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Control, Communication, and Knowledge-Building in Asian Call Centers

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Abstract

Communication within international call centers can be significantly complicated by breakdowns that result from multiple layers of corporate language. This case study explores training sessions and documentation developed and delivered by an American team responsible for training international call center workers located in the Philippines. Findings show that attempts to standardize and control workplace language can limit meaningful two-way communication, leaving workers to both question what they are told and invent new ways of communicating. Recommendations are presented in this study for a workplace writing model that can overcome language differences through authentic interaction.

Keywords: global corporate language; cross cultural communication; call centers, lingua franca

Introduction

Global businesses depend on call centers to serve as a single point of communication for their customers, delivering consistent messages and providing solutions in accordance with organizational objectives. Many are outsourced call centers located in non-English speaking countries, and although English is the language of global call centers, there is continued criticism by native-speaking (NS) callers about the communication skills of the non-native English speaking (NNS) agents. What many callers do not see is that behind the scenes there are writers and trainers creating and delivering content, leaving the agents to be messengers of corporate spin. Highly controlled yet deficient organizational communication and training strategies in call centers can account for much of the frustration felt by both agents and the callers whom they are trying to assist.

With increasing interest in call center communication studies over the past few years, there has been important research on how NNS agents communicate with NS callers and how the agents themselves function within outsourced call centers (Forey & Lockwood, 2007; Iravani & Van Oyen, 2007; Pal & Buzzanell, 2008). NNS agents are

often conflicted by the language of the organization, often American English, as compared to their own language and culture (Cowie, 2007; Elias, 2010). Call center training programs use strategies such as accent neutralization and scripted call flow simulations in an attempt to mold NNS call center agents into communicators able to interact with and understand NS callers. These training strategies are supplemented by written knowledge tools that agents can use to look up information with which to assist callers. Agents struggle to use these knowledge tools which are often created for them by native English speaking writers and trainers (Downing, 2004).

Based on analysis of an outsourced call center in the Philippines, this study explores challenges involved in the areas of communication training and knowledge-building for the global workplace. This study investigates examples of call center communication breakdowns, many of which stem from a struggle between control of information and language and the evident need for collaborative communication. Organizational communication can be impacted by issues of power and control over the ways that language is used and meaning is made. Workplaces such as the one presented in this study often adopt, or in some cases inherit, communication strategies that limit the control over language to the hands of a few, leaving others to use and interpret the language (Alvesson, 1996; Slack, Miller, & Doak, 1993). The location of control in the research site presented in this study was the team of American writers who had long been part of the corporate culture at their organization. The American writers made efforts to standardize and control workplace language, limiting meaningful two-way communication and leaving the NNS call center agents to both question what they were told and invent new ways of communicating (Herndl & Lacona, 2007).

The workplace environment studied spread across two continents (North America and Asia), with the outsourced Philippine call center reporting to the North American headquarters of a global consumer electronics company (referred to here as "Brighton"). This organization was complicated by the inability to effectively share information between the American team of writers who were employees of Brighton, and their audience – the outsourced NNS call center agents. The outcomes of ineffective communication were evident through unhappy customers who could not receive adequate help from the call center, frustrated agents who could not help customers because they did not have sound information-based tools, and frustrated writers who worked to fill the web-based knowledge tool with poorly organized, confusing, and often conflicting information only to find that the agents had trouble using the information.

Compounding factors that contributed to the problems in the call center stemmed largely from the writers' lack of direct access to the call center agents and the writers' lack of knowledge about effective organizational communication practices (Mumby and Stohl 1996). The writers had almost no direct communication with the agents for whom they developed training and content, and the communication model of this organization

did not effectively develop or tap-into the knowledge of the call center agents (Herndl and Lacona 2007; Spinuzzi 2003, 2005). Through predetermined scripts, language coaching, and call surveillance, the American writers, along with management, continued the cycle of telling the agents what to say, while wondering why they said something different.

This article begins by presenting a theoretical framework for collaboration in the training and knowledge building of NNS workforce, particularly in call center organizations (Tupas & Ruanni, 2004; Knights & McCabe, 2003; Friginal, 2007). This framework is intended to serve as a model that is inclusive of NNS call center workers. Following the discussion of this model, research is presented showing the efforts of four corporate writers who were responsible for developing and delivering content and training material for NNS call center agents. Methods, analysis, and findings will be discussed, along with implications for further research and application in the global business environment. The company name and the names of employees discussed in this article have been changed to protect their anonymity.

