

An investigation into the core competencies of an ideal call  
centre agent

A systemic perspective

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## **SUMMARY**

Call centre agents are becoming increasingly important in the call centre setting. They act as a contact point between the customer and the company, and can therefore be regarded as the builders of the company's image. Outbound call centre agents have the difficult task of gathering valuable research information. Due to the importance of these agents, they should have certain competencies to perform their duties sufficiently. The aim of this study was to determine what exactly a call centre agent needs in order to make that agent an ideal worker. Identifying competencies required to be ideal agents will ease the task of training and recruitment.

Due to the interrelatedness of the subsystems of a call centre, not only the perceptions of the call centre agent, but also the views of managers and customers were taken into account. The systems theory allowed the researcher to take into account the interrelationship between these different subsystems. A qualitative methodology was used to gather this information, as it was the ideal method to show the complex processes and interactions in the call centre. Content analysis was used to analyse the data. Firstly, categories for the information were developed (open coding), then the categories were labelled (axial coding) and finally the categories were refined and integrated (selective coding).

The results are presented from agents, customers and managements perspectives. The results found in this study are also connected to previous literature done regarding service representatives in general. Finally the competencies identified from the results are integrated with and related to the systems theory.

Recommendations with regard to training for call centre agents are made, as well as recommendations concerning research possibilities for inbound call centres and cross-cultural studies.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY**

#### **1.1. INTRODUCTION**

A call centre is an operation, consisting of as little as three people, which conducts business telephonically (Rademeyer, 1995). Dawson (1997) says a "a call centre is a physical location place where calls are placed, or received, in high volume for the purpose of sales, marketing, customer service, telemarketing, technical support or other specialised business activity" (p.1). With a strong technological foundation, call centres offer more flexibility and thus lower the costs of meeting customer needs and expectations. Although there is no face-to-face contact, emotional interaction is still involved. Using call centres for a number of business interactions is ideal for todays rapidly changing global markets (Prabhaker, Sheehan & Coppett, 1997).

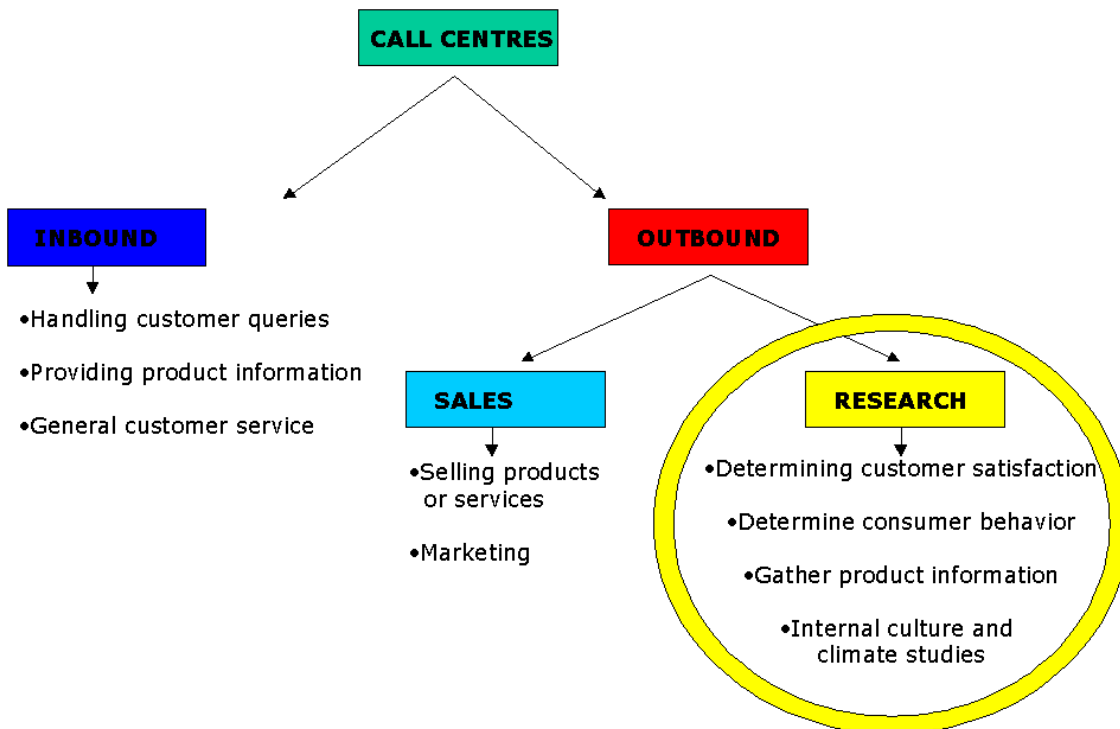
Over the past few years, the call centre operation has experienced rapid growth. Houlihan (2001) states that "the call centre processes are increasingly emerging in more specialist areas such as legal advice, psychological support, recruitment, market research and public sector communications" (p.1). Call centres are thus becoming increasingly important, both as an interaction channel as well as an important source of customer-related information. As call centres reach a new level of importance for customer relationship management, call centre agents become increasingly central within the link between companies and customers (Burgers, De Ruyter, Keen & Streukens, 2000; Houlihan, 2001).

## 1.2. BACKGROUND

### 1.2.1. The focus of this study

Two types of call centres exist: an inbound and an outbound call centre. Inbound call centres refer to centres where the customer phones the call centre whereas outbound call centres require that the call centre agent phone the client (Rademeyer, 1995). Inbound call centres handle customer service in general by solving problems, handling queries or answering questions about products or services. The outbound call centre can be divided into sales and research outbound call centres. The sales outbound call centre deals with the selling of products and/or services, whereas the research outbound call centre gathers information regarding customer satisfaction, consumer behaviour or perceptions regarding products or services. This study focuses specifically on the research outbound call centre (refer to figure 1).

**Figure 1: The different call centres**

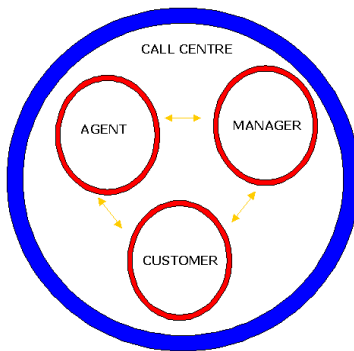




### 1.2.2. The call centre as a system

The call centre is a system composed of different parts (Ruben, 1983). This system cannot be understood by studying the different parts in isolation (Senge, 1990). These parts are all interrelated and one part or subsystem will influence the other parts' structure and function (Ford & Lerner, 1992; Vetere & Gale, 1987). The structure of the call centre is defined by the interrelations between the subsystems of customers, management and call centre agents (refer to figure 2) (Miller & Miller, 1992; Vetere & Gale, 1987). The focus of this study is thus on three subsystems of the call centre, keeping in mind the bigger picture of the call centre as a whole and without isolating the various parts. Chapter 2 will explain this interaction further.

**Figure 2: The interaction between the different parts of a call centre**



### 1.3. MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY

#### 1.3.1. The importance of call centre agents in customer satisfaction

From the above figure it is clear that each subsystem influences the other. Due to the interrelatedness of the subsystems, call centre agents influence the perception of customers regarding customer satisfaction. Each interaction between the call centre agent and the customer can be regarded as an opportunity to either make or break the relationship in question, because customers rate the quality of their personal experience every time they come into contact with the organisation (Miller, 1999).

The perception that the customer has regarding the quality of service provided by the call centre is dependent on the performance of the individual agents within the

call centre (Burns, 1995). When customers are delighted with the performance of the call centre agent, they will, as a result, continue their relation with the given organisation, which in turn impacts on business competitiveness (Stauss & Mang, 1999). If the company in question happens to be a research company which works for a particular organisation, satisfied respondents will continue their relations with the organisation, which in turn will continue their relations with the research company. Although a research company's call centre does not contact their own customers, but rather their customers' customers (whom they call respondents), these call centre agents have the ability to make or break a relationship even more so than inbound call centres. Customers associate the research call centre agent with the organisation for which the research is being done. The customers of the research organisation's – customers thus also become the research organisation's customers.

Call centre agents are thus seen as key players in customer retention. They act as a contact point between the customer and the company, and can therefore be regarded as the "source of differentiation" (Burgers *et al.*, 2000, p.2). As a result, excellent call centre agents can create a competitive advantage (Stauss & Mang, 1999).

### **1.3.2. Constant need to appoint new call centre agents**

As call centres are a relatively new and a high growth industry, there is a constant need for skilled individuals. Working as a call centre agent is a stressful job and requires a positive outlook as well as perseverance. Amongst other things, agents need to keep their composure when helping irate customers, must assist each other when necessary, and determine what to do if a customer makes an out-of-the-ordinary request. It is often a frustrating job, accounting for notoriously high turnover rates at most centres. SATeleLink (2001) reports that most call centre agents stay in one position for a timeframe of thirteen months.

Challenging situations, such as dealing with rude, demanding or distraught customers, facing crises, new and complicated technology and the pressure of constantly monitoring of each call, contribute to a very stressful work environment

(Cohead, 1995). As a result, call centre agents resign on a daily basis, creating a constant need to appoint new agents (Peter, 2001).

Not only is the call centre environment a stressful one, but it can also be a boring one. The work of a call centre agent consists mainly of answering phones or phoning respondents, and the repetition of this process can be quite tedious (SaTeleLink, 2001). SaTeleLink (2001) reports that turnover rates of twenty percent and higher are not uncommon. The cost of recruiting new agents is a source of concern to call centre management. For this reason only able and well-equipped agents should be recruited. Queck (in Cohead, 1995) writes that high turnover rates could be avoided if individuals are not suited to "the demands of the jobs were filtered out in the recruitment process" (p.19).

Unfortunately, guidelines on appointing call centre agents are rare. Seeing that there are no specific benchmarks for rating competent performance in this industry, it is extremely difficult to differentiate between "qualified" and "unqualified" agents (The Call Centre Industry, 2001; p.2; Adorno, 1998). Green (1997) states that since it is essential to appoint the correct people, some form of pre-assessment is necessary before employing an agent. Since customer perceptions in evaluating an organisation are strongly influenced by the attitude and behaviour of the call centre agents, it becomes a given that only the most suitable call centre agents should be employed (Burgers *et al*, 2000; Houlihan, 2001; Stauss & Mang, 1999). An environment where only the most competent agents are employed increases customer satisfaction, which will in turn impact favourably on organisational profit.

### **1.3.3. Investigating competencies**

In the previous paragraphs it was stated that only the most competent agents should be recruited in order to ensure customer satisfaction. The question now arises: what exactly is a competent call centre agent?

The National Qualifications Framework (1998) describes competence as the application of knowledge, skills and attitudes in a specific context. Competence is the delivery of work at the required standard. Competent performance requires the right level of skills, knowledge and attitudes, and is also be determined by talent,

experience and the application of certain personal qualities (NQF, 1998). A competent call centre agent will thus have the required knowledge, skills, attitude, experience and talent to deliver the required standard of work in the call centre.

Having the right person in the right position at the right time is critical to organisation success. It is essential to identify the key competencies and characteristics necessary for success within a particular position at a particular point in time. This will help in an assessment process that will identify individuals and evaluate their fit to the position profile (Kravetz, 1997, p.23).

In summary, therefore, the importance of appointing only competent agents, the increasing importance of call centre agents in customer relationship management, the stressful environment leading to the constant need to appoint new people and the absence of guidelines regarding appointment have served as motivation for this study.

#### **1.4. AIMS OF THE STUDY**

According to Kravetz (1997), competencies help organisations to communicate their mission, define excellence, structure appraisal, give feedback to staff, set standards for promotion, plan succession and manage compensation. The Service Centre Roles and Responsibilities Review (2002) adds to this by stating that the identification of competencies is important because it is a tool to focus on results expected, it informs what training should be provided, it assists in the development of service centre job descriptions and it focuses the unit/division on future needs.

Although various authors (Barnhart, 2000; Boshoff & Allen, 2000; Career services, 2001; Competencies on target, 2001; Freeman & Rustnell, 2000; Lorimer, 1999; NQF, 1998; Service Centre Roles & Responsibilities Review, 2002; Spencer & Spencer, 1993) have identified competencies, these competencies are not always specific to the call centre, but rather refer to service representatives in general, which can include face-to-face interaction. The contribution of this study is that it is specific to the outbound research call centre and that it also focuses on the perceptions of call centre agents, customers and managers themselves. This is the

first study to be done from the perspective of all three systems, combining their perceptions in order to get an improved picture of the whole.

The aim of this study is thus to identify agents' competencies; as well as customers' and management's perceptions of what needed to be an ideal call centre agent. These identified competencies can be used in future as an additional measurement when appointing call centre agents or when training agents that do not have the necessary competencies.

#### **1.4.1. Appointing new agents**

According to Adorno (1998), appointing agents has been haphazard and difficult up to now. An aim of this study is to provide competencies, which may be used as guidelines when recruiting to ease the task of appointing suitable agents. Recruiting only the most suitable call centre staff will in turn minimise staff turnover. This study aims to provide guidelines that will ensure that an appropriate match is made between the applicant and the position. Appointing and utilising the best call centre agents will not only ensure that companies improve the ability to attract new customers, but also that the retention rates amongst current customers increase (Burgers *et. al.*, 2000). The appointment should thus be based on call centre agent competencies, which according to legislation, are regarded as fair (Saunders, 2000). According to Spencer and Spencer (1993), selecting call centre agents on a competency basis predicts superior performance and retention without bias.

#### **1.4.2. Training current agents**

Ideally, prospective call centre agents should already possess appropriate identified competencies. If it occurs that some of the current call centre agents do not have all the required competencies, these may be taught or trained, ensuring that the agent in question functions more effectively. The secondary aim of this study is thus to apply specialised training in the fields where agents do not conform to the competencies identified in this study. According to Lorimer (1999), the role of training is essential in promoting increased competence and skill levels.

One of the main advantages of this study is that areas where current agents lack proper training, competencies can be identified and training can be focused on those

areas. When sending agents on training courses, it is useful to know exactly what type of skills are necessary. Correct training can reduce agent turnover as well as training costs. Within the ever-changing call centre environment, an understanding of the core competencies of call agents would assist management in ensuring that their staff have the right skills to manage their work.

### **1.5. METHODOLOGY**

From a systems theory framework, an analysing method that is sensitive to context and is capable of showing the complex processes and interaction in the call centre is essential (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Bryman, 1988; Neuman, 1997 and Creswell, 1997). Qualitative methods were considered to be a useful method of addressing the research question. The data collection took place with three different groups: the call centre agent focus group; the management focus group and customer telephonic interviews. Random sampling was used to select eight respondents for the agent focus group and ten customers for the telephonic interviews. Purposeful sampling was used to select the six respondents who participated in the management focus group. Content analysis was used to analyse the data.

### **1.6. OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY**

Chapter 2 entails the theoretical background from which this study is undertaken. The systems theory serves as framework to understand the different subsystems in the larger call centre agent system. The call centre agent is seen as an active and interacting part of a number of bigger systems. In this chapter, certain principles of this theory will be discussed as well as how these principles influence the study undertaken. These principles also influence the interpretation of the findings. From the systems perspective, competencies should be described from every system's point of view. Studying the perspectives of these systems, namely, call centre agents, managers and customers, will give a description of the whole relationship (Gevers, 1995).

The aim of Chapter 3 is to provide a literature review. This chapter entails previous research done on the call centre environment, call centre agents and competencies

identified by various authors with regard to service representatives in general. Definitions of the important concepts are also provided in this chapter.

Chapter 4 provides an overview of the research process followed in this study. This chapter describes the manner in which respondents were selected and sample characteristics. This is followed by a description of the data collection process. Lastly, the process of analysing the data is described.

In chapter 5 the results of the study are discussed.

The final chapter, chapter 6, is a discussion of the findings. From the findings recommendations are made for call centre managers and also for future research.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THE CALL CENTRE AGENT FROM A SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE**

#### **2.1. INTRODUCTION**

The aim of this chapter is not to give an in-depth discussion of all the basic principles of the systems theory, but rather to explain those aspects relevant to this study. The systems approach is well suited for this specific study as the call centre is a complex phenomenon. From a systemic point of view, the phenomenon under study has many interrelated systems, which contribute to the complexity of their interaction. These interrelated systems include, for example, the call centre agent, the customer, the call centre manager, the organisation, the researcher and so on. The systems theory allows the researcher to take into account the interrelationship between these structures and the meanings the participants attach to them (Gevers, 1995; Ruben, 1983).

#### **2.2. THE CALL CENTRE FROM A SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE**

##### **2.2.1. The systems of the call centre**

When units engage in dynamic interaction and there is a relationship amongst them, the resulting structural pattern can be called a system. The units form a whole, which can only function as such through the interdependence of its parts. This interdependence is known as a system. The organised units of the system are reciprocally changing and reciprocally interactive (Backlund, 2000; Levine & Fitzgerald, 1992; Vetere & Gale, 1987). Ruben (1983) states that the relationships tie the parts or units of the whole together and therefore define the system.

Any organisation is thus a system. This system has different units that are in interaction: the call centre, the call centre agent, the customer, management, technology and so on. In the framework of the systems theory the researcher must thus keep in mind that the call centre agent cannot be seen in isolation, but the customer, the company and all the other systems must also be considered. The



company and call centre can be seen as the suprasystems with the call centre agent and customer as subsystems. The call centre agent, as a subsystem, is influenced by external factors such as the customer, and internal processes such as call centre technology, to deliver certain outputs. This system has feedback loops. The total performance of the parts of the system as well as the system in totality can be measured (Capra, 1987; Gevers, 1995; Ruben, 1983; Vetere & Gale, 1987).

### **2.2.2. The call centre system as a whole**

All these subsystems of the call centre form the different parts of the whole unit. These different parts are in relation to one another and in interaction with each other. The dynamic interaction between these parts creates the call centre system as a unique entity which is more than the mere sum of its parts (Levine & Fitzgerald, 1992; Ruben; 1983; Vetere & Gale, 1987).

The power of context is very important to systems therapists (Bateson, 1980; Capra, 1987). When using this theory as a framework, it is impossible to understand the call centre agent without putting him or her in the context of the bigger organisation. Senge (1990) recommends that the call centre be viewed as a whole rather than breaking it into small pieces for study.

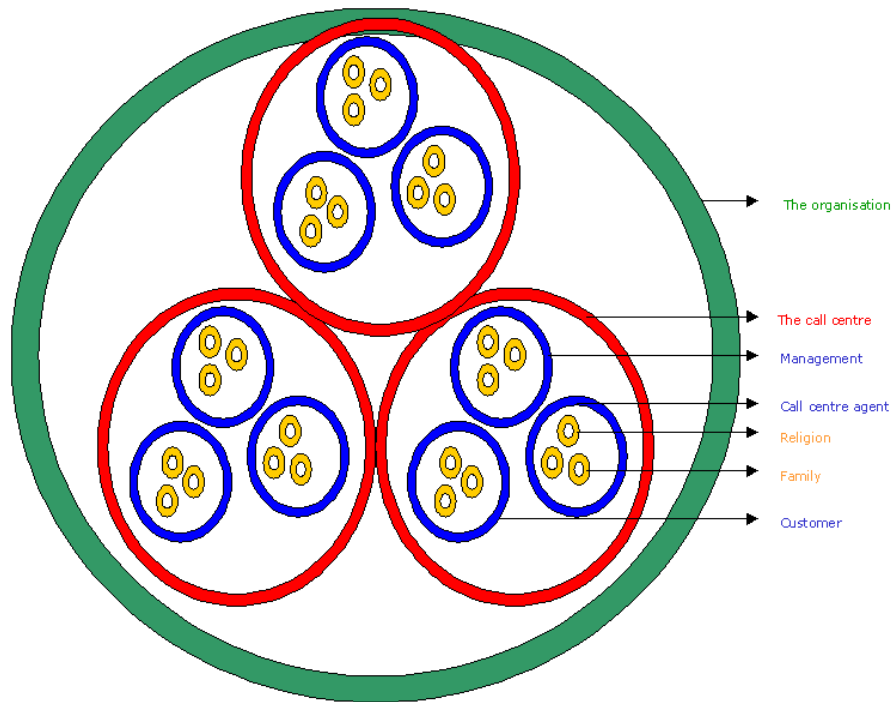
The central concerns of the systems theory include a focus on the wholeness, the organisation of the elements in that wholeness, the process of communication and the circular feedback loops that characterise such communications. By using the systems approach, researchers strive to attain sufficient knowledge of the whole. According to the systems theory, a living organism cannot be understood outside its social context or by only focusing on one part or element of it (Backlund, 2000; Bateson, 1980; Capra, 1987; Luhmann, 1992; Van Schalkwyk, 1991).

### **2.2.3. The complexity of the call centre**

The call centre is a complex system, made up of a large number of parts or subsystems, including the call centre agent, managers, customers, technology, and so on. Each one of these subsystems, for example the call centre agent, is also a

system consisting of smaller parts, embracing areas such as social life, family, religion and so on.

**Figure 3: Illustration of the complexity of the call centre**



Senge (1990) calls for a need to view the world as a system in order to understand their dynamic complexity. Studying these systems in isolation would contradict the systems theory, or as Miller and Miller (1992) call it, the "science of complexity" (p.10). This term emphasises the focus on the system such as the call centre as a whole, composed of multiple different parts, rather than each part in isolation.

