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Customer Service— What Does It Mean To You?

If there is one thing that unites all organizations, regardless of sector, is the recognition of the importance of customer service.

As always, however, when a generalist phrase is used, it often means different things in different environments. For example, if you work in the gaming industry, does the phrase 'customer service' mean the same to you as if you are a health services professional? What does the phrase 'customer service', mean to your organization, and why?

To determine the meaning of customer service, the main goals of an organization must be analyzed. It can be argued that in the for-profit sector, the main goal is to make money. In the not-for-profit sectors, such as government, education, health care, charities and other organizations, the main goal is to provide mandated service. To accomplish their goals, both need

to do one main thing- satisfy the needs of their customers/clients. This is where the concept of customer service comes in.

In business, the key to success is often seen to be not only selling your product/service to your



customer, but to have them so satisfied with the product/ service and experience that they either deal with you again, or at least recommend you to others. For many of us, this decision is

based not only on the quality of the product/service received, but the experience we got in receiving it. A good product delivered poorly often is worse than a poor product connected with good customer service. If we feel like someone is paying attention to us, understands us (or at least tries), treats us as someone special and values our time and business, we are likely to go back to repeat that experience. In no industry is that better understood than the gaming industry, which knows, particularly in a competitive market such as Las Vegas, Atlantic City, and now the Windsor/ Detroit area, that the customer has many choices as to where to gamble, and will usually go where they will have the most fun. If an employee is rude, the food is bad, or the overall experience is dull, the gambler will go elsewhere. In this kind of environment, ensuring that em-

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On EAPs

Many years ago, at the start of my career, I was the only Human Resources person in a small organization. I was approached by my boss about a new concept that she had recently heard about. She said that some employers were training and designating staff within their organization to deal with employee personal prob-

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lems, both work and non-work related. This assistance would be confidential in nature, with the rest of the organization never finding out that the service was being used. She wanted me to become this person for our organization, along with my other duties. I pointed out to her that while the idea was a good one, I did not feel

that it would not work in our organization as she proposed it, as I felt that few people would bring a serious personal problem to the same person who could end up firing them later. Such was my initial exposure to the concept of Employee Assistance Programs (E.A.P.s).

Over the years I have been

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ployees do whatever they can to make this a reality for their customer is the key to success.

While the customer service concept is easy to explain in the for-profit sector, its actual meaning often becomes confusing in the not-for-profit sector. For example, in the case of many government agencies, there is only one place to go, and even when repeat business is possible, there are few alternatives. In many situations, such as in the social and health services, the client does not necessarily even want to be there, but has no alternative. So what is the importance of employees making their clients' experiences positive?

Let's go back to our health services professional. The main point of contact between the public and the that person usually comes, during a time of personal crisis for a patient and the patient's family and friends. It can be argued that the difference between a good and a great health services professional is how they deal with the patients, their families, and anyone else they come into contact with during treatment. This illustrates the importance of customer service, even when there are no or limited alternative sources for service. As a representative of a public agency, the public servant must know how to use tools such as respect, empathy, and common courtesy to ensure that the client is treated appropriately, and leaves with as positive impression of the organization.

So why is a positive public image important to a not-for-profit agency important? The answer is what Sally Bennett Politidis, CEO of the Alzheimer Society of Windsor and Essex County, refers to as "organizational community presence". In any agency such as hers, there is a strong reliance on the community, not only for funding purposes, but also for client participation, family involvement, and volunteer support. It is therefore important that the organization be seen in a favourable light by government, funders, service partners, and clients within the community. To ensure that, it is important that employees conduct themselves appropriately at all times, and serve as positive representatives of the organization. Listening, acting professionally, and treating others the way they, and perhaps more importantly, they would like their families, to be treated in similar situations.

As mentioned earlier, the concept of customer service in the for-profit sector is a fairly easy one to understand. Good customer service equates to happy customers, which leads to repeat business/referrals, and eventually a profitable venture. So how different is the not-for-profit sector? Not much, if you realize that happy customers are the same as happy clients, repeat business/referrals are the same as ongoing organizational community presence, and a profitable venture is the same as continued justification for the continuation of the service. In both the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors, customer service is the key to customer satisfaction and in these turbulent times where industries, governments and individuals are spending a lot of time deciding where there

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involved in more formal E.A.P. programs in different organizations. While they are a start, internal E.A.P. programs, where existing employees are trained to deal with the issues of staff on a confidential basis, have always made me nervous. Issues of the perception of confidentiality, the key to the success of any E.A.P., are always at the forefront, as well as the availability of appropriate resources to the staff. I have always favoured external E.A.P. services, as they usually provide more confidentiality and provide the best range of services. In addition, even the smallest organization would have access to a service, without having to tie up valuable staff resources.

What kind of services should a good E.A.P. service provide? I believe that any employee should be able to pick up the telephone at any time of day or night and have access to assistance. They should also be able to get some initial assistance during that call, and have an appointment set to talk to someone in person, in a confidential location, within a matter of days. The service should be able to deal internally with a wide range of issues, and not 'farm out' certain aspects of assistance if it results in the employee getting help in a timely manner. The counselors should have credentials appropriate to their field. The service should maximize employee confidentiality, while providing the employer with any information that would assist it in identifying issues within the workplace. And all of this should be done at a financially responsible price.

