Getting the Right People in the Right Place at the Right Time for a Better Customer Experience

Changing the Way Contact Centers Look at the Critical Challenge of Agent Adherence

In Brief...

Process — Identify the management processes that can improve adherence (includes an adherence calculator)

People — Learn proven tactics for increasing agent commitment to adherence

Technology — See how workforce management (WFM) technology fits into the equation

Is poor schedule adherence really the problem in your center? Recent ICMI research shows a marked increase in contact centers' investments in workforce management personnel and systems over the past two years. However, we also see complaints about the persistence of a common problem — poor agent adherence — that diminishes the value of these investments. This whitepaper asks you to think of poor adherence as a result caused by bigger problems that start much earlier in your workforce planning process. It offers a look at how you can truly diagnose these problems to come up with real solutions to fix your adherence challenges.

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The Current Challenge

Whether you're a contact center supervisor, manager, director or executive, you're tasked with managing — or more likely juggling — customer satisfaction and the bottom line. Workforce management is what allows us to keep all the balls in the air by putting the right number of people in the right places at the right times, doing the right things. But no matter how much you try, if the people you count on to be there — your agents — aren't there when the calls come in (whether by telephone, email, chat or other channel), the result will be the same: Your organization will likely suffer from higher operating costs, lower customer and employee satisfaction and/or lower revenue generation. (See figure 1.)

Figure 1. The Impact of Non-Adherence

Schedule Adherence	92%	90%	88%
Total Calls and Emails	967200	967200	967200
Handle Time	300	300	300
Base Workload Hours	80600	80600	80600
Base Required FTEs	42.12	43.06	44.03
Annualized Salary and Benefits	$35,000	$35,000	$35,000
Total Salary Expense	$1,474,185	$1,506,944	$1,541,193
Incremental Cost	—	**$32,760**	**$67,008**

- To do the same work with less adherence requires more FTEs
- Inconsistent service to customers
- Higher occupancy
- Real-time team changing the past versus focusing on the future

Poor agent adherence is a common problem, and experienced contact center professionals realize how important it is to improve it. Of the 545 participants in the ICMI 2010 Workforce Management Practices study, nearly half (45.7%) cited agent adherence as their top challenge.

To get to the heart of the problem, let's first understand where and why agents really have a hard time adhering to schedule.

Process! Process!! Process!!!

ICMI asserts that most agent adherence issues are caused by problems other than agent behavior. Before you can get agents to buy into your scheduling process and adherence goals, you have to make sure that the processes surrounding them are solid. The following are ways you can start to build better processes.

Build and nurture relationships with every business unit that generates calls. This may sound elementary, but we know that very little of contact center's work is actually generated in the call center. Call center managers and executives need to be connected to other business units and departments so they know when activities in those areas of the business are likely to create call spikes. Is marketing launching a promotion? Is development launching a new product? Be prepared to show the costs of staffing on the fly for such an event compared to the cost of being able to properly schedule for it.

Dedicate an individual or team to forecasting, staffing, scheduling, reporting and real-time management. Ultimately, you want individuals who are skilled analysts who know WFM. If they don't, you must invest in the training needed to provide them with the skills required to play such a vital role in your contact center. It's important to note that training must be ongoing. It doesn't just happen when you get the latest software. ICMI encourages users to subscribe to knowledge-sharing communities (such as our **_QueueTips_** and vendors' user forums) to stay connected to other professionals who can help.

Lacking resources for dedicated WFM teams, smaller, single-site centers must often absorb the responsibility of WFM within the supervisor/manager teams. This is in line with what ICMI typically sees during visits to such sites, as well. It probably comes as no surprise that small centers often indicate that the costs/headcount associated with their operations are the primary reason for sharing these responsibilities and not having a resource dedicated to the WFM function. But even very small centers need to ensure that this aspect of management is a priority.

> ## Examine your Scheduling and Forecasting Practices for Better Adherence
>
> • Forecast and schedule at interval level
>
> • Include all activities in staff plan
>
> • Continual assessment of schedule effectiveness
>
> • Forecast call volume, talk time and after-call work at the interval level

Create an effective approach to staff planning. The primary purpose of a staffing model is to establish appropriate service level targets and provide the staffing needed to meet your objective on ongoing basis. An effective staffing plan must:

1. Forecast and incorporate all workload into plans
2. Determine base staff requirements to meet target service levels
3. Plan for activities that keep agents from the workload
4. Demonstrate how changes to the workload or staffing will affect the customer.