Vetere and Gale (1987) agree that the systems theory seeks to classify systems according to the way the parts are interrelated. Ford and Lerner (1992) state that the different systems in a call centre exist in reciprocal relation. The one systems' structure and function will influence the other system's structure and function. These two authors term this relations dynamic interactionism. For example, the call centre agent influences customer satisfaction, but the customer also influences the call centre agents' attitude.

The structure of the call centre is defined as the network of relationships among the customers, management and call centre agents. The relationship is defined in terms of interactions that are mediated by communication and information exchange. Thus, the call centre functions to develop networks of operations suitable for coping with varied and changeable environmental inputs and internal stresses (Miller & Miller, 1992; Vetere & Gale, 1987).

As a complex system, the call centre agent must have various competencies to function successfully in the call centre. The focus of this study is on exploring the call centre agent's competencies as a means of relating or connecting to other parts of the system. According to Gevers (1995), "the relations or connections are simultaneous, circular and recursive in order to ensure the survival of the system" (p.19).

#### **2.2.4. The call centre agent as an open system**

An open system is constantly in interaction with the environment and is characterised by a process of growth and change. An open system has inputs, internal processes and outputs (Bateson, 1972; Levine, Van Shell & Rubin, 1992; Vetere & Gale; 1987). The call centre agent can be seen as an open system.

A living system, like the call centre agent, never reaches a static balance, but maintains a progressive stable state. Constant energy and information exchange between the customer and call centre agent takes place across these open boundaries. Energy from one system is communicated to other systems with which it interacts (Capra, 1987). This information exchange or change of energy can also be seen as feedback (Von Bertalanffy in Gevers, 1995). For example, the energy from the customer who interacts with the call centre agent mobilises the agent to behave in certain ways. Feedback loops makes it possible for call centre agents to regulate their behaviour and to adapt to changing situations (Levine & Fitzgerald, 1992; Ruben, 1983). If, for example, the customer is dissatisfied with the attitude of a call centre agent, the increased energy from the customer will flow over to the call centre agent. The dissatisfaction of the customer is a form of feedback that call centre agents can use to adjust their behaviour, for example, adapt their attitude.

## **2.2.5. Feedback to and from the call centre agent**

### **2.2.5.1. Types of feedback**

According to Bateson (1972), a system is a unit that contains a feedback structure and can therefore process information. Positive feedback is self-enriching feedback, while negative feedback is self-regulating feedback which ensures stability. Depending on the requirements of the system, positive or negative feedback may dominate, but mostly a balance between the two is most beneficial to the system's functioning (Bateson, 1972; Levine, Van Shell & Rubin, 1992; Vetere & Gale, 1987).

Senge (1990) notes that because the call centre is filled with feedback loops, we should refocus our thinking to the call centre as a circle rather than a straight line. A feedback loop occurs when two or more units are in interaction in such a way that the cause-effect link forms a closed circle (Ruben, 1983). Positive feedback occurs in a relationship between individuals or groups of people when one party behaves in such a way that it strengthens the behaviour of the other party (Bateson, 1972; Levine, Van Shell & Rubin, 1992). Vetere and Gale (1987) define positive feedback as social systems that grow and innovate. Positive feedback is thus associated with growth or collapse over time (Levine, Van Shell & Rubin, 1992). Positive feedback cannot occur repetitively, as the cumulative interaction will reach a climax where the interaction will be terminated, for example the phone call is ended. A negative feedback loop is associated with inhibition or self-correction. In negative feedback the difference between the call centre agent's actual performance and the desired performance from the customer are thus reduced (Levine *et al*, 1992; Vetere & Gale, 1987).

According to the systems theory, each person's behaviour or response in a relationship is constricted and dictated (organised) by the behaviour or responses of the other (Bateson, 1972). According to Johnson (1998), an emotional cue from the customer will pull for a more emotional response from the call centre agent. Bateson (1972) refers to this as symmetric schismogenesis or a symmetric relationship. Because of this symmetric relationship a friendly call centre agent can pull for an

even friendlier response from the customer. The opposite, however, is also true. A rude call centre agent can cause the customer to even be more offensive.

Complementary schismogenesis or a complementary relationship takes place when the behaviour of one party elicits the opposite behaviour in the interacting system. For example, a dominant customer causes the call centre agent to behave submissively. The more dominant the customer, the more submissive the call centre agent, and vice versa. Another example is where a rude customer elicits friendly behaviour from the call centre agent. The ruder the customer becomes, the friendlier the agent becomes. Bateson (1972) states that in a complementary relationship, it is important to either maintain a balance or to change the pattern. Thus, in order for the call centre agent to succeed in maintaining a healthy interactional style, he or she needs to maintain a balance in the communication or to change the pattern of this communication (Bateson, 1972).

One person's social network is typically composed of a variety of symmetrical and complementary relationships. The call centre agents can for example have a complementary relationship with the customer but a symmetrical relationship with the call centre manager. Bateson (1972) states that "if we know that an individual is trained in overt expression of one-half of these patterns then we can predict with certainty that the seed of the other half are simultaneously sown in his personality" (p.91). The behaviour of call centre agents can thus be explained as being trained to see the world in terms of complementary patterns of dominance- submissiveness. Agents can, in certain situations, take on a submissive role, for example when dealing with the customer, while in other situations they may adopt a dominant role, for example when dealing with other call centre agents. A person can take on more than one interactional style at the same time, and different combinations of patterns is possible (Senge, 1990; Levine & Fitzgerald, 1992).

Repetitive occurrences, or patterns as Bateson (2000) describes them, are important in order for different members of a group to understand each other. The manner in which patterns are combined differs from culture to culture (Bateson, 1972). White agents might, for example, see exhibitionism as a sign of dominance, whereas black agents might see it as a sign of submissiveness. This may lead to perceptual misunderstandings between different cultures. Stauss and Mang (1999) also state

that intercultural service encounters often lead to more perceived problems with services than intracultural encounters.

#### **2.2.5.2. Response to feedback**

In systems thinking it is a fundamental principle that every influence is both cause and effect. Senge (1990) stresses this by saying nothing is ever influenced in just one direction. The call centre has the customers' needs as input, and through various organisational processes and resources the organisation delivers products or services that will either meet or neglect the customers' expectations. Customer satisfaction and expectations can be recorded and measured immediately in the call centre environment. In other words, the feedback loops to and from the customer and the rest of the organisation can be measured immediately (Rademeyer, 1995). This immediate measurement is especially important in the call centre environment in order to change aspects of the service that does not meet customer expectations. Minimising delays is the key to increasing system performance (Senge, 1990). Response to the feedback from the customer enables the organisation to adjust to the customer's demands (Montouri, 2000).

According to Gevers (1995), the basic criterion for organisational effectiveness is survival, which depends on the organisation's successful adaptation to its environment. To monitor adaptation, call centre agents develop feedback loops. Through the feedback loops the agents give each other information regarding their perceived functioning. This information enables them to adapt to changes in the call centre and to any occurrence in the conversation with the customer. The loss of flexibility will lead to the inability to adapt to the customers' feedback (Ruben, 1983; Vetere & Gale, 1987).

#### **2.2.6. Loss of flexibility in the call centre**

Bateson (1972) defines flexibility as "uncommitted potentiality for change" (p.497). Together with flexibility, the system must also allow freedom. Freedom and flexibility are needed in the process of learning in order to create a new system through social change (Ruben, 1983).

To create the ideal system for the call centre, flexibility is needed. Flexibility will enable the organisation to adapt to the customers' demands. According to Bateson (1972), a system can be described in terms of interdependent variables. For each given variable there must be a higher and lower state of perseverance, in which discomfort, pathology and death may occur. Within these borders the variable can move and be moved to promote and maintain adaptability (Levine *et al*, 1992). For example, when we experience stress, the variable takes on a value close to the higher or lower level, resulting in a lack of flexibility. Because the variables are interdependent, other variables also suffer a lack of flexibility. Stress, for example, can cause a lack of flexibility in the entire system. To ensure flexibility in the call centre, it is important to keep stress levels to a minimum. Stress lowers the threshold for what provokes anger (Goleman, 1995). The stressed call centre agent is therefore more vulnerable to becoming enraged with the customer, which will affect the other systems (such as the customer), and in the end the organisation as a whole.

### **2.3. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CALL CENTRE AGENT AND THE CUSTOMER**

Constant interaction takes place between the call centre agent and the customer over the telephone. This interaction results in a relationship between the two systems. It is vital that the call centre agent be able to detect and have insight into the customer's feelings, motives and concerns. The feedback as described by the systems theory involves a continual communication process between the call centre agent and the customer. The customer tells the call centre agent what changes must be made. Montouri (2000, p.63) calls this "communication-change-feedback" an interactive process, which involves multidimensional interaction, which must persist for the organisation to survive.

## **2.4. CONCLUSION**

The call centre as a system has subsystems such as the call centre agents, management and customers. Because these parts are in constant interaction, they should not be studied in isolation, but as a whole and a unit. The interaction results in a relationship between the systems, which consists of feedback loops to and from the call centre. The systems theory thus provides a framework for “seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static snapshots” (Senge, 1990, p.68).



## CHAPTER 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 3.1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter relevant concepts regarding the call centre, call centre technology and the importance of the call centre agents in customer satisfaction will be discussed. Following this, important competencies of a call centre agent, as identified by various authors, will be discussed.

##### 3.1.1. Defining the call centre

Barrett (1997) states that a telephone call centre is an operation that integrates advanced technology, high quality human resources and an efficiently designed business process. The Federal Consortium Benchmark Study Report (1995) states that people call to get service or information. Telephone service is a cost-effective way to deliver services to people or to get information from people. One estimate is that it costs more than three times as much to respond to an inquiry by letter than it does to respond to the same question over the phone (Barrett, 1997). Using a call centre is the most cost-effective way of interacting with the customer and connecting the customer to the rest of the organisation. Kjellerup (2001) defines a call centre as "attempts to provide customers with easy access to the company at a reasonable cost" (p.2).

Call centre agents should be highly trained and skilled in order to deliver customer service or to gather information of the highest quality. Depending on the strategy of the organisation, call centre agents can be based at single or multiple sites. To access a call centre, organisations prefer to use a "one telephone number concept" which can be toll free (Rademeyer, 1995, p.10). This telephonic interaction can be inbound (a call from the customer) and outbound (a call to the customer). According to Dawson (1997), call centres are generally set up as large rooms, with workstations that include a computer, a telephone or headset hooked into a large switch and one or more supervisor stations. The call centre may stand by itself, or be linked with other centres.

### **3.1.2. The future of call centres**

Holland (2001) is of the opinion that ways in competing for customer relationships have changed dramatically. He states that where customer loyalties were once won through face-to-face interactions, they are now being defined by telephone transactions. In short, the bond that ties customer to companies is no longer a "mere handshake but rather a telephone call" (Holland, 2001, p.1).

Due to the extreme competition between companies, the call centre environment is continuously challenged to improve and maintain high levels of performance (Belec, 1996). As an open system, which is in contact with the environment, the call centre agent can maintain a progressive stable state. According to Cleveland and Maybem (2001), many call centre managers probably wonder where are all the changes in the call centre are taking us. This is a justifiable concern, because calls are just becoming one type of transaction. For this reason Cleveland and Maybem (2001) feel that one should not refer to call centres but rather to multi-site environments. For instance, a call centre can refer to help desks, reservation centres, information lines or customer service centres.

Faxes, web services and e-mail are also becoming part of the "call" centre (Dawson, 1997). The internet, voice recordings, fax and e-mail have changed the dynamic of how a call centre answers or makes calls and forces centres to come up with new sets of metrics to benchmark performance. There will thus be more types of transactions to handle in the future, and these will be increasingly complex. The traditional call centre will therefore change from being merely a telephone call centre to a customer interaction centre (Mikol, 2001).

The main future role of call centres will be to provide a cost-effective way for the company to get to know its customers. Kjellerup (2001) feels that companies that allow their call centres to give feedback to them incorporate their customers' know-how into the organisation and use it. This positive feedback structure allows the call centre agent to self-enrich, while negative feedback serves as a self-regulating feedback. The role of the call centre is to identify the customer, prioritise that person, and use all available information resources of the company to maintain that

interaction. Compiling a customer base in this manner will result in faster service, a higher customer retention rate and lower costs (Dawson, 1997).

### **3.1.3. Call centre technology**

The following section gives an overview of the types of telecommunication technologies and facilities that are used in a call centre. These may differ for various call centres, but is the technology generally used in call centres in South Africa.

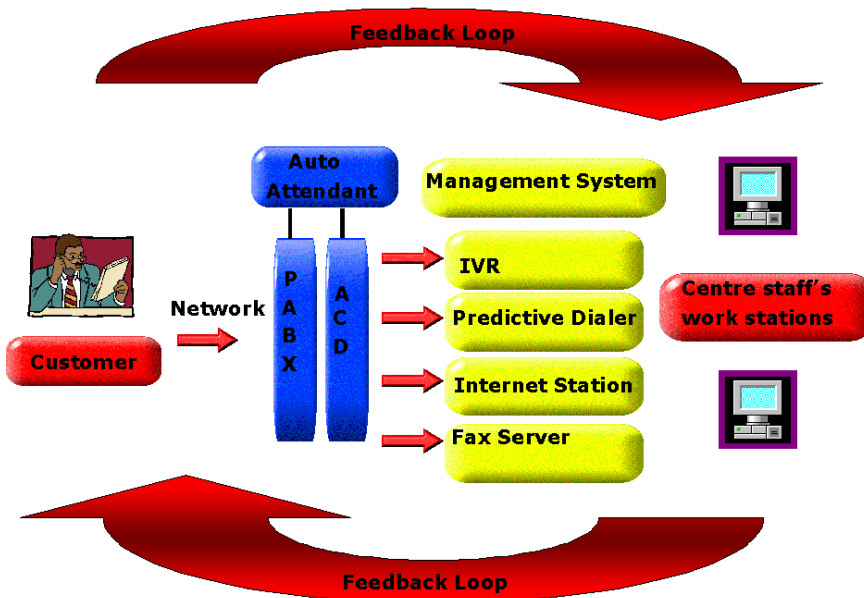
Customers access a call centre via the telephone network. If it is an inbound call, one of the decisions the organisation must make is whether the customer will pay for the telephone call or whether a toll free number will be provided. This decision is influenced by factors such as the business case, the amount of expected calls and the call duration time (Barrett, 1997). The inbound telephone network works as follows:

All incoming calls to the call centre are received by the private area branch exchange (PABX). The calls are then moved to an automatic call distributor (ACD). To evenly distribute incoming work amongst available agents the ACD route calls to call centres agents. The ACD can hold the calls in a queue if all the agents are busy. A recorded message can be played to the waiting caller (Dawson, 1997; Rademeyer, 1995) (refer to figure 1). Before the call is put through to a call centre agent, the auto attendant facility answers the call with a message. This recorded message welcomes customers and asks them to hold for a call centre agent who will shortly take their call (Federal Consortium Benchmark Study Report, 1995). The interactive voice response system (IVR) is a recorded message which gives the customer a menu of choices (Holland, 2001). Customers use the handset keys of the telephone to indicate which option on the menu they wish to access. The IVR will, for instance, instruct the customer to press one for a new service, two for an account enquiry, three for reporting a fault and so forth. After customers have entered their choice, they will then be routed to the relevant call centre agent.

In an outbound call centre, where the call centre has to make large volumes of calls, for example for interviewing purposes or sales, the predictive dialler is used. The predictive dialler uses advanced software to call customers on an electronic list and

then connect the customer to an available call centre agent (Rademeyer, 1995) (refer to figure 4).

**Figure 4: A diagram of call centre technology and feedback loops (Adapted from Rademeyer, 1995, p.17).**



In the process of using this advanced technology, the importance of feedback loops should not be overlooked (Levine *et al*, 1992; Vetere & Gale, 1987). The call centre has the expectations of the customers as input. As output, with the help of technology, the call centre delivers a service, provides information, handles a query or gathers information. The satisfaction of the customer with the call centre agent serves as a feedback loop that can be measured.

### 3.2. CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

The new and advanced call centre technology mentioned above enables call centre agents to gather information faster, better and cheaper or to deliver newer, faster or cheaper services. This, however, is no longer enough to satisfy customers. Customers are becoming aware of their rights and are demanding better value for money (Boshoff & Allen, 2000; Johnson & Gustafsson, 2001).

Customer perceptions are strongly influenced by the attitudes and behaviours of contact employees (Johnson & Gustafsson, 2001). Since the contact employees are an important communication point with the customer, they have the responsibility to sell the firm's services, deliver on the promises offered by the firm, gather valuable information and build an image. In other words, their job is keeping the customer satisfied (Bettencourt & Gwinner, 1996). The call centre agent is an important contact point between the customer and the company, and it is often the call centre agent who makes the difference between a good and an average call centre. Call centre agents are thus extremely important in determining customer satisfaction. According to the Management Development Review (1997), call centre agents are not considered as mere support staff anymore, they are viewed as the guardian of the company's image. Therefore it is very important to employ dedicated and skilled people to answer calls. Even the best systems, processes and technology cannot function without capable people (Australian National Audit Office, in Rademeyer, 1995).

Customer satisfaction is defined as "the degree of happiness a customer experiences with a company's product or service and which results from the interaction and interrelationship of all people within that company" (Kotadia, 1997, p.43). If the last person that the customer spoke to was a call centre agent from a research company, the customer will relate the experience of the interview to the company he is being interviewed about. Satisfaction with the research outbound call centre is thus not only vital to the research organisation, but also to the organisation the research is about.

The feedback loop of customer satisfaction requires contact between the organisation and customers. Each contact creates experiences which customers tally with their expectations. Ahonen (2001) defines customer satisfaction as the feeling of pleasure or disappointment after comparing the perceived performance in relation to what was expected. If performance from the call centre agent matches the expectations of the customer, the customer is satisfied and the call centre agent can maintain a progressive stable state (morphostasis). If the customer is dissatisfied, the call centre agent needs to develop new structures to adapt to the expectations of the customer (morphogenesis). Both call centre agents and customers develop feedback loops to ensure self-regulation. The feedback from the customer (satisfaction) is

thus a very important self-regulator for the call centre agent (Levine *et al*, 1992; Ruben, 1983; Senge, 1990; Vetere & Gale, 1987).

When the call centre meets the customer's expectations, the customer will be satisfied. Jones and Jaebeom (1997) state that clients firstly expect prompt and efficient call answering; secondly they expect high quality calls. In an outbound call centre customers also expect a fast, effective interview of high quality. Customers expect the call centre agent to be able to master the job without delay and to do so efficiently.

In a market with very intense competition companies are looking for innovative ways to increase their profits. In addition to strategies such as cost cutting and restructuring, research suggest that customer satisfaction is critical to the retention of customers which results in higher levels of profitability (Johnson & Gustafsson, 2001). Johnson and Gustavson (2001) continue by saying that complete customer satisfaction is the key to ensuring customer loyalty and long-term financial performance. Satisfying customers leads to retaining customers, which is the key to business performance. Rademeyer (1995) suggests that one of the main reasons that call centres exist is to better satisfy customer needs. Fulfilling customer expectations and needs will lead to satisfied customers, which will lead to loyal customers and thus higher profitability (Kotadia, 1997).

Although the call centre agent is an important contributor to customer satisfaction, in the systems perspective lineal control is not possible. Thus no part of an interactive system can have unilateral control (linear causality) over the remainder or over any other part (Bateson, 1972). The call centre agent and the customer are participants in circular loops of causation. It is arrogant to think that individual human beings, such as call centre agents, have total power over the system (Bateson, 1972). Although the call centre agent's attitude can influence customer satisfaction, the customer's satisfaction or expectations also influences the attitude of the call centre agent. The same circular loop is present between call centre agents and management: where the manager can influence the call centre agent's attitude; the call centre agent's attitude can also influence the manager (Ruben, 1983).

### **3.3. CALL CENTRE AGENT SATISFACTION**

The principles of reciprocal causality suggest that call centre agents, as key persons of the organisation, should be considered by the organisation itself as customers, because their satisfaction is vital to the success of further delivery. Kjellerup (2001) states that call centre agents will treat customers in exactly the same way that they are treated. For this reason it is imperative to develop the potential of call centre agents and to trust them to become customer intelligent, in other words knowing who your customer is, what the customers' wants and needs are and valuing this customer. Because the attitude and stress levels of the call centre agent will most likely have a direct effect on the cost and quality of service the customers receive or the quality of information gathered, employers should invest in keeping agents happy (Adorno, 1998).

Skilled call centre agents expect more than just financial compensation from their employers (Adorno, 1998). Call centre agents, just as customers, want emotional involvement. Situations have changed radically from the days where very few worried about the emotional state of their employee call centre agents. To ensure that agents are happy, the organisation must see to their emotional and other needs.

### **3.4. CALL CENTRE AGENT COMPETENCIES**

#### **3.4.1. Defining competency**

The Hong Kong Call Centre Association (2002) defines call centre competencies as any skills, abilities, or behaviours that add to the success of the call centre agents' performance. According to Kravetz (1997), leading companies might describe a job competency as a series of behaviours or actions that make up a portion of a job. These leading companies do not define the competency as an entire job; usually there are several competencies for each position. All the competencies together, with various other factors, make up the whole system that is the call centre agent. A competency is what a successful call centre agent must be able to do to accomplish desired results on the job (Senge, 1990).

