

# *The Science of Agent Selection: Assessment Tools Help Centers Find the Right Fit*

By Greg Levin

***Facing a tightening economy, nearly all business operations — including call centers — are looking for ways to cut costs. Companies that are working new assessment tools into their hiring strategies are seeing a significant dent in the cost associated with agent turnover, as well as improved quality and performance.***

A few years ago, U.S. Cellular introduced a multipronged hiring strategy at its contact center to help put an end to historically poor selection decisions — decisions that had resulted in the center being staffed with many agents who either lacked the skills, the attitude and/or the drive to succeed in the contact center.

What set the center's new hiring strategy apart from the old approach? The incorporation of some innovative assessment tools designed with the unique requirements of contact centers in mind. These tools, in addition to saving U.S. Cellular hours and hours of manual applicant screening and assessments, enabled the center to stock its frontline with agents who not only have the ability and personality to thrive in customer contact, but who actually end up doing so — for years on end.

Each of U.S. Cellular's assessment tools serves a slightly different purpose and is used at distinct stages of the hiring process. First, the center counts on a comprehensive, automated applicant tracking system (ATS) called PeopleFilter, developed by PeopleFilter Technology. This tool helps the company separate promising agent agents from the rest of the pack early on in the application process. The ATS evaluates all applicants who complete the online application process and rates them on a wide number of competencies — each defined by U.S. Cellular as either "required," "very important," "important," "desirable" or merely "nice to have." The system also takes into account any call center and/or customer experience the applicant has, and then assigns the applicant an overall score.

To help with the skill assessment, the company uses the Call Center Simulation product from Employment Technologies Corporation. "It replicates a typical call center, and measures such things as comfort with typing, computer navigation,

transferring audio information to text, etc.," explains Manny Torres, senior H.R. director of talent acquisition for U.S. Cellular.

Another key assessment tool the center uses to enhance hiring is the Call Center Fit Index — developed by the DeGarmo Group — which is designed to see if an applicant has the specific character elements needed to succeed in the challenging call center environment. Torres points out that, just because a candidate has the skills needed to handle customer contacts doesn't mean he or she has the "will" to remain committed to such work. "Far too often in call centers, we have folks who just cannot 'put up' with call center operations and everything that comes with it. [The Call Center Fit Index] assessment tries to help us isolate those folks."

## **High-Tech Hiring**

Numerous other organizations have followed U.S. Cellular's example, taking advantage of advanced applicant assessment tools aimed directly at contact centers. And there are plenty such tools available. Many are Web-based, very user friendly and have highly robust reporting features that assist managers and supervisors in their selection decisions.

Today's best agent assessment systems are comprehensive product suites, featuring a diverse range of customizable components that, collectively, can do everything from weeding out weak candidates to gauging more viable applicants' skills, motivation levels and adaptability.

A prime example is Furst-Person's 1stHire product, a Web-based hiring system that features various modules from which contact centers can choose and, to an extent, customize. In addition to a prescreening/basic hiring requirements module, 1stHire features:

- **Work habits assessment** — a biographical data assessment tool that measures things like dependability, person-environment fit, computer use, resiliency, compliance, frustration tolerance, attention to detail and conscientiousness. This assessment takes applicants about 15 minutes to complete on a testing computer.
- **Work attitudes assessment** — measures a candidate's attitudes, interests and motivations to work in a contact center

## *The Science of Agent Selection: Assessment Tools Help Centers Find the Right Fit*

By Greg Levin

environment. Factors of focus include problem solving, idea generation, resistance to change, teamwork, expressiveness, attitude toward work and self-centeredness. Most candidates will complete this assessment in roughly 20 minutes.

- **Job simulation tool** — a realistic job simulation that allows job candidates to play the role of agent in your contact center. Simulations feature several interactive call scenarios, where candidates listen to realistic customer inquiries and issues, and then select responses from a list. Because it is all Web-based, it doesn't require that any software be installed on the contact center's testing computers. Within minutes after a simulation session — which lasts about 35 minutes — managers can peruse a detailed report that rates the candidate in various areas, including customer service and sales orientation, listening, keyboarding, problem solving, rapport building, determining customer needs and multitasking.

Incorporating call simulations into the agent hiring process benefits not only the contact center, but the applicant, as well, says Joe LaTorre of Employment Technologies Corporation, makers of the popular Call Center Simulation product used by U.S. Cellular and many other centers. "One of the greatest advantages of simulation is it gives the applicant the opportunity to experience what the position is like, so it builds more realistic expectations about what it's like to do that job. And it gives them a chance to self-select out if they don't feel that that type of work is suited for them."

Other vendors offering potent hiring product suites that effectively combine simulated customer interactions with valid, survey-based agent skills and attitude assessments include LIMRA International, DeGarmo Group and Knowlagent. (See the Vendor Directory box below.)

