

► Three years ago, bookmaker William Hill had an attrition rate of 100 per cent amongst the 600 staff in its call centres in Sheffield and Leeds. The company was interviewing three candidates for every appointment it made and many staff were leaving within just six months of starting the job. While none of this is especially unusual in the call centre industry, it was a problem for William Hill. Just where are the eager beavers when you need them?

David Russell, human resources director with William Hill, explains: "Phone customers lay higher stakes than those in our shops or on our website, so they are extremely important to us. In fact, William Hill started out in 1932 as a telephone-based betting firm and high street betting was illegal until 1961. However, our pedigree was not helping us. We were investing in three to six weeks training for staff, many of whom left soon afterwards. It was costing us money and losing us customers. Something had to be done."

### ***The contact centre industry as a whole suffers from appalling staff retention. This is a costly problem for employers who are forced to repeatedly recruit staff***

#### **AN INDUSTRY-WIDE PROBLEM**

William Hill is not the only company to have faced problems such as these. The call centre industry as a whole suffers from appalling staff retention. This is a problem not only for the employees who flit between one unsatisfactory job and another, but it's also costly for the employers who are forced to repeatedly recruit and train staff for the same roles. Most critically, it also damages customer satisfaction and so destroys profit and shareholder value.

Traditionally, call centres have seen job design and man management as their primary tools for improving staff retention. However, many are now going back to the beginning of the process, to look at how improving recruitment methods can improve retention. Those right at the cutting-edge are convinced that recruitment by

motivation is the answer to this perennial contact centre problem.

#### **RECRUITMENT BY MOTIVATION**

Call centres have always wanted motivated staff. Rob Jenkins, call centre sales manager at marketing firm Response Analysis and Mailing, says: "We have 150 agents working on inbound and outbound campaigns for clients like Citroen and Nando's. We want to hire highly motivated people and rely on our recruitment partner Teleresources to find them for us."

Indeed, it is rare to see a call centre recruitment advertisement that does not specify that it is looking for "motivated" people. Yet, some in the industry are beginning to recognise that motivation is more complex than that. They are realising that candidates are not either motivated or demotivated — they are simply motivated by different things.

This insight leads to fairly radical shifts in recruitment policy. Rather than looking for

bright, enthusiastic, motivated staff who have call centre experience and all the necessary skills, companies are beginning to look for staff who are motivated by the same things as the current high performers in the call centre. No one is ignoring experience and skills. They are simply recognising that there is little sense hiring someone with the right experience and skills who will leave in ten weeks because they are not temperamentally suited to the role.

Aurea Fellowes, managing partner at Kaisen Consulting, a firm of work psychologists that has introduced this approach to BSKyB, MoreThan and the Signet Group, says: "Very often jobs in call centres are procedure-driven, highly-structured and scripted. There is a particular type of person who thrives in that environment and it generally isn't the young, dynamic achiever that call centres tend to look for."



**Hard at work:** call centres are starting to "branch out" and recruit for the longer term

She continues: "We've had great success in recruiting by motivation for our call centre clients. First, we profile successful current employees, getting a firm understanding of what motivates them as well as the skills they need. Then we build a recruitment process that will attract and select people that are motivated in the same way. We ask open questions in interviews and, as well as listening to what they say, we use neurolinguistic programming techniques to get a fuller understanding of their response."

#### **GROWING SUPPORT**

This approach is not yet widespread, but some believe that it will be before long. Vernon Bryce, managing director at recruitment firm Kenexa, says: "Leading



companies are beginning to recruit by motivation. Soon everyone will be doing it. Call centres should be acting now to understand what motivates their best performing staff, model it, and incorporate it in their recruitment process."

Dr Nicola Millard, a psychologist working as a futurologist at BT, believes that the telecom giant is moving towards this model. She says: "Currently we recruit primarily on experience and skills, but we are beginning to recognise that motivation is also important."

James Bywater, head psychologist at SHL, a firm of work psychologists, adds: "We conducted extensive research into why call centre staff stay in their jobs. We found that ability, experience and even performance

have almost no bearing on it. What matters more is whether they are in a job which suits them. Those in service jobs need to be dependable and reliable. Those in sales jobs need to be competitive and sharp. By understanding what motivates candidates and placing them in the right job, our clients have been able to cut their attrition rates by 50 per cent."

#### THE RESULTS

David Russell at William Hill can now testify to this. He brought in Kaisen Consulting to profile his best performers and to design a recruitment process that would select people who were motivated by the same things. He reports: "This has resulted in a 50 per cent reduction in our staff attrition rate. It's still

#### CASE STUDY: THE LISTENING COMPANY

Established in 1998, The Listening Company has a 900-strong call centre in Richmond and counts Volkswagen, Oxfam, Microsoft, BUPA, Peugeot amongst its clients. Laura New, resource director, says: "We believe in sourcing candidates who might not yet have all of the required skills and relevant experience needed for a position working in a call centre environment, but who do have the right levels of determination and motivation to succeed."

She continues: "Past experience has shown that a person's personality traits and attitude are just as, or in some cases more important than, their previous employment record." Consequently, the company's assessment centres look at a potential candidate's motivation, attitude and trainability as well as matching their skills and identifying their previous experience.

Once the company hires someone, its training teams then fill any skill gaps to ensure that the employee has the skills needed to do the job. Laura New reports that some of The Listening Company's most successful agents have never worked in a call centre or even a customer service environment before.

not where we want it to be, but it's a huge improvement. Furthermore, we've seen a 40 per cent reduction in the number of those leaving within six months."

He concludes: "It wasn't easy getting buy-in from line managers, and recruiting in this way is more expensive per candidate, but we're now hiring far fewer people than we did in the past, just because we're losing far fewer. In all, recruitment costs have remained about the same, but the quality of our staff and our calls have improved dramatically, and this in turn is having a positive effect on customer retention. We're now convinced that motivation is at least as important as skills and experience when it comes to call centre recruitment."

2007. The year of the beaver perhaps? ■