JGN Consulting (2002) states that a competency refers to an individual's demonstrated knowledge, skills, or abilities (KSAs) performed to a specific standard. In the light of the systems theory, these observable, behavioural acts are demonstrated in a job context and, as such, are influenced by an organisation's culture and work environment. The work environment and organisational culture are systems with which the call centre agent interacts constantly. A competent call centre agent refers thus to an agent who possesses the skills and knowledge necessary to handle the telephonic conversation (Spencer & Spencer, 1993).

Garavan and McGuire (2001) define competencies in terms of three distinct perspectives: competencies as individual characteristics, competencies as characteristics of the bigger organisation or call centre and competencies which are used to arrange and assist communication. Again from this definition it is clear that the call centre and the competencies relevant to the call centre agents do not exist in isolation, but that the entire organisation and communication with the customer should also be taken into consideration (Ruben, 1983).

Spencer and Spencer (1993) state the following broad definition of a competency:

A competency is an underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to criterion-referenced effective and/ or superior performance in a job or situation. Underlying characteristic means the competency is a fairly deep and enduring part of a person's personality and can predict behaviour in a wide variety of situations and job tasks. Causally related means that a competency causes or predicts behaviour and performance. Criterion-referenced means that the competency actually predicts who does something well or poorly, as measured on a specific criterion or standard (p.9).

### **3.4.2. Competencies identified**

From the previous definitions it is clear that competencies are a way of grouping the countless specific tasks required in the call centre into a manageable number of core skills, with each being given a label or title and definition. The following is a



summary of all the main competencies consisting of the specific tasks and skills required relevant to service representatives in general, as identified by various authors.

### **1. Communication skills**

Competencies on target (2001) identifies communication skills as a very important competency for service representatives. At ATO (2002) one of the criteria used to appoint call centre agents includes effective communication skills. Barnhart (2000) states that oral as well as written communication is a very important skill that a call centre agent should possess.

Oral communication can be defined as the use of verbal communication to effectively convey ideas and information (Barnhart, 2000). Freeman and Rustnell (2000) define oral communication as the ability to communicate and understand the customers. Career services (2001) and Lorimer (1999) state that excellent verbal communication or vocational qualification skills are a must-have for any call centre agent. The National Qualifications Framework (1998) has identified communication and questioning techniques as one of the key competencies that a call centre agent should possess. Boshoff (1999) says that communication refers to how call centre agents handle the way in which customers address their needs.

Oral communication also includes audio nonverbal communication. Although the customer cannot see the agent, they can hear language and tone of voice (Barnhart, 2000). The systems theory explains that most communication is done by nonverbal means. This includes hesitations, shifts in tempo of speech or movement, overtones of the voice and irregularities of respiration (Bateson, 1972). SATeleLink (, 1999) adds to this by saying that words are much less important than tone. Barnhart (2000) defines written communication as the ability to convey ideas and information clearly and concisely in grammatical form.

Call centre agents with excellent communication skills will have the ability to express themselves confidently and effectively, both verbally and in writing. Luhmann (1992) believes that communication is the foundation for social systems such as the call centre agent and customer.

## **2. Listening skills**

The ability to listen well, which is closely associated with effective communication, is another skill that call centre agents need to possess.

The ability of the call centre agent to respond to the statements and comments of others; and the ability to use reflective responses and clarifying questions to assure the other person that they have been heard are defined as elements of listening skills by Barnhart (2000). Listening skills entail the ability and desire to listen actively. Competencies on target (2001), Barnhart (2000), Charos (1999), Freeman and Rustnell (2000) and the NQF (1998) all identify listening skills as an essential competency for call centre agents.

Charos (1999) states:

One of the most important skills that any telephone professional should have is that of listening. The listener must be able to remember the notable points covered by the customer (p.4).

## **3. Understanding**

Call centre agents should also be committed to providing maximum service quality and to satisfying the customer (Boshoff & Allen, 2000). This includes understanding the customer's predicament and making an effort to understand his or her specific needs (NQF, 1998). This also means that call centre agents must learn how to 'read' customers to identify what they require and what they expect from the contact.

The telephonic interaction between the call centre agent and the customer results in a relationship between the two systems. It is vital that the call centre agent be able to detect and have insight into the customer's feelings, motives and concerns. This knowledge of the customer can lead to an easy intimacy or sense of rapport. Miller (1999) states that by developing a unique understanding of the customer's motivations and reactions, call centre agents learn how to provide service with positive outcomes.

Interpersonal skills include understanding, consulting and listening to others; communicating openly; giving and seeking feedback and acting on it (<http://redcross-ap.ifrc.org/competencies.html>). Understanding includes sensitivity to others, awareness of others' feelings and empathy (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Empathy, which can be defined as the ability to provide the customer with caring, individualised attention (Goleman, 1995), is identified by various authors as an important interpersonal skill for call centre agents to have (Boshoff & Allen, 2000; Goleman, 1995; Spencer & Spencer, 1993). ATO (2002) reports that they look for employees who enjoy dealing with people and get satisfaction out of resolving client issues.

#### **4. Teamwork**

The Service Centre Roles and Responsibilities Review (2002) emphasises the importance of collaboration, work relationships and the ability to work as a team, especially in a call centre setting. Teamwork implies working cooperatively with others, being part of a team and working together (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Collaboration, work relationships and ability to work in a team all require first-rate interpersonal skills. ATO (2002) lists the ability to work as a member of a team as a requirement for employees, in order to assist them to meet call centre objectives.

#### **5. Control**

Career services (2001) emphasise the need to be assertive by keeping calm, taking control of the conversation and being patient when working under pressure as another important interpersonal skills required to be a top performing call centre agent.

#### **6. Analytical and problem solving skills**

Various authors (Barnhart, 2000; Competencies on target, 2001; Freeman & Rustnell, 2000; Service Centre Roles & Responsibilities Review, 2002; Spencer & Spencer, 1993) emphasise the importance of the analytical and problem solving competency for call centre agents. The NQF (1998) calls this competency the

analytical thinking process and the ability to solve problems. Thinking and problem solving involves the ability to gather information and select the best possible solution (Barnhart, 2000). It includes thinking for yourself, practical intelligence, analysing problems, reasoning and planning (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). This competency entails the ability to think creatively where necessary. Freeman & Rustnell (2000) add that problem solving includes the ability to identify solutions related to customer issues.

Call centre agents who can think analytically and solve problems will have the ability to use their judgement to make sound decisions or appropriate recommendations.

## **7. Knowledge**

Most authors (Career Services, 2001; Criterion Partnership, 2001; Freeman & Rustnell, 2000; NQF, 1998) emphasise the importance of product knowledge. This represents knowledge about the product (or service) benefits, usage, features, and product or service related information, which may be communicated to customers. Call centre agents need to know about their organisation's products or services in order to provide effective customer service. ATO (2002) claims that they prefer to appoint call centre agents who have the ability to quickly acquire knowledge and apply it.

A call centre agent who is knowledgeable about the company's products will be able to provide the customer with valuable product or service information and answer any product or service related questions without the customer having to be transferred to another agent.

## **8. Stress tolerance**

The call centre is a stressful environment, as call centre agents have to deal with rude, demanding, or distraught customers, face crises, master new and complicated technology and constantly monitor incoming calls (Peter, 2001). Competencies on target (2001) state that a call centre agent should have the ability to perform under conditions where pressure, resistance, or opposition makes completing the work

difficult. Stress can cause a lack of flexibility in the entire system. A call centre agent who is able to manage stress will have the ability to remain productive in times of crisis or critical events (Barnhart, 2000).

#### **9. Attentiveness**

Competencies on target (2001) state that a concern for accuracy and quality, thus ensuring that work has been correctly completed, is an essential competency which will ensure customer satisfaction. Another important skill a call centre agent should possess is the ability to be detail-focused (Freeman & Rustnell, 2000). Being detail-focused will ensure that all the work allocated to the agents is not only completed, but is also correctly completed. This includes monitoring and checking work, insisting on clarity of roles and functions and setting up and maintaining systems of information (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Being detail-focused also means that the call centre agent delivers on promises dependably and accurately (Bennington, Cummane & Conn, 2000; Spencer & Spencer, 1993).

#### **10. Speed**

Although accuracy and detail are important to customers, they still want their request to be attended to in a timely manner. Boshoff (1999) states that time refers to the speed with which the customer complaint or wish is resolved. Although call centre agents should be accurate, their service should also be fast in order to satisfy customers (Jones & Jaebeom, 1997).

#### **11. Adaptability and flexibility**

Adaptability and flexibility demonstrates an ability and willingness to change, keep an open mind, implement new approaches, maintain perceptual objectivity, stay objective, be resilient and manage the process of change (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). The Service Centre Roles & Responsibilities Review (2002) identifies change facilitation as an important competency for call centre agents to have. Competencies on target (2001) states that call centre agents should be able to conform to procedures and be able to adapt to certain processes.

## **12. Attitude**

Boshoff (1999) describes this attribute as “whether or not the service provider’s employees are friendly and considerate when they deal with the customers” (p.240). Call centre agents need to be self-motivated in order to continue to work at consistently high levels of performance. Performance in the call centre is influenced by an individual's motivation and attitude (Boshoff, 1999). Lorimer (1999) feels that call centre agents must be professional when dealing with customers. Another important attitude a call centre agent should have is that of helpfulness (Bennington *et al.*, 2000). In line with the systems theory, if the call centre agent is friendly, helpful or professional it will pull for an even friendlier, more professional or more helpful reaction from the customer. Bateson (1972) describes this as symmetrical schismogenesis. In short it can be summarised that call centre agents should have a pleasant telephone manner in order to satisfy customers (Career services, 2001).

## **13. Computer and technology skills**

All call centre agents must have an aptitude for applying computer or telephone technology. They must be able to enter and retrieve information on computer databases. In other words, they should be able to use computers and type information while talking to customers on the telephone. Typing skills are thus also required (Career services, 2001; Competencies on target, 2001; Freeman and Rustnell, 2000; NQF, 1998).

## **3.5. CONCLUSION**

In summary it can be said that ensuring customer satisfaction will lead to a loyal customer base, which will increase profitability for the organisation. The process of satisfaction is a reciprocal causal process: as the call centre agent influences the behaviour of the customer, the customer influences the behaviour of the agent. Research suggests that if competent call centre agents are appointed, organisational profit will be higher.

This chapter provided a summary of the various competencies required to be a call centre agent, identified from previous research. These competencies include that an agent should be able to communicate verbally and in writing and be aware of nonverbal language. An agent should have the desire and ability to listen attentively, make an effort to understand the customer's predicament and understand specific customer's needs. Collaboration, work relationships and ability to work in a team are all needed to be an effective call centre agent. Call centre agents should keep calm and take control of the conversation. They should have a high tolerance for stress so that they can remain patient when working under pressure. Call centre agents should think analytically and solve problems in order to make sound decisions or appropriate recommendations. Call centre agents who are knowledgeable will be able to provide the customer with valuable product or service information and answer any product or service related questions without the customer having to be transferred to another agent. Knowledge includes having an aptitude for applying computer or telephone technology. Agents should be accurate but quick, be willing to change, keep an open mind, implement new approaches and manage the process of change. Most importantly, call centre agents should have the correct attitude when dealing with customers.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THE RESEARCH PROCESS**

#### **4.1. INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter an overview of the research process of this study will be given. Secondly, a motivation for using qualitative research methods in the systems theory framework will also be provided. Thirdly, the way in which the respondents were selected and sample characteristics shall be described. A detailed description of the data collection process will follow. Lastly, the process of analysing the data will be described.

#### **4.2. AIM OF THE RESEARCH**

In short, the aim of the research is to investigate the core competencies required to be an ideal call centre agent. The results were gathered from call centre agents', managers' and customers' own frame of reference. The competencies identified can be used in future to appoint new call centre agents or to train current agents with regard to the specific competencies they lack.

#### **4.3. RESEARCH METHOD**

In this study, qualitative methods, focus groups and telephonic interviewing were used to obtain the data. The main reason for choosing qualitative research methods is the nature of the research problem. Since we are concerned with the perceptions of people (in this case, agents, management and customers), qualitative methods provide an appropriate vehicle for addressing the research question (Bryman, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Qualitative research methods will enable us to connect these perceptions to the social world (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Neuman, 1997).

Other reasons for using qualitative research methods include that they reflect real life; they provide us with a "thick description" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.10) and



rich, descriptive, colourful detail (Neumann, 1997; Silverman 1993) and they will help us understand the participants' personal perspective (Bryman, 1988).

Dey (1993) is of opinion that qualitative analysis is a way of transforming data into something that does not exist. Although various authors have identified a large number of core competencies needed by service representatives in general, the aim of this specific qualitative study is to obtain a fresh view of the data.

We break down the data in order to classify it, and the concepts we create or employ in classifying the data, and the connections we make between these concepts, provide the basis of a fresh description. The core of qualitative analysis lies in these related processes of describing phenomena, classifying it, and seeing how our concepts inter-connect (Dey, 1993, p.30).

#### **4.3.1. Focus groups**

Berg (1998) defines a focus group as an interview style designed for small groups. Focus groups are a qualitative technique which allow for the explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group (Morgan, 1990; Ward, Bertrand & Brown, 1991).

Kruger (1988) states that one of the greatest benefits of focus groups to the researcher is the speed at which data is obtained. A range of attitudes is displayed within a very short time (Gevers, 1995). Another advantage of focus group research is the flexibility to explore beyond the boundaries of tightly worded questions to allow rich, experiential data to evolve. The interaction between the respondents in the group can possibly make them more creative, as spontaneous responses are encouraged (Gevers, 1995; Kruger, 1998). The flexibility of focus groups is essential in gaining the insider perspective on the subject. In addition, the focus group is less intimidating to the individual (Gevers, 1995; Morgan, 1990). This gives the research high face validity and the results are generally easy to understand and presented from the perspectives of the participants accessed together in a social setting (Morgan, 1990). Gevers (1995) also states that social and cultural influences between the different participants are accentuated within a focus group.

Patton (1990) states that a weakness of the focus group is that the number of questions that can be asked is limited because of the time it takes for the participants to respond. The group process can also inhibit certain respondents and others might react negatively to the facilitator, topic or environment (Gevers, 1995). The researcher was aware of these disadvantages before commencing with the focus groups. Actions such as asking fewer questions and allowing more time for each question to be answered were implemented to overcome these weaknesses.

#### **4.3.2. Telephonic interviews**

Computer-assisted telephonic interviewing (CATI) involves the interviewer making a call to a respondent, asking the respondent questions and recording the answers (Neuman, 1997). The questions that the interviewer asks the respondent is carefully worded and arranged in order to have the same sequence and same wording for each respondent (Patton, 1990). To ensure that the study remained qualitative by nature and that the customers' own perspectives are taken into consideration, customers were mainly asked open-ended questions.

Customers who have had previous contact with the call centre under study are difficult to reach and even more difficult to gather together at one location. Focus groups with customers were thus not an option. The advantage of using telephonic interviewing is that the customers can easily be reached by this means and the interviewing method is flexible (Neuman, 1997). Other advantages of this method include the speed of the interviewing process and the reduction of interviewer error (Patton, 1990). Respondents were encouraged to give as much information as possible through the use of open-ended questions.

Although authors like McBurney (1994) feel that it is difficult to ask open-ended questions over the telephone, various studies done by this means have proved to be successful. Other weaknesses of telephonic interviews include the high cost of calls and limited interview time (Neuman, 1997).

#### **4.3.3. Qualitative methods within the systems theory framework**

The research question of this particular study is linked to the systems theory as explained in chapter 2. Qualitative methods are compatible with the systems theory for various reasons, some of which are discussed below.

In the frame of the systems theory we are looking for an analysing method that is sensitive to context and capable of showing the complex processes and interaction in the call centre. Authors such as Miles and Huberman (1994), Neuman (1997) and Strauss and Corbin (1998) state that this is exactly what qualitative analysing methods do: "Explanations tend to be rich in detail, sensitive to context, and capable of showing the complex processes or sequences of social life" (Neuman, 1997, p.420).

The systems theory emphasises the importance of context. Dey (1993) states that the need to take account of context is a recurrent theme in qualitative analysis. Miles and Huberman (1994) add that in qualitative research the emphasis is on a specific case and its embedded context. Context requires detailed descriptions of the social setting within which action occurs (Dey, 1993). For this reason, not only the perceptions and experiences of the call centre agents, but also the perceptions and experiences of customers and management will be taken into account. In addition, because the call centre agent as a system cannot be seen in isolation, it is important to also focus on other systems. Focus groups and open-ended interviews enable the researcher to place the respondents' experience, whether it is call centre agents, management or customers, within this context. For more than two systems in interaction, every system will punctuate the interaction from its own perspective. It is up to the researcher to combine the views of all the systems in order to come closer to a holistic description (Gevers, 1995). Getting the viewpoint of the call centre agent, customer and manager "yields a glimpse of the whole relationship" (Keeney, 1983, p.37).

According to Bateson (1972), it is wrong to separate the self from the experience. The perceiver and the object perceived become integrated as one unit. This aligns itself with the systems notion that everything is interconnected and part of one entity. The respondent (call centre agent, manager or customer) can thus not be separated from their experiences in

the call centre. Using a qualitative research method allows the researcher to take the subjects' perspective into consideration: "...seeing through the eyes of the people you are studying" (Bryman, 1988, p.61). In qualitative analysis, there is a strong emphasis on describing the world as different observers perceive it. The perceptions of subjects are often in an advantaged position in qualitative research, because of the access they can provide the researcher to the meanings of actions for particular observers (Dey, 1993).

In the systems theory, language is seen as a tool to make distinctions in order to describe and know the world (Bielfield, 1997). Both focus groups and interviews employ language as a tool to give detailed descriptions of situations and events.

#### 4.4. VERIFICATION

Verification operationalises the trustworthiness of the study (Guba in Creswell, 1997). The following steps were incorporated to verify the study:

<p><b>Verify the results through triangulation</b> (Creswell, 1997; Jordan, Van Rooyen &amp; Strumper, 2002; Kirk &amp; Miller, 1986; Neuman, 1997; Silverman, 1993).</p>	<p>In this study, two methods, focus groups and interviews, were used to gather data. According to Silverman (1993), triangulation can show how multiple but different qualitative measures might simultaneously be true. Results were further verified by comparing results with previous research done regarding service representatives in general.</p>
<p><b>Competent insider performance</b> (Neuman, 1997)</p>	<p>As part of the organisation, it was possible for the researcher to interact effectively as a member and build trust with agent, management and customer groups.</p>
<p><b>Doing member checking</b> (Creswell, 1997; Neuman, 1997)</p>	<p>The results were conveyed to call centre agents and management who then judged the adequacy of the competencies identified. The respondents recognised and understood the researcher's description as reflecting their call centre.</p>
<p><b>Providing a rich, thick description of the participants</b> (Creswell, 1997; Miles &amp; Huberman, 1994)</p>	<p>The researcher described the participating respondents in detail. This rich description of the participants will allow the information to be transferred to other settings because of shared characteristics.</p>
<p><b>Keeping a register of data</b> (Miles &amp; Huberman, 1994)</p>	<p>Notes of relevant events and the state of affairs were made and regularly studied while analysing the data.</p>
<p><b>Providing a detailed description of the process</b> (Kirk &amp; Miller, 1986; Miles &amp; Huberman, 1994; Neuman, 1997).</p>	<p>A detailed description of how the project was conducted was provided. This involved a precise description of the selected subjects, the concepts used, theoretical ideas and research methods. Neuman (1997) refers to this as the natural history of the project. Outsiders reading the study can see and follow the researchers' actions exactly.</p>
<p><b>Auditing for future researchers</b> (Jordan, Van Rooyen <i>et al</i>, 2002; Miles &amp; Huberman, 1994).</p>	<p>The research report was sufficiently detailed for a secondary researcher to arrive at similar conclusions by using the original data.</p>
<p><b>The mechanisation of registration</b> (Neuman, 1997)</p>	<p>Another measure to verify the data was to use tape recordings in order to ensure correct reporting of results.</p>

## **4.5. SELECTION OF RESPONDENTS**

### **4.5.1. Sampling strategy**

The call centre used in this specific study was established in 1994. The management of the call centre requested that this study be conducted in order to improve the quality of their call centre and call centre agents. The call centre was started as a one-woman operation at home and has now grown to include a staff of 72 people. There are 30 permanent call centre agents and five temporary agents.

Computer Aided Telephone Interviews (CATI) are the nerve of the company and process up to 5000 interviews per day. The call centre is an outbound call centre and does not receive any calls. Rather, the function of the centre is to conduct research by means of telephonic interviews. The aim of the interviews is to determine amongst other things subjects' customer satisfaction and consumer behaviour, to gather valuable product information and to perform internal culture and climate studies. The agents call the customers, ask questions and record their answers. As the call centre under discussion does not contact their own customers, but rather their clients' customers whom they call respondents, the call centre agents still play a very important role in customer satisfaction as customers associate the research call centre agent with the organisation the research is being done for. The research organisation's customers' customers thus also become the research organisation's customers.

The aim of this study is not to generalise the findings to the larger population, but rather to gain a deeper understanding of this particular call centre's agents. Although this is an outbound research call centre, these results may still be used as guidelines for other call centres as the competencies classified here apply to an ideal call centre agent. Most of the competencies necessary in an outbound call centre are also necessary in an inbound call centre and vice versa. Most of the agents in the focus groups also had previous experience in an inbound call centre.