### **Agent E-assessments**

While most agent assessment and simulation tools focus primarily on pinpointing people who will succeed in a traditional phone-based customer contact environment, a handful of vendors have created products aimed at identifying promising e-support agents — an often overlooked hiring practice in today's increasingly competitive multichannel contact center world. Employment Technologies has led the way with its innovative e.Skills Simulation offering. This is a PC-based, multimedia simulation tool that tests candidates' ability to effectively respond to customers via email or chat. The simulation features

an email composition test in which candidates receive email messages from "customers" with various questions or issues. For each contact, the candidate must look up customer and product information — using information screens provided — and respond in writing. Hiring managers receive a detailed assessment of each candidate's spelling, grammar, vocabulary, tone and response content.

e.Skills Simulation features another test in which candidates view written email messages, then retype them as quickly and as accurately as possible, as well as a data entry test that assesses candidates' ability to accurately enter key customer information (e.g., account numbers, addresses, credit card information) into appropriate data fields using the keyboard and mouse.

The full e.Skills Simulation assessment can be completed in about 30 minutes. The overall results include a prediction of each agent candidate's potential for success as well as specific performance feedback and tips for improvement.

Employment Technologies also offers e.Skills Simulation Bilingual, which helps contact centers identify agent candidates who can effectively communicate with customers in both English and Spanish via email or chat.

Aon Consulting is another provider that has added an e-support component to its agent job simulation offering. Aon's REPeValuator product features not only simulated customer phone calls but also simulated customer chat interactions.

"We already know the skills that chat and email agents need," says Dr. Seymour Adler, Aon's senior vice president. "...The real challenge is to validly measure these characteristics in a prospective chat or email agent."

### **Select Carefully, Use Appropriately**

With so many viable agent assessment tools on the market, choosing the right one can be a challenge. Walk into a product exhibit hall at any major contact center conference, and you'll find plenty of vendors eager to show you how cool the graphics and interfaces are on their latest "revolutionary" selection system. The key is to not get overly distracted by bells and whistles, and to focus instead on what really matters: what the product can actually do for your contact center.

When evaluating a prospective assessment tool, find out if and how the product content correlates — or can be customized to

## *The Science of Agent Selection: Assessment Tools Help Centers Find the Right Fit*

By Greg Levin

correlate — to what your contact center needs to measure. Ask about the vendor's hiring expertise and, more specifically, their understanding of contact centers and the agent position itself. Most importantly, ask about specific results; i.e., can the vendor clearly show how its assessment tool has led to measurable improvements in agent performance as well as retention in actual contact centers? (To learn more about choosing the right assessment tool, read *High Volume, High Stakes: A Better Strategy for Hiring*.)

Once you find an automated agent assessment product that is a good fit for your organization, don't expect it to automatically turn your struggling hiring program around. Ask any reputable provider or seasoned user of assessment systems, and they will tell you about the importance of using such technology to supplement — not fully replace — your less high-tech hiring practices.

As Jeff Furst, president and CEO of the contact center hiring services firm FurstPerson, puts it: "We look at technology as a way to deliver more predictive assessments, but using technology does not solve all hiring challenges — the same way that simply implementing a CRM system doesn't mean that you are all of a sudden going to sell more goods and services and increase customer loyalty. A contact center first has to have a solid hiring foundation and fully understand what they are looking for in an agent. Then a well-designed assessment tool can be invaluable."

### **Rebuilding a Struggling Hiring Process Around an Innovative Assessment Tool**

For years, Embarq had been fighting high agent churn — particularly among new-hires — in its 13 contact centers. Part of the problem was that there was no consistent, standard method for selecting agents across the various centers; each center had a different hiring process, and none was truly focused on accurately predicting job fit and performance.

That has all changed, thanks to the strategic use of a psychology-based assessment tool as an integral part of its new-agent hiring process organizationwide at Embarq, which provides high-speed Internet service, wireless phone services, data and entertainment. The screening and assessment tool, designed by PreVisor, helps to see beyond the typical hard skills needed for the

agent position: It identifies the personality characteristics and motivations necessary for long-term success in the job. The tool can give accurate, validated, quantitative measurements of traits such as customer focus and persistence.

The results have been overwhelmingly positive:

- After the first few months of implementing the selection system, turnover declined from an average of 33.5 percent for all locations to a mere 12.5 percent (measured as rolling 90-day averages) — an outstanding level compared to industry norms.
- Among candidates who passed through the selection system, those with higher scores on the initial assessment achieved
  - Higher sales rates: 103 percent of quota vs. 83 percent for lower-scoring candidates
  - Shorter hold times: 42 seconds less than the lower-scoring group

"Since incorporating our call center agent selection process, we've seen a marked reduction in early turnover and a notable lift in sales from our new agents," says Bob Sloboda, vice president of consumer care. "I'm convinced our system is improving the quality of our hiring, and promises to make a bottomline difference."

### **Vendor Directory**

Here are the Web sites of each agent assessment product vendor mentioned in this article:

PeopleFilter Technology [www.peoplefilter.com](http://www.peoplefilter.com)  
Employment Technologies Corp. [www.etc-easy.com](http://www.etc-easy.com)  
DeGarmo Group [www.degarmogroup.com](http://www.degarmogroup.com)  
FurstPerson [www.furstperson.com](http://www.furstperson.com)  
LIMRA International [www.contactcenter.limra.com](http://www.contactcenter.limra.com)  
Knowlagent [www.knowlagent.com](http://www.knowlagent.com)  
Aon Consulting [www.aon.com](http://www.aon.com)  
PreVisor [www.previsor.com](http://www.previsor.com)