The workload of a call center is the basis on which a staff plan is built and must include inbound calls as well as all other work performed by agents. Most call centers deal with other things besides inbound phone calls. For example, it is common for agents to answer emails, manage chats and handle back office paper processing, place outbound calls and focus on other non-inbound activity. Any activity that has a volume and a handling time associated with it should be converted to workload. This allows management to get a full understanding of what work is being done and ensures that the center gets staff allocated to that work.

Once the workload is defined, the additional time associated with handling the workload — along with other activities — must be factored in to determine the total staff required. By effectively layering the different components of staff time on top of the workload, planners can make a solid case for total staffing requirements and demonstrate the effects of staffing decisions. These factors can be grouped into four buckets:

1. *Occupancy.* This is the percentage of time agents handle call-related work versus wait for calls to arrive (the inverse of occupancy is idle time).
2. *Adherence.* Adherence refers generally to how well agents adhere to their schedules. The two key aspects of adherence include availability (the amount of time agents were available) and compliance (when they were available to take calls).

3. *Utilization Factors.* This reflects the time agents spend in the building but not on the phones — e.g., for breaks, meetings, training and coaching sessions.

4. *Presence Factors.* These variables include vacation, absenteeism, jury duty, disability, etc. — the time agents cannot or do not show up for work.

You will first determine base staff requirements (generally using the queuing formula Erlang C), which will identify realistic occupancy levels. (The time agents have to wait between calls is affected by the workload, service level objectives and the size of the agent group.) You can then factor in the remaining components — those related to adherence, utilization and presence — to create staffing plans that are both accurate and realistic.

Focus on interval level forecast accuracy and schedule effectiveness before doing any schedule adherence initiative. In our WFM research, many centers expressed a strong desire to improve adherence to schedule. But consider this: Many centers reported that they are not basing their schedules on forecasted volume and average handle time (AHT) at the interval level.

What we found troubling about the results in our 2010 WFM research is that many contact centers do not forecast their entire workload at the interval level. Contact centers can actually hurt service level performance by getting agents to adhere to schedules that are not a good fit to requirements. (See figures 2 and 3.)

- 59.4% forecast call volume at the interval level

- 49.5% forecast average talk time at the interval level. (The most common response was monthly.)

- 38.3% forecast average after call work at the interval level. (Again, the most common response was monthly.)

- 63.1% of centers are not conducting intra-day re-forecasts.

Intra-day forecasting for real-time workloads such as inbound calls and chats is a recommended practice that helps the contact center meet its service level and abandonment objectives throughout the day and avoid being overstaffed. (Larger, more complex contact centers may call for interval forecasting in 15-minute increments.)

What Interval Should You Use for Planning?

Given variations in the workload throughout the day, call center forecasts and resource calculations must be based on specific increments, not daily averages. (Increments, also called intervals, are the smallest units of time reflected in reports.) Typical reporting increments include:

- 30 minutes. Thirty-minute increments are common because they provide an adequate level of detail and accuracy for many call centers without burying them in unnecessary detail.

- 15 minutes. Large call centers (e.g., those approaching or exceeding 100 agents in an agent group) often pick up additional accuracy by planning around 15-minute increments.

- 60 minutes. Call centers that handle long calls (e.g., when average call length approaches or exceeds 30 minutes) often establish report increments and staff calculations around hours.

- 10 minutes or less. Peaked traffic, which is a surge beyond random variation within a half hour, requires reports and staffing calculations at five- or 10-minute increments.

Source: Call Center Management on Fast Forward, Succeeding in Today's Dynamic Customer Contact Environment, by Brad Cleveland. ICMI Press, 2006-2009.