Different types of sampling were used to select respondents for the different groups. For the management focus group, purposeful sampling was used. The logic and

power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting "information-rich cases for an in-depth study" (Patton, 1990, p.169). An information-rich case refers to a case from which a great deal of information and knowledge can be gathered. As there are only six management positions in this specific call centre, which are all especially informative, all six managers were invited to participate in the management focus group.

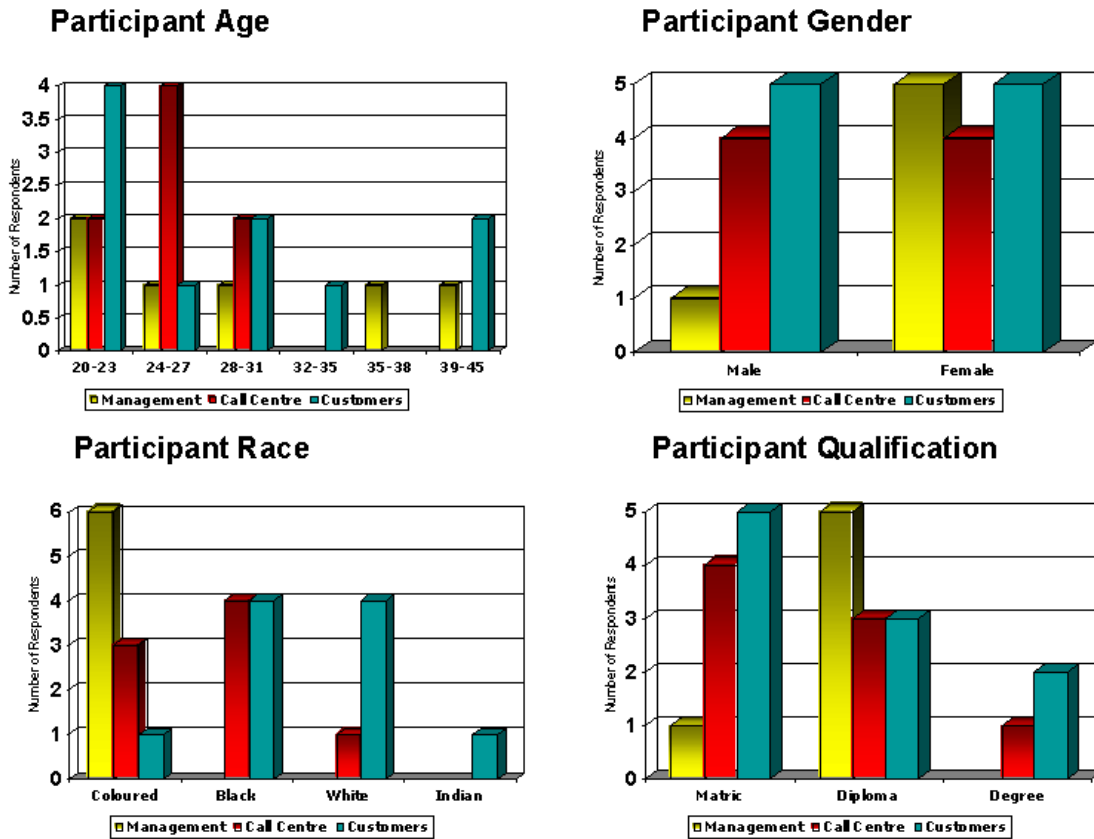
To select eight call centre agents out of the 30 call centre agents in this specific call centre, simple random sampling was used. Each call centre agent was numbered from 1 to 30. After numbering all the elements in the sampling frame, the researcher used a list of random numbers (random number table) to decide which elements to select (Babbie, 1989; McBurney, 1994; Neuman, 1997).

The customers were selected by using simple random sampling. Each customer in the database of the call centre who had been contacted within the previous month was numbered. Again after numbering all the elements in the sampling frame, a random number table was used to decide which elements to select (Babbie, 1989; McBurney, 1994; Neuman, 1997).

#### **4.5.2. Description of the sample**

The following graphs will give a clear indication of the demographics and how the different groups compare with each other.

**Figure 5: Description of the sample**



### 4.5.3 Sample size

#### 4.5.3.1. The call centre agent focus group

This focus group consists of eight persons, which Greenbaum (1998) defines as a full group. The discussion lasted for approximately 90 minutes, and was led by a moderator. The eight agents were recruited through simple random sampling (Morgan, 1990).

#### 4.5.3.2. The management focus group

This mini focus group consists of six representatives from the management level. The discussion lasted for approximately 50 minutes, and was led by the same



moderator. All members of the call centre management team were recruited for this group.

#### **4.5.3.3. The customer telephonic interview**

Ten customers were recruited from the call centres' database to partake in this interview. The interview lasted approximately 15 minutes.

#### **4.6. DATA COLLECTION**

The data collection took place with three different groups, all forming part of the bigger system and providing circular feedback:

- (1) The call centre agent focus group
- (2) The management focus group
- (3) The customer telephonic interview

The two focus groups were both conducted on the same day, the 12<sup>th</sup> of December 2002. The agent group was conducted first and lasted approximately 90 minutes. Thereafter the management focus group was conducted, with a duration of approximately 50 minutes. Both groups were held in the boardroom of the call centre. The customers were all contacted via the call centre's CATI system on the 13<sup>th</sup> December 2002. Each of the 10 telephonic interviews lasted approximately 15 minutes.

#### **4.7. THE RESEARCH QUESTION**

The construction of the main question directing the flow of the discussion is important, as it should not pre-empt any responses. "The question should be short, concise and understandable by everybody" (Gevers, 1995, p.36). Creswell (1997) feels that the research question should be open-ended and non-directional, and should restate the purpose of the study in more specific terms. The main question to start the discussion was: "What do you think are important competencies to be an ideal call centre agent?" Competencies were defined to each group as the skills, knowledge, attitude and behaviour necessary to handle the telephonic conversation.

#### **4.8. THE DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS**

According to Neuman (1997), data analysis in qualitative research means a search for patterns in data. According to Bateson (1972), we aim to classify people by identifying certain patterns. Identifying these patterns by interpretation and explanation is the responsibility of the analyst, and it is his or her task to develop a meaningful and adequate account; the data merely provide a basis for the analysis, they do not dictate analysis. Classification can be seen as a form of practical reasoning. Once the data have been organised into categories, they can be retrieved in a variety of ways. Categorising data allows the researcher to make comparisons more effectively and lays the basis for making new connections between different bits of data (Dey, 1993).

Creswell (1997) states that analysing qualitative data is a process of moving in analytic circles rather than a fixed linear approach. The researcher enters with transcripts and exits with an account or a narrative. In line with the systems theory, "...to analyse qualitative data the researcher engages in the process of moving in analytical circles rather than using a fixed linear approach" (Creswell, 1997, p. 142).

The telephonic interviews and focus groups were tape-recorded with the respondents' permission and afterwards transcribed verbatim. The transcribed interviews and focus groups were read and reread until a sense of totality was obtained (Bielfield, 1997). The idea was to get an overall picture of the data or, as Neuman (1997) states, to conceptualise the data in order to make sense of it. The degree of detail in coding depends on the research question, the richness of the data and the researcher's purposes. In this particular study, each response was coded (Neuman, 1997).

Neuman (1997) refers to adequacy in qualitative research, which means that the emphasis is not on the number of respondents used, but the amount of data collected. Consequently, the relatively small number of respondents in this study is not considered problematic; as saturation in the discussions was reached and no more information was needed (Creswell, 1997; Jordan *et al*, 2002; Neuman, 1997).

Common features promoted by several authors (Berg, 1998; Creswell, 1997; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Neuman, 1997; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) were used as guide for the content analysis of the data. The data were analysed in the following three steps.

### **Step 1: Open coding**

In this first step of analysing the data, themes are located and initial codes are assigned to organise the data into categories (Creswell, 1997; Neuman, 1997). Patton (1990) states that categorisation is critical; without categorisation "there is chaos" (p.382). Throughout the analysis the original research question must kept in mind (Berg, 1998). According to Neuman (1997), in this step, the researcher focuses on the data and assigns code labels for themes. Berg (1998) recommends that data should be coded minutely during open coding. The analysing in open coding starts with a broad statement.

### **Step 2: Axial coding**

The second step in the data analysis concerns the initial broad themes or statements compiled in step one. All these broad themes (sub-themes) are grouped together as main themes. Strauss and Corbin (1998) state that the purpose of axial coding is to group the data that were fractured during open coding. The focus of this step is on the categories assigned in step one and not on the data; and the aim is to review and examine these initial categories (Neuman, 1997). In this step, we move towards organising the themes and identifying the axis of key concepts in the analysis. In this step a researcher explores causal conditions, asks about causes and consequences, conditions and interactions, strategies and processes (Creswell, 1997; Neuman, 1997). Also, during axial coding, the researcher interconnects the categories by looking for categories or concepts that cluster together. Miles and Huberman (1994) define clustering as the process of iteratively sorting things into categories. Comparisons can be made between reappearing themes. New themes and questions can arise from axial coding. Neuman (1997) states that the connection between a theme and data is strengthened by multiple occurrences.

### **Step 3: Selective coding**

In the final step, selective coding, the different categories identified in axial coding are integrated and refined (Creswell, 1997; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to Neumann (1997), selective coding involves examining the previous categories to make comparisons and contrasts after data collection is complete.

### **4.9. SUMMARY**

In this chapter a detailed description was given of the research process that was followed in this study. The motivation for the study, the sample and the method in which the data was collected and analysed was described. In the following chapter the results of the data analysis will be discussed.

In summary, the data analysis in the study proceeded in the following order. Firstly, categories for the information were developed, then the categories were labelled and finally the categories were connected. The final step follows, as Keeney (1983) says, once the researcher has drawn distinctions and conclusions, and "he can step back and examine what he has done" (p.28).

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **RESULTS**

#### **5.1. INTRODUCTION**

The aim of this chapter is to present the results of the data analysis. This includes a presentation of the coding, followed by a discussion of each main theme or competency identified by the three systems interviewed, namely, call centre agents, managers and customers.

The results presented are the researcher's account of the important competencies as identified by the respondents.

#### **5.2. THE DIFFERENT SYSTEMS OF THE CALL CENTRE**

Different systems involved in the call centre will experience their interactions differently and will report this interaction from their own perspective. It is the researcher's role to combine the viewpoints of the three systems to come closer to a complete or a holistic description (Bateson, 1972). The combination of the three perspectives gives us a view of the whole relationship (Gevers, 1995; Keeney, 1983). Gevers (1995) states that even though language constrains our knowledge, double (or in our case triple) description "provides a way of using language to direct us toward higher order description" (p.46). From the three descriptions obtained from the managers, call centre agents and customers, a pattern and relationship can be derived (Keeney, 1983).

#### **5.3. RESULTS**

The data analysis is presented below. The first step (OPEN CODING) was designed to develop broad categories for the information. Themes were located and initial codes were assigned to reduce and organise the data into categories. The second step was to interconnect the categories (AXIAL CODING) by grouping the broad categories identified in the open coding. Finally, the different categories identified in

axial coding were integrated and refined (SELECTIVE CODING). The previous categories were examined to make comparisons and contrasts.

### 5.3.1. Open coding

#### 5.3.1.1. The agent focus group

The agent focus group consisted of eight participants between the ages of 22 and 32. Four of the participants are male and four female. All eight have completed school or have a higher education. Three respondents were coloured, four were black and one was white.

Response	Open Coding
<p><b>Moderator introduction</b></p> <p><b><i>To start off with I want to know what you like about being a call centre agent. What about being a call centre agent makes you tick?</i></b></p>	
<p>Participant A: I would say it is talking to different people about the same thing and getting different opinions. Talking to these different people develops you as a person. Because people may say to you whatever they want, but you are not allowed to say how you feel, because you must stick to your script. There is a way they talk to you and a way you must talk to them.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talking</li> <li>• To different people</li> <li>• Getting different opinions</li> <li>• Not allowed to say how you feel</li> <li>• Certain way you talk to them</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>And that is what you like about your job? Talking to these different people and getting different responses to the same question?</i></b></p>	
<p>Participant A: Yes, talking to different people and improving in this way your communication skills.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talking to different people</li> <li>• Improving communication skills</li> </ul>
<p>Participant B: It is also challenging, because you don't know what the next call holds in store for you. Say you start dialling, but you don't know how that person is going to react, firstly, and then you won't know how you are supposed to handle yourself with that specific person. And like (A) says it is different for each and every respondent that you talk to.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Challenging; not to know what to expect</li> <li>• Different for each respondent</li> </ul>
<p>Participant C: People have different moods, and you have to control yourself. Even if you reach someone in a bad mood, you</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customers have different moods</li> </ul>

have to smile and have a friendly attitude in order to do the interview again.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need to control yourself</li> <li>• Remain friendly</li> </ul>
<b><i>And that is what you like about being a call centre agent, dealing with these people regardless of their moods?</i></b>	
Participant C: Yes, it is all about customer service over the telephone.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customer service over phone</li> </ul>
Participant A: What I also like is that you shouldn't bow down, tell what you want – but at the same time with respect and being tactful. And the day when you get home as an agent, you must feel; Wow! can you believe I did this and who says I can't speak to anyone? At the end of the day you speak to so many different people, from a student at the university to a managing director of a big company. This makes me feel some sort of satisfaction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not bow down</li> <li>• Respect</li> <li>• Tact</li> <li>• Speaking to different people</li> <li>• Speaking to people of different status</li> </ul>
Participant D: What I like is when I can convince someone, who doesn't want to participate, to change their minds and participate in the interview. Most people change their minds and participate in the research in the end.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Convince someone to partake</li> </ul>
Participant A: You don't have to initiate it in the scope of your work, you get to say what you want. You have to make a person react in the first place and maintain this throughout the interview – it can be 25 minutes or whatever, but use your own thing that works for you. And sometimes you feel like, I think I am going to quit, but you have to maintain the interview – so you stay right where you are.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get person to react</li> <li>• Maintain yourself throughout interview</li> </ul>
Participant B: In the back of your mind, you must always remember that sometimes you have to dial back your respondent and you do get difficult people, but at all times you must keep your cool. Because you tend to get frustrated sometimes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You get difficult people</li> <li>• Build the customer base</li> <li>• Keep your cool</li> <li>• Frustrated</li> </ul>
<b><i>Talking about you getting frustrated, what do you dislike about being a call centre agent?</i></b>	
Participant E: You get pressure from everyone, from management, from the respondent, everyone. It is like you are being squashed!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pressure from various sources</li> </ul>
Participant D: The stress levels.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stress levels</li> </ul>
Participant A: It is the whole day sitting on the phone. Your manager tells you five interviews per hour {B: And you think about the five interviews the whole time} and you can't tell the respondent 'listen I only have 15 minutes to do this interview' and the person doesn't understand what pressure we are under.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monotony</li> <li>• Time frame causes pressure</li> <li>• Maintain the pace that the customer prefers</li> </ul>

<p><b><i>So, time is a negative aspect. And what about talking to rude customers? Do you dislike that in being a call centre agent?</i></b></p>	
<p>Participant G: You just ignore it, despite what you are feeling {Participant C: It is part of your job}. You see, you are a professional - if you come across a person who is rude, you just have to handle it professionally. When you do that, you often find that the person is willing to accommodate you.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ignore what you are feeling</li> <li>• Handle rude people professionally</li> <li>• Person will accommodate you</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>So speaking to a rude person or a person that doesn't want to talk to you is actually a positive part of your job? It is something you like about your job?</i></b></p>	
<p>Participant A: Yes, you can say that.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speaking to rude people – positive</li> </ul>
<p>Participant H: You know, I think if you approach your job in the correct way, there should not be anything negative. It might be something you need to learn from, or it might be something you need to adapt from, that you could always use. A lot of people thing that feedback is a negative thing. They always say 'Ah hell, I am going to get feedback, not again'.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The manner in which you approach your job</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Feedback from who?</i></b></p>	
<p>Participant H: From the quality assessors. But even if you get negative feedback, you might feel despondent at first, but if you can take that and you can work on it and use it. The same with bad respondents, the same with anybody. If you always see something as a challenge, there should not be anything that is negative. Except the fact that you work overtime.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use feedback</li> <li>• Finding even rude customers or negative feedback challenging</li> <li>• Overtime – negative</li> </ul>
<p>Participant A: I agree, you must always take everything as a learning curve. Today you might have a bad experience, but it is a learning experience for you because tomorrow you might find yourself in the very same situation again. The fact that you have dealt with that before should enable you {Participant B: Yes, to use that}.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Everything is a learning curve</li> <li>• Dealing with similar situation before makes the situation more predictable</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>If I ask you, what is the main (JUST ONE) competency (skill) that you need to be a top performing agent, what would that be? Can we go around? C, what do you think?</i></b></p>	
<p>Participant C: I think it is to be professional.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional</li> </ul>



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Participant F: I think to be a good listener.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good listener</li> </ul>
Participant H: I think thoroughness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thoroughness</li> </ul>
Participant B: Yes and to be attentive.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attentive</li> </ul>
Participant G: I think it is to be confident. If you pick up the phone to call someone, you must have confidence in yourself. You must be confident that this person will accommodate me. {Participant B: Confidence in yourself}. The person on the other end can hear in your voice that you know what you are doing and whether you are confident or not.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidence in yourself</li> <li>• Confident that person will accommodate me</li> <li>• Hear confidence in your voice</li> </ul>
Participant A: If you say [in a soft voice]: Hi "I'm (A)", this person doesn't sound that confident. When you say [harder] "Hi, I'm (a)", you sound more confident and you give them the whole story right there. The person would think "Alright this is A, this is B, what must I do, it looks like this guy knows what he is talking about, let's give him a try".	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tone of voice will make you sound confident</li> <li>• Confidence makes customer believes that agent knows what he is talking about</li> </ul>
Participant E: I was thinking, I just got off the phone with a very difficult respondent. In the beginning he didn't want to participate in the interview, but in the end he said that he actually felt better after talking to me which made me feel good. I think getting someone to talk to you, who doesn't really want to... that is an important competency and in the end making them feel glad that they participated – that is what being a call centre agent is all about.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Getting someone to partake in interview</li> <li>• Making them glad they partook</li> </ul>
Participant H: Being in an outbound call centre you actually phone, you have to take the first step, you have to convince the customer, you have to convince the respondent to partake in this. When you work, and you get stressed in the levels that he gets forced to continue: you have to do this in this amount of time, or do this quantity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Convince the customer to partake</li> <li>• Stress caused by amount of time or quantity of interviews</li> </ul>
Participant A: I think to become a top performing call centre agent you have to be consistent in everything you do. In other words, do what you do every single day in the same way. Don't come today in a bad mood and tomorrow you are fine again, that will affect your performance. Even if something bad happened the previous night at home, you have to begin the day as a neutral person and not let personal matters affect they way you treat customers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistent in everything you do</li> <li>• Consistent mood</li> <li>• Do not let personal matters influence work</li> <li>• Be a neutral person</li> </ul>
Participant D: You have to be positive. You must have a positive attitude throughout the day.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive throughout the day</li> </ul>

Participant A: You should not treat the person you interview at 17:00 different to the person you interview at 8:00 in the morning, regardless of how tired you are and in what a bad mood you are.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Treat people consistent at different times of the day</li> </ul>
Participant C: I think you have to be more energetic to work in an outbound call centre. You have to be the same in the afternoon as you were in the morning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Energetic</li> <li>• Consistent in afternoon and morning</li> </ul>
<b><i>That also goes with consistency as (A) mentioned earlier.</i></b>	
Participant D: It is all about your attitude: being positive, being friendly, being helpful.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive attitude</li> <li>• Friendly attitude</li> <li>• Helpful attitude</li> </ul>
<b><i>What other competencies do you think are important to be an ideal call centre agent?</i></b>	
Participant A: You have to be a quick thinker. You have to think on your feet. Otherwise, it sounds like you are not sure of what you are doing. For example, this lady asks you what does some or other abbreviation stand for, I mean you've got to find your way as soon as possible and tell the person what you mean by that.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quick thinker, think on your feet</li> <li>• Sound like you know what you are doing</li> <li>• Solve problems quickly</li> </ul>
Participant G: Again I say you have to be confident and know the answers, for example, when the lady asks you what the abbreviation means you have to be confident and know the answer.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confident and know the answers</li> </ul>
<b><i>So, in a way being knowledgeable will make you confident?</i></b>	
Participant H: Yes, but even if you don't know what it stands for you can quickly find out what it means.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If you don't know answer, find out</li> </ul>
<b><i>Earlier (H) said, every situation, even if it is a bad experience, should be seen as a challenge, because it might be something you need to learn from, or it might be something you need to adapt to. Do you think adapting, or changing, being flexible, is important in an outbound call centre?</i></b>	
Participant G: Yes, I think so.	
<b><i>Why do you say that? How should you be able to adapt and why?</i></b>	
Participant A: I'll give you an example, say you speak to a 45 year-old now and your next call is a 16 year-old, you should change according to the situation from the one person to the next. There is a certain way that you speak to a 16 year-old and a certain way you speak to a 45 year-old.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speaking to people of different age groups</li> </ul>
Participant H: I think personally there is a very thin line between	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thin line between</li> </ul>