PROMOTING COLLABORATIVE COMMUNICATION

Organizational communication research on collaboration highlights three key areas—the need for shared meaning and language, the impact that organizations have on identity and agency, and the importance of collaboration for communication and problem solving (Hunsinger, 2006; Mangrum et al., 2001; Nielsen, 2009). A shared language can mean a shared corporate language and identity, as well as a shared cultural and linguistic approach to English (Jameson, 2007). Existing organizational structures can be prohibitive of genuine collaboration, and can inhibit the connections in language and culture needed for workers to engage in collaboration (Amidon & Blythe, 2008; Hart-Davidson et al., 2008). Finding or establishing a shared language is likely only possible within organizations that embrace collaboration, and encourage the development of new practices and inlets for collaboration. Empirical studies have shown the positive outcomes of successful workplace collaboration, including the richness that diverse voices bring to the job of content development and knowledge building (Asproth & Nyström, 2008; Heidecke & Back, 2009; Palmeri, 2004). This article builds on the positive outcomes of collaboration shown in existing literature, showing that collaboration is needed particularly in organizations consisting of a global, NNS workforce. As a case study, this research looks at two sides of a breakdown in both communication and collaboration, with one side (corporate writers) struggling to communicate their corporate values, knowledge and language to/through an outsourced, overseas call center and the other side (call center agents) trying build their identity in an organization that they really do not belong to.

Building Shared Understanding in Global Organizations

In organizational situations such as the call center discussed in this article, the nature of global settings introduces factors that can impact communication. Proximity, culture, and language separate geographically distributed teams, and overcoming this through shared language and meaning must be facilitated through communication structures that promote collaboration (Bjørn & Ngwenyama, 2009). Studies show that global organizations can tap into existing social media to promote shared understanding for both co-located workers as well as distant, virtual teams (Signorelli, 2009; Zhang, et al., 2009). Popular social media like Twitter and Facebook allow for meaningful connections to occur across distant teams, while more traditional media such as email, online content collaboration systems, and messaging tools encourage collaborative communication that can be characterized as both formal and informal.

When English is the corporate language, the use of collaboration-oriented technologies like blogs and content management systems demands a consistent approach to language in order to ensure that voices are heard, meaning is understood, and content is thorough and usable. Although these technologies allow distant teams to be more directly involved with each other and with the development and delivery content, the challenge of using or interpreting a single English, or a standard English, is likely to be ever evolving.

Participatory Design as a Model for Training, Knowledge Building, and Workplace Collaboration

Participatory design, having roots in Scandinavian design theories, has been studied in organizational communication as a way to identify and expand upon existing workplace knowledge and experience (Johnson, 1998; Salvo, 2001; Spinuzzi, 2005). For global organizations with native and non-native English speaking workforce, participatory design can be applied to training and content development programs as a way to focus on a collaborative knowledge building. Categorizing workers as either designers or users of information or products, participatory design places the primary responsibility of leadership onto the worker/designers (in the case of this article writers, trainers, and managers), puts the designers into direct communication with users, and puts users in direct communication with each other (Johnson-Eilola, 1996; Mirel, 2002; Sullivan, 1989). What this means for training and knowledge building in the global workplace is that NS and NNS workers are in dialogue with each other, whether as users or designers, and are continually evaluating and evolving existing organizational practices, knowledge, and information.

Johnson (1998) outlines three ways to view the knowledge that a user brings to the table. Users for Johnson can be classified as practitioners, producers, or citizens. The practitioner and producer both use something for a specific, pre-determined purpose, while the producer is also involved with the building of new knowledge. The citizen user participates in and advocates social, collaborative design and development. It is

this third type of user, the citizen, who is actively involved in the creation, change, and outcomes of the information and products they use. The citizen user is critical to the success of workplace collaboration, and brings with them existing knowledge that can and should be applied to improve workplace communication.

As a communicator, the citizen is a catalyst for developing new knowledge, building bridges to others through language, and collaborating in a decentralized organizational space. Workers become direct participants in the communication process by creating content and information and by directly influencing the work of others. Citizen communicators can contribute to content development in a meaningful way, providing their personal, even expert opinions as both users and communicators. These citizen communicators work with trainers, content developers, and each other to create and continually improve organizational content.

In a study demonstrating the need for citizen communicators, Downing (2004) notes the difficulty that call center agents have with using the knowledge tools that they are provided. Downing cites many factors affecting the adoption and use of knowledge tools, such as how much time it takes to learn and use them, insufficient information in the tools, and difficulty conducting searches within the tool. Downing also discusses the ineffectiveness of feedback loops in which call center agents provide feedback and request updates for the tools. "The tools were designed to take the individual out of this decision-making process. The feeling of accomplishment the individual […] may have had was eclipsed by the impersonal nature of the tool" (Downing 2004, p. 180). A critical reason for this lack of user dissatisfaction with the tool is lack of control over the information and the inability to build and contribute personal knowledge gained from experience in the workplace.

For NNS call center workers, contributing knowledge to the organization is often not an option, although given the present research, should be an important consideration for global organizations that employ these frontline workers. Call center agents are cross-trained to handle various types of calls, with the goal being to improve call handling times and reduce call queues (Ahghari & Balcioglu, 2009; Iravani & Van Oyen, 2007). Cross-training, product training, and language training, however, cannot fully account for the knowledge the call center agents gain on the job. Unfortunately, based on research conducted for this article, the tacit knowledge (Spinuzzi, 2003, 2005) of the call center agents often goes unnoticed by the trainers and content developers who script the agents' calls, and only slowly, if ever, becomes part of the organizational knowledge set.

