

Call Center Glossary of Terms

ABANDONED CALLS Calls answered by equipment but never reaching a telephone specialist because the caller hung up (usually due to a long wait), caller interruption, or recognition of a misdialed call.

AFTER CALL WORK (ACW) TIME Time required by a telephone specialist after a call to complete the record of that call and to arrange for fulfillment implementation. This work might be completing an order form or complaint form and sending it to the appropriate department.

AGENT A general term for someone who handles telephone calls in a call center. Other common names for the same job include, but are not limited to: operator, attendant, representative, customer service representative, customer support representative, telephone sales representative, technical support representative, telephone salesperson, and telemarketer.

AUTOMATIC CALL DISTRIBUTION (ACD) Incorporates both functional and informational advantages for contact center managers, such as automatic and equitable distribution of incoming calls, and queuing of calls. It also provides real time management information to determine the operational efficiency and effectiveness and to determine the number of specialists and network service lines necessary for the center to achieve efficiency and effectiveness objectives.

AUTOMATIC NUMBER IDENTIFICATION (ANI) A term used in the United States and Canada. The digits that arrive at the same time as a telephone call that tell the telephone number of the person calling. In general, ANI is the service provided by a long distance service. ANI has big benefits for call centers. By gathering the digits sent, and doing a database lookup, agents can receive a screen of information on the caller along with the voice call. Centers report this saves them up to 20 seconds per call, since the agent doesn't have to ask for and enter a name or account number, then wait for the database to respond during the call. Those 30 seconds per call have a significant impact on staffing needs and telephone service charges. ANI can also serve as a security ID for various applications.

AVAILABILITY The amount of time an agent or agent group is available to receive calls. The amount of time they are logged-in, at their desks, but not on a call. A statistic tracked by some call center management software programs. A similar term is also used for computers or telephone systems for the time they are turned on and available for processing calls or transactions.

AVERAGE CALL DURATION The amount of time the average call lasts. Calculated by dividing the total number of minutes of conversation by the number of conversations.

AVERAGE HANDLE TIME (AHT) An Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) statistic that tells how long, on average, an agent spends on each call. ACDs calculate this differently. Some include after call work time, some don't.

AVERAGE TALK TIME (ATT) An Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) statistic. The average amount of time the agent spends talking to the caller. Usually timed from when the call arrives at the agent station to the time it is released by the agent.

AVERAGE WAIT TIME The length of time a caller must spend on hold before an ACD can find an available agent to take the call. Most ACDs will keep track of this statistic. Obviously, the shorter the time the better, especially if your company is paying for the call (such as an 800 or 888 call). Minute reductions in the average wait time can add up to huge savings in toll-free service usage when multiplied by thousands of calls.

BLOCKED CALLS Calls that are not completed because a customer receives a busy signal. See [BLOCKING](#).

BLOCKING When a telephone call cannot be completed it is said that the call is "blocked." Blocked calls are different from calls that are not completed because the called number is busy. This is because numbers that are busy are not the fault of the telephone switching and transmission network.

BROADCAST FAX A feature of many fax machines and fax boards that lets the user send the text of a single fax to a large number of recipients using a master list of names and numbers. It is useful for marketing, public relations, and for distributing information to salespeople in the field. Some fax service companies let subscribers keep lists on file or upload them, and the fax text, via modem.

BUSY In use. "Off-hook." There are slow busies and fast busies. Slow busies are when the phone at the other end is busy or off-hook. You hear the buzz 60 times a minute. Fast busies (120 times a minute) occur when the network is congested with too many calls.

BUSY HOUR The hour of the day during which a call center handles the most call traffic. Knowing when a center's busy hour occurs (and what the call volume is when it occurs) is vital for staff scheduling, traffic engineering, and equipment purchases.

The idea is if you create enough capacity to carry that "busy hour" traffic, you will be able to carry all other traffic. In actuality, one never designs capacity sufficient to carry 100% of the busy hour traffic. That would be too expensive. So, the argument then comes down to, "What percentage of my peak busy or busy hour calls am I prepared to block?" This percentage might be as low as half of one percent or as high as 10%. Typically, it's between 2% and 5%, depending on the business and the cost to that business - in lost sales, etc. - of blocking calls.

CALL A connection providing for a communications between two or more simultaneously present users for the purpose of exchanging information.

CALL ABANDONS Also called ABANDONED CALLS. Call Abandons are calls that are dropped by the calling party before their intended transaction is completed. The call may be dropped at various points in the process (i.e., while on hold, while dialing, etc.). The point in the call at which the call is abandoned will have varying impacts on a telephone system. Many callers will hang up as soon as they realize they've reached an automated system and not a person. For systems that expend significant energy in setting up to answer a call, a large percentage of call abandons can negatively impact the call capacity of the system.

CALL ACCOUNTING SYSTEM An automated system for recording information about telephone calls, organizing that information and upon being asked, preparing reports - printed or to disk. The physical system itself consists of a computer, a data storage medium, software, and some mechanical method of attaching itself to a telephone system.