<p>adapting or changing to fit in with the respondent and your maintaining your professionalism. Because you have a certain frame of professionalism you work in and you can only change that much {Participant C: Yeah}. I think, personally, we can't really change that much. In the tone of your voice maybe, in how hard or how loud you speak maybe. But according to the standards of the organisation you are not allowed to change that. If I speak to an Afrikaans person from Pretoria and I speak to an Afrikaans person from Cape Town they have different accents, but to change your accent according to the respondents you speak to, will mean you are compromising your professionalism. So, I think change is a relative small thing. I don't know, it is a very difficult thing, because you can very easily overstep the mark.</p>	<p>adapting and maintaining professionalism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adapt one's nonverbal communication</li> <li>• Adapt according to where people live</li> <li>• Adapt without compromising professionalism</li> </ul>
<p>Participant H: If we, for example, do a different study for a cigarette brand and the organisation says I expect of you to be informal – then you change. You as an individual can't decide for yourself, the organisation decides.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change according to standards set by organisation</li> </ul>
<p>Participant B: You change in terms of your voice (louder, softer, faster), but not in terms of your professionalism and you must stick to the script.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adapt in terms of voice</li> <li>• Do not compromise professionalism</li> </ul>
<p>Participant A: I agree, but how you read the script can make a big difference. The way you read the script will differ between a managing director of a company and a 20 year-old student.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manner in which you read the script</li> <li>• Adapt to different status</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>(E), earlier you said it is important to listen to your customer. Why do you think it is important?</i></b></p>	
<p>Participant E: I think it is important because you have to capture exactly what that person is saying. So you have to listen to capture everything.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listen to capture exactly what the person is saying</li> </ul>
<p>Participant D: Capturing correctly, but also checking if that is relevant to the specific question. Because from time to time you speak to a person who gives you a total different answer than what you asked for, and I mean, you just keep on typing; you are listening but you are not really listening.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capturing relevant information</li> </ul>
<p>Participant H: I think control also goes with that, you need to be in control of the situation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Control of the situation</li> </ul>
<p>Participant I: You also need to be familiar with the questionnaire. Before we start interviewing we always do practice interviews and when you do a practice interview you need to concentrate.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Familiarity with questionnaire, practise interviews</li> <li>• Concentrate</li> </ul>

Participant B: The briefing sessions we get also makes you familiar with the questionnaire.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Briefing sessions in order to become familiar with questionnaire</li> </ul>
<b><i>How knowledgeable should you be regarding the research studies you are working on?</i></b>	
Participant H: I think you have to be familiar with the terminology to be able to answer the respondents' questions, knowledge about the product or service or whatever.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge of terminology, product or service</li> </ul>
Participant C: If the respondents ask questions, you have to have knowledge regarding the questionnaire. For example if they don't understand the question, you should have the knowledge to explain to them what is meant if they don't understand.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge of questionnaire to explain what is meant</li> </ul>
<b><i>Do you think it is important to understand what the customer is going through?</i></b>	
Participant B: Yes, I think it is an advantage. Say you speak to a customer regarding the service he received, and he had a really bad experience. These customers complain and you have to listen as well as take down all the complaints. We tell the customer we do this in order for the company to prevent such a bad experience in the future. You have to allow the respondent to tell you what he has experienced. Because we must work in a certain time frame and are limited by time you tend to want to cut that person down, make his story shorter.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listen to take down complaints</li> <li>• Although limited by time frame, still allow respondent to tell what he has experienced</li> </ul>
Participant A: I think you have to understand what the person is going through, but at the same time maintain your professionalism, be neutral. Understand what the person is going through but don't feel what the person is going through. Don't get too emotional, and don't get too involved.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand</li> <li>• Maintain professionalism</li> <li>• Remain neutral</li> <li>• Don't get emotionally involved</li> </ul>
Participant H: Being an outbound call centre agent you should not show any empathy, you are impartial, you are neutral value and you should stay that at all times. If he had a bad experience, you would just say I am from XX, I am purely doing the research, I am capturing the information. You are not there to have empathy with that client, you are impartial. But do this in a very, very good way, there is a very thin line, you should not contradict him and you should not neglect him, and you should not put him down, but it's not your job to be empathetic towards him.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No empathy, stay impartial</li> <li>• Do this, but remain professional and polite</li> </ul>
Participant A: We might get the same information, the only difference is when you show understanding a person is more likely	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Showing empathy will get customers to partake in</li> </ul>

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to partake in research again. The person speaking to some one who doesn't show any empathy will perceive that person as rude or impatient and not participate in market research again.	<p>interviews in future</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of empathy will give the idea that call centre agent is being rude</li> </ul>
Participant B: You don't let the person take over the interview, but you have to allow the person to share with you what ever he or she is going through. {Participant F: What he or she is feeling}.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remain in control of the interview</li> <li>• Allow person to share what he or she is going through</li> </ul>
Participant G: The thing is for example, when we deal with a policy study, and you ask the person why did they contact the particular financial institution and the lady tells you that her husband just died, you have to have some sort of understanding.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand particular situations</li> </ul>
Participant B: Ja, maybe make an appointment to deal with that lady at a later stage when she feels better and because you were considerate she will be more than willing to help you when you phone at a later stage.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being considerate to the situation</li> <li>• Consideration may lead respondents to be helpful at later stage</li> </ul>
<b><i>What do you think about this topic, (E)?</i></b>	
Participant E: I agree that you can't do the interview for example if the lady is still grieving. I mean, you will have to show some understanding.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show understanding of situation</li> </ul>
Participant H: But there is a difference between being courteous and showing empathy. If you tell the lady, "Okay Ma'am, I do understand I will call you back at a later stage", that is not empathy that is being courteous. She is happy, she will speak to me again, because I am being courteous.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being courteous or understanding, not empathetic</li> </ul>
Participant A: But if you are halfway through the interview and the lady says her husband died, you cannot just ignore that.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cannot ignore customers' situation</li> </ul>
Participant H: You can tell the respondent, I am sorry that it happened, I understand what happened {Participant B: Exactly}. But that is being courteous.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand situation</li> <li>• Be courteous</li> </ul>
Participant A: It depends on the manner in which the person approaches you and the mood he is in. You have to understand, I am not saying feel, but understand why that person is behaving in such a way.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have to understand why person is behaving in a certain way</li> </ul>
<b><i>So understanding is another competency important for an outbound call centre agent?</i></b>	
Participant H: Understanding I think is almost more than being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding without</li> </ul>

empathetic. Because empathy has a more emotional side, whilst understanding somebody's problem you are not encouraging him, you are not putting yourself in the position where you can get emotionally involved, but you still understand his problem.	getting emotionally involved
<b><i>On the topic of emotional involvement, do you think it is important for a call centre agent to be emotional intelligent?</i></b>	
Participant C: In our line of work, I think so.	
<i>Why do you say that?</i>	
Participant A: If you cannot communicate, if you are not outspoken, cannot talk properly, the person would not be willing to participate in the interview. The introduction is what makes or breaks the interview. If you can't communicate you won't get what you want.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk properly and be outspoken in order to get an interview</li> <li>• Importance of introduction</li> </ul>
Participant C: The approach is very important, sometimes you get someone who is very angry, but you must still approach that person in a good manner.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approach person in good manner</li> </ul>
<b><i>Talking about a person being angry when you phone him, do you think, (C), that an Afrikaans-speaking person will be more reluctant to do an interview with you than a Xhosa-speaking person, because your first language is Xhosa?</i></b>	
Participant C: Yes.	
Participant B: Yes.	
Participant A: Yes.	
Participant H: Yes.	
Participant B: It also depends on the agents understanding of the questionnaire and whether he is capable of doing it in the language of choice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding of questionnaire by agent</li> <li>• Language ability</li> </ul>
<b><i>But that is specifically about language, what about across different cultures?</i></b>	
Participant H: I don't think it is an issue.	
Participant A: I think language is the problem and not the racial issue.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language, not racial issues</li> </ul>
Participant E: Cross-cultural might be an issue, but only within a small group of people. Normally, when a person doesn't want to do an interview with me, it is because I can't speak their language.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initial refusals, only when agent cannot speak the customers' preferred language</li> </ul>
Participant D: Everybody prefers to be helped in their own language. It is not a question if they can do it in another language,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prefer to be helped in own language</li> </ul>

<p>it is a question that they prefer doing it in their own language.</p>	
<p>Participant B: That's why it is so important to be bilingual in a call centre. {Participant G: Actually, multilingual}. Yes, sometimes I wish I could speak Sotho or Zulu; that would make my job so much easier.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be able to speak more than one (or two) languages in order to accommodate customers of any language</li> </ul>
<p>Participant H: If I was able to speak for example Zulu, I would be able to handle 99% of all the Zulu sample even if I am Afrikaans-speaking. These people would talk to me, just because I can speak their language. They won't think, this is a white man speaking Zulu, they would think this person can speak my language and they will do the interview. To them it won't matter if you are from China, at least you are doing it in his language.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They would talk to me, because I can speak their language</li> </ul>
<p>Participant A: I am more than willing to do an interview in Afrikaans, provided that the person is nice to me too. I am not a rude person and if a person is rude to me I'll tell him I can get someone to do the interview in Afrikaans, but if he is nice to me I'll do the interview in Afrikaans.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agent can still make a decision to do the interview or not</li> <li>• Will do interview in Afrikaans, if person is nice to me too</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>So you also have a choice in deciding if you want to do the interview?</i></b></p>	
<p>Participant B: Yes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choice in deciding to do the interview</li> </ul>
<p>Participant A: But you have to do this professionally.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decline interview professionally</li> </ul>
<p>Participant H: I also find that people who are not Afrikaans-speaking find us to be very hard, we pronounce words hard. The person thinks you are being rude, when in actual fact you are being courteous in your own way.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Afrikaans people pronounce words hard</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>But this isn't this a cultural issue? In your culture you see speaking loudly as being courteous, whereas in the other person's culture they see that as being rude?</i></b></p>	
<p>Participant H: I also found this at another place I worked at with mothers and their kids. In some cultures it is fine to touch the kid, but in others it is just not on. Or looking the person in the eye, some cultures just don't like that. That is the kind of differences; it is almost more like social cultural. It is not a racial issue; it could be the same for an Afrikaans white man and an English white man.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Differences between cultures, social culture, not racial</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>What do you think call centre agents need or should get</i></b></p>	

<b>training on?</b>	
Participant H: If we could have a seminar with mock interviews, where they give you ideas, different techniques.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mock interviews</li> <li>• Different techniques</li> </ul>
Participant A: They tell us what to do but they don't actually show us. They need to show us how to maintain yourself throughout a forty-five minute interview. They just give it to you and you have to find a way to keep your pace normal, keep yourself normal through out the interview, but they don't show you how to do it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show interviewers what to do</li> </ul>
Participant H: Earlier we mentioned negative aspects about being a call centre agent, and one that I forgot to mention is hit rate. That is the one thing we can do nothing about. You call and call and you can't help it if they don't answer, and still management expects a certain amount of calls from you even if it is out of your control. They should not only look at your hit rate they should look at other things you are doing as well. And incorporate that also, because all they are looking at is the number of completes per hour, if you are not getting completes it's wrong, but surely they should be looking at the other things you do as well. How many calls did you make, are you repetitive. That is the negative part.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Certain amount of calls in certain time</li> <li>• Take everything into consideration when doing performance reviews</li> </ul>
Participant B: We all have typing tutor on our computers, they can divide us into little groups and give us half an hour training session, even if it is only once or twice a week. They should not just give us typing tutor and then leave us, they should actually, like, control it. 'Cause if you can't type you slow the respondent down by means of control, but surely you need help. Developing your typing skills would get your length of interview down. And it is a skill you can even use in other fields in the future.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Typing tutor</li> <li>• Get length of interview down</li> </ul>
Participant A: You said something about what we need training on, but all these when you start working in a call centre you should actually have, all these should come naturally. The typing, constructive thinking, being positive.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Possess all these skills when starting in call centre</li> </ul>
Participant C: We get in-job training; I don't think we need to sit through 3-hour training sessions. The quality assessors can just tell us what went wrong where and next time you improve on that and in this way you learn.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On-the-job-training</li> </ul>
Participant H: I think in a call centre you should look at specific people and see what their specific needs are. At the moment I am getting all this call centre training, but I am actually an analytical person and would love to do some of the analysis. If they knew	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Look at specific needs</li> </ul>



<p>this by looking at what our needs are, then perhaps they could advance this, they could provide you with in-work experience. That you work for the company, but you can also study through them. In this way you can develop not only your interviewing skills, but also your other skills from which the company can benefit. That is something that is not happening, everybody is working to be a research interviewer – but what if you have other ambitions?</p>	
<p>Participant D: I think they should give us more research training. I know all the skills required to work in a call centre, but I don't know all the interviewing techniques and research methods.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research training, interviewing techniques and research methods</li> </ul>
<p>Participant C: I would also like to be informed about the research results.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inform about results</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Do you have any other comments or suggestions?</i></b></p>	
<p>Participant A: We should have a 30-minute company meeting every month. Where we discuss what we did the previous month, what is expected of us for the coming month. Just a general discussion, where everyone gets together.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meeting every month</li> </ul>
<p>I also think they should upgrade the website. They have nothing there about our call centre.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Upgrade website</li> </ul>
<p>Participant H: I saw that as well, we are doing the research but there is nothing about us in the website or in the magazine.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mention call centre in website and magazine</li> </ul>
<p>Participant E: I think we should have our own call centre magazine. We could even do the articles ourselves.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Call centre magazine</li> </ul>
<p>Participant B: I think we should have awards every month, most improved call centre agent of the month, top performing call centre agent etc. And put a photo of that person in the foyer.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monthly awards</li> </ul>
<p>Participant F: They can hand out these awards at the monthly meeting.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hand out awards at monthly meeting</li> </ul>
<p>Participant G: If we work overtime, they should acknowledge that. Even if we don't get paid overtime they can at least buy us a pizza at the end of the month and say 'today you can have a pizza and leave at two because you worked so hard this month'. Maybe even just a pat on the back would be nice, some positive feedback.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledge overtime</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Thank you very much for your time and all the useful information you have given me. Please join me for some refreshments.</i></b></p>	

**5.3.1.2. The management focus group**

The management focus group consisted of six participants between the ages of 20 and 45. Five of the six participants were female. All six have completed school, and five have a diploma. All six respondents are coloured.

<b>Response</b>	<b>Open Coding</b>
<b><i>Moderator introduction</i></b> <b><i>To start off with I want to know what you like about being a call centre agent? What about being a call centre agent makes you tick?</i></b>	
Participant I: The interaction, that type of thing – the interaction with the people. Everything is different in lots of cases; it is a varied work environment. If you like social interaction, this is the type of work for you.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interaction with different people</li> <li>• Different in various cases</li> <li>• Varied work environment</li> </ul>
<b><i>What do you think call centre agents dislike about their work and why they would not want to be a call centre agent any more?</i></b>	
Participant J: The abuse that you have to go through on the phone, the abuse by the customers over the phone.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abuse from customer on phone</li> </ul>
Participant J: The monotony of the job.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monotony</li> </ul>
Participant L: And the hours.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hours</li> </ul>
Participant K: Yes. The routine.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The routine</li> </ul>
<b><i>If I ask you, what is the main (JUST ONE) competency (skill) that you need to be a top performing agent, what would that be? Can we go around?</i></b>	
Participant N: Initiative. You have to be able to give information or provide information, which are sometimes not supplied with, so you have to think on your own sometimes as well.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiative</li> <li>• Provide information you are not supplied with</li> <li>• Think on your own</li> </ul>
Participant M: I think building a rapport with the customer is very important and that also goes with being able to communicate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building a rapport</li> <li>• Being able to communicate</li> </ul>
Participant J: Being goal-driven is very important in any outbound call centre. You have a target and you have to reach that target before say the end of the day.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reach target before end of the day</li> <li>• Setting a goal for yourself</li> </ul>
Participant N: You should be able to deal with people, because they will come down on you and you will feel that it is not even your	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deal with people who will come down on you</li> </ul>

fault, but because you are representing a company they are probably dissatisfied with they will come down on you.	
<b><i>Should you have empathy with this dissatisfied person who is coming down on you?</i></b>	
Participant J: We can guide customers to the right place, we can provide them with a number to call. We can try and understand what is happening, but we can't be empathetic. I think that is a bit strong in our case. We cannot for one minute understand what the customer is feeling because we are not the company they are dissatisfied with. We can't even help them, if you understand what I'm saying.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guide customers to right place</li> <li>• Provide information</li> <li>• Help customer</li> <li>• Understand what is happening</li> </ul>
Participant I: It is very difficult in our situation to be too sympathetic, we always need to remain neutral so that we don't lead people to answer in a certain way in other words lead them to give a certain answer. So, yes, you need to show sympathy but in a way also remain neutral. You need to have that balance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remain neutral</li> <li>• Do not lead people to answer in a certain way</li> <li>• Balance between understanding and remaining neutral</li> </ul>
<b><i>Do you think this is connected to emotional intelligence and is this important in your call centre?</i></b>	
Participant J: In a call centre it is important to be emotionally intelligent and know exactly when you've got to show some kind of understanding – when it is a problem that can be relevant to us. Sometimes, however, people are just talking about nothing, about problems unrelated to your call and they are wasting your time. This is when a call centre agent should make a decision and decide: should I listen and understand or should I tell them this is not what I am here for?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show understanding</li> <li>• Identify relevant problems</li> <li>• Make a decision to listen or to cut them short</li> </ul>
Participant I: You need to be confident as well, even if you are making a boo-boo you should still feel confident. The moment you show a lack of confidence is the moment you lose the customer.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidence even if you make a mistake</li> <li>• Lack of confidence causes loss of customer</li> </ul>
<b><i>Do you need to be analytical and be able to solve problems when applying for a job at {this company}?</i></b>	
No (all respondents)	
<b><i>So when you recruit you are not necessarily looking for someone who is analytical and can solve problems?</i></b>	
No (all respondents)	
<b><i>What do you look for when you recruit?</i></b>	
Participant J: All the things named above. I think telephone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Telephone manner</li> </ul>

manner, we left that out when we named the main competencies.	
<b><i>What exactly is telephone manner?</i></b>	
Participant J: Can you read, do you know your goodbyes, your hellos, do you use your name and the respondent's name throughout the interview, things like that. The basics.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read</li> <li>• Goodbyes/ hellos</li> <li>• Using respondent's name</li> <li>• Basics</li> </ul>
<b><i>Telephone and computer technology and typing skills?</i></b>	
Participant J: Telephone and computer skills and typing skills, that is basic skills a call centre agent should have.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Telephone skills</li> <li>• Typing skills</li> <li>• Basic skills</li> </ul>
<b><i>If you are recruiting someone, should they have all the basic computer and telephone technology skills?</i></b>	
Yes, the basics (all respondents)	
Participant I: And how you sound over a telephone too. Some people do not have a good telephone voice and it comes up all mumbled. They need to be articulate. It is difficult to say what a call centre agent needs, because it is impossible to predict every situation, because you come across a million different situations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good telephone voice</li> <li>• Articulate</li> <li>• Impossible to predict situations</li> </ul>
<b><i>Talking about the unpredictability of the call centre, do you think a call centre agent should be flexible and able to adapt to change?</i></b>	
Participant K: I was going to say flexible.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexible</li> </ul>
Participant I: Language barriers and that type of thing. Language, you have literacy barriers, you have...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language barriers</li> <li>• Literacy barriers</li> </ul>
Participant L: Different status, say when you speak to a professional person.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Different status</li> </ul>
Participant K: You should be able to adapt to the situation and still be professional.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adapt, but still be professional</li> </ul>
<b><i>Another competency according to various authors is that you should be thorough and detail-focussed. In your particular call centre is this a necessary competency to have?</i></b>	
Participant L: You have to have a sense of detail, especially in the requirements of this call centre because of the importance of the information; you have to be detail-focused. If you are just capturing what the person is saying without having a sense of detail, it doesn't mean anything at the end of the day, that useless information is not detailed, it is not proper, not accurate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sense of detail, because of importance of information</li> <li>• Relevance of information</li> <li>• Information must be accurate and detailed</li> </ul>

Participant I: You have to be focused as well.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focused</li> </ul>
<b><i>Focused on the call?</i></b>	
Participant I: On the call, on the questions you are asking. You should sort of predict what the response is going to be like, you should see that the response is relevant.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focused on the call</li> <li>• Focused on the questions</li> <li>• See that response is relevant</li> </ul>
<b><i>What kind of attitude should a call centre agent have? Should you be a certain personality type to work in the call centre?</i></b>	
No (all respondents)	
Participant I: You just have to be confident.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confident personality</li> </ul>
<b><i>How is confidence important if these people can't see you?</i></b>	
Participant K: They can't see you, but they can hear your voice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hear confidence in your voice</li> </ul>
Participant N: If you are sitting with a frown on your face, whilst talking to someone they can hear it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frown on face, they can hear it</li> </ul>
Participant K: Even if you sit in a slouched position, they can hear in your voice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The way you sit can be heard over phone</li> </ul>
Participant L: They can also hear when you are moving around on your chair.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moving around on chair can be heard</li> </ul>
Participant M: But you also have to sit comfortably, because you have to sit that way the entire day. So whilst you are comfortable, you will also sound professional and confident.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be comfortable</li> <li>• Sound professional</li> <li>• Sound confident</li> </ul>
<b><i>What about knowledge? Should an outbound call centre agent be knowledgeable?</i></b>	
Participant J: The knowledge that an outbound call centre agents has is knowledge of the purpose of why they are doing the research. It won't be anything related to the product. They don't even have to know who the client is; they just have to know why they are asking the questions. They should also have a lot of knowledge regarding the skills to do the research. They require knowledge to help them to do their job right.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge about the purpose of research</li> <li>• Not product-related</li> <li>• Know why they are asking the questions</li> <li>• Knowledge regarding skills to do research</li> <li>• To do job right</li> </ul>
<b><i>Is there a lot of stress in the call centre?</i></b>	
Participant I: Yes, but the call centre agents know that the abuse they receive over the telephone isn't personal. The majority of the agents deal very well with that.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abuse over the phone causes stress</li> <li>• The agents must realise abuse isn't personal</li> </ul>