Participatory design as a workplace model for communication, training, and content development puts agency into the hands of call center agents. Access, distance, time constraints, and corporate cultures can all inhibit collaboration with globally dispersed teams like those in call centers. Many companies have moved to XML based documents

and content management systems that open up access across the workplace for collaborative contributions to organizational content. These tools encourage collaboratively created content that is easily maintainable because the authority to change it lies with the organizational community. The content is reusable and open, which is a way to ensure consistent and flexible use and transmission of information (Salvo & Rosinski, 2010; Bromberg, 2004; Sapienza, 2004). Reusable, flexible, and constantly evolving communication comes from an organizational approach to collaboration that truly values the varying languages and contexts within the organization.

DATA AND METHOD

The data used for this study were collected from observations over a six-month period at the North American headquarters of Brighton, a global consumer electronics company that outsourced product support to a call center operated in the Philippines. The majority of data gathered resulted directly from meeting and training session observations (about 45 hours) of the team of four American writers responsible for developing training material for the call center. The length of each meeting was approximately one hour, however, training sessions discussed in the analysis section of this article were all day events. Data collection included taking observational and meeting notes and collecting documentation that described or reflected the writers' roles and processes. This included content that the writers produced and historical and contextual documentation regarding the role of the writers, the call center, and organizational processes.

Data were also collected from observing all aspects of the writers' work, including planning practices, development methods, final content products, meetings, and personal interactions and collaboration. The data collected consisted of observational notes about the writers, meeting notes and transcripts, notes and documentation on organizational processes and requirements, correspondence between the call center and the writers, quality assurance notes, scores, and documentation for the call center agents, and historical and current documentation on the roles of the writers and the call center.

Cases presented in this article were drawn from a larger set of study data from the call center site, and are examples of training sessions, agent quality evaluations, and agent feedback about the knowledge tools. Each case is presented to show how the writers worked to develop training and content for the call center and to examine how the corporate structure and language impacted the work of both the NS writers and the NNS agents. Results of the writers' work were analyzed through feedback from the call center agents. This feedback from agents came in the form of requested changes,

questions about clarifying existing content, and inquiries about new issues that were not yet covered.

The data in this study were analyzed to identify relations of power within the research site and to allow impacted communication issues to surface (Sullivan & Porter, 1997; Herndl & Nahrwold, 2000). Issues among the writers, the call center agents, and the corporate organism appeared in the forms of struggles for control of and adaptation to the corporate language. With English as the lingua franca in these transactions, the data contextualize the complex interactions of communicators who develop, deliver, and utilize content in global organizations (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Charles, 2007).

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Presented here are cases from training sessions, agent quality evaluations, and agent feedback to show that in the call center, the agents attempted to participate in a corporate language that was not their own, and continually failed in the eyes of the American team of writers. The research in each of the following cases shows that corporate language and meaning can be misconstrued by outsourced call center agents who do not share the same organizational culture and corporate language, and that the training and content given to the agents may be contributing to this failure. Analysis began with training sessions conducted before the call center opened in the Philippines, and will progress through discussion of agent feedback to issues with the content and with quality evaluations of agent calls.

Training and Content Limitations

Research presented in this article began at Brighton shortly before the call center moved from the U.S. to the Philippines. Since the 1990's, the Brighton call center had been located in the U.S. with American call center agents, and the move to the Philippines was seen as a financial benefit to the company. During the pre-launch period for the new Philippine call center, the Brighton writers were given several tasks to oversee, including preparing to lead a train-the-trainer session and transitioning content and tools from the U.S. call center to the new infrastructure for the Philippine call center. Initial gaps identified during this research showed that the writers did not develop plans for transitioning existing content for the new NNS agents, they did not evaluate the potential effectiveness of the content or tools for the new agents, and they did not re-examine their process for developing, localizing, and delivering new content to the agents (Esselink, 2000; Holt, 1995; Sprung, 2000). The writers would continue developing and delivering content exactly as they had for agents in the previous U.S.-based call center.

Three weeks before the opening of the Philippine call center, a team of six representatives came to the Brighton headquarters for a one-week intensive train-the-

trainer session. The five representatives from the Philippines included four men, James, Paul, Al, and Harry, and two women, Janice and Laura, all of whom were non-native speakers of English, each had a bachelor's degree, and all of whom would be managers, team leaders, or trainers in the call center. This team from the Philippines came to Brighton to learn more about existing content, practices, and products that they would be responsible for helping the NNS call center agents learn back in the Philippines. These six representatives were expected to learn from the training experience, take notes, and return to the Philippines to develop training plans for the call center agents based on the Brighton training sessions.

The four Brighton writers were responsible for preparing and conducting the training for this week-long session. During the session, the most senior writer on the team, Adam, who had been with Brighton for 30 years, was to be the primary trainer, delivering presentations, demonstrating product functionality, and explaining how the knowledge base tool worked. Each of the writers would present to the call center team their specific product area of expertise, describing common problems, and explaining how these issues had historically been resolved when customers would call in with an issue.   Other subject matter experts, such as product engineers, were invited to demonstrate specific products and give overviews of major known problems or issues.

