

## **Identifying Service Centre Staff in the Public Sector – A Systematic Approach**

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### **Introduction**

Many call/contact centres report difficulties in attracting and more dramatically, retaining staff. Annualised turnover figures of 30-40% are common and in many cases, are higher. The costs associated with these rates of turnover are huge and have a direct impact on organisational effectiveness, customer service and profitability. They also indirectly effect productivity due to reduced morale and the continual replacement of staff with less experienced people. Invariably, longer serving, more experienced staff are burdened with training and explaining details.

The industry is well aware of these pressures and a great of effort and investment have been made to improving working conditions. Many centres use the best of contemporary technologies. Nevertheless, problems remain.

consultingtools' response to this has been to focus on systematically selecting service centre staff. We can objectively identify sets of characteristics which address both:

- The realities of a particular operating environment
- A structured, disciplined way in which an employer can differentiate between “most suitable” and “least suitable” candidates.

This case study describes a project in Norfolk County Council. The project utilised Facet5 in the form of “Audition” which augments the Facet5 analysis with criterion based interviewing. It might be helpful to provide a brief overview of Facet5.

Five factors are now widely accepted as the fundamental building blocks of personality. These ‘Big 5’ have consistently emerged from research around the world as the irreducible minimum needed to give a comprehensive description of someone’s personality. The factors are:

- Will (determination, confrontation, independence)
- Energy (vitality, sociability, adaptability)
- Affection (altruism, support, trust)
- Control (discipline, responsibility), and
- Emotionality (anxiety, apprehension), which interacts with the other four affecting stability, confidence, emotional state.

Facet5 measures these five factors precisely and quickly to give the most accurate and easily applied portrait of individual differences in behaviour.

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Facet5 also allows a detailed breakdown of the five factors into 13 sub factors (facets) to explore subtleties of behaviour at an individual level.

Audition is an on-line process. This means that selection decisions are not delayed by having to wait for results to be produced, having qualified scorers available, interpreting results, etc.

### **The Business Case**

A recent industry survey by the Contact Centre Association reports that in the next 12 months (throughout 2004), there will be a 68% growth in contact centre workforce size, with 72% of that growth being accounted for by core business growth and demand.

This compliments the official Department for Trade and Industry report which showed that call centres in the UK are set to recruit an extra 300,000 workers over the next 3 years.

Service centres are integral to the public sector modernisation agenda and to the extension of e-service modes of delivery. Substantial expansion is forecast over the coming years.

County Councils are part of the UK Local Government structure. There are 35 County Councils in England. They provide, for example, education, social services, Fire and Civil Defence, environmental services, libraries and community services to their population area, which is usually around 1 – 2 million.

Secondly, the UK has introduced, through central government, a performance rating system for local government. The system ranks performance from “excellent” to “poor” and the results – which are all published – produces considerable emotional reaction from the organisations. In this case study, the Council, were rated “good”. This means the organisation is comparatively high-performing with significant internal knowledge and capability and were looking for new ways of approaching the challenges they face.

Norfolk County Council established their Customer Service Centre with substantial growth plans. By mid 2005, there will be an indicative yearly call volume of 1,000,000 calls covering 6 service areas and 12 product areas, including:

Education – general enquires, school admissions, Adult education, etc

Environment – street lighting, abandoned cars, etc

Cultural Services – libraries, etc

Trading Standards

In addition, the Customer Service Centre will be capable of being demand-lead e.g. in response to County or national emergencies.

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To meet their targets, the number of people in the Centre will grow two-fold, from its present base of 20 to 60 people, in about 12 months.

The centre will also feature as a new employment and career opportunity for Council staff who might change from working in individual Service Directorates into a central service. The Centre will be a challenging new type of work environment for many people with a work history in traditional public sector structures. The Council were also therefore seeking innovative ideas in how the selection of internal candidates could be both thorough and accessible to the employee considering a possible transfer.

### **The Process**

Audition is a process within Facet5 that, on the basis of research, identifies a specific Facet5 profile that is linked to the behavioural requirements of a particular "role". By applying Audition to the responses given by a particular candidate, recruiters are given clear interview guidelines, specific to that candidate. These interview probes are designed to focus on those areas where the candidate matches (or does not match) the ideal profile and to explore and qualify this "fit" so that recruitment decisions can be made with added confidence.

An audition template can be based on either statistical research (where there is a large amount of historical data) or on detailed analysis of the recruitment guidelines including, for example, position descriptions. In this case, since the customer Service Centre is newly created, the latter approach was adopted.