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<p>Participant K: It is stressful to meet your target as well. Sometimes you just have a bad patch and you are dialling and dialling and everyone else is getting an interview, just not you.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meeting your target can be stressful</li> <li>• Comparing your amount of interviews with the other agents can also lead to stress</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>How important is it to satisfy your respondent and to what degree do you satisfy your respondent?</i></b></p>	
<p>Participant N: Personally I don't think you have to put up with, for example, a rude customer, you can tell him in a polite way that you are going to end the interview.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not putting up with rude customers</li> <li>• Can end the interview in polite manner</li> </ul>
<p>Participant J: Yes, when people are abusive there is no need to continue the interview.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End interview when people are abusive</li> </ul>
<p>Participant I: You are still in control of the interview. That is one thing we try and train all the time, is that you need to be in control all the time. Because we need the interviews, a lot of people put up with really bombastic respondents.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You are in control of the interview</li> <li>• Continue with abusive customer in order to reach target</li> </ul>
<p>Participant M: That links with the stress, because the call centre agents feel that they have to put up with these people in order to reach their target, you have to. That is also what causes a lot of stress.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Put up with rude customers to reach target</li> </ul>
<p>Participant L: I think it also lies in what causes the respondent to be rude, if it is a natural response and the person is just rude in his natural way – I don't think we need to do the interview. If, however, the person is rude because he is dissatisfied with our client, then we must do the interview because that could just be the opinion that we are looking for – the reason why this person is dissatisfied. So, we tried to get to speak to the respondent if ultimately nothing works, then there is nothing left but to end the conversation. If you tried your best and it is not working, no use continuing with the interview. But you need to give that dissatisfied person, who is rude for a reason, the opportunity to speak.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reason for rude behaviour important, information might be relevant</li> <li>• Give customers opportunity to speak</li> </ul>
<p>Participant I: You have to have a matter of control, where you say up to this point and no further. But there are very few people who are actually so rude that you have to end the conversation; that is actually the exception and not the norm. Maybe it is because we</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Control of interview</li> <li>• Make a decision to continue or end the interview</li> </ul>

are not an inbound centre, but an outbound, but we haven't experienced very rude customers.	
Participant K: The more advanced an interviewer is, I should say, the more able they are to deal with situations like these. It is part of their skill, I mean that is what they should be able to do – deal with these types of situations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advanced agents have the ability to deal with rude customers</li> </ul>
Participant I: If you maintain your level of confidence, you will be able to deal with such a situation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidence will enable you to deal with rude customer</li> </ul>
Participant M: Some people in the beginning don't want to do the interview, but at the end they get very interested and are actually happy that they did it. It is like a challenge to sway this person.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Challenge to sway the person to partake in interview</li> <li>• Make the person glad that he partook</li> </ul>
Participant I: That is a characteristic of a good agent, if you are able to sway a person to take part in the interview and make him glad he took part in the research.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make the person glad that he partook</li> </ul>
<b><i>Is it important to listen attentively to a customer?</i></b>	
Participant I: Yes, it goes with being focused. Typing what the person says, but at the same time determining if what this person is saying is relevant. If you do not capture relevant stuff, you are defeating the purpose of the interview.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listen attentively, goes with being focused</li> <li>• Determine relevance of information</li> <li>• Irrelevant information defeats the purpose of the interview</li> </ul>
<b><i>Anything else?</i></b>	
Participant K: I forgot to say, you should be able to work in a team and on your own. We also give prizes for the best teams.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be able to work in a team</li> </ul>
<b><i>Why in a team? I though this is a job very much for the individual, because you sit behind your desk and do your interviews alone?</i></b>	
Participant I: That as well.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be able to work individually</li> </ul>
Participant K: Ja, also individually. Where you set goals for yourself.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set goals for yourself</li> </ul>
Participant I: The thing is, if you are underperforming, you bring the whole team down or everybody who is working on that study. Everyone else will then have to work a little bit harder, and you not. So, yes, you are actually brining everyone down if you are not doing your bit.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The team is dependent on your work, which might cause stress</li> </ul>

<b><i>Speed and quality work. How do you manage to do an interview fast but still be effectively, and maintain the quality?</i></b>	
Participant I: It is possible.	
Participant M: You are very dependant on the respondent regarding the speed of the interview. They can hold you back.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respondent influences speed of interview</li> </ul>
Participant L: It balances out; one time you get a slow respondent that asks questions about everything and the next time you get a respondent who answers fast and effectively and to the point.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respondent influences speed of interview</li> </ul>
Participant I: You also learn techniques how to deal with people who actually jabber on and on.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Techniques to deal with customers</li> </ul>
Participant J: To have the speed is a combination of all the other things. The confidence, mostly. When you have the confidence in terms of you know what to do and how to do it, the speed will come with that.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The more confidence and knowledge, the faster the interview will be</li> </ul>
<b><i>What do you think call centre agents need and should get training on?</i></b>	
Participant J: I can't really say.	
Participant I: I think on-the-job-training is the most effective. You are competent in the one area, then you fall short in something else, then you master that and then you fall short on something else. It is a constant coaching and training situation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On-the-job training</li> </ul>
<b><i>Do you do other training, before, during or after? Maybe typing training?</i></b>	
Participant J: Before, but not during the day; we just don't have time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training before starting to work in call centre</li> </ul>
Participant L: You get better with the typing, because you do it every day, the more typing you do, your typing gradually improves. That is also a sort of on-the-job-training.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Typing will improve the more you do it (on-the-job)</li> </ul>
<b><i>Do you have any other comments or suggestions?</i></b>	
Participant J: Probably something with regards to stress management. That would be very good.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stress management</li> </ul>
Participant L: Space, we need more space.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More space</li> </ul>
Participant I: We need a break-away room. That in itself will de-stress the agents, just something away from the call centre, something colourful, something that could just get your mind off work. That would be a great stress reliever.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Break-away room</li> </ul>



***Thank you very much for your time and all the useful information you have given me.  
Please join me for some refreshments.***

**5.3.1.3. The customer interviews**

Ten customers were interviewed telephonically for the purpose of this study. The ages of the customers varied between 20 and 45. Five of the participants were female and five were male. All the customers have completed high school or have a higher qualification. One customer was coloured, four were white, four black and one was Indian.

<b>Response</b>		<b>Open Coding</b>
<b><i>Moderator introduction and screening questions</i></b>		
<b><i>Sam_No</i></b>	<b><i>Q3A. If I ask you only to mention ONE (the main) competency of an ideal call centre agent, what would that be?</i></b>	
902	Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication</li> </ul>
904	To be able to bring forth a message-; communication skills, know what they are asking.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bring forth a message</li> <li>• Knowledgeable agents</li> <li>• Good communication skills</li> </ul>
905	Friendliness, speak clearly and language is also important.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friendly agents</li> <li>• Speak clearly</li> <li>• Language is important</li> </ul>
906	Understanding English, speaking clearly, understanding what is required.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand English</li> <li>• Speak clearly</li> <li>• Understand requirements</li> </ul>
911	Telephone manner is important to me.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Telephone manner</li> </ul>
913	Knowledge.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge</li> </ul>
914	Needs to know how their own company works from department to department.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge regarding company works</li> </ul>
928	Know what they are talking about.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Know what they are talking about</li> </ul>
946	Friendliness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friendliness</li> </ul>
965	Fluent in English; be able to speak all languages, be outspoken, communicate, be caring and have patience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fluent in English</li> <li>• Ability to speak all languages</li> <li>• Be outspoken</li> </ul>

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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicate</li> <li>• Be caring</li> <li>• Have patience</li> </ul>
<b>Sam_No</b>	<b>Q3B Why do you say that?</b>	
902	If there is no communication, how will you know what the question is? It is also important to be a good listener, because sometime people <i>dinges</i> around with the wrong answer if they should be able to listen properly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good communication will ensure customer knows what the question is</li> <li>• Good listener, to select relevant information</li> </ul>
904	The lady I spoke to is such a sweet, nice lady. We had questionnaire problems, but she was able to make sense out of everything. She knew what she was asking and I understood her very well.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nice, sweet lady</li> <li>• Make sense out of everything</li> <li>• Knowledge regarding questionnaire</li> <li>• I understood</li> </ul>
905	Just the way he spoke to me made me feel good. He was very friendly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Through communication, making the customer feel good</li> <li>• Friendly</li> </ul>
906	Most of the time call centre agents speak English, but what if someone doesn't understand English. That means they won't be able to understand what is required, which is very important.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speak English</li> <li>• Important to understand what is required</li> </ul>
911	Telephone manner includes friendliness, raising accurate points, right reading of scripts. I prefer it to be rather a conversation than a read script, the agents must sound if they are having a conversation with me.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friendliness</li> <li>• Raising accurate points</li> <li>• Knowledge of questionnaire</li> <li>• Communicate in conversational tone</li> </ul>
913	I think they should have knowledge about the product or service they are doing research about.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge about product or service</li> </ul>
914	The call centre should know their own company's profile - who's responsible for what.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge regarding the company</li> </ul>
928	Call centre agents should know what they are talking about and provide first hand help. They should do this speedily, I don't want to be put on hold.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge regarding research</li> <li>• Provide help</li> <li>• Speed, I do not want</li> </ul>

		to be put on hold
946	If the person's approach is friendly, it just makes everything easier.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friendly approach</li> </ul>
965	If a call centre agent is patient, he or she will be able to handle all the different tempers and problems he gets to deal with.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Patient, to handle different tempers and problems</li> </ul>
<b>Sam_No</b>	<b>Q4A. What competency of the call centre agent you spoke to impressed you the most?</b>	
902	Friendliness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friendliness</li> </ul>
904	He was friendly, and nice. He was also very thankful that I participated in the interview.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friendly</li> <li>• Nice</li> <li>• Thankful for willingness to participate</li> </ul>
905	His friendliness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friendliness</li> </ul>
906	The way he tried to get it done, determined to get the questionnaire done.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determination to get it done</li> </ul>
911	The telephone manners, he was very professional.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professionalism</li> </ul>
913	His friendliness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friendliness</li> </ul>
914	His sense of humour.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sense of humour</li> </ul>
928	Her knowledge about the product she was researching.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge regarding product</li> </ul>
946	He handled the interview like a conversation. He was familiar, impersonal and friendly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicate in conversation tone</li> <li>• Familiar tone</li> <li>• Impersonal tone</li> <li>• Friendly</li> </ul>
965	The way he handled the interview, he was patient, he listened and was very understanding.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Patient</li> <li>• Listened</li> <li>• Understanding</li> </ul>
<b>Sam_No</b>	<b>Q4B What competency of the call centre agent you spoke to impressed you the least?</b>	
902	Everything was excellent. He has an excellent voice and was very friendly. Nothing didn't impress me.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excellent voice</li> <li>• Friendly</li> </ul>
904	The questions in the questionnaire, but nothing regarding the call centre agent.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questions in questionnaire</li> </ul>
905	He asked my surname and then I had to spell it too.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asking my surname</li> <li>• Basic spelling skills</li> </ul>
906	The interview took too long, he wasted my time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slow interview</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wasted my time</li> </ul>
911	It sounded like he was reading off the script, I think it should be more like a conversation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reading of a script</li> <li>Communicate in conversation tone</li> </ul>
913	Nothing didn't impress me.	
914	Nothing didn't impress me.	
928	Nothing, he was very interested in everything I had to say	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interested in everything</li> </ul>
946	He talks a bit too fast, I couldn't always hear the questions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Talks too fast</li> <li>Speak clearly</li> </ul>
965	Nothing didn't impress me.	
<b>Sam_No</b>	<b>Q6A What do you think the call centre agents' attitude should be like?</b>	
902	Friendly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Friendly</li> </ul>
904	A good attitude is important. He should be patient.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Good attitude</li> <li>Patient</li> </ul>
905	Friendly. A bad attitude will cost you the interview. If you don't hear clearly, they must ask the question again.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bad attitude will cost you the interview</li> <li>Speak clearly</li> <li>Repeat questions</li> </ul>
906	They should be friendly and helpful.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Friendly</li> <li>Helpful</li> </ul>
911	Friendliness is important, they should be to the point and no waffling.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Friendly</li> <li>To the point</li> </ul>
913	They should be friendly and speak clearly. I'm not that worried about language, as long as they speak clearly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Friendly</li> <li>Speak clearly</li> </ul>
914	How they approach you and how they come across. They should be relaxed and friendly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Approach</li> <li>Come across</li> <li>Relaxed</li> <li>Friendly</li> </ul>
928	They should be positive and patient. I don't want to speak to a grumpy call centre agent.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Positive</li> <li>Patient</li> <li>Friendly</li> </ul>
946	Positive and sound like they are enjoying what they are doing. They should also sound interested.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Positive attitude</li> <li>Enjoy what they are doing</li> <li>Interested in customer</li> </ul>

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965	The call centre agent should be able to understand people from different backgrounds. They should handle people with a bad attitude by being patient, they should be able to build that person by being positive. Being positive will show that person, positivism is the only way to solve a problem.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand people from different backgrounds</li> <li>• Handle people with bad attitude</li> <li>• Positive attitude</li> </ul>
<b>Sam_No</b>	<b>Q6B What can the call centre agent do to satisfy your needs?</b>	
902	The manner in which he spoke satisfied me. It felt as if we were having a conversation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicate in conversation tone</li> </ul>
904	I was happy at the end of the conversation, maybe they can practise more before actually doing the interview.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practise before doing the interview</li> </ul>
906	The interview can be shorter.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shorter interview</li> </ul>
911	I like it if it feels as if we are having a conversation. It should be familiar, no reading, which will give it a personal touch.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicate in conversation tone</li> <li>• Familiar tone</li> <li>• Give interview a personal touch</li> </ul>
913	Good service is all I need.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good service</li> </ul>
914	They should take the initiative to follow up on a problem and not pass it on.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiative</li> <li>• Follow-up</li> </ul>
928	Friendliness and putting my needs first.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friendliness</li> <li>• Putting my needs first</li> </ul>
965	They should be patient, as well as delivering the right information. I do not like my time to be wasted.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Patient</li> <li>• Deliver right information</li> <li>• Do not waste customers time</li> </ul>
<b>Sam_No</b>	<b>Q6C Should the call centre agent be knowledgeable and, if so, regarding what?</b>	
902	He should have knowledge regarding the research topic he is interviewing me about.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge regarding the research topic</li> </ul>
904	Product knowledge or knowledge regarding whatever he is trying to find out, also knowledge about the questionnaire.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge regarding the product</li> <li>• Knowledge regarding the research being conducted</li> <li>• Knowledge regarding</li> </ul>

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		the questionnaire
905	Knowledge about the questions and he should be able to answer my questions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge regarding the questions</li> <li>• Knowledge in order to answer customer questions</li> </ul>
906	If they are doing a promotion, he should have all the details regarding that promotion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge regarding the details of the promotion</li> </ul>
911	He should be knowledgeable regarding the specific research he is doing and should be able to answer my questions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge regarding the specific research</li> <li>• Knowledge in order to answer customers' questions</li> </ul>
913	He should be knowledgeable regarding the study he is busy with.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge regarding the research</li> </ul>
914	He should have knowledge regarding the company, depending on what the company does, whether it be, product, basic, or general knowledge.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge regarding the company</li> <li>• Knowledge regarding the basic products or general knowledge</li> </ul>
928	The call centre agent should have proper information, know what they are taking about, have a strong background knowledge.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge regarding the research</li> </ul>
946	Knowledge to answer my question.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge in order to answer customers' questions</li> </ul>
965	He should have all the information and not waste the customer's time, no arguments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not waste customers' time</li> <li>• Have all the information</li> </ul>

<b>Sam_No</b>	<b>Q10A What competency do you think the call centre agent needs training on?</b>	
904	He went through the list and studied it. Nothing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Studied lists</li> </ul>
905	His confidence was excellent.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidence was excellent</li> </ul>
913	He can get training on how to speak more clearly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speak more clearly</li> </ul>
965	Training is always important. I think once in a while they all should get trained in order to update their skills.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Update skills</li> </ul>
<b>Sam_No</b>	<b>Q10B Do you have any suggestions or comments regarding this call centre in particular?</b>	
904	They should think twice about questionnaire, before doing the interviews.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reevaluate questionnaire</li> </ul>
965	Try to get well-trained staff, which can deal with people with different attitudes. They should be able to handle a person with a bad attitude.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Well-trained staff</li> <li>• Deal with different attitudes</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>I really appreciate your time and effort!</i></b></p> <p><b><i>Thank you very much for your time and cooperation!</i></b></p>		

### 5.3.2. Axial coding

Step 2 is presented in the tables below. The general aim of this step is to interconnect the broad categories identified in the open coding. Another aim is to compare how each group (agents, customers and management) understands the content of each category. The following categories were identified:

**5.3.2.1. Communicating effectively**

<b>COMMUNICATION</b>		
<b>AGENTS</b>	<b>MANAGEMENT</b>	<b>CUSTOMERS</b>
<b>VERBAL COMMUNICATION</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Agents enjoy communicating with different people from different walks of life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicating with different customers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicating effectively with customers</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicating effectively</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Having a good voice and being articulate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bringing forth a message</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicating in a good voice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Speaking clearly</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Speaking clearly</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being outspoken</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Building rapport with customers through verbal communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being outspoken</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicating without being affected by customers' attitude</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Through communication, convincing the customer to take part</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicating in conversational tone, keeping interview informal</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicating professionally</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Remaining professional whilst communicating with a rude or abusive customer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Making the customer feel worthy through communication</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Through communication, provoking an interest in the research for the customer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicating in such a way that customers delighted that they participated in the interview</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicating in a good voice</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inducing and maintaining a reaction from the customer through effective communication</li> </ul>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Producing a satisfied customer at the end of the communication process</li> </ul>		



<b>AUDIO NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicating with confidence, as customers can hear confidence in voice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When communicating, being aware that customers can hear nonverbal communication such as a frown in your voice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicating in conversational tone</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When communicating being aware of tone of voice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Customers can also "hear" body language in voice</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When communicating with different people from different walks of life, adapting tone of voice and pronunciation of certain words</li> </ul>		

### 5.3.2.2. Listening carefully

<b>LISTENING SKILLS</b>		
<b>AGENTS</b>	<b>MANAGEMENT</b>	<b>CUSTOMERS</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being a good listener</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Listening attentively</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being good listeners</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Listening carefully to capture everything the customer says</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sounding interested in everything the customer has to say</li> </ul>

### 5.3.2.3. Being attentive

<b>ATTENTIVENESS</b>		
<b>AGENTS</b>	<b>MANAGEMENT</b>	<b>CUSTOMERS</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being attentive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attentive agents will identify relevant problems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being attentive in order to select relevant information</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attentive agents will capture exactly what the customer is saying</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The information an attentive agent captures will be accurate and detailed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being attentive in order to raise accurate points</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attentiveness will lead to only relevant information being captured</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>An attentive agent will be focused on the call and on the questions</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being attentive will lead to the agent being thorough</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If the agent is attentive, only relevant information will be captured</li> </ul>	

**5.3.2.4. Showing understanding**

<b>UNDERSTANDING</b>		
<b>AGENTS</b>	<b>MANAGEMENT</b>	<b>CUSTOMERS</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being understanding of customers' specific situations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not showing empathy, just understanding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agents who are understanding impress customers</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding what the person is going through, but not becoming emotionally involved</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding the reason for rude behaviour from customers, as it might be relevant to the research</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allowing the customers to tell what they have experienced</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show understanding by guiding customers to the right place, helping them by providing them with a number to call</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being courteous and remain professional</li> </ul>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show understanding by being considerate and phoning back at a more suitable time for the customer</li> </ul>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding means having a balance between being neutral and getting involved</li> </ul>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Showing understanding and listening to customers' stories even if agents are pressured by time</li> </ul>		

**5.3.2.5. Having the correct attitude**

<b>ATTITUDE</b>		
<b>AGENTS</b>	<b>MANAGEMENT</b>	<b>CUSTOMERS</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Remaining <b>friendly</b>, even if agents reach someone in a bad mood</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being <b>helpful</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being <b>friendly</b> and <b>nice</b> to customers</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Handling customers with <b>respect</b> and <b>tact</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being <b>polite</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being <b>professional</b></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Treating rude persons <b>professionally</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being <b>professional</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Having a <b>good sense of humour</b></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Never compromising their <b>professionalism</b></li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being <b>patient</b></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Remaining <b>positive</b> throughout day</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being <b>helpful</b></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being <b>energetic</b></li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being <b>relaxed</b></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being <b>helpful</b></li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being <b>positive</b></li> </ul>

<b>APPROACH</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The introduction of the interview is very important</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How agents approach customers is very important to the rest of the interview</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Approaching customers in a good manner</li> </ul>		

