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Extending Your Enterprise

European Standard for
Contact Center Performance
to Boost Industry

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At a time when Europe is going through difficult financial times, the outlook for the contact center outsourcing market in Europe provides a ray of hope. In a recently released report, *Frost & Sullivan* estimates the European market to grow at an annual rate of three percent from 2010-2017. The expansion in the mature markets in Western Europe will be mainly within the public sector, travel / hospitality and retail / CPG verticals. By contrast, the Eastern Europe market will grow more rapidly and the demand will come primarily from the telecom and financial services sectors.

For the contact center industry, Europe and the US are two of the biggest markets. Interestingly, the two markets are vastly different and offer a study in contrast in the way the industry is organized in these two regions.

The Salient Features of US and European Markets

In general, customer contact centers in Europe tend to be smaller in operation, linked to networks of more decentralized, multi-site centers than their American counterparts. The largely greenfield environment with multilingual offerings and the lag in technology adoption are responsible for this trend. The late adopters of technology in fact are at an advantage as they employ solutions that are more advanced than what are being used in the US.

This difference manifests itself in an interesting managerial phenomenon: American contact centers tend to create a flexible workforce through remote units and provide them with technology that "virtualizes" them, to give managers access to them as if they are onsite. In effect, the remote workforce is part of a large, virtual center with managers having as much control over the system as they would if all the agents were in one room. No matter how many centers or agents are a part of the network, the key American mode of management is to roll all the parts together into one coherent unit.

The trend in Europe is quite the opposite. A typical customer contact center in Europe is more innovative in its practices, and more open to new technologies and operating techniques. Managers who run smaller, less centralized sites double up as researchers in a laboratory-like setup who try out new technologies and ideas. A single organizational view of how things should be done does not impede the deployment of used ideas. There are two big markets for contact centers globally – America and Europe. A comparison between the two throws up interesting differences in the way contact centers are organized in these two regions.

Advantages and Disadvantages in the Two Styles

In a multi-national and multi-modal customer landscape, contact centers are striving to accommodate cost-optimized workforces and enterprise-optimized metrics to corporate culture specifics. And this is being done in many ways. The outcome is consistent variation in the levels of service quality and consumer protection, and working towards many standards and levels of efficiency.

Contact centers have an important role to play in the transactions between the organization purchasing the contact center's service and their customers. The European Commission asked the European Standardization Institute (CEN) to draw up a European norm for customer contacts going by the history of years of customer dissatisfaction over long waiting time, lack of clarity about the costs of service numbers, inefficient handling of queries, endless transferring of calls and unfriendly treatment.

CEN drew up the European Contact Centre Standard (ECCS) by looking at requirements laid down in the national contact center standards that already existed in several countries. The American Customer Operations Performance Center (COPC) standard also served as inspiration.
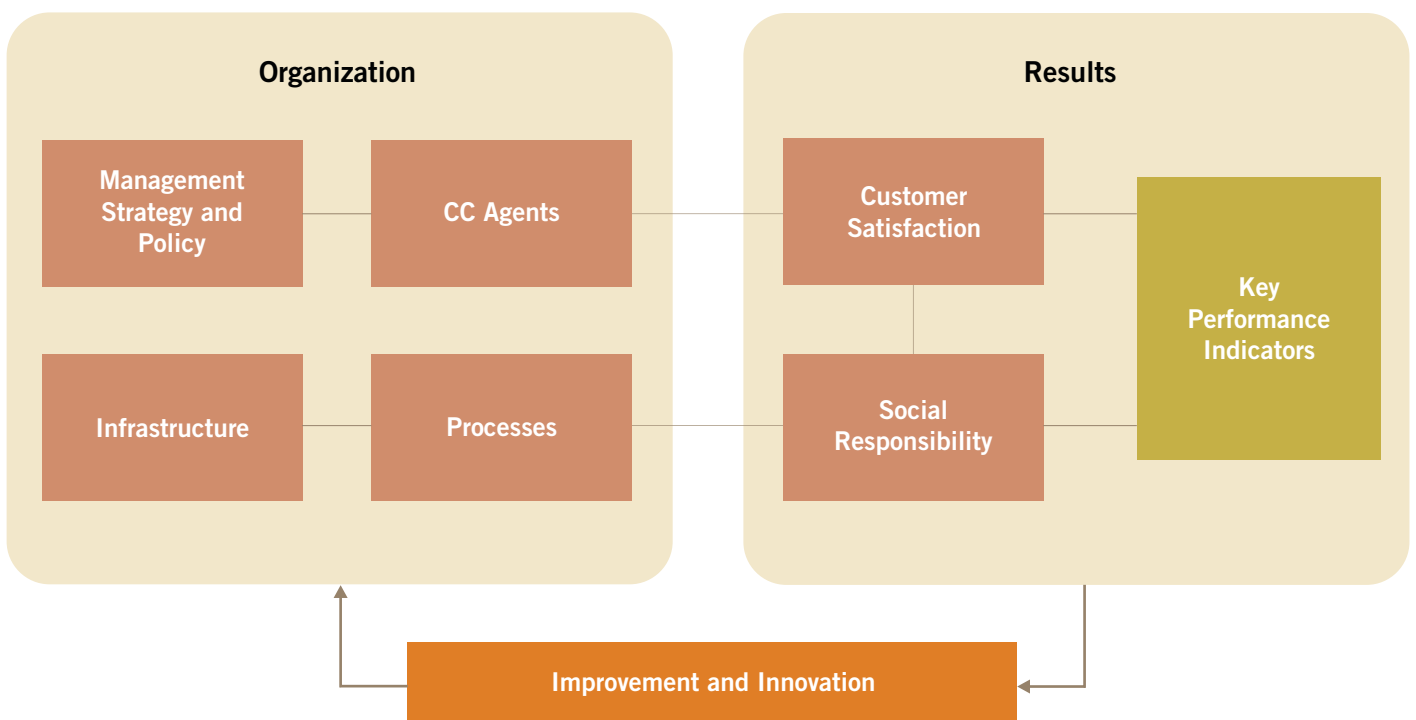
It took several years to draw up the new standard. A major challenge was to find common ground between the participating European countries with strong cultural differences in as much as a contact center as in everyday life.