The analysis has identified a number of key behavioural characteristics that would seem to be required in order for a candidate to succeed if appointed to the position of Customer Service Assistant. These behaviours have been converted to Facet5 behavioural structure and an Audition template that embodies them has been created. It is now possible to apply this template to any candidate's Facet5 profile and produce an interview guide for that candidate.

### **Initial results**

- If there was no relationship between the Facet5 profile and the rated performance, there would be the same proportions of 'high' and 'low' performers across the sample as a whole. However this was not the case.
- Facet5 demonstrated that people in the lower performance areas were more likely to be rated 'low'. Whereas people who were assigned to the 'high' performer groups were more likely to be rated high.
- We mentioned above that there are 13 Facet5 sub factors. The data was now subject to further analysis to determine which sub factors predominate in this case. Which sub factors were most likely to be associated with high performance? The sub factors may be different in

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each case, reflecting the realities of different operating environments and employee groups. In this case, the high performers:

- Strap commitment to the client
- Take individual responsibility
- Take the initiative
- Be assertive
- Take definite decisions on the information the caller gives
- Follow through to set that decisions are implemented

more than average or poor performers.

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For recruitment and selection purposes, we can rephrase this as the search for candidates who are:

- The closest fit to the high performers that the subsidiary is seeking
- A good, average fit and can be considered
- A poor fit

These Candidates profiles can in turn be presented as Facet5 portraits, where the grey portrait is this client's profile of high performers, and the red portrait an individual candidate. This profile can vary between organisations, operating environments, types of contact centres (between sales, service, support etc centres). In this case:

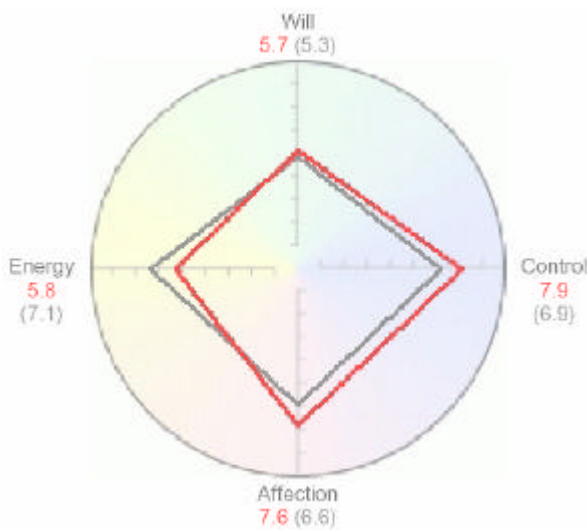


Figure 1 : Portrait of a 'close fit'

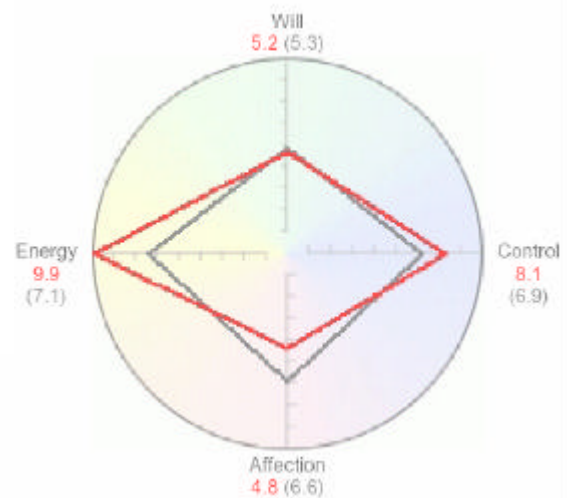


Figure 2: Portrait of an 'average fit'

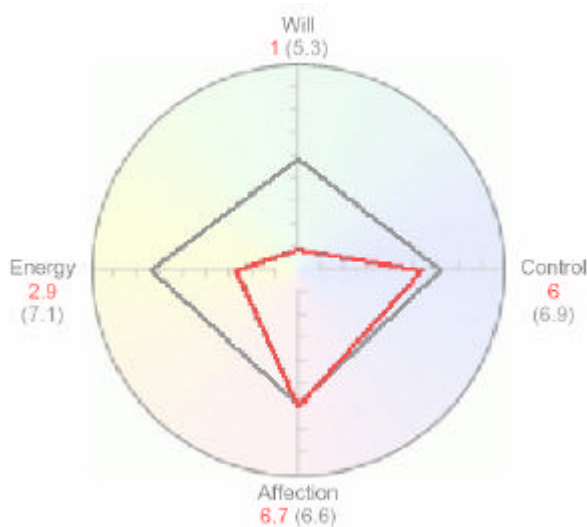


Figure 3: Portrait of a 'Poor fit'

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## **Audition as an Aid to Interviewing**

Audition has been designed to provide not only a robust and rapid method of sorting between candidates, but as an aid to interviewing. This is especially valuable in installing consistent selection systems, free of bias and with greatly reduced subjectivity. Audition employs criterion based interviewing where a set of interview guides are generated with specific interview questions. This provides clear indications of what areas should be explored. Audition incorporates a set of behavioural and situational questions and these can be further refined and put in the context of an organisation's operating environment in order to capture more precisely their corporate culture and style.

