological aspects of working remotely hinder customer service.

3. There are stakeholder benefits of teleworking that promote customer satisfaction.

Customers Benefits

- Working from alternate locations generally means fewer interruptions for employees, resulting in their ability to provide customers with their undivided attention.

"With telework there are no disruptions when talking with customers so you can give them your undivided attention."

- Technology use enhances the customers' experience; for example, the use of online multi-party meetings allows multiple people to connect remotely.

"Technology is used to enhance the customer experience and improve productivity since employees are more available."

Employee Benefits

- Flexibility in employee work scheduling affords enhanced customer service and greater accountability.

- An improved work-life balance increases employee morale, which in turn generally leads to enhanced customer service.

- Employees in the surveyed work groups are measured on productivity and outcomes, and not the number of hours spent in the office.

Organization Benefits

- The organizations recognize the expanded ability to use technology to communicate and respond to customers in a timely manner.

- The process of Continued Operations, or COOP, allows for no loss of time due to inclement weather or other types of emergencies. Customers do not experience a break in service because of telework and COOP measures, even if a GSA building is closed for the day.

"With telework, we were fully operational the week the buildings were closed due to the inclement weather"

- Telework allows for increased productivity and customer service.

- Sick leave usage declines since telework allows employees the flexibility to schedule medical appointments on telework days, and then return to finish the work day rather than having to schedule the whole day as out of office.

- Several organizations, including GSA, have realized real estate savings due to reduced space and energy needs. GSA is viewed as the government leader and can share these best practices with other agencies.

- Telework and reduced commuter travel will help agencies meet their Scope 3 greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reductions requirements under Executive Order 13514.

Conclusion

- Being a successful teleworker is no different than being successful at any other business initiative. That is, management support is a key to success.

"From the customer's standpoint, it shouldn't matter if you are teleworking. It needs to be a seamless experience, embedded into well managed operations."

- Communication and training will put employees in a position to continue to provide excellent service to the customer.

- Clear expectations and accountability keep employees on track, while goals and measurements keep an organization on track.

"The voicemail that says, "I'm teleworking today" shouldn't happen."

- The environment should be results oriented, based on customer expectations rather than a duty hour schedule.

- While teleworking has some challenges, its benefits for employee customer and organization outweigh those challenges.

Appendix 1:
Interview questions

The following questions were asked:

1. Please tell us more about your experience as indicated on the mobile work forum.

2. How often do you and your team mobile work?

3. Please describe how your team mobile works. What are the alternative work locations?

4. Who are your customers?

5. Prior to mobile work, how did you interact or communicate with your customers?

6. What encouraged your move to a mobile work environment?

7. With mobile work, how do you interact now with your customers? What tools and/or technology do you use to facilitate communication?

8. What are the two or three biggest challenges you still face working in a mobile work environment that you didn't face in a traditional office setting and what steps are you taking to overcome them?

9. Do your customers know you mobile work? If so, how?

10. What type of feedback have you received from your customers about how you interact with them?

11. What are your most successful best practices?

12. Anything else that you would like to mention?