Interview /

Discovering the right answers

How can you find and keep the best staff? TUANZ *Topics* meets Mary Murcott, keynote speaker at the TUANZ Contact Centre Conference in June, and talks about her philosophy on maximising workplace performance.

Can you give readers a taster of what you plan to talk about at the TUANZ Contact Centre Conference?

I intend to describe how to increase a centre's overall performance by significantly improving the performance of the individual. This process involves new and innovative practices for recruiting, selecting and retaining the right person for each job.

Many executives think there's little difference between the top and bottom performers – perhaps 30 to 40 per cent – when, in fact, there can be a 100 per cent difference. The top performers outperform low performers by two to one; in other words, they are twice as productive – and when jobs are more complicated it's a lot more advanced.

What my presentation will address is why top performers are twice as productive as low performers, and what call centre managers can do to find and retain more of the top producers. This is about creating the staff you want and need versus leaving it to chance.

How much of a problem, in general, is this for contact centres?

It's significant. A difference of 100 per cent between your top and bottom performers could be your competitive edge. In some instances it could be the difference between profitability and solvency for an entire company. That's why call centre managers carry a heavy responsibility. In many companies there is significant profitability potential to be found in ways that the executives don't even know.

Can you explain what you mean by performance?

My definition is: sustained peak productivity at an acceptable level of quality. It's not high activity or effectiveness one day and low the next. A manager needs to determine the minimum level of quality required to get in the game.

How can it be measured?

It's most easily measured as a business outcome over some set time period. Many people make the mistake of measuring business processes, not business outcomes.

What are the keys to helping to improve performance?

I think we need to stop running centres on averages. The key is digging deep into individual performance. I think the three main components are setting proper performance standards, driving accountability, and providing really good feedback. That's where many managers fall down. They give feedback but they don't do it right and are not effective.

Can performance be measured too much?

Absolutely! Managers can make the mistake of trying to use any related metrics as performance measures. I think focusing on one or two key performance measures is really the best approach. If the measures can be focused on the business outcome, that's even better. I've known some centres that have 20 to 30 key performance measures; but 20 to 30 cannot be "key". The poor rep is so confused as to what's important that they don't do anything right or they do everything on a mediocre basis. Fewer measures are better, and managers need to determine a way to validate whether or not the performance criteria actually moves the business in the right direction.

We're talking about improving the performance of individuals; what about simply getting rid of the bad performers?

Many managers and supervisors don't like to make these hard but necessary decisions. They live with poor or mediocre performance. They're afraid to act or don't know how. The best strategy is a preventative one. Don't hire poor performers in the first place. There are a lot of methods that I will address in the presentation which define how to be more successful at hiring very, very few poor performers, so they do not have to be terminated later on.

Holding on to the star performers seems key. How can that be achieved?

Star performers are hard to find and demand very sophisticated management to keep them. If you don't get the management right, you're going to lose the star performers. High performers want different things from the poor and average performers. A lot of people ask me: what is the right attrition level? Well, there isn't a right one. The question is: who's leaving? If you have a 10 per cent attrition level but it's the top performers who are leaving then that's disastrous. If your rewards, recognition, compensation and feedback systems are built around the average performer – or below-average performer – then you have a system that's not working very well. High performers want high standards and compensation based on risk and high rewards.

**Are top performers born or can they be made?**

I believe that top performers are born. Everybody is a top performer in some job; you've just got to find out what that job is for them. I think top performers can get even better. I think average performers can move closer to top performers. But it is rare that a low performer can be converted into a high performer. Training cannot fix a hiring mistake.

I'd like to talk a little about you. Can you explain your current role?

I have a bit of a portfolio career right now. My company is called Performance Transformations and I'm working with a number of companies to improve performance, at both a functional level and an enterprise level. That includes consulting, training, speaking, and executive coaching. I've also just written a book on performance management that will be out in July.

How have you come to be in this position?

