

WHAT CALL CENTER MANAGERS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ENGLISH LANGUAGE TRAINING

Call centers are central to the smooth operation of American businesses.

Companies in almost every industry rely on call center agents to handle customer complaints, solve problems, answer questions, and resolve disputes. They play a vital role in maintaining good relations with consumers and retaining those customers over the long term.

According to the Communication Workers of America, the call center and customer service industry employs approximately four million people across the country.¹

Besides having call centers in the United States, many companies maintain facilities around the globe. The Philippines, India, Poland, Spain, Costa Rica, Malaysia, and Brazil are among the countries that operate major call center facilities and provide essential support for American businesses, according to Site Selection Group.²

With so much riding on these call centers, it is only logical to have agents who can communicate clearly and confidently in English. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. For workers whose second language is English, otherwise known as

ESL workers, their lack of English skills can cause problems.

This deficiency puts an unfair burden on call center managers and LOB leaders. Managing a workforce that is not proficient in English adds pressure to those who are already tasked with running efficient call centers that help drive the growth of American businesses.

The answer for overworked call center managers can be found in English language training programs for their workers. This white paper will explore the problems that call centers face with their ESL workforce, assess the available options, examine the benefits of training, and provide realistic solutions that can improve the responsiveness of call centers and hence the success of American businesses that rely on them.

DRAWBACKS OF AN ESL WORKFORCE

An essential function of businesses of all sizes is providing superior customer service. Typically, this is handled by the company's call centers.



In a way, a call center is the company’s lynchpin. Call center agents interact with customers and prospects in an “up close and personal” way. They represent the company in one-on-one exchanges and are the human voice of the company every time they pick up the phone. Indeed, a customer’s experience with a call center agent will go a long way in determining how that customer thinks of the company and whether they will continue to do business with it.

The ability to communicate with assurance cannot be overstated. According to a survey of HR leaders in domestic and global companies of all sizes co-conducted by *Workforce Management* magazine, 78 percent of respondents said that language skills “had a significant effect on reaching their business goals.”³

Call center agents with limited English proficiency (LEP) put the reputation of any company at risk and cause unnecessary problems for the center’s already burdened managers. For example:

- **Harder to retain workers.** Call center operations tend to lose agents faster than other industries. The Quality Assurance & Training Connection organization found that “overall averages for the call center industry as a whole range between 30 to 45 percent, with some centers having almost no turnover, and other centers having turnover in the triple digits.”⁴
- **Lower productivity and profitability.** Disengaged call center agents can have a negative impact on a company’s

bottom line. A McLean & Company study found that the performance level of disengaged employees falls by 55 percent.⁵

- **Undermines employee cohesion and morale.** Call center agents who feel disconnected from the corporate culture because of language problems affect the working climate of fellow workers. McLean & Company reports that “47% of disengaged employees complain about their organization to co-workers and 43% complain about their manager to co-workers. That means if you have a disengaged call center, almost half of your agents are complaining.”⁶
- **Workers missing shifts.** Higher absenteeism has been reported in call centers as a result of agents who feel isolated from their fellow workers and the overall company.⁷
- **Longer to resolve customer problems.** According to a study by Intradiem, a solutions provider for frontline workforces, “When agents don’t feel engaged, employees pay less attention, care less about their work and make more mistakes, costing your contact center money.”⁸
- **Drains company resources.** LEP call center agents can drive up company costs. Intradiem estimates “that disengaged agents cost your contact center \$714,000 USD for every 100 agents.”⁹

It is clear that call centers with LEP





workers can be detrimental to companies in both subtle and measurable ways.

The obvious solution is English language training. But while the solution may be self-evident, the obstacles can be problematic.

WORKPLACE BARRIERS TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE TRAINING

It has been established that call centers routinely employ LEP agents to resolve customer issues.

And it has been shown that these agents can jeopardize the reputation, productivity, and profitability of American companies due to poor English language skills.

To overcome these challenges, ESL agents must improve their communication proficiency.

The obstacles that the ESL workforce faces in this pursuit include:

- **Not enough time.** ESL workers are simply stretched thin with current commitments that make it impossible to further their education. According to the Workplace Management magazine survey of HR leaders, “The most frequently cited barrier to success with language learning was employee workload.... Employees were simply too busy to complete training, even when the need was clear.”¹⁰
- **Outside obligations.** ESL workers are often saddled with personal and family responsibilities that prevent any chance of improving their own skills.
- **Inconvenient class schedules.** A Brookings Institute report found that even when ESL workers had access to adult education classes, class schedules often conflicted with their work schedule.¹¹
- **High demand and low supply of adult education.** The benefits of adult classes are well established, but this popularity could also be undermining the efforts of ESL workers to attend them. Many adult education classes have waiting lists that extend far into the future.¹²
- **Inconsistent classroom quality.** Through no fault of their own, adult education classes are limited in resources, class materials, and teachers. EdSurge, an online resource that covers education and technology,

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So the next logical question is: who should provide that training?

