



How To Improve Communication Between Your Customers And Your Foreign Consultants

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The recent trend of companies outsourcing their technical support and information technology services to foreign consultants does not appear to be going away any time soon. We could debate the merits and implications of this for hours, but we're not going to do that here. Instead, we will discuss some of the pitfalls of sending your technical support overseas and how to improve the quality of the interaction between your foreign based representatives and your customers located in the United States of America.

Any manager who has ever monitored phone calls of their overseas customer support representatives knows that the biggest problem with foreign outsourcing can be found within the communication gap that often occurs between the customers and your agents. Most managers, however, mistakenly believe that the problem is caused by the fact that their American customers cannot understand their foreign representatives. After monitoring thousands upon thousands of these calls myself, I have come to the conclusion that the real cause of the problem lies within the foreign representatives inability to understand the American customer. Don't get me wrong, I have been on the phone myself with overseas technicians and had difficulty understanding them. But, I have found that the problem itself is rooted more in the agent's inability to follow what the customer is saying than in the customer's problems with the agent's accent.

Let's take, for example, technical support representatives located in India. Most of the people that you find on the phone in Indian call centers have been speaking English their entire lives. Many of them may even have a better grasp of the English language than the people they are providing support to. But, that may be the genesis of the problem right there. People in India speak a very proper British version of English and they are not used to dealing with the various accents and colloquialisms that exist in the United States. They have a difficult time keeping up with some of the fast talkers in the U.S. and often times, because they are expected to follow a certain script or troubleshooting plan, they just get lost trying to listen to their American customers and read what is on their computer screen at the same time.

I would venture to guess that you do not see this listed as an issue on most managers' quality improvement plans. They probably start planning to put their representatives through an ESL program, with no real understanding of the fact that what their agents actually need is a lesson in critical listening skills and exposure to American culture. You can put all of your foreign consultants from around the globe through a class in English, but they will all come out with an understanding of the proper textbook way to



speak English and no understanding of what they will face when speaking to real American customers.

If you want to experience this for yourself, just take a listen to some of your company's customer support phone calls. What you will here consistently is the foreign representative asking the customer the same questions over and over again. This is a clear indication that the agent is not following or is incapable of following what the customer is saying. And nothing frustrates customers more than having to repeat themselves.

This issue also goes far beyond the realm of technical support. Many companies are now outsourcing their internal IT departments. Many American employees call their internal company help desk for support and are answered by technicians located in another country. Employees across the country are facing roadblocks to their day-to-day work because their equipment is not working and they cannot receive proper support. This decrease in efficiency can greatly affect a company's bottom line.

So, what should you do to resolve this issue if you are faced with it? At Doctrino Systems, we were recently compelled to investigate solutions to these critical issues by customers of ours who came to us complaining that they were losing out on money and contracts because their foreign consultants could not properly communicate with their American partners. We were asked to develop a training program to help foreign consultants get acclimated with the North American business environment. The program we developed attacked the problem from several key areas.

Soft Skills

Our Soft Skills Course is engineered to prepare new consultants to flourish in the North American corporate environment. It gears up consultants by teaching them the best tactics, techniques, and business and cultural understandings they will need to prosper in the corporate world. This course concentrates on the following topics:

- Phone Answering Protocol
- Active Listening Skills
- Discovering the Complaint or Issue
- Managing the Conversation
- Directing the Focus of the Phone Call
- Utilizing Documentation
- Vocal Skills
- Customer Relationship Management
- Handling Irate Customers
- Handling Abusive Customers
- Cross-Cultural Understanding
- Understanding American and Canadian Accents

- Understanding Expectations of Cultural Groups

Quality Assurance

Our QA Course schools consultants in the Quality Assurance process. This course can focus on internal applications and solutions or concentrate on inbound issues coming from end-users and clients over the Internet and telephone. This course concentrates on the following topics:

- Obtain Criteria
- Product Testing
- Feedback from End-Users
- Bug-Fixing Procedures
- User Manual and Documentation
- Process for Review with End-Users
- Preparation of Support Staff
- Forecasting and Assessing User Issues
- Bug Fixing vs. Support Cost Analysis
- Monitoring Support Staff

Project Management

Our Project Management Course is designed to get consultants geared up to lead the development of solutions. It covers defining, planning, executing, and assuring the application or service. This course concentrates on the following topics:

- Initial Discussion
- Defining Requirements
- Reviewing Requirements
- Stakeholder Agreement
- Planning and Strategy
- Status
- Staying on Target
- Tactics for Advancing the Project
- Avoiding “Mission Creep”
- Testing
- User Feedback
- User Training and Support
- Final Implementation



Business Analysis

Our Business Analysis Course teaches the fundamentals of discovering problems, developing requirements and specifications, and then engineering the solutions. This course concentrates on the following topics:

- Situational Assessment
- Summarizing the Issue
- Setting Expectations
- Documenting Customer Issues
- Keep it Simple
- Research
- Planning the Solution
- Implementing the Solution
- Testing and Follow-up

We developed this curriculum and the course material based on intensive research on what foreign consultants need in order to prosper in the American business world. We take the approach that the responsibility for a successful customer interaction rests on the shoulders of the representative and their company. We concentrate our efforts in teaching foreign consultants how to listen properly and assess all situations, whether they are supporting a consumer customer on the phone or dealing with an employee who needs support. All aspects of these courses are conveyed from the point of view of dealing with each topic while keeping American cultural idiosyncrasies in mind.

We also feel that these tactics are extremely beneficial to internal employees who are managing projects. The key is to really listen and understand the customer and then move forward in a logical manner.

By improving the listening and analytical skills of your foreign consultant base, you can increase efficiency and customer satisfaction. If your representatives can learn to understand your customers and take control of the conversation, then the issue of customer frustration or a customer's inability to handle the agent's accent can be minimized. I have found over the years that American customers can be extremely nice to and grateful to foreign consultants if that consultant can quickly and effectively solve their problem. The only way to guarantee such success is to ensure that your representatives understand these expectations and have the skills to fulfill them.

Steven A. LaVista is the President & CEO of Doctrino Systems, a firm that specializes in IT Professional Services. He has years of experience in every facet of call center management, from answering support calls to quality assurance monitoring to training development and delivery. He has designed and managed call centers around the world and his experience has provided him with a unique understanding of what it takes to run a successful call center.