

# **Winning The Call Center Career Marathon**

## **From Agent to Supervisor to Business Analyst to...?**

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My best buddy's brother is a world renown running coach; he's Terrence Mahon, the Head Coach for Team USA running, which includes our Olympic Marathon Team and other long distance teams. He tells his athletes that training for a competitive marathon is a journey. You have to decide which race you want to win, and begin planning for it years in advance.

A career in call centers is exactly the same, except for the sweating, huffing, and puffing. Or the marathon running. Or real exercise in general; we tend to work sitting down.

But your career is a journey, however sedentary. You train hard for your events- the next job challenge, the next project, or the success of your current assignment. It is the rare professional who truly plans each step; I'd have to say that most of us (myself included) stumbled into our current jobs in the contact center industry; nobody goes to college to get a degree in call centers. That's not to say that some career foresight isn't a good thing- the more we prepare ourselves for the next task the better.

To torture this running analogy further, when you plan the many steps of your career, you must take care to make yourself stronger: train yourself regularly and hard, learn from the folks who have run those races before, and (intellectually) digest those things that will make you faster while avoiding those things (the intellectual habits) that slow you down.

### **The Road Most Traveled: The Standard Call Center Career Path**

When speaking with anyone in our industry about their careers, it is rare to find supervisors, or managers, or executives who didn't start their contact center career answering support or service or sales calls. We learned a lot there- almost every contact center supervisor has proven himself or herself to have strong interpersonal skills, to be good at handling customers, and to be capable of understanding center production. You wouldn't have been considered for supervision if you didn't prove these skills while a phone agent. Similarly, supervisors have shown themselves to be mature and with great potential for leadership.

Like noncommissioned officers, the sergeant in the Army, our supervisors are the lynchpin to troop performance, and we never, ever, want to lose a great supervisor. So we tend to promote them to keep them in house. If you've already been promoted to supervisor (congratulations!) you're probably figuring out where you'd like your career to go next.

There are several natural paths for call center supervisors to take. What is interesting, however, is that the skills required for this next career step are very different from those required in the last job.

The typical next step for a contact center supervisor is to become either a manager of supervisors (in large center networks), a business analyst, or a staff manager, like human resources or training. As a contact center supervisor, it would be in your best interest to begin training for, and showing management that you are capable of, this next step. Starting soon.

So what do you like to do? What makes you happy? What are you good at? Which path seems most interesting to you? What is your dream job (not, like, beer taster or professional shopper) - your contact center dream job?

Most operations vice presidents have spent time in an analyst role; it is a great training ground to learn decision-making. For this reason, and because, to be honest, that's where my career has gone, we'll chat about this today: preparing yourself for a leg in your career in an analytical function.

## **How do you prepare yourself to be an analyst?**

In the contact center, there are four major areas that you could **branch into contact** center supervision: workforce management, network operations, business analysis and reporting, and finance. Each has major differences, but one solid thing in common - they require significant math and data manipulation skills. What can we do to get ready to be an analyst?

*Bone-Up Task One:* Sorry to say, but it is time to get on top of your spreadsheet skills. Like it or not, any analyst will spend significant time creating and editing spreadsheet reports. Learn to create macros and produce significant reporting packages. *Extra Credit:* To get the big boss to notice you, volunteer to produce (or just start producing) productivity reports that the big, big boss would like to see daily. After you start producing this report (leave one in the boss' In Basket), and it gets noticed, you can take time to ask the big, big boss what he'd like to have in "his" report. In time, you get to ask the boss these questions on the golf course.

*Bone-Up Task Two:* If you plan on staying anywhere near the contact center, it is time to become an expert on the concepts of contact center production: the relationships between staff, handle times, volumes, and service; the concepts of contact center economies of scale (both operational and financial); and the relationships between service and network routing rules (there are many good books out there). If you haven't yet looked at an Erlang equation, it makes sense to download one and begin to play with it (in your spreadsheet?). You must also quickly begin to understand the limitations of Erlang. *Extra Credit:* Better yet, drop Erlang (it is beginning to go by the wayside anyway)- if the company owns a simulation package, ask to borrow it to create a network simulation model. Take time to create a cool animated simulation model and demonstrate it to the big, big, boss. My prediction: promotion within a week.

*Bone-Up Task Three:* Begin to study the reports and MIS that is already being produced on your network's daily performance. Study the details on how the important metrics are calculated, what they mean and what they hide (too many reports, **through** their assumptions, tell a casually wrong story). *Extra Credit:* Learn to interpret reports- because of your experience on the floor, you already have insight into the workings of the operation and the habits of the phone agents. When you create your "super reports" as an analyst in the future, it is critical that your reports tell your executives a story. Each of your reports should have, at the top of each page, a point that you wish to make, like: "Service Levels are Being Degraded Due to Increased Handle Times." This changes you from a data reporter to a real business analyst- known for your reading of the data. Use your insight.

*Bone-Up Task Four:* Take some (math) classes. If you are to go anywhere in business, your math skills will pay off more than any other. Your ability to evaluate competing decisions is enhanced by training your mind to think logically and mathematically. *Extra Credit:* Take an introduction to operations research class at your local college. Operations research is the study and optimization of systems. It forms the mathematical backbone in all network modeling. And we deal in networks.

## **What is in store for you as an analyst?**

We work in a terrific industry, and those of us who stay in contact centers do so for one interesting reason: the amazingly cool complexity. We work in an industry where hiring a phone agent in **the** Manila will affect the **workload** of agents in Hoboken. We work in an industry where a new more effective manager can affect your workload across the world. We work in an industry where a new network routing rule can greatly improve performance. This cool complexity gives us daily puzzles, brain teasers, and challenges. This complexity makes for an interesting job.

We also work in an industry that is easy for non-contact center-trained folks to mess things up if given the opportunity. We're starting to see more of the "professionalization" of the call center business - the influx of, say, consultant-types who will work in the call center for a year or two then move on to some other "challenge." Through their "new ideas" these folks pose an operational risk to your company. Part of your job, as an analyst with real contact center experience, is to communicate clearly to center novices how the contact center works (e.g. why "idle time" is not really agents goofing off) and propose real solutions that will achieve the boss' goals with minimal risk to the operation. This requires powers of analysis and persuasion - if you do your homework, you'll be up to this task.

What else is in store for you as a contact center analyst? It is this: your stint as a contact center analyst will provide you with an unsurpassed intellectual challenge. I have worked with business analysts in and out of contact centers and, by and large, the analysts who trained in contact centers have always placed amongst the best. You learn a lot here.

However, know that no matter the route your contact center career takes you, your stumble into a career in contact centers was one of the best, if unplanned, runs you could possibly have had. With some training and some foresight, you'll have a great career, especially if you are in contact center operations for the long run (get it?).