I've been in call centres for most of my life. It began, believe it or not, when I was 16 and I began taking reservation calls for a hotel chain. I was a rep for six years during high school and college. I always had a lot of credibility when I eventually got into management because I knew what it felt like to thank 150 customers a day for calling and to sound like I really meant it! I worked through service management and on to the executive ranks. I've run service and sales centres as well as technical helpdesks. I've worked as an executive in call centres for DHL, Cox Communications and American Express, and most recently was CIO and SVP Technology and Worldwide Reservation Services for Budget Group.
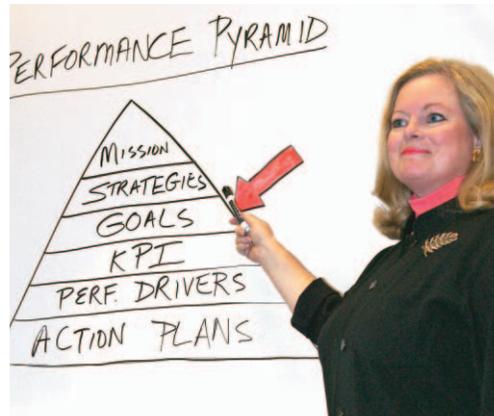
What do you think makes you suited to the job you are doing?

I think, basically, because I've been there, in all positions and all situations. I know what it feels like. I know the frustrations working for companies with large budgets and small budgets. I've centralised call centres. I've decentralised them. I've outsourced and in-sourced call centres, and implemented every conceivable technology and process along the way. I have worked in operations with as few as 15 staff to more than 15,000. I've also been privileged to work with some great companies and people, and have developed a vast network of contacts and resources. I really enjoy developing call centre executives. They usually have no problem getting the basic resources they need to do the job, but some stumble on the business cases for unique resources that can really evolve their organisation into a leading centre that creates a competitive edge for their company.

You have a degree in philosophy. Have you been able to bring anything from your studies to your work?

Yes, in many ways. I like to build models and develop process visuals to help to explain complex issues. I think everybody really appreciates someone who can make the complex simple. Philosophy has taught me to argue and reason. It taught me various forms of logic that have been instrumental in helping build winning business models. It's also helped me to sort out philosophical call centre issues, such as service quality and sales issues as they relate to ethics. If I lacked a philosophy degree, I don't think I could have discovered the right answers.

Among others you have received the Teleprofessional Magazine's Award for Excellence in Customer Contact Center for your project at American Express, the Call Center Network Group's Call Center of the Year Award, and the YWCA's Tribute to Women in Business Award. To what do you attribute this impressive success?

I select missions that needed to be accomplished and for which I can create really good business cases. I hire the right people to get the job done and create good teams. I have good project management skills. For example, people can buy a lot of technology and when it doesn't work they call it a failure. Really the technology is not the failure; it's the inability to execute it correctly or to design the right model. I think strong project management skills help a lot.

What do you get from doing the job?

I really get a kick out of solving complex problems. Each one is different. Situations might sound similar but when you get behind the facades there are differences. The problem might be identical in two companies, but if the culture is different, the solution set will be as well.

What keeps you awake at night? What do you worry about?

Boredom, which is why I enjoy the variety that consulting can offer. What concerns me more than anything is people jumping on the technology bandwagon. Technology is important but the ROI on people and process is usually higher. I also worry that the attention span of senior management is frequently so short that they're on to the new, biggest and best idea before the old project is completely implemented. But that's also my challenge.

Is this your first trip to New Zealand?

Yes, although I did stop over a couple of years ago for 30 minutes on the way back from Australia. My husband always gets nervous when we're at airports because I have the tendency to buy expensive coats. In Auckland, I remember I bought a red shearing coat and everyone back in Dallas always want to know where I got it.

I'm sure the airport will be pleased to see you again. Are you doing anything else while you are here?

I am running a performance management workshop the day before the conference. I don't have a schedule for centre visits yet but I'm always open for invitations. I also plan to extend my visit so I can finally see more of your beautiful country.

To finish up, I'd like to get your thoughts on the industry in general. What do you think is the biggest challenge facing contact centres?

I think underpaying line staff and not paying enough attention to processes are two of the most looming problems. And I think way too much reliance is put on IVRs. Most IVRs are really poorly executed and constantly incur the wrath of our customers.

How important is technology?

Very important to a technology company! Basic technology, like ACDs and scheduling systems, is extremely important to a call centre. Additionally, there are a lot of technologies, like prompting and IVRs, that are okay but should probably be re-executed to be fully optimised and more customer friendly. There are also plenty of good, basic technologies out there that people aren't using because they're not new and sexy. Take scheduling. Everybody should be using it – not just 30 per cent or so. Perhaps not for the forecasting module of a scheduling system, but certainly for actual physical scheduling of reps; there's nothing that has a better ROI.

What sort of a place is a contact centre as a career?

For me it's been a really great choice. What I like about it is that everything is fast-moving and complex. You're always on an adrenalin high. It does take a special sort of person to manage a large group of staff and an inordinate number of processes, as well as continually to look for technology innovation. But you're always in the centre of the company, and closest to the customer. That combination gives these positions tremendous knowledge and power.

