

**INFLUENCE OF JOB DESIGN ON COMMITMENT OF CONTACT CENTRES AGENTS**

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**Abstract**

Commitment of employees has been recognized globally as a critical success factor for any business operation. The commitment may be influenced by many factors from within or outside an organisation. This study aimed to examine influence a certain internal factor may have on commitment of agents in contact centres. The research sought to explain various aspects relating to job design and their effectson commitment of contact centre agents. The study was conducted between November 2013 and December 2013 using an exploratory research design to meet its objectives. Two contact centres (Horizon and Jambo Contact Centres) were selected for this study and systematic sampling was used to select a sample of 325 agents. Questionnaires were used to collect primary data which was analysed using several descriptive and inferential statistics. The study found that job design significantly influenced commitment of contact centre agents.

**Keywords:** Contact Centres, Commitment, Job Autonomy, Time Flexibility, Skill Flexibility

**1 .Introduction**

Customer care services are essential for service industry because they helpin increasing sales and improving products, hence increasing customer satisfaction. Consumers find it necessary to consult service providers in any phase of the buying process in order to, resolve a query, find additional information or lodge a complaint. In this regard, many service provides have established a customer care service division or have outsourced services of conventional contact centres to ensure that clients are served whenever they seek help. Moreover, the widespread increase in service consumers has elevated the need for contact centres to cater for the rising 24 hours demand (Charbotelet *al.*,2008).

There are many contact centres around the world that have become a source of livelihood for many people. For instance, a report by IBIS World (2008) showed that there were 56,000 contact centres in the US in 2006, with approximately 3.07 million agents.In 1997, over 20,000 people were employed in Swedish contact centres and five years later, the

number had grown to around 60,000 (Strandberg and Sandberg, 2007). A study by Jones (2008) showed that, South Africa experienced a tremendous growth in the sector, with about 1,500 operational contact centres that employed between 150,000 and 170,000 agents nationally. Apart from setting up contact centres, some service providers in Kenya outsource their customer care services from the business process outsourcing (BPO) sector which is related to contact centres. As an emerging sector in Kenya, BPO was expected to create at least 7500 direct BPO jobs contribute a GDP of almost Kshs.10 billion by 2012 (Gathara, 2006). These reports could be an indication that contact centres are slowly moving from occupying a relatively small niche, to becoming a significant part of global economy, hence it is crucial for the agents to be highly committed to their work. This would go a long way in the provision of services that are vital to the service industry.

Coffman and Gonzalez-Molina (2002) noted that, many organizations are struggling to meet service demands despite the fact that the outcomes were directly dependent on the ability, commitment and skills of the employees. This is an indication that employee commitment is one of the key factors in determining success of an organisation since the most unique way of beating competition is to have qualified and reliable workforce. Losing qualified and reliable employees is often a big blow to an organisation and therefore, it is vital to ensure that employees are committed. Green (2006) stated that, since 1990 there were significant changes in organizational and labour environment with employee commitment being the most imperative emerging issue amongst them. Globally, organisations restructured to deal with external factors such as increasing competition, costly and scarce resources, rising demand for higher quality and pressure for greater returns on investment. The restructuring greatly affected employee commitment as it led to reductions in number of employees and change in work schedules.

To some extent, this could explain the high turnover rates of between 35% and 50% in contact centres as discontentment results to lack of commitment (IBIS World, 2008). Seemingly there is an unspoken agreement in the business world, where employees have employers provide some forms of value for employees, such as secure jobs, fair rewards, opportunities for growth and development in exchange for their commitment. If reciprocity is not achieved, the level of employee commitment is perhaps affected. However, there is no single stimuli that can be said to boost employee commitment and therefore this study sought to examine the influence of job design on employee commitment in contact

centres. Specifically, the research expected to find out the effects of time flexibility, skill flexibility and job autonomy of commitment of contact centre agents.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Employee Commitment**

Employees are the most valuable resource compared to other resources like finances, equipment and land among others in any given organization. Building employee commitment is extremely important for organizations in order to retain this priceless resource which is a key source of competitive advantage for any business venture. Several definitions of employee commitment (Meyer & Smith, (2000);Jassen (2003) and Ogba, (2007)) signify a strong bond between a member of staff and an organization they work for. Employee commitment is crucial in the workplace and has been linked to a number of good aspects in companies. For instance, Gennard and Judge (2005) stated that an employee who is committed is more motivated to work and adapts more easily to new ideas. Verbruggen (2012) indicated that high employee commitment can also lead to high performance in an organization.