It's important to note that inaccurate forecasting can actually contribute to 20% actual higher talk time, which has a huge downward impact on service level. When you look at the combined impact of talk time forecast and accurate talk time, you'll see that they have as big an impact on service level as call volume. Once you get your call center attuned to this, you're likely to get buy-in for the resources necessary to create more accurate forecasts and be able to compensate for lack of time to explore alternative forecasting/scheduling scenarios (two challenges that were ranked closely behind the overall adherence challenge by survey participants).

Unless your center is so small that it has only a few calls per interval (where one or two calls could be 25–200% of forecast variance), interval forecasting is the most important timeframe to analyze. The accuracy at the interval level provides much more meaningful input for meeting schedule requirements and making necessary changes than do daily or monthly forecasts.

Once you have the forecasts right, it's time to look at your schedules and the people who will be working them. You must ensure you are creating schedules based on forecasted demand.

Take a careful look at where your adherence goals are coming from. In our experience, we know that these goals are sometimes developed in a vacuum. Contact center professionals (including executives) must understand what should be included in setting adherence goals. On page 5 (figure 4) is a simple adherence calculator, developed by ICMI, that can help in this effort.

Once you know you're "getting it right," that you understand and can set adherence goals, look at where you can make positive changes in the way you schedule breaks and other types of scheduled work.
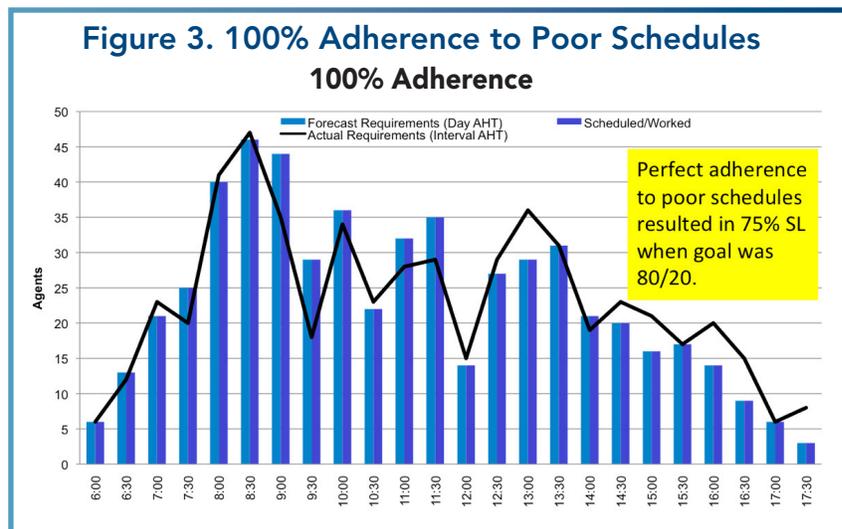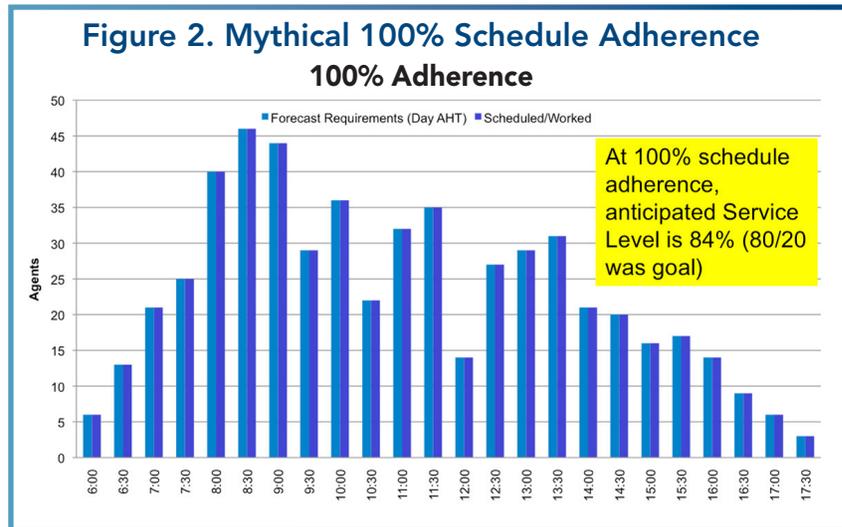

Figure 2. Mythical 100% Schedule Adherence
100% Adherence

At 100% schedule adherence, anticipated Service Level is 84% (80/20 was goal)

Figure 3. 100% Adherence to Poor Schedules
100% Adherence

Perfect adherence to poor schedules resulted in 75% SL when goal was 80/20.

