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'Someday, I Hope to Work at a Call Center': Behind the Scenes at One of the Biggest

Matt Creamer Visits the Voices on the Phone Repping Many of America's Favorite Brands

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More than 20 million telephone calls flow into and out of iQor's call centers each month, every one of which is recorded and saved for at least 90 days.

Your voice, digitized, may well be in there if you've had a technical problem with one of your gadgets or are, uh, in arrears with any number of well-known companies. This constantly refreshed cache of consumer agita is searched by iQor's quality-control experts, who then sit and parse old calls with phone agents. High-decibel levels, a short duration or profanity are good hints that something went wrong and suggest a call that might yield a teachable moment.

A coaching session goes like this: After listening to a replay, the agent is asked to evaluate his or her own performance by a supervisor, who reads through a checklist in a sort of Socrates-as-HR-person dialogue, a line of questioning designed to ferret out both the strengths and weaknesses of the performance.

"Do you think you resolved the customer's questions?" asked Al Garci-Crespo last

The Tempe center processes 1.1 million calls each month. Credit: Terri Lea Smith

Tuesday in a small office in iQor's Tempe, Ariz., call center. He and an agent, Jeff Brisendine, had just listened to a call that had been chosen at random. Mr. Brisendine knew he had gotten the job done and said as much, repeatedly. Then, asked whether he could have improved anything, Mr. Brisendine, bespectacled and well-spoken, wondered aloud whether he had wrongfully indulged in a bit of jargon. Mr. Garci-Crespo said he hadn't.

Then Mr. Brisendine raised the issue of "dead air," another no-no. Mr. Garci-Crespo agreed that there had been some silences and indeed this was a challenge for all agents. When the supervisor added that this dead-air question might be the difference between a very good score and a perfect one, the air grew thick with something that could only be described as suspense. Then Mr. Garci-Crespo revealed that the longest period of dead air was 17 seconds -- he had counted in his head -- which was totally acceptable. Mr. Brisendine received the top mark.

This session was, like everything else I saw at this call center, detail-obsessed and shockingly nonconfrontational. That two grown men can sit in a small room and close-read a mundane gripe session from a customer as though it were a lost J.D. Salinger story and not lose their sanity is either miraculous or a testament to the process iQor has inculcated. And iQor has no shortage of processes, many of which are ordinary words whose C's and K's have been replaced with Q's. So its call-recording and -archiving system is Qatch, as opposed to Catch. Its training program is sQool.

The name iQor itself is the company's coinage, a reference dragged from Greek mythology, where ichor referred to the golden blood of the gods. The more-recent usage of ichor is ickier: an antiquated pathological term for pus or fluid. Etymological realities aside, iQor once said in a press release that it devised the name to suggest people and technology, both of which it has a lot of . And many of those people and much of that technology is in the U.S., which might be surprising given that call centers are often thought to be an Indian thing. In reality, business-process outsourcing, as call centers are more fancily known, is less and less Indian. Meanwhile, shifts in global labor arbitrage mean they're surging in the Philippines and resurging in the U.S.

In 2010, iQor opened a 50,000-square-foot call center in a brown brick building in Tempe. With 732 employees, it processes 1.1 million calls each month. It hummed along without a lot of fanfare until last fall, when a former employee from a facility in nearby Chandler who had peanut allergies sued the company under the American Disabilities Act and made some news. Her charge was that co-workers rubbed the offending legume on her arms and legs, inflicting all kinds of distress. She asked for, among other things, money and her job back.

The company declined to comment on the suit, which is unresolved. But regardless of its merits, the lawsuit paints a worst-case picture of a workplace and profession most Americans look down on as low paid, unskilled and straight-up irritating.

It's an image that Linda Johnson, VP-business development and a guide during my visit, wants to change. Imagining a career day where the kiddies get excited about becoming a doctor or lawyer, she said, "I want that kindergartener to

want to work at a call center."

With more than 23 years at call centers, 13 of them at iQor, Ms. Johnson has seen the business change. Much of it comes from technological improvements that have focused workers on a tightly limited set of tasks. In the past, agents might have "wasted time" by calling mom, or supervisors might have been doing spreadsheets instead of monitoring calls. Now, she said, "the system ... doesn't allow you to stray."

Central to this are employee fingerprints, taken upon hiring and put into the company's biometric system. A security measure eliminates the need for passwords -- there's a fingerprint reader on each keyboard. The system also determines permissions employees have and what activities they can perform. Asked the admittedly philosophical and unanswerable question of whether such a sharp division of labor is a good thing, Ms. Johnson thought and then offered, "It gives you more time to do your job well."

Probably the most-popular success metric is the self-explanatory one-call resolution, which makes sense for everyone involved, including the client.

"Why should anyone pay for the same call twice?" Ms. Johnson said.

IQor is run by Norm Merritt, an operations and turnaround specialist, the kind of guy who puts his yearly EBITDA in his LinkedIn profile. While working for Disney in the 1990s, he spent a Fourth of July in the Magic Kingdom watching the park close to understand how it emptied out efficiently without "human gridlock."

His office is far from Tempe, in iQor's global headquarters on the 27th floor of 335 Madison Avenue in Manhattan. The building was once the Biltmore Hotel, until it was gutted to its steel skeleton and remade into offices in the early "80s. Bank of America has a large presence there, as does Facebook.

When Mr. Merritt arrived at iQor in 2003 after a well-timed exit from the mortgage business, the company was a money-losing mess, a poorly integrated amalgam of acquisitions with no brand to speak of . He recalls asking an employee whom she worked for. "Nextal," she responded, getting both the name of her company and her client wrong.