The first day of the training session was primarily a day to familiarize the Philippines team with Brighton's product lines, including TVs, audio products such as mp3 players, telephones, and other electronics products. The manager of the Brighton team started the session off with a welcome speech and communicated to the Philippines team that she hoped this session would prepare them to develop comprehensive training for the call center agents. After a brief overview of what the week would consist of, the Brighton writers began the training by showing samples of Brighton products and demonstrating various functionality and features. The second and third days of the training were product intensive training. Subject matter experts came to present their products, and the Philippine team was invited to product testing labs for hands-on learning.

The last two days of the train-the-trainer session consisted of in-depth training on how to use the call center knowledge base and other tools, with most of the time being spent on the knowledge base since it was the tool that the agents were expected to use most regularly. Adam explained to the team that the knowledge base was a web-based troubleshooting tool organized in a knowledge tree structure with topics or common problems branching into other topics and solutions. After the introduction to the purpose of the tool, Adam presented multiple practice scenarios in which he would ask the team to use the knowledge base to solve the problem. The scenarios were presented to the team just as the writers thought that customers would call in with a problem. Adam pretended to be the customer in the scenario, and the team, collectively, pretended to be the agent assisting the customer. One scenario went like this:

Adam: Hi, I am having trouble with my mp3 player. I just bought it from Wal-Mart, and I can't see my mp3 player listed in the My Computer window when I plug it into my computer.

Janice: Ok, I can help you with that. Could you give me your model number?

Adam: Yes, it is ABCDE.

Janice: Thank you for that. One moment while I look up that information. (At this point Janice and the rest of the Philippine team used the knowledge base to enter the model number and look for additional information about how to help this customer.)

When they entered the model number, the team was presented with five choices in the knowledge base to select from: Installation, Setup, Operation / General Features, Troubleshooting, and Warranty Information.

Janice selected Setup because the customer said he just purchased the mp3 player, so Janice assumed this was a setup issue. When she opened Setup, she found that the information there was about how to charge the mp3 player, how to turn it on and off, and how to setup the time/date functionality. Paul and Harry had both selected the Operation / General Features option and found an additional question in the knowledge base to ask the customer based on his statement of "I can't see my mp3 player listed in the My Computer window".

Paul: Does your mp3 player say "connected to computer"?

Adam: No, it says "Ready to Disconnect".

Paul: Ok, well what we need to do is to change a setting on your mp3 player that will allow the computer to see the mp3 player.

Paul had found the correct resolution for the customer, but it was through trial and error with the knowledge base that the team was able to successfully help the customer. The knowledge base was organized in a question-answer format, rather than a searchable database. This structure limited the ways that an agent could search for information. It was a tiered information system that required the user to make choices within the system, and if a user made a wrong choice, like Janice did, then there would be a significant delay in solving the problem. This example shows the limitations of the knowledge base as a tool to effectively assist agents in their search for solutions to consumer problems.

After this scenario-based training, the visiting call center manager, Al, asked Adam how the writers would handle revisions to the knowledge base and if there was a way for the agents to provide direct feedback about issues they had with the content, the tool, or

other specific questions. Adam responded to Al by saying that the writers would update the knowledge base with information as new products came out or if new information or issues became known about existing products. Adam also described to Al the plan that the writers had for gathering feedback from the agents – a spreadsheet that would be managed and compiled by supervisors at the call center and then would be sent to the Brighton writers. Although that answer satisfied Al's questions, neither Al, Adam, the other writers, nor anyone else on the team realized that that plan omitted the agents from truly participating in the development and revision of the knowledge base.

Based on observations and assessment of the week-long training session, three issues came to the surface that contributed to the problems that the call center agents would eventually have:

1. The managers and the training personnel that came from the Philippines did not take adequate notes or document what they had learned in the training sessions to in turn prepare them for training the future call center agents on the products and processes of Brighton.
2. The Philippines team did not realize, as the writers did not, that the knowledge base was difficult to use and that the plan for revising the knowledge base was inadequate.
3. The writers did not have access to the agents either during the training or after the call center launch to understand their needs and interactions with the knowledge base.

The limitations of the knowledge base to help the agents and customers were linked to the limitations of the writers to access their audience and gather feedback about what might help improve the knowledge base. The knowledge base had been in use for seven years at the time of this study, and in all of that time, the structure had remained the same – question and answer. There was no analysis process in place to assess the knowledge base, and no strategies for improving usability had been initiated by the writers (Postava-Davignon et al., 2004). The writers followed existing processes for gathering and transferring information that had seemed to work for all previous call centers, and the writers assumed that these same processes would work for the new call center in the Philippines.

