

Hilton's Call Centers: Putting the Strategies and Tactics to Work in a Large Company



Company:	Hilton Reservations and Customer Care (HRCC), headquartered in Dallas, Texas, with additional locations in Tampa, Fla., Hazleton, Pa. and Hemet, Calif.
Employees:	2,500 whose primary job is to receive inbound calls from Hilton customers to reserve hotel rooms and related services
Main players:	Top executive Russ Olivier and HR manager Bryan Thomason

Retention challenge

Facing annual turnover of 55 percent, Olivier and Thomason recognized that doing the same traditional retention tactics would lead to the same results. They were pleased with their overall performance against aggressive business goals but wondered how much better their centers could perform if turnover was lower and they retained more veteran agents. So they asked The Retention Firm (SM) to conduct a retention review at each of their four centers and then implement solutions.

Retention solutions

Whereas HRCC had been tracking annual and monthly turnover, The Retention Firm found that half of all new hires failed to reach 90 days. As a result, The Retention Firm recommended three new metrics for center directors: (1) 75 percent of new hires reach 90 days, (2) 50 percent of all new hires come from employee referrals, and (3) applicant-to-hire ratio goals be established appropriate for each location. Center directors were told they had six months to achieve each goal. New tools would be introduced month-to-month but tracking would start immediately. They were also told that the first goal was most important: 75 percent of new hires reaching 90 days. Achieving that goal but missing on the others would be okay, but any who missed that goal had best achieve the others as an indication of effort.

Over the next five months, The Retention Firm reviewed each process that agents experienced in their first 90 days and recommended revisions to Olivier, Thomason and the executive team. With their smart feedback and endorsement, The Retention Firm proceeded to install the following tactics.

The Retention Firm recommended three new metrics for center directors: (1) 75 percent of new hires reach 90 days, (2) 50 percent of all new hires come from employee referrals, and (3) applicant-to-hire ratio goals be established, varying by location.

- **Why they stay.** The Retention Firm built the retention strategy around why workers stay by leveraging the Hilton brand, employee travel benefits and the opportunity for some applicants to work from home.
- **Skills for success.** Identified core job skills to develop a structured interview with special focus on retention, then trained interviewers to conduct these interviews effectively.
- **Employee referrals.** Designed employee referral programs by center, including forming center-wide committees comprised of top performers who were in their thirties or older to attract middle-aged and older workers.
- **Technology skills.** Removed technology experience as a job requirement and instead relied on trainers to teach the level of skills required for the job. This enabled Hilton to attract older workers who had all the other core job skills.
- **RJP.** Developed a facilitated realistic job preview conducted by trained experts, which led to several candidates opting out of the applications process.

- **Retention supervisors.** Assigned the best supervisor in each center be responsible for the newly hired team immediately after training. The supervisors understood their own performance standard included retaining their teams until the end of week 13, which comprised the first 90 days.
- **Focused on retention coaching.** From weeks two through 13, trainers and then supervisors coded each employee red, yellow, or green in a confidential database to indicate which employees were likely to stay or leave based on either their performance or their preference. The trainer or supervisor then met with the manager weekly to review the coding and decide who to coach and who to terminate based on performance.
- **Welcomes from all.** Provided all new hires with a color-coded identification badge to encourage all others in the centers to greet and welcome them. This tactic also laid the groundwork for a celebration when the new hires progressed to a regular identification badge after completing 90 days on the job.
- **360° accountability.** To ensure all who interacted with new hires accepted their roles in the retention process, center directors conducted a meeting 91 days after each training class began. HR, training, the new-hire supervisor(s) and their managers participated in the meetings. The group reviewed the status of all who had joined 90 days prior. The key focus areas were whether the 75 percent retention goal had been achieved, the week each leaver left, and the coding for each leaver. Discussions included whether HR should have seen pre-hire signs that a particular agent would leave in week two, or why a supervisor continuously coded an agent green who surprised everyone by leaving in week 12.
- **Executive report.** The center director completed a weekly report for Olivier that tracked the 30-, 60-, and 90-day retention results, along with progress on applicant-to-hire ratios and employee referrals. Olivier designed the report himself, and center directors originally referred to it as the “Russ Report” until Olivier modestly asked that they not refer to it by that name. Instead, they colored the report purple and gold to reflect Louisiana State University, Olivier’s alma mater, so directors continued to remember who would read the report.

Retention results

Total company retention improved rapidly with this plan, as turnover declined at least 20 percent each month for the first four months compared to the same months of the previous year. Business metrics also improved, as quality measures reached an all-time high, cost per call improved and average handle time improved. With these new processes in place, HRCC executives are optimistic that retention improvements will continue.

About The Retention Institute

The Retention Institute (SM) offers executives a comprehensive program in employee retention leading to certification as a Certified Employee Retention Professional (CERP). The program enables companies to measure the business impact and reduce the costs associated with employee turnover. CERP is based on The Rethinking Retention Model (SM) developed by retention expert Richard Finnegan. The Rethinking Retention Model is a research-based method that offers three specific principles, seven proven strategies and more than 300 tested actionable tasks to improve employee retention. For additional information, visit www.retentioninstitute.com.

About Richard Finnegan

As founder of The Retention Institute and president of Finnegan Mackenzie, The Retention Firm, Dick Finnegan is recognized by executives across people management professions as the leading thinker and advisor on employee retention. Dick has worked with scores of clients across six continents on employee retention solutions in industries including healthcare, energy, manufacturing, and financial services. He is the author of *Rethinking Retention in Good Times and Bad*, available in the fall of 2009.

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