What do you hope people will take away from your talk?

I hope they rethink their people strategies. I hope they actually create a business case to recruit, select, retain and terminate both phone reps and supervisors very differently than they do at present. On the whole, current people processes have created many mediocre call centres.
There's tremendous performance and revenue improvement potential in call centres, but to achieve and sustain it, you've got to change the people strategies and change them dramatically.

Finally, what's your vision for the future of contact centres?

Better pay for line staff that is primarily paid for by much better performance than currently exists.
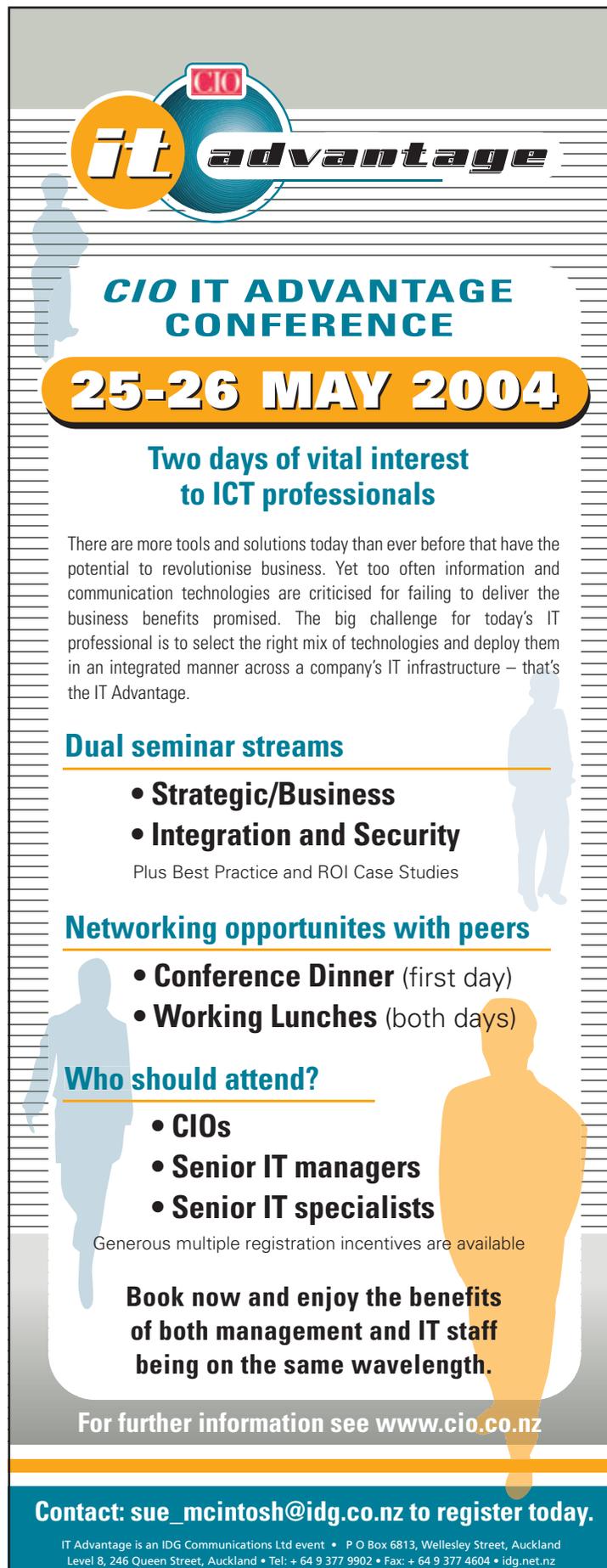
I also think that call centre managers need to move up a level or two on the food chain. Some need more formal education to be able to drive better performance, develop better business cases, practise a lot more influence management and exert a lot more power in their organisation. Managers need to be in charge of channel management, not just centres, so that there's one person balancing the resources between the IVR, the call centre, the Internet, or whatever other distribution channels there are.

More of a highly paid industry, with more professionals at the top, intelligently influencing channel management issues that are confronting the company. That's the future I'd like to see.

Is it going to happen?

It already has. There are a number of companies I speak to where the person in charge of the call centre has grown to be in charge of all channels, and that individual has a place at the executive table and is taken very seriously. I think that call centre managers are a lot more informed than they know, but they need to get more formally-trained business acumen to exert influence.

Thank you and see you in June. ■