**5.3.2.6. Being consistent**

<b>CONSISTENCE</b>	
<b>AGENTS</b>	<b>MANAGEMENT</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Remaining consistent in every activity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maintaining a constant balance between being neutral and getting emotionally involved</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Personal matters should not influence interaction with the customer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Remaining consistent and not leading customers to answer in a certain way</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Remaining neutral/ impartial</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being consistently positive throughout the entire day</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Treating customers consistently throughout the day</li> </ul>	

**5.3.2.7. Having confidence**

<b>CONFIDENCE</b>		
<b>AGENTS</b>	<b>MANAGEMENT</b>	<b>CUSTOMERS</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having self-confidence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having confidence, even if agents make a mistake</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being confident and to the point</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being confident that the customer will accommodate agents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of confidence may cause the loss of a customer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidence impresses customers</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sound like you know what you are doing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidence will enable agents to deal with rude customers</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being comfortable will make agents sound confident</li> </ul>	

**5.3.2.8. Being in control of the interview**

<b>CONTROL</b>	
<b>AGENTS</b>	<b>MANAGEMENT</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remaining in control of the interview at all times</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remaining in control of the interview at all times, which includes cutting customers short if they are giving irrelevant responses</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not letting the customer take over the interview</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agents are in control of the interview and can decide whether or not to continue with the interview</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintaining composure right through the interview</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agents are in control of the interview and can decide whether or not to continue with the interview</li> </ul>	

**5.3.2.9. Being knowledgeable**

<b>KNOWLEDGE</b>		
<b>AGENTS</b>	<b>MANAGEMENT</b>	<b>CUSTOMERS</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge regarding the research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge of purpose of research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge regarding the questionnaire</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sufficient knowledge to answer customers' questions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge regarding skills to do the research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge about the company</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge of questionnaire</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agents do not need product knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge of product or service</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge of terminology</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge regarding the research topic</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge of product or service</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge to answer all the customers' questions</li> </ul>

**5.3.2.10. Conducting interviews quickly**

<b>SPEED</b>		
<b>AGENTS</b>	<b>MANAGEMENT</b>	<b>CUSTOMERS</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agents are expected to do a certain amount of interviews in a certain timeframe</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customers influence the speed of an interview</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customers do not want to be put on hold</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improving typing skills would decrease the amount of time spent on an interview</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agents should learn techniques to increase speed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customers do not want their time to be wasted</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidence and knowledge will increase speed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questionnaires should be shorter to reduce time spent on each interview</li> </ul>

**5.3.2.11. Coping with the unpredictability of the call centre**

<b>UNPREDICTABILITY</b>		
<b>AGENTS</b>	<b>MANAGEMENT</b>	<b>CUSTOMERS</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Customers’ responses cannot be predicted: for the same question agents get different opinions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Every call that an agent makes is different from the next</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Practising before doing the interview</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Agents never know what to expect</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The call centre is a varied work environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Practising the interview will make the call more predictable</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dealing with difficult situations will enable agents to deal with the same situation in future</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It is impossible to predict every situation in the call centre settings</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Practise interviews and briefing sessions will make agents familiar with questionnaire</li> </ul>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Familiarity with questionnaire will make interview more predictable</li> </ul>		

**5.3.2.12. Being flexible**

<b>FLEXIBILITY</b>		
<b>AGENTS</b>	<b>MANAGEMENT</b>	<b>CUSTOMERS</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being flexible is important as agents speak to many different people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being able to adapt to the language and literacy level of the customer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Speaking different languages will enable agents to be flexible to the customers’ preferred language</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adapting to the age, status or location of the customer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being flexible to adapt to the demands of the situation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being able to adapt to and understand the different backgrounds of customers</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Using a different tone of voice for different customers (louder, softer, fast, slow)</li> </ul>		

**5.3.2.13. Language**

<b>LANGUAGE</b>		
<b>AGENTS</b>	<b>MANAGEMENT</b>	<b>CUSTOMERS</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Helping customers in their language of choice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Overcoming language barriers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Language is important to customers</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Customers refuse to do interviews if it is not in their preferred language</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fluency in English (understanding and speaking)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Customers prefer to be helped in their own language</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Speaking all languages</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Agents should have the ability to speak more than one language</li> </ul>		

**5.3.2.14. Finding the call centre setting challenging**

<b>CHALLENGING</b>	
<b>AGENTS</b>	<b>MANAGEMENT</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Finding the unpredictability of the call centre challenging</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Convincing the customer to take part in an interview should be seen as a challenge</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Experiencing difficult customers challenging</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seeing negative feedback as a challenge to improve</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Viewing everything as a learning curve</li> </ul>	

**5.3.2.15. Stress tolerance**

<b>STRESS TOLERANCE</b>	
<b>AGENTS</b>	<b>MANAGEMENT</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Agents get put under pressure by management, which causes stress</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dealing with rude customers to reach targets increases the level of stress agents experience</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pressure from customers adds to the stress</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Realising that the abuse from customers is not personal will decrease the amount of stress experienced</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The pressure of completing a certain amount of interviews in a certain timeframe adds to the stress</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In a call centre the team is dependant on your work which can add to the stress</li> </ul>

**5.3.2.16. Being goal driven**

<b>GOAL DRIVEN</b>	
<b>AGENTS</b>	<b>MANAGEMENT</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being goal driven, due to the target of a certain amount of interviews in a certain timeframe</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being goal driven in order to reach the target set by management before the end of the day</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Setting goals for themselves</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Putting up with rude customers to reach their goals</li> </ul>

**5.3.2.17. Proactive problem solving**

<b>PROACTIVE PROBLEM SOLVING</b>		
<b>AGENTS</b>	<b>MANAGEMENT</b>	<b>CUSTOMERS</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being a quick thinker</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having initiative</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having initiative</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thinking on one's feet</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being able to provide information to customers, which they are not supplied with</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Following up on problems</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Looking for the answer</li> </ul>		

**5.3.2.18. Teamwork**

<b>TEAMWORK</b>		
<b>AGENTS</b>	<b>MANAGEMENT</b>	<b>CUSTOMERS</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being able to work in a team</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being able to work independently</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In a call centre the team is dependant on your work</li> </ul>	



**5.3.2.19. Basic telephone manner**

<b>BASIC TELEPHONE MANNER</b>		
<b>AGENTS</b>	<b>MANAGEMENT</b>	<b>CUSTOMERS</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Possessing the basic skills when starting to work in the call centre</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Telephone manner includes knowing how to read, knowing the proper greetings and using the customer’s name throughout the interview</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Telephone manner includes the reading of the script and being able to spell</li> </ul>

**5.3.3. Selective coding**

In this final step, the different categories identified in axial coding are integrated and refined. The previous categories are examined to make comparisons and contrasts between the three groups.

**5.3.3.1. Communicating effectively**

From the axial coding it is clear that all three groups think an ideal agent should be able to communicate effectively. The first sub-theme of communication is verbal communication. Communicating effectively includes the ability to communicate with different people in a professional way without your having own personal feelings influence the process. Call centre agents deal with people from different backgrounds, ages and locations and therefore should be able to communicate with people from different walks of life. Through effective communication, call centre agents should build rapport with the customer. Call centre agents should be able to provoke an interest in the research for the customer and thereby induce and maintain a reaction from the customer. Communication also includes more general aspects such as being outspoken, having a good voice and speaking clearly. The second sub-theme identified is nonverbal communication. Agents must be aware of the fact that, although customers can't physically see them, they can hear their body language through their voices. Tone of voice is very important when emphasising and pronouncing different words to different people. Customers want the communication to take place in a conversational tone, which means the agent should communicate in an informal manner.

#### **5.3.3.2. Listening carefully**

In a call centre setting it is important to be a good listener. Agents should listen carefully to the customer without being distracted by their surroundings or personal matters. Agents should sound interested in everything customers have to say, as customers indicated that an interested call centre agent impress them. Agents have to listen in order to correctly capture everything the customer says.

#### **5.3.3.3. Being attentive**

Listening skills are closely associated with being attentive. A call centre agent who is focused will not only correctly capture what the customer is saying, but also capture only relevant responses. An attentive call centre agent will ensure accurate and detailed information, which is very necessary because irrelevant data defeats the purpose of the interview. Being attentive will further ensure that call centre agents raise accurate points, which is what customers desire. Attentiveness will lead to a call centre agent being thorough and detail-focused which contributes to the high quality of the research.

#### **5.3.3.4. Showing understanding**

It is very important for a call centre agent to maintain a balance between being neutral and getting involved. An understanding agent will be considerate to the customers' situation and if necessary phone back at a later, more convenient, time. Although agents are pressed for a certain amount of interviews, they should at all times be understanding and give customers the opportunity to finish their complaint regardless of relevance. Being understanding will lead to the customer agreeing to be interviewed again at a later stage, while showing no understanding will lead the customer to believe that the agent is being rude. Whilst being understanding is important, agents should always remain professional and not let personal opinions and beliefs influence their understanding of the customers' situation.

#### **5.3.3.5. Having the correct attitude**

The attitude of an ideal call centre agent should be friendly and professional, regardless of the customers' attitude, the time of day, or any personal matters. An ideal agent will remain positive and energetic throughout the day. Customers expect call centre agents to be very friendly and even have a good sense of humour. An ideal agent will go out of his or her way to help the customer and answer any questions or solve any problems the customer has. The call centre agent should be polite and patient with the customer by being willing to repeat questions, explaining confusing questions in the questionnaire, by answering the customers' questions and by giving customers the opportunity to state their case. Customers should always be treated with respect, even when they are abusive. In cases where customers are abusive, the interview should be ended with tact. This attitude should be maintained regardless of the customers' disposition, the agent's personal opinions, the time of day or personal issues.

A sub-theme of attitude refers to how the call centre agent approaches customers. How agents approach the customer, as well as how they introduce the interview, are very important for the rest of the interview. If the approach is wrong or the introduction does not create an interest in the research, then the interview is likely to fail.

#### **5.3.3.6. Being consistent**

Customers always want to be treated in a friendly fashion and with respect, which implies that an ideal agent should be consistent. Agents should have a positive attitude throughout the day and not let personal matters influence their interaction with the customer. Also, agents should always maintain a balance between being impartial and getting emotionally involved. Call centre agents who do not have this balance, might lead a customer to respond in a certain negative manner.

#### **5.3.3.7. Having confidence**

If call centre agents show confidence, customers will accommodate them by participating in the interview. Not only does confidence impress customers, but it also helps call centre agents to deal with rude customers. When agents are unsure, they may lose the customer. Customers accommodate agents who sound as if they know what they are doing. An ideal call centre agent will thus be confident and to the point.

#### **5.3.3.8. Being in control of the interview**

Having confidence will put the agent in charge of the interview. Being in control of the interview at all times is very important. The call centre agent has the power to decide whether to continue with the interview or not. When customers get abusive, agents can end the interview. Agents should not let the customer talk about irrelevant matters, but remain in control of the interview in a professional manner.

#### **5.3.3.9. Being knowledgeable**

An ideal call centre agent will be knowledgeable about the research, the product, the service, the company, research methods and the terminology of the research project. Customers expect call centre agents to be able to answer all their questions, whether these are about products, services, the company itself or regarding the research. A call centre agent should be familiar with the questionnaire and know what they are talking about. An ideal agent is a knowledgeable agent.

#### **5.3.3.10. Conducting interviews quickly**

Acquiring all the identified competencies, for example confidence, knowledge and a good telephone manner, will lead to a speedy interview. An ideal agent will conduct interviews quickly, not only because of the timeframe set out by management, but also not to waste the customer's time.

#### **5.3.2.11. Coping with the unpredictability of the call centre**

The call centre is regarded as a very unpredictable environment, where every situation is different. To function effectively in this irregular setting, it is important for the call centre agent to manage this unpredictability. One way to ensure that the situation is not totally unpredictable is by studying the questionnaire thoroughly and doing a few practise interviews before starting the actual interview. Management can conduct briefing sessions not only to familiarise agents with the questionnaire, but also to provide information about the company, product or service. Having experienced a difficult situation will also contribute to a more predictable environment, as agents will have the experience to manage similar difficult situations in future.

#### **5.3.3.12. Being flexible**

The unpredictability of the call centre makes it imperative for an ideal agent to be flexible. Customers vary in terms of age, status, location, language, literacy and background. An ideal call centre agent should be able to adapt to each customer and thus be flexible to suit their unique needs. An ideal call centre agent will be flexible and adapt to the requirements of the situation, without compromising professionalism.

#### **5.3.3.13. Language**

Accommodating customers in their language of choice will lead to a satisfied customer base. An option would be to transfer the customer to an agent who can speak the customer's preferred language fluently, but customers do not want to be put on hold. Management should thus ensure that call centre agents are capable of speaking more than one language and doing this fluently. Management should recruit agents who are fluent in English and give preference to agents who are bilingual or multilingual.

#### **5.3.3.14. Finding the call centre setting challenging**

Agents who find the unpredictability of the call centre challenging will fit perfectly into this setting. An ideal call centre agent will perceive situations such as rude customers, negative feedback and not knowing what to expect next as a challenge. Management prefer call centre agents who find it a challenge to persuade a person to partake in an interview. When management recruit new call centre agents, they should look for a person who loves a challenge; someone who perceives the unpredictability, the abuse from customers and negative feedback as challenging.

#### **5.3.3.15. Stress tolerance**

Agents experience stress because they are pressurised from different sides. They deal daily with rude customers who just want to finish the interview and with management, who expect a certain number of calls in a certain time frame. Working in a team and contributing to the team effort can also cause stress if your performance is lower than the other agents' performance. Realising that the abuse over the phone isn't personal will help reduce stress levels. An ideal call centre agent will be able to deal with the stress of targets set by management, and still be able to keep the customers happy and contribute to the team performance.

#### **5.3.3.16. Being goal driven**

Call centre agents are required to do a certain number of interviews in a certain time. Call centre agents should set goals for themselves and keep to those goals. Agents have to put up with rude customers to reach their targets. In order to be an ideal call centre agent, an agent should be goal driven.

#### **5.3.3.17. Proactive problem solving**

Customers sometimes require information that call centre agents do not possess. The call centre agent must have initiative, be a quick thinker, and be able to provide the customer with this information. An ideal call centre agent will have initiative, think on his or her feet and be a proactive problem solver.

#### **5.3.3.18. Teamwork**

It seems obvious that an ideal call centre agent should be able to work independently and also in a team. Poor work performance will influence the entire team performance.

#### **5.3.3.19. Basic telephone manner**

Basic knowledge agents should possess before starting to work in the call centre include typing skills, a good telephone manner and computer literacy. An ideal agent will possess basic telephone skills such as how to greet respondents appropriately, using the respondents' name throughout the interview and how to read properly.

### **5.4. CONCLUSION**

A very important competency, which is necessary for this interaction over the phone, seems to be good communication skills. Agents should focus on verbal as well as nonverbal communication. Agents must be able to speak clearly, be outspoken and have the ability to talk to people. A part of communication is the competency listening ability. Agents should listen carefully not only to sound interested in the customer, but also to correctly capture everything that has been said. Listening ability can be taken even further and be described as attentiveness. Attentive call centre agents will ensure that relevant, accurate and detailed information is gathered from each interview.

An ideal call centre agent must be understanding of the customers' situation without getting emotionally involved. Being understanding will secure the customer as a future respondent. Attitude is important when call centre agents interact with the customers. Call centre agents must be friendly, positive, helpful, energetic, polite, respectful and at all times professional. The way in which agents approach customers is important and influences the rest of the conversation. If agents project confidence, customers will accommodate them. Not only does confidence impress customers, but it also helps call centre agents to deal with rude customers. Call centre agents should always be in control of the interview and remember that they have the power to decide whether to continue with the interview or not.

Confidence is acquired when call centre agents are knowledgeable. Call centre agents should have knowledge regarding the product, service or general purpose of the research they are conducting. Knowing the questionnaire is very important before starting with the interviewing. Agents should also have basic computer, typing and telephone skills. Confidence and knowledge will lead call centre agents to conduct a fast but effective interview. Speed is important to reach targets and also to not waste the customers' time.

The unpredictability of the call centre calls for agents to study the questionnaire and go through briefing sessions in order to make circumstances a bit more predictable. This unpredictability of the call centre setting requires that call centre agents be flexible to adapt to the different situations and customers they face daily. Flexibility is also required in terms of language choice. The choice of the language spoken is very important to customers, who prefer to be helped in their own language. It is thus important that call centre agents are able to speak more than one language fluently.

The unpredictability of the call centre environment presents many challenges. Ideal call centre agents will perceive situations such as rude customers, negative feedback and not knowing what to expect next as challenging. These challenging situations are, however, stressful. Agents experience pressure from both customers and management. A competent call centre agent will be stress tolerant and manage any stressful situation effectively. Adding to the stress in the call centre environment are the targets set by management. Call centre agents should be goal driven, meaning that they set goals and stick to them. Being a proactive problem solver will assist agents in reaching targets in an effective manner. Call centre agents should have the initiative to provide information they are not supplied with, solve problems or handle any other unforeseen situation. Finally, an ideal call centre agent will be a team player who is also able to also work individually.

The following chapter will indicate how the competencies identified in this study by the call centre management, call centre agents and customers are connected to the reported literature and how these competencies relate to the systems theory.



## CHAPTER 6

### DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 6.1. INTRODUCTION

Each person, whether they be a call centre agent, a customer or a manager, is different and will respond differently to the same thing (Dell, 1985). Although a person will have unique experiences, through the use of language, these individual experiences become shared meanings (Bielfield, 1997). If a researcher connects these different experiences or perceptions, this will give a "glimpse of the whole relationship" (Keeney, 1983, p.37). Therefore, the closest we can get to the truth is by identifying the shared meanings within the individual meanings (Bateson, 1972) of the respondents' perception of the competencies needed to be an ideal call centre agent.

In this chapter the researcher will attempt to indicate how the competencies identified by the call centre management, call centre agents and customers are connected to the literature explored in chapter 2. The researcher will also attempt to indicate how these competencies may be integrated with and related to the systems theory. Recommendations with regard to training for call centre agents will be made and, finally, recommendations with regard to future research will be made. The aim of this chapter is thus to obtain a more integrated understanding of the competencies of the call centre agent in the context of the systems theory.

#### 6.2. DISCUSSION

##### 6.2.1. Communication

The importance of communication for an ideal call centre agent is emphasised in literature and from the results presented in this study. Vetere and Gale (1987) state that within a system all processes depend upon communication, or in other words a flow of information from and to the call centre agent in the form of instructions or

constraints. Ruben (1983) adds that communication is the most basic life process and is the process of transforming information in order to adapt to the environment.

The literature reported that an ideal call centre agent should have the ability to effectively convey ideas and information (Barnhart, 2000) and should be able to understand customers (Freeman & Rustnell, 2000). Communication skills include effective questioning techniques (NQF, 1998).

The results explained the competency communication further by noting that communication skills include the ability to communicate with different people in a professional way without personal feelings influencing the process. Effective verbal communication includes the ability to communicate with people from different walks of life, the ability to build rapport with the customer, the ability to provoke an interest in the research from the customer and in so doing, induce and maintain a reaction from the customer. Communicating effectively also includes more general aspects such as being outspoken, having a good voice and speaking clearly.

Although the literature (Barnhart, 2000; Boshoff, 1999) states that service representatives should also be able to communicate effectively through written communication, no reference was made of this in this particular study. The conclusion is thus that in this particular call centre under study, written communication is not a competency required to be an ideal call centre agent.

Communication also includes nonverbal communication, which includes hesitations, shifts in tempo of speech, overtones of voice and so on, that the customer can hear over the phone. Customers want the communication to take place in a conversational tone. Bateson (1972) believes that nonverbal communication is more important than verbal communication as this provides the customer with the underlying message that agents do not want to convey through verbal communication, such as that they are upset (faster tempo); tired (a yawn) or unsure (hesitation).

Agents should be trained to communicate effectively verbally and nonverbally. When training current agents, management should remind agents that, although customers can't see their body language, they can hear the nonverbal communication in their

voices. When recruiting new agents, management must ensure that they can communicate effectively with different people. Such communication includes building rapport, provoking interest, conveying information, being outspoken, speaking clearly and performing these actions this professionally, without being affected by personal feelings.

### **6.2.2. Listening carefully**

The results of this study found listening skills, which demonstrate the ability and desire to listen actively, to be an important competency for an ideal call centre agent. This was supported by the literature on service representatives. In the framework of the systems theory, feedback is very important to the functioning of any system. When agents do not listen to the feedback from the customer, mistakes may become greater as agents do not take action based on the feedback (Ruben, 1983). Agents thus have to listen carefully to self-regulate or self-enrich.

Listening ability, according to the literature, includes the ability and desire to listen actively (Barnhart, 2000). Listening skills also include the ability to respond to the statements and comments of others; to use reflective responses and clarifying questions to assure the other person that they have been heard and the ability to remember notable points covered by the customer (Barnhart, 2000; Charos, 1999; Competencies on target, 2001).

The following competencies were not identified in the literature, but became evident from the results of this study: the ability to listen without being distracted by surroundings or personal matters, sounding interested in everything customers have to say and the ability to correctly capture everything the customer says.

Training in listening skills should focus not only on sounding interested in what the customer says, but also on correctly capturing everything that has been said. Agents should also be trained to remain unaffected by their surroundings whilst talking to the customer on the phone. Recruitment of new agents should be based on their ability to listen attentively.