Now, some companies might believe that it is up to ESL workers themselves to seek out training on their own. After all, they should take charge of their own careers. They are responsible for coming to the workplace with marketable skills intact and ready to go.

There are certainly merits to this case. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes plain to see that expecting call centers agents to get English language training by themselves is unrealistic.



found that some adult education courses were handicapped by below average teachers, materials, and training, providing an uneven learning experience.¹³

Given these realities, it is clear that ESL workers cannot solve the problem of improving their English skills on their own. Another approach is needed.

But to what end? After all, what practical benefits does a trained ESL workforce bring to call centers and the businesses behind them?

WHAT A TRAINED ESL WORKFORCE CAN DELIVER

It's natural for companies to want their workers to be trained and competent in their duties. When it comes to language training, however, the push for high levels of proficiency is not always there. If ESL workers can handle their calls "well enough," why bother sharpening their skills?

Indeed, this attitude extends to some workers, too. McLean & Company reports that "49% of disengaged employees perform at the level of do what it takes to not get fired."¹⁴

While that attitude and mentality may exist in some quarters, call centers that invest the time and resources in English language training for their ESL workers come out far ahead.

In practical terms, consider the benefits that a trained ESL workforce provides:

- **More responsive customer service.**

Call center agents who can handle customer calls efficiently add to the company's overall profits. A survey by Gallup reports "that companies with higher employee engagement score 10% higher on key customer service metrics."¹⁵

- **Stronger engagement.** ESL workers who can speak and communicate easily with fellow workers will naturally develop strong bonds of camaraderie and mutual support where all their efforts are appreciated and recognized.
- **Effective customer service.** Call center agents with a comfortable command of English will feel more empowered when they deal with customer calls.
- **Greater collaboration.** According to a survey from the Harvard Business Review, companies where the agents get advice and guidance from their colleagues "actually reduce the risk of...error by 25%."¹⁶
- **Higher profit margins.** Well-trained ESL agents who can resolve customer problems promptly can make a measurable impact on the bottom line. According to CSM: The Magazine for Customer Service Managers & Professionals, "Reducing customer defections can boost profits by 25% to 85%."¹⁷
- **Increased productivity.** A Gallup research study found that "companies with higher employee engagement have 41% fewer quality defects. While





defects apply more to manufacturing or software development, the basic concept holds for the contact center.”¹⁸

- **Better retention rates.** Call centers that demonstrate an active interest in the careers of their agents by investing in training will find it easier to attract and retain skilled employees, allowing for promotions from within and cutting down on recruiting costs.

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Addressing the language requirements of call center agents requires flexibility, imagination, and commitment.

Investing in the language training of an ESL workforce empowers call center agents with newfound confidence, improves the efficiency of call centers, motivates the workforce, leads to greater collaboration and involvement, and reduces pressures on call center managers to meet their goals.

Now...what must a language training program offer?

THE SOLUTION FOR TRAINING ESL WORKERS

As this examination of the problems that occur when employing an ESL workforce in the call center industry has shown, addressing the language requirements of call center agents requires flexibility, imagination, and commitment.

To that end, Rosetta Stone offers an array of tools, options, and benefits that meet the specific needs of call center managers and their ESL workforce. For example:

- **Customized English language training.** Call center managers can work with Rosetta Stone to come up with the content and training that fits their particular workforce—allowing

them to tailor instruction to their circumstances.

- **Anytime/anywhere training.** Rosetta Stone lets call center personnel access their training modules on almost any type of digital device, from desktop workstations to mobile devices and portable tablets and computers—giving ESL workers unlimited freedom to practice their language skills whenever and wherever they like, making efficient use of their time.
- **Challenged at just the right levels.** Rosetta Stone can help call center managers set up individual training programs so each student studies and trains at their own level in a progressive learning environment.
- **Feedback and live tutoring.** ESL workers can access speech-recognition technology, instant speech feedback, and live tutoring that complements learning and increases learner motivation.
- **Greater manager control.** Real-time reporting tools from Rosetta Stone enable managers to keep track of the progress of individual employees and groups for greater accountability, measurement, and analysis.
- **Easier buy-in.** Rosetta Stone provides deliverables, measurements, and metrics that help call center managers make a persuasive case for an investment in and commitment to this language training to all relevant decision-makers.





TAKING THE NEXT STEP

According to Technavio, a London-based market research company, “The global contact center market has been registering a positive growth rate for the past five years, and this growth is expected to gain momentum in the coming years.”¹⁹

Undoubtedly, many of those incoming workers—as well as a massive number of current workers—will need to cultivate their English language skills.

It’s good for business and good for morale. Rosetta Stone can unlock the doorway to a more harmonious, highly-functioning call center environment.

For more information specially prepared for call center leaders, visit the Rosetta Stone [portal](#).

Or, you can request a consultation about setting up an English language training program for your call center by contacting [Rosetta Stone](#).

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