Employee commitment takes several forms since different individual are committed for different reasons. A Three Component Model of Commitment by Meyer and Allen (1997) shows three dimensions of commitment; affective, continuance and normative commitment. Employees who display affective commitment have a positive emotional bonding with an organization since their individual values are in harmony organizational values, thus they seek to stay with the organization as a choice. Employees that have a perception that it is costly to lose their connection with an organization in regard to, losing relationships with co-workers, unique job skills acquired, career and retirement investments tend to exhibit continuance commitment. Normative commitment is manifested when there is an obligatory concept. The employees simply reciprocate the value that the organization has given to them.

### **2.2 Job design**

The scopes of commitment are usually demonstrated within the areas of an employee's jurisdiction. Such areas are determined by the job design. A job design is a combination of various aspects that form an occupation with consideration to organizational and individual employee requirements, as well as health, safety and ergonomics concerns. Therefore, a job design specifies the contents of the job, its functions and methods of performing the job (Slack *et al.*, 2010). These specifications define characteristics of a job

like time flexibility, skill flexibility and autonomy. A well designed job can take care of problems like work overload or under load, monotony, limited control over work, isolation, excessive working hours and limited understanding of the whole job process. Such jobs are likely to have a positive impact on both employee commitment and the quality of performance. In this regard, it is vital to considerately design jobs so that commitment of employees as well as their performance can be improved and organizations can effectively compete in the global marketplace.

The rising 24 hour demand for services means that business hours will be stretched and this would have an implication on working hours and days. Though productivity is crucial for any organization, great care ought to be taken so that the process of productivity improvement does not dehumanize jobs. Working throughout the week would subject employees to odd working hours and therefore duty rotas are usually important in organizing the contact centre operations. Appropriate working hours are needed so that employees can have a balance between working hours and time to focus on personal matters (Rahman *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, a study by McNallet *et al.* (2010) found that flexible working hours contributed to higher employee commitment which is an effective strategy of increasing productivity without increasing the work force or stressing the employees. Therefore, time flexibility is one of the paramount aspects of achieving employee commitment in organizations.

Slack *et al.* (2010) indicated that skill flexibility connotes employees being able to do more than one job. It allows employees to combine skills and competencies to increase their flexibility through various stages of service delivery. Employees who carry out similar tasks repetitively usually have limited skill flexibility. Repetitive routines of work provides little opportunity for the employees to expand their capabilities and skill base. As a result, career development is hindered due to lack of transferable skills attained.

According to Mukherjee and Malhotra (2006) job autonomy is the perception that employees have in regard to freedom and flexibility provided to them in terms of, how they execute their duties and the personal initiative allowed to be exercised while performing their duties. This is vital in service operations due to the heterogeneous and inseparability nature of services. Attempts to standardized services may not be easy since unexpected and unusual situations arise and strict adherence to rules and regulations may impede customer satisfaction. However, it is good to consider that the need for autonomy in job varies with the individual personality. Some individuals employees may find it hard to work and move

without directions from their supervisors and therefore they do not feel comfortable with autonomy provided to them. Furthermore, if job autonomy is provided to poorly trained employees the performance is likely to be poor hence, training is of great importance for autonomy to be exercised without jeopardizing performance.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted an exploratory research design. Purposive sampling was used to select Jambo Contact Centre (JCC) and Horizon Contact Centre (HCC) which provided an accessible population of 2,200 agents. In order to give every agent an equal chance to be included in the sample, systematic random sampling was used whereby, every 8<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> agent was picked from HCC and JCC respectively. A total of 227 agents participated in the study.

### **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The study respondents were asked to rate their responses about various statements in regard to time flexibility, skill flexibility and job autonomy on a five point Likert scale (5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3=Neutral, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree). Chi-square and *t*-tests were performed to establish whether the comparison of the responses suggested significant differences in the JCC and HCC and ANOVA was used to test the null hypothesis.