The writers were not aware of possible differences between the new call center agents in the Philippines and the previous agents who had been located in the U.S. Many of the previous U.S. call center agents had been with the company for at least a year or longer, and they were skilled in using the content and tools in place at the call center. By only updating the knowledge base with new product information or updates about existing products, the writers were assuming that the new Philippines call center agents would completely understand the existing content and would be able to use it in the format in which it already existed. The writers did not evaluate existing content and tools for use

by their new agents; they did not conduct any surveys, focus groups, or even have one conversation with a real agent in the new Philippine call center (Albers, 2004; Rush Hovde, 2000; Rosenbaum, 1989). By not actually gathering input from the agents, the writers were assuming that they knew what the agents needed and that the knowledge base was an effective way of transmitting the information the agents needed (Sless, 2003).

Adapting to a Corporate Language and Organizational Culture that was Not Their Own

Once the call center opened in the Philippines, the agents had suggestions, questions, and problems. In particular, the agents were having problems using the information in the knowledge base. The writers knew that the call center agents were experiencing difficulties with using the knowledge base content and with helping callers solve problems based on the outcomes of quality evaluations and agent feedback. In the first days the call center was open, the agents were copying content out of the knowledge base and saving it onto their desktops. When asked why, the agents said they found it easier to access common issues from their desktop than by using the knowledge base. Although this practice was discouraged, agents persisted in their efforts to make the tools work for them.

The Brighton writers were heavily involved with the Philippine call center, serving as primary contacts for subject matter questions. Two meetings, quality calibration and feedback meetings, brought the Brighton writers and the Philippine call center team together several times a week. The writers at Brighton participated in each of these meetings with the goal of identifying unique or recurrent problems that related to their work in order to implement possible solutions in terms of updates to the knowledge base, implementation of new policies or procedures, or suggestions to the QA team about developing improved training plans for the agents. The writers also had access to listening to live calls that the agents were on with consumers. Listening to live calls was another way that the writers were able to identify gaps and problems with agents' ability to navigate, understand, and use the content that they created for them.

The limited, though indirect communication that occurred between Brighton writers and the call center agents they supported hinged around the quality calibration and feedback meetings every week with the call center. However, call center agents were not direct participants in any of these meetings, and there was no direct contact with agents at any other time. Instead, these meetings were phone conferences lasting about an hour each between the Brighton writers and the call center management, QA and/or training teams in the Philippines. The call center QA team consisted of four to five people, of which some had originally been hired as agents, but were moved to the QA team because of their skills with products, processes, and general customer service abilities.

Communication & Language at Work

Feedback meetings were held on a weekly basis during which the call center provided questions to the Brighton writers about problems the agents were having with content or understanding particular products. The agents would provide questions to their team leaders or managers, and then these managers would compile the feedback for the call center QA team to discuss with the Brighton writers. After the feedback meetings with the call center, Brighton writers would meet internally with product engineering teams, when necessary, to relay questions from the call center and to find out information on new and existing products. Although there was no formal process for transmitting the questions other than emailing a spreadsheet from the call center to Brighton writers, the process flow for answering the questions was fairly standard, ending either in resolution directly from the writers, or from the engineering team if the writers were not able to answer the questions. The feedback flow looked like this:

Feedback Flow

Key

Questions

Answers

Call Center Agents

Call Center QA Team & Mgmt.

Brighton Writers

Brighton Engineering Teams
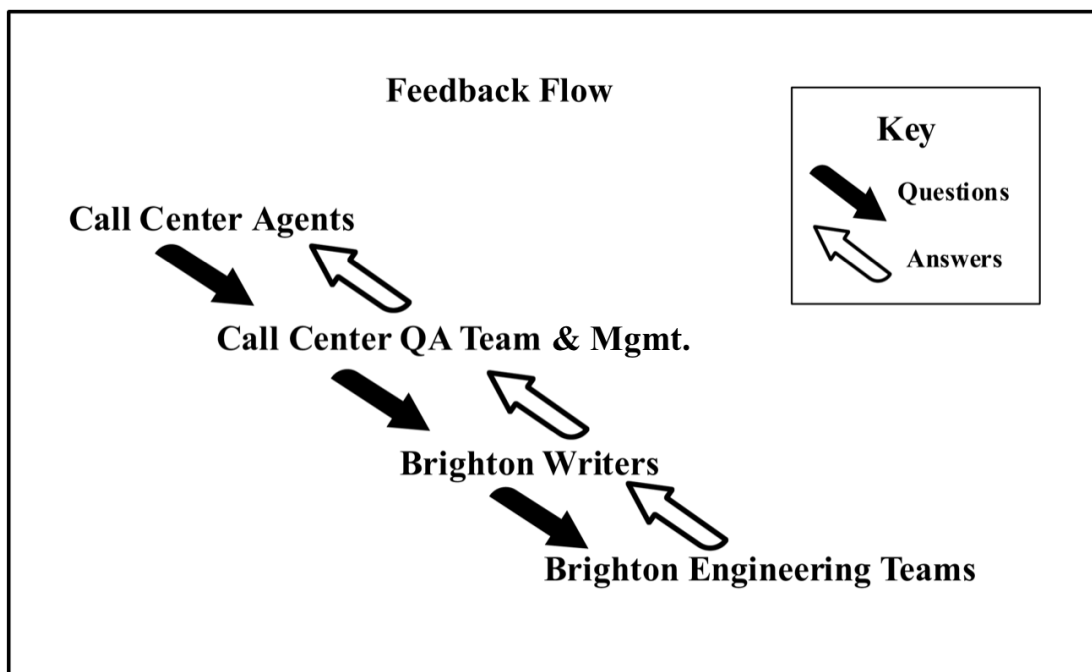
This feedback route was the only method of communication the call center agents had with the Brighton writers. The agents were the audience that the Brighton writers wrote for and developed tools for, but the agents and writers had no direct method of communicating with each other. The writers created content for an audience that they had no direct access to and that they could not include in the content development and revision processes. It was organizational policy that only the Brighton writers could update or add content to the system. This was clearly a lack of power on the part of the agents, as well as a division of labor establishing the writers as the voice of the organization.