This is achieved in a three-step process:

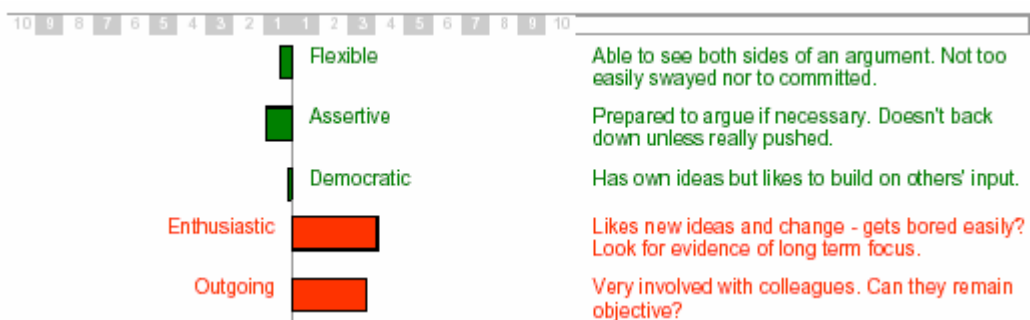
- i. In any one client situation, which of the 13 sub factors is significantly related to high performance
- ii. What the "ideal" scores are, where ideal equates to 'close fit'
- iii. The "ideal" direction, that is, where there are differences, are they more or less desirable

The significant sub factors are combined to produce a "Convergence Chart" which shows how closely a candidate's profile on these sub factors matches the ideal and illustrates the differences.

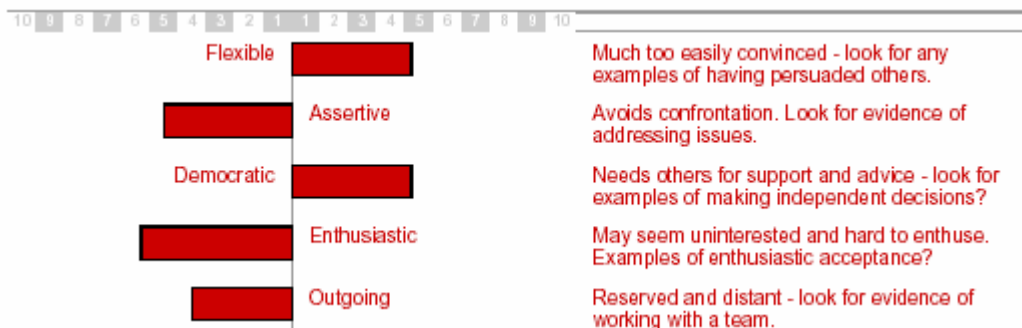
In this case, the three Convergence Charts are:



**Figure 1: Convergence Chart of a close fit**



**Figure 2: Convergence Chart - chart of average fit**



**Figure 3: Convergence chart of a poor fit.**

Where the chart shows minimal or zero differences, the ideal is as closely matched as possible. The 'further away' from zero, the greater the difference. If the bar goes to the left of zero, this is a sub factor which the candidate has less than the desired profile; a bar to the right, is more than the desired sub factor. Audition will generate appropriate questions dependent on these bars.

## **The Interview Template**

Audition will automatically generate interview templates based on the convergence chart. The template will provide behavioural and situational questions related directly to the degree of difference in a sub factor. A trained interviewer will be able to elicit substantial information from candidates using this approach. The template will guide the interviewer to seek concrete examples of relevant experience from the candidate.

Consultingtools provided comprehensive interviewer training for a team of Customer Service Managers who will be tasked with the selection interviews.

## **Conclusion**

Contact Centre growth in workforce size and business application is seemingly inexorable. While technology costs are subject to constant challenge and reduction, people costs in recruitment, selection, retention, training and development remain significant proportions of total costs and show no sign of reducing.

The consultingtools approach demonstrates that very considerable improvements in the quality of staff recruitment and cost reduction are possible. When combined with an increase in the more effective use of management time in induction and training, the returns are significant.

## **Contact**

*For further information on this case and to talk with the team who undertook the assignment, please contact the International Client Centre, details are below.*

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