#### **4.1 Influence of Time Flexibility on Commitment of Contact Centre Agents**

The work schedule of agents in JCC was 100% based on rotational shifts whereas that of HCC was 59% and 41% use of rotational shifts and daytime 8-5 schedule respectively. This notable difference in the work schedule ( $\chi^2 = 67.844$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $\alpha = 0.05$ ) could have been due to the fact that JCC was an in-bound contact centre while HCC was an in/out-bound contact centre.

With regard to how comfortable the agents were with their working hours, HCC had a mean value of  $M=2.70$  and JCC,  $M=3.22$  which was an indication that agents in HCC were somewhat discontented with their working hours despite the fact that they were required to work for an average of 40 hours in a week. The disparity as shown by  $F(1, 225) = 23.027$ ,  $p=0.000$  could be attributed to the fact that agents in JCC worked on rotational shifts which involved alternating day and night working hours hence allowing them time to attend to personal matters unlike some of their counterparts in HCC who were on daytime 8-5 schedule with only two planned 15 minutes rest breaks and a 45 minutes lunch break. Such a schedule would certainly tie them down to their work stations for the better part of the day and

definitely restricted their time flexibility, hence dissatisfaction with their working hours. A similar pattern was observed in response to the choice of shift schedules. The responses in HCC obtained a mean value of 2.74 compared to 3.26 in JCC,  $t(225) = 3.564$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $\alpha = 0.05$ . This significant difference could be attributed to the kind of operations in each contact centre. For instance, HCC being partially an outbound contact centre required its agents to meet and possibly exceed their daily targets for outsourced business processes such as request for donations, debt collection among others. This compelled the agents to carry out their tasks during a certain time in order to easily reach their target clients and hence could not simply choose their shift.

#### **4.2 Influence of Skill Flexibility on Commitment of Contact Centre Agents**

The agents were asked whether they made full use of their skills at work and the responses from JCC and HCC recorded low mean values of 2.45 and 2.38 respectively. This could be an indication that their knowledge account did not correspond well with their duties or perhaps the agents were not given an opportunity to employ their skills as shown by the mean values of 3.60 and 3.71 in JCC and HCC respectively, which confirmed use of predetermined scripts while carrying out their tasks. The adherence to such procedures further made the agents' everyday work to be repetitive and this was manifested by high mean values of 3.51 and 4.27, even though repetition of tasks was more intense in JCC as indicated by  $t(225) = 5.772$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $\alpha = 0.05$ . This substantial difference could be due to the fact that agents in HCC may have had to use different tactics to appeal to potential customers to honour their pledges in favour of companies that had outsourced services.

#### **4.3 Influence of Job Autonomy on Commitment of Contact Centre Agents**

The study found that many respondents had to follow some procedures while performing their tasks as manifested by high mean values 4.15 in JCC and 4.01 in HCC. Although such procedures are meant to standardize services, they are detrimental to the agents' job autonomy as implied by  $M=1.99$  and  $M=2.04$  in HCC and JCC respectively, in regard to the attribute of having sufficient freedom to decide the order of work. This meant that the agents' order of work was already planned hence limited opportunities for exercising new ideas. Consequently, this could be the reason that the agents disagreed with the fact that their opinions would be considered in decision making  $M= 2.93$  in JCC and  $M=2.91$  in HCC.

#### **4.4 Study Hypothesis**

The study had hypothesized that job design does not influence commitment of contact centre agents. The ANOVA results depicted that  $F= 98.809$  while the Table value  $F (2, 224)$  at 5% significant level was 3.04. The  $F$  value in the Table was lower than the computed value thus an indication that job design significantly influenced commitment of contact centre agents.

#### **5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The research findings have revealed that job design influences employee commitment in a number of ways. These results concur with Gunderson (2002) who argued that job design accentuates enhancement of personal and professional development as well as lifelong learning which are closely linked to commitment. A lot of similarities were reported in the contact centres regardless of their differences in clientele. The tendencies mostly prevailed in regard to skill flexibility and job autonomy of contact centre agents. Thus, the highly controlled and routinized procedures as seen in JCC and HCC limit opportunities for growth and personal development, which is unfavourable for the organisation and its employees. Therefore, the study recommends that the authorities in contact centre should devise policies that make the job design of agents more favourable, not only to achieve a good balance in their work and personal life, but also to increase their commitment.

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