Figure 4. ICMI Calculations for Determining Schedule Adherence Target Percentage

	Data	Calculations
Average Hours Scheduled per Day[1]	7.5	450
# of Times Caught On Call per Day (Avg.)	3	
AHT (minutes)[2]	5	15
Additional Minutes of Non-Adherence	40	40
Total Minutes Out of Adherence[3]		55
% of Non-Adherence Time[4]		12%
Proposed Schedule Adherence[5]		**88%**

(1) Multiply hours by 60 to convert to minutes.

(2) Multiply # of times caught by AHT to get number of minutes due to being caught on calls.

(3) Add the caught on call time and the additional minutes of non-adherence (restroom trips, etc.).

(4) Divide the total minutes out of adherence by the total scheduled minutes.

(5) Subtract the % non-adherence time from 100% to obtain Proposed Schedule Adherence target.

Note: Using AHT for the calculation is a conservative starting point; ultimately, half of AHT should likely be the input.

Start re-routing calls to other agents as the time for a break or other scheduled non-phone work approaches. It doesn't have to be a lot of time, maybe equivalent to half the handle time, but doing this will allow agents to wrap up calls so that they aren't overly delayed in beginning breaks or other work. Even a modest delay of five or ten minutes can create a situation where an agent is, at best, confused about when the time markers are, or, at worst, feel they've been cheated out of a portion of their break. Either way, they may be late returning to ready mode, which can begin to erode your center's adherence performance.

You're ready to focus on schedule adherence at the agent level when you are forecasting ALL workload at the interval level and creating schedules that match the forecast, and when you have a re-forecast process in place.

Getting Agents to Buy Into Adherence

Agent adherence is a critical factor in both customer satisfaction and managing the bottom line. Poor adherence to schedule is often viewed as an agent behavioral problem — and sometimes it actually is. But often, the underlying truth is that the contact center isn't doing enough to train and reinforce the behavior necessary for better adherence performance from agents.

Make agents aware/educate them on the value of adherence. Ask yourself if your center is doing an adequate job of educating agents (new and existing) on the "power of one" principle. This principle says that each agent's adherence has an impact on customers, other agents and

the contact center's overall performance. When you onboard new agents, is adherence part of the training? If it's not, it's a must. Start by dedicating at least an hour of new-hire training time to share with agents the power of one, the essential steps in resource planning, and how schedules are made. For a quick look at the impact that just one agent can make on occupancy and service level, see Figure 5.

You can demonstrate the principle of the power of one simply to agents (and to supervisors and others in the organization) with a quick exercise. Sit down with two or more agents and a deck of beginner mathematics flashcards. Dole out the cards to the agents every few seconds,

Figure 5. The Power of One: How One Agent Can Mean the Difference Between Meeting and Not Meeting Service Level Goals

Erlang C Calculation	Agents	Service Level	ASA	Occupancy
1. How many agents do you need to meet your service objective?	30	24%	209	97%
	31	45%	75	94%
	32	61%	38	91%
	33	73%	21	88%
	34	82%	13	86%
2. What happens to service if you lose one agent because they are out of adherence?	35	88%	8	83%
	36	92%	5	81%
	37	95%	3	79%
	38	97%	2	77%
	39	98%	1	75%
	40	99%	1	73%
3. What happens to occupancy?	41	99%	1	71%
	42	100%	0	69%

Notes: Talk Time in Seconds = 180
After Call Work in Seconds = 30
Calls per Half Hour = 250
Service Level Objective in Secs = 20

representing incoming calls and their distribution. Ask the agents to write down the problem and then the answer before moving on to the next card. A few cards in, remove one of the agents from the rotation, but keep dealing at the same rate. Agents will soon see that losing just one person will quickly cause a pileup of the cards/calls. (If you really want to stress the point, track the agents' accuracy between the period of total adherence and when you removed one agent. Were they able to multiply and divide, even add and subtract, accurately when the pressure was on?!)