What came next is maybe best articulated on Mr. Merritt's LinkedIn page: "Restructured company. Changed out management. Closed facilities. Drove multimillion-dollar margin enhancements. Streamlined back-office operations." Boom. Now iQor is closing in on $500 million in annual revenue and throwing off plenty of cash.

Along the way, its ranks swelled and big investments were made in developing its proprietary technology rather than using off-the-shelf options and making the call-center experience around the world uniform. No phones or local hard drives; all VoIP and cloud storage. Among the company's clients are major marketers CapitalOne, DirecTV , the BBC and MetroPCS.

One of the iQor innovations Mr. Merritt is proud of is its hiring process. For the average iQor agent, this begins when he or she goes to the company's website and takes an emotional aptitude test , Qfit, developed by Columbia University labor economist Lalith Munasinghe. A passing score results in an outreach phone call, which, it is stressed, is not an interview. IQor does not believe in job interviews and makes employment offers "sight unseen."

"Interviewing actually destroys value," Mr. Merritt said. "It will overcome all the other indications telling you whether a person is good or bad."

After our meeting, I took the Qfit test . There was a question about the size of my Facebook network, some easy-ish logical queries, and some pretty specific-feeling problems based on debt-collection scenarios. But my favorite asked what conclusions could be drawn from this set of facts: "A man tells you: "The movie was what's up. The special effects were the bomb. The acting was totally wack, but the music was chill.'"

Fourteen is important to iQor. It's the number of agents to which each supervisor is assigned, the size of the team that begins and ends shifts together. This ratio is considered relatively low by industry standards, and that is understood to be a good thing, not unlike a low teacher-to-pupil ratio is a good thing. It fosters a lot of interaction, like those coaching sessions, and it's reflected in the floor plan and cubicle distribution. Each team gets its own bay that has two long desks facing each other, with seven agents on each side. At one end is the supervisor, who sits noticeably higher than the agents.

I was allowed to look over the shoulder of one of the supervisors at a screen showing general company information, real-time details about the current shift -- including the number of calls in the queue -- and a list of agents along with their stats, such as the number of calls they've handled and the average time it takes to finish them. The supervisor even flashed her referral stats, revealing that she could make as much $29,000 in bonuses if they all stayed for a year.

About halfway through an eight-hour shift, the reps had each handled between 17 and 37 calls, averaging between 300 and 700 seconds. The slower times could generally be attributed to newer agents, the supervisor told me.

She can listen to calls on her headphones and is constantly giving advice via an instant-messaging system, a practice called "barge and chat." There is also the capability to break into a call, though I was assured this rarely happens.

I was permitted to sit for a few minutes with an agent, hearing only her side of a few customer calls. This agent was a veteran -- over 10 years at the center -- and flipped quickly through various menus and windows as she listened to the customer's problem.

During lags, she moused around the screen so the computer wouldn't think she was gone and put itself in sleep mode. When the next call came, there was no ring. Instead a box popped up and the agent began with a bright greeting, remaining civil to the customer who, sadly, seemed to not know what he was talking about. The only evidence of frustration on the part of the agent were a few eyerolls that were, of course, invisible to the caller.

Asked if this work ever got boring, the agent shook her head. "With every call, there's something new." She also said she was glad to no longer work in collections.

Throughout my time in the call center, there was a constant thrum that rarely gained in volume and was never broken by loud voices -- surprising when you consider what's being talked about: nonfunctioning products, byzantine corporate practices and mountains of soul-sucking debt. Everything was quite calm.

It's pretty clear that keeping people motivated and interested is a key challenge for iQor management. In part, this is handled visually. There are lots and lots of decorations strewn about. These touches are seasonal, or geographic or client-specific -- and some are pleasantly weird, as in the curious case of a large cartoonish rendition of a friendly-looking orca that owned one wall. While generally charming, the look can also feel forced, as though good vibes increased proportionately to the use of poster board and magic markers. It's a little like high school.

Another key is instilling what you might call values in the employees. The walls of one iQor training room are plastered with handwritten sayings urging empathy and effective listening. One reads: "I am a valuable person. I am worthwhile. I bring value to the company. And that 's why I smile."

All in all, this call-center stuff seems like very difficult work. The word "empathy" is tossed around a lot in reference to customers, but I left feeling it for the agents. Not only are the agents faced with callers who, to put it mildly, aren't happy to be talking to them, but they are constantly being evaluated. Agents receive regular reports on quality scores that determine promotions and raises. Everything can be listened to.

At the risk of sounding like that guy sleeping under a filthy tarp in your nearest public square (or a Radiohead song), there are questions to be asked here about the impact of all the specialization and routine on the employees. But, then again, these are jobs -- and in this day and age that 's nothing to sniff at. It'd be easy to chalk this up to an antihuman view of labor; a fast, cheap way to get as many fresh recruits for low-paid and at times unpleasant jobs with high attrition. But another way to understand it is as a rational elimination of rituals -- passwords, job interviews -- that don't really work, part and parcel of making iQor as scalable as possible. Plus , iQor bills itself as a high payer in the industry, with some agents making more than $100,000.

And there are ways for employees to push back and have their say. Their computer interface makes it easy to reach higher-ups, including Mr. Merritt. And when performance evaluations come, they have the option to appeal their grade to an iQor manager who doesn't oversee them.

Scott Locke, the center's training chief and a former schoolteacher, called me over to a computer to take a look at how this works. He pulled up the correct window.

It read, "Your Feedbaq to our Feedbaq."

Then there was a choice of two boxes to click.

"Qool" and "Unqool."