The quality calibration meetings were also held once a week, and these meetings were attended by the call center QA team and the Brighton writers. During the quality calibration meetings, three to four recorded agent calls would be played for evaluation purposes. The calls were supposedly chosen randomly from the call database by the QA

team in the Philippines. The Brighton and Philippine teams would independently score the call and would then discuss issues with the calls and final scores. During data collection, it was noted that some agents were repeatedly evaluated, while other agents were only represented once during the meetings being observed. It might be concluded from this observation that certain calls or agents were being cherry-picked, or that important issues were being highlighted by selecting particular calls. This may have been an effort of the Philippine team to rebalance the power relationship and select calls that they felt were better.

A common question asked by the team of American writers during quality evaluation sessions of recorded agent calls was "Why did he (or she) say that?" This question was repeated in a majority of the sessions studied, and it was a question that the writers asked each other while pushing the mute button. Most often in asking this question, the writers were genuinely trying to figure out why an agent said what they did to a caller. Perhaps the agent had given incorrect information to a caller, had misrepresented the content in the help files, or had placed blame on the company by apologizing to a caller, thus admitting fault. Any of these grievances would constitute a failure for the agent's review, yet the answer to the question of why the agent said what they did in the first place reflected more on the corporate language, training, and organizational structure than it did on the agent's communication skills. By failing the agent, blame is pushed to the lowest worker in the hierarchy, the call center agent, the most powerless and the easiest to blame. Again, reflecting issues of power within the organizational structure, getting the agents to conform to the corporate language and culture, was a complex and politicized issue.

Over a six-week period during the research, call evaluations were examined to determine the top reasons for markdowns. The six week period selected was after the call center had been open in the Philippines for over five months, thus allowing time for the agents to settle into their roles and receive training and on the job experience. Although the agents were the ones being evaluated in these meetings for the quality of their call handling skills, product knowledge, and ability to assist callers, the top eight reasons for agent markdowns listed below reflect gaps in training and knowledge base content. Agents were consistently failing quality evaluations because of lack of content, or lack of clear content in the knowledge base, and lack of effective training. The top eight reasons for markdowns were:

1. Demonstrate Product / Process Knowledge
2. Product Tool Use
3. Provided Inaccurate Information
4. Educates Customer on All Solutions
5. Grammar / Etiquette
6. Empathy
7. Proper Hold Procedure

8. Listening Skills

Based on my observations, the first four reasons for agent markdowns were within the realm of responsibility of the Brighton writers, and the remaining four reasons for markdowns are more directly related to job training of the agents. In each of these areas, the agents lost marks because of lack of sufficient training, lack of understanding of the content, or inability of the content to meet the agent's needs.

According to the definitions established by the call center QA team, the first four top markdowns related to knowledge of products, tools, and how the agents conveyed this knowledge to callers (See Appendix A for the quality evaluation form). Products were documented in the knowledge base tool by the Brighton writers, and each of these four markdowns stemmed from the agents' abilities to use and understand this tool. All eight of the markdowns reflected inadequacies in the preparedness of the agents. Grammar, etiquette, and listening skills were scored very subjectively, with the American team often scoring very differently from the NNS Philippine QA team. Empathy was a common markdown for the American team in situations in which the agent apologized for problems a caller was having. The American team perceived this as placing blame on the company and being patronizing to callers, whereas the Philippine team saw the apologies as a simple statement expressing concern for callers' problems (Tuason, 2007). Listening skills was another common markdown that the American team gave to the agents, but the Philippine team did not due to differing perceptions of what was heard, what was meant, and what was ultimately conveyed by the agents. Clearly there was a gap in cultural preferences between the American team of writers and the Philippine quality team, as well as the call enter agents themselves.