Here are some other ways you can advance your adherence curriculum for agents and supervisors:

- *Make sure definitions are communicated in a standard fashion.* Agents (and supervisors) should know what "after call work" means and when they should be in this state.

- *Establish task priorities for agents.* Agents should know exactly what to do when they're idle, whether it's delivering faxes, clearing their inboxes or taking a break.

- *Teach agents to look at real-time information and to understand corresponding actions.* They should know the compliance target and how their actions affect success.

- *Educate supervisors, agents and schedulers about the broader impact of non-adherence.* This isn't just the queue stacking up on frustrated agents, it's frustrated customers and lost opportunities — and of course, there's often revenue and customer loyalty tied to that.

Motivate and engage agents to be in their seats — and performing at high levels — when needed. There are several ways to do this, including these we've seen from top-performing centers:

- *Agent-centric schedules.* This can include giving agents the ability to schedule themselves based on their needs — in the context of what's necessary to serve customers.

- *Allow trades.* Like self-scheduling, allowing trades gives agents a sense of empowerment while balancing their needs with those of the organization. Increasing flexibility by this method can be a powerful way to drive agents' commitment to schedules in general, limiting both non-adherence and absenteeism.

- *Recognize and value adherence and attendance.* This doesn't require huge incentives. Singling out agents with special recognition for their contributions is a very powerful incentive. By nature, most of us very much appreciate positive recognition for our contributions.

- *Involve agents in the scheduling process.* This is simpler than you might think. When you make time in your new-hire training to share the power of one, the essential steps in resource planning and how schedules are made, ask agents for their thoughts and input on the process. And do this regularly with all agents. Consider this nugget from the ***2010 ICMI Workforce Management Practices Report:*** "Only about 60% of respondents indicated that their agents are satisfied with the center's scheduling process."

> **Keys to Agent Buy-In on Adherence**
>
> - Awareness/Education
> - Agent-centric schedules
> - Allow trades: increases flexibility
> - Recognize and value attendance and adherence
> - Agent-generated solutions

Understand the impact of poor adherence on agents and the customer. There are hard consequences to poor adherence that everybody in the contact center should understand.

- *When adherence is down, occupancy goes up.* For those of you who don't speak call center or WFM, that means when agents aren't where they're supposed to be —when they're supposed to be there — the other agents who are still valiantly manning the phones are exhausting themselves taking on the additional workload. These adhering agents are more prone to get burned out and call in sick, or worse, leave your organization. Now you face the additional cost of training new agents to replace them. Add to this the fact that the agents most likely to adhere to schedule regularly — and to face a high-occupancy environment more frequently — are probably your best agents.

- *When occupancy goes up, service level goes down.* That means more customers are likely to abandon calls when there are long wait times. Every time your customers hang up before reaching an agent, your organization has missed an opportunity to (among other things) solve a problem and keep a loyal customer, cross-sell or up-sell them, or otherwise serve their needs.

- *When occupancy goes up, quality and first-call resolution are likely to take a dive, too.* Those agents in adherence, faced with a stacking queue thanks to other agents who've

taken a couple of extra minutes at lunch or on break (or who are down the hall following up on a customer fax), are going to be tempted to do one of two things, or both: cut a couple of quality corners or hurry a customer off the line without really resolving their issue in order to meet average handle time goals or simply to clear the queue so they can catch a breather. A drop in quality creates myriad scenarios for loss — from regulatory penalties to missed opportunities for both customer data management and customer satisfaction. Lower first-call resolution can have a more direct impact — even in short intervals — by generating more incoming calls (of a less predictable nature) that the center must handle.

Where WFM Technology Can Help

Once you've looked at all the angles involving people and processes, it's time to investigate how technology can help.

Today we see WFM technology — whether it's tools or automated systems — in all shapes and sizes, hosted and premise-based, for large contact centers and small. The key to getting the most out of your WFM technology — in terms of improvement and ROI — is to make sure that your people and processes are as close to solid as you can get them on your own.

Centers that are not able to have a technology company create tools specifically for them should find and implement the WFM-related technology that best fits their call center environment. But implementation isn't the end of the process: Thorough training and continuous practice using that new technology to optimize their performance is at the heart of ROI.