While all of the above sounds good, how does an employer go about justifying the expense of implementing an E.A.P. program? It is often difficult to quantify the savings that having an E.A.P. will bring to an employer, but if you think of the cost of the time that these issues use up in a workplace, be it the time of the supervisor, fellow employees, or the employee who has the issue, you can see that there can be great benefit. I have also found E.A.P. programs a great tool to supervisors, by giving them a way to deal with the personal issues that employees bring forward, or the supervisor becomes aware of. The simple truth is that, if you let them, employees will suck the life out of your supervisors. By giving them a tool that they can provide to that employee, the supervisor will be able to deal with issues in an appropriate manner, and will not force them to deal with something they may not be equipped to handle.

If your organization does not have an Employee Assistance Program, I would urge you to consider looking into one.

Pay Equity– First You Establish It, Then You Maintain It

Remember the *Pay Equity Act*?

If you are like most organizations, you worked hard, posted a pay equity plan, and made the appropriate pay equity wage adjustments. And maybe you even cleaned up the problems caused by pay equity with internal equity adjustments. Now what? Well, according to Section 7(1) of the *Pay Equity Act*, every eligible employer is responsible to not only establish pay equity, but to ensure that it is **maintained**. This means that organizations need to keep an eye on the job duties of the respective male and female job classes, and if there is substantial change (enough to cause changes in the rating of the position), reevaluate the duties to see if there needs to be a change in the compensation of the female job class. If you have restructured your organization, including amalgamations, this must also be reflected in your pay equity plan.



The Pay Equity Office is the government agency charged with ensuring that pay equity is established and maintained in the workplace. It does this, in part, through random audits of designated employers. For example, according to their website, the hotel/motel sector in the Peel Region was subject to review. In addition, complaints can be made by bargaining units and employees to the Pay Equity Commission if they believe that pay equity is not being maintained.

The best way to ensure compliance with the *Pay Equity Act* is to have an ongoing and scheduled review of all of the appropriate job classes. For example, depending on your circumstances, reviewing the job classes when there are duty changes or every couple of years just to be sure. That way, if there are concerns in the future, you will be able to document an ongoing maintenance process.

JM Box Consulting Services has extensive experience in the areas of pay equity and job evaluation. Please contact us if you have any questions, comments or concerns.

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Bill 168 Update

In our last issue, we discussed Bill 168, Ontario’s violence in the year, without major changes. The latest that we have heard is that the Bill is expected to pass by the end of the year, without major changes.

Periodic Police Checks

For some employers, one way of ensuring that its employees have not done anything criminal that would jeopardize their ability to work or that could harm the reputation of the employer is to mandate that the employees consent to periodic criminal record checks. While this practice has been validated through arbitration for some classifications of employees such as airport workers, municipal workers placed in positions of trust with vulnerable clients, and staff working with the physically handicapped, a recent arbitration involving the City of Ottawa and the Ottawa Professional Firefighters Association, may limit this practice.

As reported by the firefighters’ legal firm, Nelligan O’Brien Payne, in its summer 2009 newsletter **Labour Law** (www.nelligan.ca), a challenge was made to the City of Ottawa’s policy of requiring periodic criminal records checks for firefighters. While upholding the needs for such periodic checks for certain occupations, the Arbitrator ruled, upheld on appeal to the Ontario Divisional Court, that for other occupations such ongoing access to personal information should only be allowed where there were reasonable grounds to justify it.

What all of this means is that while employers can still ask for police checks prior to employment, the ability of employers to ask for them on a periodic basis will be restricted to certain occupations.



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An Overview of Our Services

JM Box Consulting Services provides creative and cost-effective Human Resources support and services that assist clients in dealing with their issues and challenges with confidence. Together, we will resolve issues one at a time, either through consultation, training or working together on necessary projects. These services are designed to be of greatest service to small to medium size organizations, mainly but not exclusively in the municipal, health care, charitable and not-for-profit sectors.

JM Box Consulting Services takes the approach of meeting client expectations by identifying the gap between the desired goals and current realities, to discover the best ways of eliminating that gap- not just for the present, but for the future as well.

Services

E-Consulting- providing clients with quick, cost-effective access to Human Resources expertise through the use of e-mail and telephone communications, without the expense of or supplemental to internal Human Resources staff.

Project Management Services- to provide project management and expertise on matters such as job evaluation/pay equity, wage/salary administration systems, policy and procedure review and development, and organization redesign and restructuring.

Training Services- to address client needs that are best addressed through training specific to the needs of the organization, such as Violence in the Workplace, E-mail and Internet Use, and Hiring/Interviewing.

Downloadable Diamonds

The purpose of this section of our newsletter is to alert readers to some resources available from the internet that they might not be aware of.

From the Ontario Safety Association for Community and Healthcare (www.osach.ca) comes **Personal Relationship Violence in the Workplace: a Handbook for the Workplace**. This 23 page document deals with violence within the workplace, be it through criminal intent, client/customer involvement, worker to worker issues, or the result

of an external personal relationship. This information is quite topical, given the proposed inclusion in Bill 168 of employer responsibility to deal specifically with these issues. One very useful section deals with disclosure issues, which will be of interest to everyone inside and outside of the workplace.

Also available through O.S.A.C.H.'s website is a 2 page "Fast Facts" document entitled **Protecting Workers Who Work Alone**.

As many of JM Box Consulting Services' clients are in the health and social services, an American document may come in handy. Published by the U.S. Occupational Health and Safety Administration

(www.osha.gov), their **Guidelines for Preventing Workplace Violence for Health Care and Social Service Workers** (OSHA 3148-01R 2004) is aimed specifically at workers in the identified sectors. It ties in nicely with the upcoming Bill 168 requirements, as it deals with issues such as workplace analysis, hazard prevention and control and potential employer responses. It also has an assessment checklist which might prove useful.