Eventually all the obstacles were overcome and all European countries ratified the ECCS in the fall of 2009. Now a total of 30 European countries are going to implement this standard.

Understanding the Basics of ECCS

The implementation of ECCS, comparable with ISO quality standardization, is voluntary for contact centers. The ECCS setup is broad and its framework covers all aspects of a contact center. This structure is based on the EFQM model and consists of seven parts.

The ECCS Model:

Organization		Results	
Management Strategy and Policy	CC Agents	Customer Satisfaction	Key Performance Indicators
Infrastructure	Processes	Social Responsibility	

Improvement and Innovation

The requirements that the customer service of the contact center has to fulfil in terms of management strategy and policy, CC agents (contact center employees), infrastructure, processes, customer satisfaction and social responsibility are clearly identified. There are guidelines for selecting, hiring and training of agents, the organization of the contact center management, the setup of customer processes, quality monitoring, rosters and planning and the measurement points for which reporting is required.

There are 12 compulsory measurement items or Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and a couple of recommended ones. Among the mandatory KPIs are service level, progress, forecast accuracy, abandonment, customer satisfaction, first contact resolution, average handling time and two KPIs for the quality of customer contact. There are no benchmarks or fixed values for these KPIs. The ECCS feels the need to have an

agreement between the contact center and the customer of the contact center about the nature and quality of the service rendered. The ECCS assumes that the KPI goals determined by these agreements will be challenging but realistic.
They are expected to be in line with what is common for the contact center industry.

The standard (EN 15838) includes areas such as:

- Management strategy and policy
- Processes
- Requirements for contact center agents
- Requirements for infrastructure
- Customer satisfaction
- Social responsibility

- Mandatory KPIs
- Recommended KPIs
- Best practice guidelines for client organizations

The ECCS devotes a lot of attention to employees of the contact center, especially agents. The quality of the service depends largely on the quality of agents. Agents need to be skillful and equipped in carrying out the job of answering and handling customer queries well. The ECCS contains requirements with regards to the training of agents, work circumstances, recruitment and selection, required skills and workplace equipment. The overriding theme of ECCS is: "Satisfied employees bring about satisfied customers".

A requirement that contact centers have been struggling with is "traceability" of customer contact. The customer's history needs to be traceable, preferably accessible at the time when he or she is holding a conversation with an agent. This enables the agent to anticipate the customer's needs and reconstruct the customer's question of customer case.

How this standard will catch on in Europe is hard to say yet. So far it's encouraging to see the interest that the industry has shown in it. Most of the interest as of now is coming from in-house contact centers that want to distinguish themselves in the market with quality.

In many countries, it will also become possible to get certified for ECCS. A contact center with ECCS certification distinguishes itself from others in the market.
It will serve as a stamp of quality from an authenticated third-party source. The ECCS quality mark will be a guarantee for customers that the contact center has the requisite qualities to provide fast and efficient service, and that their customers will be handled well. It will serve the industry well by adopting the standard throughout Europe.

To learn more, please write to us at **marketing@wns.com**