

by Richard L. Bencin & David Maggiore

Why call centers hire and keep "C-rated" managers (Part One).

Your Prescription for Mediocrity

If more call centers dispensed with counterproductive hiring practices and followed Jack Welch's advice, they'd get and keep the top-tier talent they claim to want.

In his book, *Jack Straight from the Gut*, the former GE CEO suggests ranking managers into "A," "B" and "C" categories. "A's" are "...people filled with passion, committed to making things happen [and] open to ideas from anywhere."

"C players" are the opposite: "People who can't get the job done, enervate rather than energize and procrastinate rather than deliver." GE annually asks these managers, the bottom 10%, to leave.

Unfortunately, too many call centers endeavor to find and retain the "C" candidates. How can this be? Consider these reasons:

1. *Requiring a college degree.* Example: A utility that demanded a college degree of candidates for a scheduling & planning manager, though 75% of such managers don't have a college degree. Result: The client disqualified 75% of the premier candidates. The utility should only have required experience working with scheduling software.

2. *Depending on a psychological test.* A client of ours once interviewed a premier candidate for vice president of telesales. She was "a perfect candidate," except that her personality test didn't match with the boss'. Turned down, she subsequently went to work — and delivered great results — for another company as a senior telesales executive.

To depend solely on psychological tests to make critical hiring decisions

is absurd. Rather, companies should consider the applicant's success in school, the military, career and extra curricular activities. Psychological tests, if used, should only be one among many tools.

3 & 4. *Cutbacks and hiring freezes.* To quote Jack Welch again, "Edicts to impose a uniform 10% layoff policy or a wage freeze undermine the need to take care of the best." He adds, "Losing an 'A' is a sin." Losing "A's" and backfilling later with mediocre candidates doesn't make sense.

5. *Not paying fair market salaries.* One can easily spot the companies that pay less than prevailing salaries. They advertise "competitive salaries," a code phrase for under market. Armed with a salary survey, these internal recruiters slant the data to their advantage. Examples:

- Undervaluing corporate positions relative to service agency jobs;
- Not considering head count accountability. The manager supervising 500 agents should earn more than a manager supervising ten;
- Making no allowance for a premium hire (someone in the top 20%);
- Not offering better wages to employees working in higher-cost cities; and
- Downgrading titles (e.g., from "manager" to "supervisor") and, thereby, wages.

By paying below fair market value, hiring firms usually get lower quality candidates. If they get a top candidate, they stand to lose that person to another company willing to pay more.

6. *Opting for a contingency versus a retained search.* Most recruiting firms will not expend much effort without

being guaranteed compensation for their search. Those tapped to do a contingency search (i.e., fee paid only when the search is successful) typically make a few phone calls to off-the-shelf (i.e., probably not the best) candidates.

We recommend contracting with a good specialty firm to do a premier retained search (i.e., fee paid in advance). That means making hundreds of calls to carefully targeted candidates. A retained search doesn't necessarily cost more than a contingency search. It only requires a commitment to do the job right.

7. *Demanding a local candidate when a national search makes more sense.* Sometimes it is good business judgment to hire locally. If the situation is right (e.g., plenty of candidates within a large labor pool), a local search can keep salaries in check, eliminate relocation expenses and get a new hire ramped up quickly.

However, if a company needs to fill an unusual position, then a national search is applicable. To limit a search only to the local area for esoteric candidates (such as scheduling and planning managers) probably eliminates 99% of the top people in the country. ☞

— Richard L. Bencin and David Maggiore are, respectively, president and executive vice president of Richard L. Bencin & Associates, a call center executive search firm. Mr. Bencin has also authored three industry books and hundreds of call center articles for magazines and newspapers worldwide. Direct comments to 440-526-6726 or rlbencin@netzero.net.

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Your Prescription for Mediocrity

Why call centers hire and keep "C-rated" managers
(Part Two).

Last month, we examined corporate and cost factors to explain why call centers hire and retain "C" managers (the worst performers) rather than "A" managers (the top performers). Contributing equally to this unfortunate syndrome are hiring and human resource issues. Consider the following:

MEDIOCRITY CHECKLIST

1. Premier call center candidates who intimidate hiring managers. This happens because managers don't want to hire subordinates who are "better" or

4. "C" candidates who do "snow jobs" to sound like "A" candidates. Some people are very good verbally and know how to manipulate and romance their targets. Most are attractive, well dressed, urbane and quite resourceful. Because these smooth candidates are so disarming, hiring managers often ignore due diligence. Add poor interviewing skills to "snow jobs" and you've got a great formula for finding the wrong people.

5. Companies that stick with marginal employees because of complacency or an inability to hire high-quality person-

is the issue here. We've seen companies pass over premier applicants because hiring authorities couldn't grasp candidates' work ethics, accomplishments or personalities. Examples include managers turned off by candidates who:

- Take a unique and powerful approach to running a call center;
- Search for problems so as to solve them; and
- Exhibit the capability to think outside the box.

**"Aim at the center of the Bell Curve...
and you'll hit it."**

GOING FOR GOLD

But for those call centers that want to excel, senior management must expend the time, effort and resources to field an all-star team. Recruiting the best requires those who are best at hiring. A company must commit to a program of excellence. Staff those in hiring positions with the best; create a competitive environment; and hire the best candidates.

Sorting out the "C" management candidates annually will take a lot of guts. But it will help keep a company's call center at the premier level. Remember, it's easy to be average or to fail; it's difficult to be the best. Those who are successful wouldn't have it any other way. ☎

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"smarter" than they are. If the hiring manager is only a "C" manager, one can see how this happens. Successful companies encourage managers to hire the best and brightest so their teams can be outstanding.

2. Hiring managers who rule out prospective employees from certain companies. To exclude top candidates from a company — especially a high-profile Fortune 500 representative — because the hiring manager had a bad experience with a former employee from the same company is nonsensical.

3. Poor interviewing skills. Inappropriate questions, the lack of analysis and the inability to compare basic skills and past successes (or failures) contribute to poor selections. If the hiring manager can't tell the difference between top and mediocre call center managers, the employer will have severe hiring or retention problems.

nel. These firms will keep long-timer "good-old-Joe" because he is doing OK. Some hiring authorities are comfortable maintaining the status quo. Aim at the center of the Bell Curve (mediocrity) and you'll hit it.

6. Overreaching affirmative action "quotas." Fortune 500 companies occasionally ask search firms to find call center managerial candidates within certain sex, race and age parameters. Aside from moral and legal issues, this narrow targeting probably eliminates over 90% of the "A" candidates. Hiring the best regardless of sex, race or age makes the most sense. Handicapping should be reserved for horse races, not call centers.

7. Interviewers turning down candidates who are "different" or "too creative." The inability of hiring managers to see the potential of gifted candidates — not intimidation —