Call center agent evaluations are most often looked at in terms of language skills of the agent (Downing, 2011; Lockwood, 2012). However, in the Brighton case, and possibly many other call centers, markdowns on the evaluation should be seen as a shared responsibility between how information was delivered to the agents, how the call center trained the agents to handle calls, and how the agents were and were not able to negotiate the information and training they received. In one quality evaluation of an agent, Adam commented "The agents just need to say what is in the knowledge base." However, this did not always work since the agents would have to ask probing questions, handle issues that were not in the knowledge base, and use filler talk while looking for information. Often the agents seemed confident that they understood a given solution in the knowledge base, then were surprised by markdowns on the call's quality evaluation. The writers' presentation of information as facts and instructions in the knowledge base certainly influenced how the agents used and interpreted the information, but the professional contexts and communication strategies of the agents often differed from the way that the information was presented in the knowledge base. Language was seen by the writers as objective in this writing situation, and the information and knowledge resulting was also intended to be objective. Because the

Brighton writers were unaware of the impact that language had on the call center agents, the miscommunication, misinformation, and misunderstandings resulting from the ways that content was presented to agents and the ways that the agents then communicated the information to customers continued to be problematic throughout this study.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this research show that the writing situation at Brighton was severely impacted by the lack of connection between the writers and the call center agents. The complications of accessing the agents caused problems with creating and delivering content. As users, the call center agents were the ones who were supposed to use the content created for them, but they were virtually unknown to the Brighton writers. There was a lack of genuine communication between the writers and agents about content validity or tool effectiveness. At the end of the day, the writers were responsible for not just content, but for making sure that customer problems were solved. To that end, the writers were responsible for the agents. The lack of communication with the agents came not from a deliberate effort to alienate the agents or have them fail their quality evaluations, but from the writer's lack of awareness that real two-way communication was needed in this situation. The writers thought that creating content like they always had would get the job done. Evidence that the existing writing process was not working effectively was seen in the agents' difficulties in using the knowledge base tool to help consumers. Agents did give feedback to the writers about their problems with the tool, and this feedback consisted of general product questions, scenarios derived from consumer calls, and feedback specifically about the knowledge base content. Although the writers did try to integrate responses to feedback into the knowledge base, much of the feedback was limited to rare circumstances or lack of training and understanding of products on the side of the agents. Here again, the ability to interface with the corporate writers and/or SMEs would have benefitted the agents.
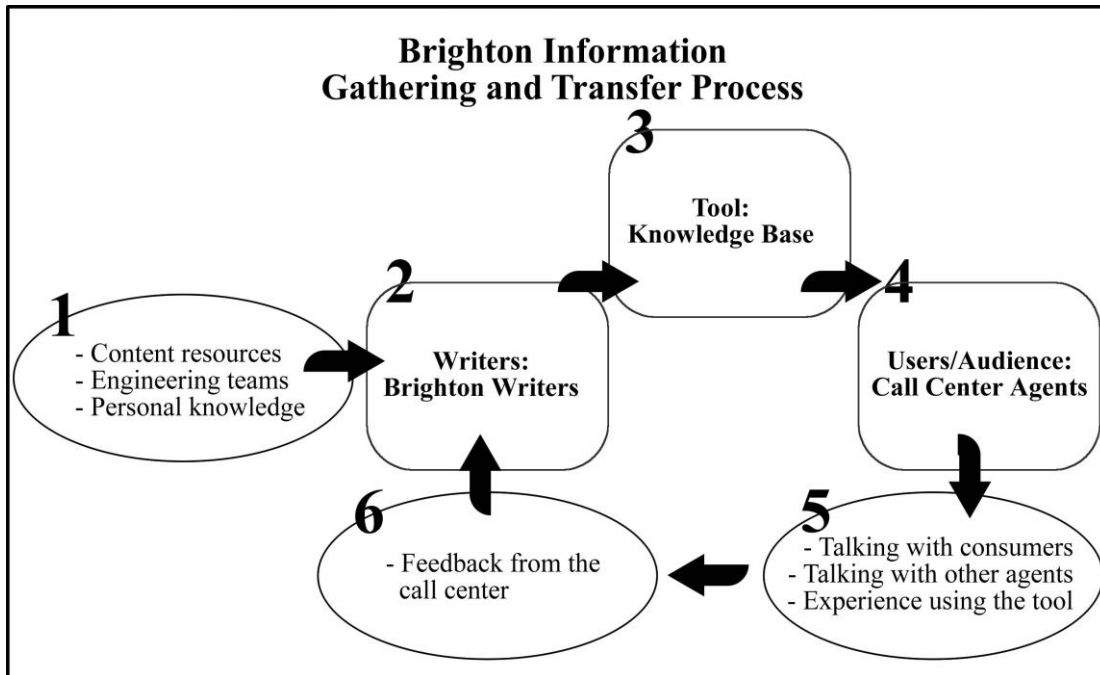
There are, no doubt, many reasons for communication breakdowns in any given workplace. Call centers face numerous problems related to the work of the agents, including poor training, lack of English skills, and cultural differences from their customers as shown in the findings of Forey & Lockwood (2007). Further, personal identities of the agents, as seen in the work of Pal & Buzzanell (2008), impact how the agents are able to perform in their roles. The present research supports the previous findings and shows that there was clearly a constrained agency on the part of the Brighton writers, not just the agents, as the writers had little control over improving their interactions with the call center agents. The writers were involved in training and development meetings with the call center, but the writers had little to no direct interaction with the agents and almost no chance for improving this relationship. This was the case primarily because of lack of awareness of exactly how two-way

communication could improve this situation. In addition to the lack of awareness, there was a sense in the organization that because they were paying for the services of the outsourcing agency, the agents and the call center overall should be more prepared to handle the content they were given. All writers had been with the organization when the call center was located in the US (also an outsourced operation), and rarely had to get involved with a call. Expectations were being met there, and the writers continued to expect that the center in the Philippines would work the same way.