### **6.2.3. Attentiveness**

Being attentive was found, by the literature and this study's results, to be a critical competency of an ideal call centre agent. Being attentive and detail-focused is an important concept in systems thinking as it allows the call centre agent to focus on the customer as a whole and also to keep detail such as the context of the customer in mind (Senge, 1990).

The literature explains being attentive as having a concern for accuracy and quality (Competencies on target, 2001), correctly completing work, monitoring and checking work (Freeman & Rustnell, 2000); and finally delivering on promises dependently and accurately (Bennington *et al*, 2000; Spencer & Spencer, 1993).

The results of this study confirm these findings and add to them by asserting that attentiveness is the ability to correctly capture relevant responses; the ability to gather accurate and detailed information; the ability to raise accurate points and the ability to be thorough and detail-focused.

Agents should be trained to be thorough and detail-focused, to be accurate and to the point. Consequently, training call centre agents to be more attentive or recruiting new agents who are attentive will ensure that relevant, accurate and detailed information is gathered from each interview.

### **6.2.4. Understanding**

Whilst the literature uses the word empathy, the results found this competency better described as understanding. According to the systems approach, it is impossible to understand customers without putting them in context. It is thus important to include the customers' emotional experience and how it is constructed and processed, or as Johnson (1998) puts it, the other intrapsychic half of the feedback loop.

From the literature and the results, being understanding includes understanding the customers' predicament and making an effort to understand the customers' specific

needs. Providing the customer with caring, individualised attention also forms part of being understanding. The literature states that understanding includes what the customer is feeling and what their motives and concerns are (Boshoff & Allen, 2000; NQF, 1998; Spencer & Spencer, 1993).

The results from this study contributed to the explanation of understanding by saying it includes having a balance between being neutral and getting involved; and being considerate to the customers' situation by, for example, phoning back at a later, more convenient, time. Although agents are pressed for a certain number of interviews, they should at all times be understanding and give customers the opportunity to finish their complaint regardless of its relevance. Understanding agents should remain professional at all times and not let personal opinions and beliefs influence their understanding of the customers' situation.

Training can be focused on how to be more understanding in any situation without getting emotionally involved. When recruiting, management should look for agents who will be considerate to the customers' predicament and provide the customer with caring, individualised attention.

#### **6.2.5. Attitude**

In the framework of the systems theory each persons' response in a relationship is organised by the response of the other person in that relationship (Bateson, 1972). A call centre agent's attitude will thus influence the customers' attitude. For example, if the call centre agent has a friendly attitude, it will pull for an even friendlier response from the customer. For this reason it is important that a call centre agent has the correct attitude. This was confirmed in both the literature on call centres and the results of this study.

The literature and results state that a call centre agent (or service representative) should be friendly, considerate, self-motivated, professional, helpful and pleasant (Boshoff, 1999; Career Services, 2001; Lorimer, 1999).

The results of this study add to this information by indicating that call centre agents should consistently maintain a friendly and professional attitude, regardless of the

customers' attitude, the time of day, or any personal matters. Call centre agents should remain positive and energetic throughout the day; have a good sense of humour and go out of their way to help the customer and answer any questions or solve any problems the customer has. Ideal call centre agents will be polite and patient by being willing to repeat questions, explain confusing questions in the questionnaire, answer the customers' questions and give customers the opportunity to state their case. Customers should always be treated with respect, even when they are abusive. In such cases, the interview should be ended with tact. An ideal call centre agent will approach customer in the correct manner. The approach towards a customer is very important. If the approach is wrong or the introduction does not create an interest, then the interview is likely to fail.

Because call centre agents have contact with customers the entire day, their attitudes are very important. Management can incorporate motivational sessions to keep agents positive and energetic. Training sessions can include how to remain professional during all situations. When recruiting call centre agents, management should ensure that these agents are friendly, positive, helpful, energetic, polite, respectful and at all times professional.

#### **6.2.6. Consistency**

No evidence of this competency was found in the literature. Repeated occurrence of this theme in the results, however, show that it cannot be ignored. An ideal call centre agent will be consistent throughout the day. Being consistent includes having a positive attitude throughout the day and not letting personal matters influence interaction with the customer. Furthermore consistency includes maintaining a balance between being impartial and getting emotionally involved. Being consistent means that the agent treats all customers in the same way.

Management should emphasise the importance of remaining consistent throughout the day. Being consistent includes being neutral. When recruiting, management must ensure that the call centre agents they employ will not let personal issues affect their interaction with the customer.

### **6.2.7. Confidence**

Again no evidence was found in the literature regarding this competency. The results, however, indicate that being confident is imperative in order to be an ideal call centre agent. Having confidence will ensure that the customers accommodate agents by participating in the interview. Confidence also assists agents to with rude customers. A confident agent is brief and to the point. When management recruit new call centre agents they must make sure that these are confident people.

### **6.2.8. Control**

According to Vetere and Gale (1987), the capacity of a system to execute control depends on the amount of information it can process and store. All control processes depend upon communication. Both the literature and the results point out that control is very important. Career Services (2001) mentions that service representatives should take control of the conversation.

The results confirm the literature by saying having confidence will put the agent in charge of the interview. The call centre agent has the power to decide whether to continue with the interview or not. When customers become abusive, agents can end the interview. Agents should not let the customer talk about irrelevant matters, but should remain in control of the interview in a professional manner. Managers should train agents to take charge of the interview and not let the customer talk about irrelevant matters.

### **6.2.9. Knowledge**

An ideal call centre agent should be knowledgeable. Senge (1990) feels that this knowledge should not be "compartmentalised", as compartments creates a false sense of confidence (p.283). The call centre operates as a whole, and agents should not focus their knowledge on one area, because the openness of the system will then be lost.

The literature as well as the results underline the fact that a call centre agent should be knowledgeable. The literature specifically emphasises product or service knowledge. This involves the benefits, usage and features of the product or service (Career Services, 2001; Criterion Partnership, 2001; Freeman & Rustnell, 2000; NQF, 1998). Agents should be able to acquire and then apply knowledge quickly (ATO, 2002).

The results verify product knowledge as being essential, but add that an ideal call centre agent should also be knowledgeable regarding the research, the company, research methods and the terminology of the research project. The results show that the agent should have adequate knowledge in order to answer all the customers' questions, whether these concern products, services, the company itself or the research. Agents should also have knowledge regarding the questionnaire.

Management should have briefing sessions before the start of each new project to enlighten the agents about the product, service or general purpose of the research. Agents should receive training on the questionnaire and practise this questionnaire thoroughly before attempting to start interviewing. When recruiting, call centre agents need not have any specific knowledge, but they should acquire this as soon as they start working.

#### **6.2.10. Speed**

The literature notes that, although customers require accuracy and detail, they still want their requests to be solved in a timely manner (Boshoff, 1999; Jones & Jaebeom, 1997). The results support that a speedy interview is important to customers. From the results it is evident that acquiring all the identified competencies, for example confidence, knowledge and basic telephone manner, will contribute to a speedy interview. Management can teach agents techniques to assist them conduct a fast but effective interview. Agents suggest that better typing skills would lead to a faster interview. Recruitment criteria could include typing speed and speed for conducting an interview.



#### **6.2.11. Unpredictability**

In the literature no mention is made of the unpredictability of the call centre. In the results of this study, however, it became evident that an ideal call centre agent must be able to handle the unpredictability of the call centre. As the call centre is a very unpredictable environment, it is important for management to train current agents to manage this changeableness. Agents feel that studying the questionnaire, having briefing sessions and dealing with similar difficult situations will assist in making the call centre a more predictable setting.

#### **6.2.12. Flexibility**

According to the systems theory, flexibility will allow the creation of a new system through social change (Bateson, 1972). If call centre agents are flexible, they will be able to adapt to management and the customers' demands, thus ensuring a satisfied customer base.

In the literature, flexibility is defined as the ability and willingness to change, keep an open mind, implement new approaches, maintain perceptual objectivity, stay objective, be resilient and manage the process of change. Flexibility also includes the ability to conform to procedures and adapt to certain processes (Spencer & Spencer, 1993; Service Centre Roles & Responsibility Review, 2002).

The results confirm this and contribute by saying agents should be flexible in order to deal with customers from various walks of life and adapt to their specific needs. Agents should not compromise professionalism in any situation, but still be flexible and adapt to the requirements of the situation. Flexibility and adaptability should therefore be qualities to consider when recruiting new agents. Training current agents to be more flexible will benefit the call centre, because customers will appreciate call centre agents accommodating them in their language or by keeping their age, status or background in mind.

### **6.2.13. Language**

The existence, functioning and development of an open system, like the call centre agent, requires continual exchanges with different contexts. This exchange can take place in the form of communication. Ford and Lerner (1992) believe that meanings can be communicated if different individuals have the same linguistic images linked to similar abstract representations. Understanding each other's language will activate one another's abstract and imagistic representations.

Although the literature makes no reference to language in particular, from the above statement and the results from this study, the importance of language in a call centre setting is evident. Customers prefer to conduct the interview in their language of choice. Management should thus ensure that call centre agents are capable of speaking more than one language fluently. Management should recruit agents who are fluent in English and give preference to agents who are bi- or even multilingual. Current agents should receive lessons in second or third languages in order to be fluent in whichever language the customer prefers.

### **6.2.14. Challenge**

According to Levine and Fitzgerald (1992), as the call centre as a system develops, its dynamic structure emerges as a results of feedback processes. Call centre agents should find adapting to the demands of the feedback a challenge.

The literature makes no mention of the unpredictability of the call centre and thus the challenges that accompany the call centre are not discussed. The results, however, repeatedly indicate that the call centre is an unpredictable setting accompanied by various challenges. For this reason an ideal call centre agent will perceive situations such as rude customers, negative feedback, persuading a person to partake in an interview and not knowing what to expect next as a challenge. When management are recruiting new call centre agents, they should look for a person who loves a challenge; someone who perceives the unpredictability, the abuse from customers and negative feedback as challenging.

#### **6.2.15. Stress tolerance**

Stress causes a variable to take on a value close to the higher or lower level of the next variable, resulting in a lack of flexibility. Because the variables are interdependent, the other variables also suffer lack of flexibility. To ensure flexibility in the call centre, it is important to keep stress levels as low as possible. Because the call centre environment is a stressful environment, which management cannot do a great deal about, call centre agents should be stress tolerant.

From the literature it is obvious that the call centre is a stressful environment in which call centre agents must deal with rude, demanding, or distraught customers, face crises, work with new and complicated technology and constantly monitor each call (Peter, 2001). Being stress tolerant is the ability to perform under conditions where pressure, resistance or opposition makes completing the work difficult (Competencies on target, 2001). Being stress tolerant is the ability to remain productive in times of crisis or critical events (Barnhart, 2000).

The results of this study contribute to our understanding of this competency. Contributors to stress in the call centre include dealing with rude customers and pressure from management, who expect a certain number of calls in a certain timeframe. Working in a team and contributing to the team effort can also cause stress if your performance is lower than the other agents' performance. An ideal call centre agent will be able to deal with stress caused by the targets set by management, and will still keep the customers happy and contribute to the team performance.

Training should be focused on stress management, although it would be ideal to appoint agents who are already stress tolerant. Training recommendations would be a stress management course, how to handle a huge amount of work in a certain timeframe or how to handle abusive customers. When recruiting new agents, management should look for agents who are able to cope with these stressful situations. The agent as part of a bigger system should remain as stress free as possible in order to ensure flexibility.

#### **6.2.16. Goal-orientation**

In the context of the systems theory goal-orientated behaviour is a reaction to negative feedback, or as Senge (1990) calls it, balancing or stabilising feedback. For example, if the feedback from the customer is that the interview should be shorter, the agent sets a goal to conduct a faster interview; or if management states that they need 10 completed interviews, the agent sets a goal to complete 10 interviews in three hours.

Although the literature does not refer to the importance of being goal-driven, the importance of this competency becomes apparent in the results of this study. Call centre agents should be goal-driven in order to reach targets set by management. Being goal-driven means tolerating rude customers in order to reach targets. Recruitment should be directed at agents who are goal-driven. Training should be focussed on reaching targets, setting goals and sticking to them.

#### **6.2.17. Proactive problem solving**

Senge (1990) states that being proactive means being in charge of your future. Proactive agents can influence the bigger system (the organisation), which is again part of a bigger system (society), which can in turn influence the future of the organisation. Proactiveness comes from "seeing how we contribute to our own problems" (Senge, 1990, p.21).

In the literature, problem-solving skills are explained as representing an analytical thinking process in order to solve problems. This is reflected in call centre agents' ability to gather information and select the best possible solution. Problem-solving skills include practical intelligence; reasoning; planning skills and creative thinking (Barnhart, 2000; Competencies on target, 2001; Freeman & Rustnell, 2000; Service Centre Roles & Responsibility Review, 2002; Spencer & Spencer, 1993).

The results contribute by saying that customers sometimes require information a call centre agent is not supplied with. The call centre agent must have initiative, be a quick thinker, and provide the customer with this information. Management should

train call centre agents to be proactive, not just in providing information, but also in solving problems or dealing with any other issues. It is important that managers employ agents who are proactive problem solvers.

#### **6.2.18. Teamwork**

A system is a whole, which is constructed of various subsystems. Each of these subsystems contributes to the bigger system's performance (Levine & Fitzgerald, 1992). It is thus very important for each call centre agent to perform individually and in a team in order to contribute to the overall performance of the call centre.

The literature highlights the importance of collaboration, work relationships and the ability to work in a team. Teamwork implies working cooperatively with others, which requires interpersonal skills (Service Centre Roles & Responsibility Review, 2002; Spencer & Spencer, 1993). The necessity of an ideal call centre agent being able to work independently and also in a team became evident in this study. Poor work performance will influence the entire teams' performance. Management should train agents to work in a team or should aim to recruit team players who are also able to work individually.

#### **6.2.19. Basic telephone and technology skills**

The literature states that all call centre agents must have the ability to apply computer or telephone technology. Other basic skills include typing skills and retrieving information from the database (Career Services, 2001; Competencies on target, 2001; Freeman & Rustnell, 2000; NQF, 1998).

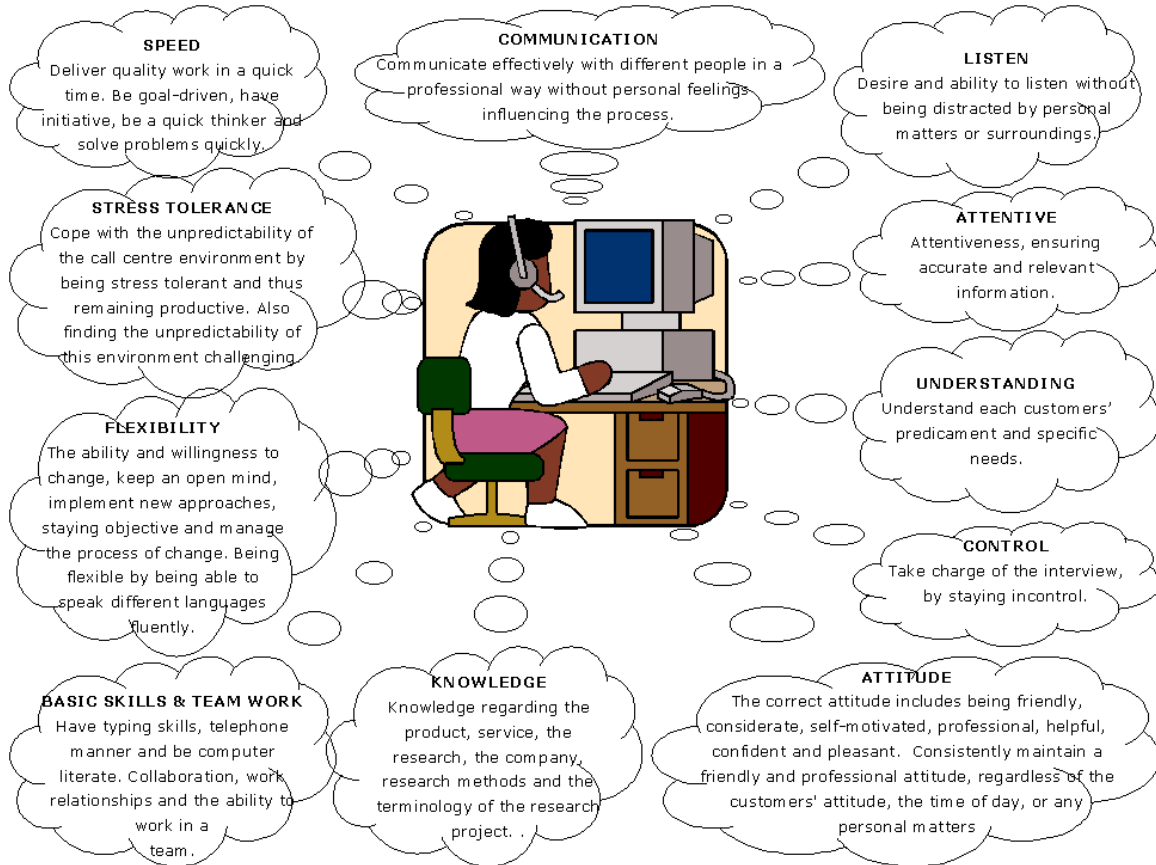
The results confirm this by noting that basic knowledge that agents should possess before starting to work in the call centre include typing skills, a good telephone manner and computer literacy. An ideal agent will possess basic telephone skills such as how to greet customers appropriately, how to use the respondents' name throughout the interview and how to read properly. When management recruits new agents they must ensure that they already possess these basic skills. Current agents who do not have these basic skills should be given the appropriate training.

### **6.3. CONCLUSION**

From the results and the discussion it became clear that an ideal agent would be able to communicate effectively with different people in a professional way, without personal feelings influencing the process. The agent would listen without being distracted by surroundings or personal matters. The ideal agent would be attentive, ensuring accurate and detailed information. An ideal agent would show understanding of the customers' predicament and make an effort to understand the customers' specific needs. Having the 'correct' attitude includes being friendly, considerate, self-motivated, professional, helpful, confident and pleasant. An ideal agent would consistently maintain a friendly and professional attitude, regardless of the customers' attitude, the time of day, or any personal matters. Ideal agents would stay in control of the interview at all times. An ideal agent is a knowledgeable agent. This agent will have knowledge regarding the product or service, the research, the company, research methods and the terminology of the research project. An ideal agent would be able to deliver quality work in a short period of time. An ideal call centre agent must be able to handle the unpredictability of the call centre and find this unpredictability challenging. This unpredictability also calls for an ideal agent to be flexible and adapt to the demands of the situation. One manner in which an ideal agent can be flexible is by being multilingual. In any stressful situation an ideal agent would be stress tolerant and remain productive in times of crisis or critical events. Ideal call centre agents would be goal-driven, have initiative, be a quick thinker and solve problems quickly. It is necessary for an ideal call centre agent to work independently and also in a team. The final competency that an ideal call centre agent would have is a mastery of basic telephone and technological skills such as speedy typing, a good telephone manner and computer literacy.

An ideal agent would possess all these competencies and would apply them effectively everyday at the call centre.

**Figure 6: Visual presentation of competencies needed to be an ideal call centre agent**



## 6.4. CRITICISM REGARDING THE STUDY

### 6.4.1. Generalisation

According to Graziano and Raulin (1999), generalisation is the process of assuming that the findings of this study can also be applied to other situations (in our case, other call centres agents in other call centres). Investigating only one call centre limits the generalisability of the results from this study. For future research it is recommended that more than one call centre be involved in the research. Using inbound and outbound call centres, instead of just one outbound call centre, would have allowed the results to be generalised to both kinds of call centres. Using more

respondents in the focus group or using more than one focus group for the agents would also have added to the generalisability of the study.

#### **6.4.2. Data collection from customers**

The data collection from the customers was done by means of telephonic interviews. Open as well as closed questions were asked. Using additional qualitative methods to gather customer perceptions may have provided richer descriptions of their perceptions. Focus groups would have produced data and insights that were not accessible because there was no interaction between the different customers (Morgan, 1990; Ward *et al*, 1991).

#### **6.4.3. Verification**

The researcher did not make use of other coders to assist in analysing the data. Using another person would have ensured intercoder reliability. The reliability of the study would have been higher if different coders were used and these coders agreed with each other regarding the results (Neuman, 1997).

### **6.5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

#### **6.5.1. Training programmes**

Each competency identified in this study should be dealt with individually in order to determine what training is needed to acquire or develop the specific competency. These training guidelines should be compiled in a training programme for call centre agents. This training programme will assist management with agent training. The guidelines should be made available to all call centre agents.

#### **6.5.2. An inbound competency study**

As the particular study only used an outbound call centre, the same research can be conducted with an inbound call centre. The results would determine if agents working in an outbound call centre require different competencies than those working in an inbound call centre and vice versa. The study would ease the task of



recruiting agents for specific call centres. Another suggestion would be to measure another type of outbound call centre, for example, a sales call centre. The competencies required for working in different outbound call centres, for example outbound sales versus outbound research centres, can in this way be compared.

### **6.5.3. Cross-cultural studies**

Emerging from the results is the fact that cultural concerns in a call centre are mostly related to cross-cultural issues rather than interracial issues (Ruben, 1983). Clearly there is a need to explore communication between different cultures and how cross-cultural issues affect interaction over the phone.

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