Why does Office Process Have to be Customer-Centric?

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Why *does* office process, which encompasses most work outside of manufacturing, have to be customer-centric? Why not just redesign the office for efficiency purposes and take the money and run? I'll give you three good reasons, including one that may surprise the daylights out of you.

The first and most obvious is that customers say so. Office process–front office, back office and every other type–provides customers everything they're after outside of physical product, and in some cases significantly affects product as well. Companies that don't give customers what they want and expect are paying a steeper and steeper price by the year–and with the recession upon us and customer demand dropping precipitously, that may change to by the month.

The good news for companies is that what's good for customers is often good for them, and vice versa. But we'll address that shortly.

The second reason is that marketing, sales and service–all office process-driven functions–have to move in customer-centric directions. Traditional marketing approaches such as talking *at* customers (instead of with them) and persuading them to adopt the seller's point of view no longer produce the traditional results, thanks to empowered customers and web 2.0. And thanks again to empowered customers, plus today's buyers having wider choices of sellers than in the past, traditional "sell for today and worry about tomorrow, tomorrow" sales tactics have become counter-productive, even in the short-

term. And traditional customer service concepts like minimizing cost-per-call received in contact centers or maximizing rep calls per hour are going the way of Sprint (down, if you haven't been reading the papers).

In order to acquire new customers and hold onto current ones, companies have to redesign marketing, sales and service process to align with customer needs and expectations. And if they don't–well, take a closer look at Sprint, and think about Circuit City while you're at it.

Not much to dispute about reasons one or two, unless you still believe Northwest Airlines needed a buyout because customers hated the color of its planes. But the third reason is not nearly as intuitive or accessible. In fact, it's almost *counter*-intuitive.

The third reason is the role customer-centricity plays in reducing office labor costs. That's right. I said "reducing."

"Panic layoffs" where every function cuts a percentage of staff aside, when companies review office operations to reduce cost, what happens? Combining roles of underutilized people; trimming poor performers; more sharing of fewer support staff; eliminating only marginally useful work; even cutting a superfluous supervisor or manager or three. In other words, a cut here, a cut there, careful trimming around the edges, occasionally an accidental cut into flesh, but that's it. How far can you get this way? Unless you have people standing around the water cooler for hours at a time, typically 5% at most. And what about improvements to work quality and cycle times? Not the goal of this type staff trimming.

But what happens to staff levels when companies redesign office process around customers? Empowering employees so they need less supervision; better training employees so they need less support; eliminating or drastically downsizing supervision and support staffs; tearing down functional silos that make work more complex than it needs to be; combining functions instead of individual roles; properly aligning technology with process to enable much more efficient, higher quality and shorter cycle time work; and there's more.

But wait a minute. Weren't we talking about redesigning work around customers? You betcha, we were, What I just described is what customers want–less bureaucracy; one contact solutions; no passing the buck; dealing with knowledgeable employees; improved work quality; less waiting; and even a lower cost-base so customers can share in the labor savings through lower pricing. And companies can accomplish all this with potential FTE (full time equivalent) reductions averaging 15%. At least that's our average using our Visual Workflow process methodology to redesign office process.

As counter-intuitive as seems to reduce office staffing in order to become more customer-centric, there is, indeed, a one-to-one relationship. Think about that for a while.

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