Every WFM professional, at a minimum, should have Erlang calculating tools. Most centers can improve performance significantly by implementing additional WFM tools — as long as they have staff that is fully trained and has a solid level of competence on that software. A number of centers we have worked with over the years have had WFM systems; however, many of them did not have the training or competence to fully utilize the software to maximize effectiveness.

Today's WFM systems deliver some very powerful features for enabling the center to better meet adherence objectives.

On the people side, these systems are moving into the performance management space from the workforce management angle. Some of the capabilities in the market include:

Agent adherence monitoring and alerts. Both agents and supervisors can know when an agent is out of adherence. Note, however, that this shouldn't be perceived as or used as a "Big Brother" feature. You don't necessarily need corrective action just because an individual is out of compliance at the moment. What it does do is allow you to see patterns so that you can better determine the root cause(s) of noncompliance.

Agent self-scheduling. This capability allows managers to set up areas where agents can control a lot more of their scheduling than ever before. Of course, managers and supervisors can restrict what agents see and have control over, but within the parameters, they can move more

freely. And you are in charge of what those software-based rules are, e.g., you won't want chat agents to make a switch with telephone agents (or selling agents with service-only agents). You create the parameters.

Remote agent scheduling and monitoring. Today, home agents can be managed in the mainstream with in-house agents, with all the same self-scheduling, monitoring and alert capabilities.

On the process side, there are many robust offerings aimed at helping to improve forecasts and scheduling that can, thereby, have a positive impact on agent adherence. Here are some key features to explore:

Call volume change notifications. These alert managers/supervisors when schedule changes are necessary due to sudden increases in call volume. When you can make changes as far in advance as possible, they will have the least impact on agent performance and morale and, consequently, on adherence. Here's a caveat, though: If your processes are in order and your forecasts and schedules are accurate, this feature really becomes a "nice-to-have." Even when you can't know what's coming down the pike, by staying alert and keeping a close eye on real-time occurrences, you'll be able to make necessary adjustments when unexpected call spikes occur.

Incremental data capture. WFM systems can capture call data in increments as small as five minutes, and they store that data indefinitely. This can really help you smooth out your seasonal and cyclical forecasts. Some systems have grown quite sophisticated in their intelligence and adaptability, collating this seasonal and trend data into forecasts for better accuracy in fewer steps — freeing time for alternate scenario planning.

No matter the tools, technologies or features you're looking at for your center, remember that technology is an enabler. Without the right people and processes supporting it (and guiding your decisions), you may be making the problem worse — and wasting your investment.

Better Adherence — and Better Service — Starting Now

The good news is that you can begin improving agent adherence — and the customer experience — in your contact center right away. Start with your processes for forecasting and scheduling to make sure you're doing everything you can to make them accurate. Then take a look at your people: Make sure they're involved, valued, trained and motivated. When performance is up to par in these areas, you'll be able to better support your agents, and you'll have a better idea of what kinds of WFM technologies and tools (and their various features) are right for your center.

About ICMI

The International Customer Management Institute (ICMI), celebrating its 25th anniversary in 2010, is the leading global provider of comprehensive resources for customer management professionals—from frontline agents to executives—who wish to improve contact center operations, empower contact center employees and enhance customer loyalty. ICMI's experienced and dedicated team of industry insiders, analysts and consultants are committed to providing uncompromised objectivity and results-oriented vision through the organization's respected lineup of professional services including training and certification, consulting, events and informational resources.

Founded in 1985, ICMI continues to serve as one of the most established and respected organizations in the call center industry.

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Pipkins Inc. has been at the forefront of Workforce Management Systems development for nearly two decades. Headquartered in St. Louis, Missouri, Pipkins provides modern commercial call centers with advanced sophisticated forecasting and scheduling technology.

Founded in the early 1980s, Pipkins' early and continuing associations with British Telecom (BT) and AT&T Network Systems United Kingdom helped establish Pipkins at the forefront of the demanding operator services industry. In 1993 Pipkins reengineered its product line to meet the business needs of the rapidly expanding US commercial call center market. Pipkins, Inc. offers complete technical and human resources in the areas of new product development, technical support, sales, customer service, and training.

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