Based on my observations, it was clear that any improvements in the communication between the agents and the writers could only occur through an organization-wide realization that agents were inhibited in their jobs by the content and training they were provided. The agents had no power to speak for themselves, other than indirectly through feedback comments and call evaluations. They were on the front lines, but their concerns were being handled on a small scale with the writers making content fixes or adding information to the knowledge base. Whereas what was really needed was a global assessment of how the agents could contribute to the knowledge base themselves, based on their experience and interactions with callers. Certainly, corporate politics were at play. The agents were not being treated as staff who needed to be in the know; as outsourced workers, the agents were further alienated because of working in a different country, with a different native language and background than the writers and their organization.

If the organization could see the significance of including agents in the information development and delivery process, then the agents could begin to grow their knowledge, and apply and contribute their knowledge and experience to improving the overall information flow. Downing (2004) found that the call center agents in his study enjoyed the interactive process of directly communicating with other agents to find solutions to challenging calls, rather than struggling to input symptoms into the computer-based knowledge tool. The challenges that agents faced in Downing's study were almost identical to the problems faced by Brighton agents, particularly as he discussed the agents' frustration with the time and lack of follow-up involved with them entering feedback into the tool. As shown in the information gathering and transfer process below, the infrastructure was in place at Brighton for communication, but changes were needed to improve communication.   Improved technology, such as a searchable knowledge base rather than a knowledge tree format could help, as well as implementing blogs or other information sharing technologies for improved feedback between the agents and writers.

Brighton Information Gathering and Transfer Process

1 - Content resources - Engineering teams - Personal knowledge

2 Writers: Brighton Writers

3 Tool: Knowledge Base

4 Users/Audience: Call Center Agents

5 - Talking with consumers - Talking with other agents - Experience using the tool

6 - Feedback from the call center

The agents had no control over language in terms of what made it into the knowledge base, and they had no control over even using or trusting their own interpretation of knowledge base content. Although the language used in the knowledge base was clearly subjective, as can be seen from the agents' continuous misinterpretations and misreadings, the Brighton writers continued to see the language as objectively presenting instructions, scenarios, and solutions. The language of the knowledge base was viewed by the Brighton writers as accurate, even though the call center agents consistently had problems with it. The agents made assumptions about the meaning of content, and the writers made assumptions about how the agents would understand the content. The writers were working from a perspective that the content they created was clear, so the agents should be able to use and understand it. These assumptions of both the writers and the agents, however, were faulty, as they were derived from problems with the subjective nature of language.

There were organizational limitations keeping the Brighton writers from genuinely interacting with the call center agents, but the writers did not fully explore how they might better reach out to the agents. Organizational limitations included the desire from Brighton management to handle all process related issues internally to Brighton and with little input from the call center. An additional limitation that kept the writers from interacting with the agents was that the agents had the job of answering calls and little more. The agents were expected to be on the phone, keep call times low, resolve the issue for the caller, and move on to the next call. These limitations could have likely been overcome if the Brighton writers had voiced a concern to their manager about not having the agents included in the writing process. However, since the Brighton writers continued to move forward with their existing plan, no efforts were made to include the agents in the writing process. The results of not including the call center agents in the

writing process meant that if they did have a suggestion, a question, or a problem, their voice would be hidden among many others on a spreadsheet that was not prioritized, not evaluated for validity, and that could not be interrogated for further information.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There is a growing need to understand how to best prepare NNS call center agents for the often stressful communication situations that they face in their jobs. The training that agents receive should focus on knowledge-building activities that help clearly define the valued language of the organization. For the global workplace, whether a call center or another organization with NNS workforce, this research shows that corporate language, and indeed corporate politics, should be inclusive of NNS workforce, and that this can be achieved through collaboration and simply allowing the NNS workers to genuinely participate in the corporate language.

This study demonstrates that corporate language can be difficult for NNS workforce to fully integrate into their jobs. Limitations to the present article include not being able to provide extended examples of calls and feedback, while also not being able to extend the discussion to other findings in the research such as the impact of technology on the corporate language and communication strategy. There are other interesting areas of future research that would be valuable to conduct either in a call center environment or other workplaces with NNS workforce. Collaboration in business situations such as training and content development could be examined from various cultural perspectives across multiple workplaces. Further analysis could look at instances of formal and informal talk between NS and NNS workers in call center environments: For example, when do NNS workers talk with NS workers and does this talk help them communicate in their roles as call center agents? Much fieldwork has improved call center practices over the past decade, and it could be valuable to look at the role of the researcher as practitioner in this context.

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