The information which it records (or “captures”) about telephone calls typically includes the extension from which the call is coming; which number it is calling (local or long distance); which circuit is used for the call (AT&T, WATS, MCI, etc.); when the call started; how long the call lasted; and for what purpose the call was made (which client? which project?).

A call accounting system might also include information on incoming calls; which trunk was used; where the call came from (if ANI or interactive voice response was used); which extension took the call; if it was transferred (and to where) and how long it took.

There are nine basic uses for call accounting systems in the call center:

1. Controlling Telephone Abuse.
2. Controlling Telephone Misuse.
3. Allocating telephone calling costs among departments and divisions.
4. Sharing and resale of long distance and local phone calls, as in a hotel/motel, hospital, shared condominium, etc.
5. Personnel evaluation and motivation.
6. Network optimization. Two fancy words for figuring which is the best combination of a PTT, MCI, AT&T, Sprint (etc.) lines. And which is the best combination of all the various services each offer.
7. Phone system diagnostics. Is the phone system working as well as it should? Are all the lines working?
8. Long distance bill verification.
9. Tracing calls.

CALL CENTER A place where calls are placed or received in high volume for the purpose of communicating with customers, vendors, or employees. Typical business processes supported include sales, marketing, customer service, telemarketing, technical support, or other specialized business activity. One early definition described a call center as a place of doing business by phone that combined a centralized database with an automatic call distribution system. That's close, but it's more than that, it is the integration of automation and telephony into business processes to both optimize business processes and provide better service to customers.

CALL DATA Call data refers to any information about a phone call that is passed by a switch to an attached computer system. Call data is usually used by the computer telephony application to process the call more intelligently.

Call data almost always includes what number dialed the call (ANI) and/or what number was called. More complex call data links used for "PBX integration" may also indicate why the call was presented (such as forwarded-on-busy-busy), or tell what trunk the call is coming in on.

CALL MANAGEMENT Process of selecting, based on detailed information of telephone activity and costs, the optimum mix of terminal equipment, network services, and staffing to achieve maximum productivity and service from a call center.

CALL MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (CMS) This is the AT&T name for their inbound call distribution management reporting package.

CALL PRIORITY A term for the value assigned to an incoming call, from highest priority to lowest.

CALL PROCESSING The movement of a call to its intended point, through all its automated twists and turns. Call processing is the set of instructions that are used to deal with a call, and the act of dealing

with the call. You more often hear of a call processing system (read: switch, plus its software) than the "process" itself. The act of call processing is roughly equivalent to switching, except that call processing implies that the connection is switched according to those pre-set instructions.

CALL RECORD Information about a call (extension or position, length, time of-day, number dialed) recorded by a PBX or ACD. These records are the basis of call center management software and telecommunications management software systems.

CALL REPORTING In an outbound environment, detailed accounting of telemarketing activity measured by agent, group of agents, campaign, region, or other key factors. Similar reports are also important for keeping tabs on inbound marketing. Good reporting capabilities are a critical feature for both dialers and ACDs.

CALL ROUTING Literally, the list of choices a user sets up within an ACD for where to send the incoming calls. You might define a path for calls that last a certain amount of time, or define options - if a caller presses "O," send the call to an operator, if a caller presses "1" send the caller to technical support. The routing table will reflect the different campaigns that are ongoing, enabling the ACD to send calls to the right agent groups or departments. Within the ACD, you can use more sophisticated criteria to direct the call, like skills calls that originate from a particular country are sent to agents with certain language abilities. Parsing incoming ANI or DNIS data for routing is increasingly important.

CALL VOLUME The number of calls that come into a call center in a given period.

CALLER ID On an incoming phone call, the information you get that lets you know where the call is coming from before you answer it - that is, the telephone number of the person calling you. Caller ID is the consumer "brand name" for the local phone company variety of this service. The calling party's phone number is passed to your phone between the first and second ring signaling an incoming call. The simplest Caller ID devices show you the originating phone number of the incoming call. If you have the appropriate software, though, you can match that phone number with a caller's name (and other information straight from your database).

In fact, the more important variety of Caller ID (to call centers) is provided by the long distance carriers in the form of ANI - automatic number identification, chiefly on 800 calls. It delivers the calling party's telephone number, which can then be looked up in your company's database.

CALLING NUMBER DISPLAY The screen on your phone (or attached peripheral device) that shows you ANI or Caller ID data on incoming phone calls - the phone number, or the name of who's calling.

CAPACITY The information carrying ability of a telecommunications facility. What the "facility" is determines the measurement. You might measure a data capacity in bits per second. You might measure a switch's capacity in the maximum number of calls it can switch in 1 hour, or the maximum number of calls it can keep in conversation simultaneously. You might measure a coaxial cable's capacity in bandwidth.

CARRIER A company which provides communications circuits. Carriers are split into "private" and "common." A private carrier can refuse you service. A "common" carrier can't. Most of the carriers in our industry - your local phone company, AT&T, MCI, Sprint, etc. - are common carriers. Common carriers are regulated. Private carriers are not.

CENTRAL OFFICE (CO) Telephone company facility where subscribers' lines are joined to switching equipment for connecting other subscribers to each other, locally and long distance. The term central office is also referred to as public exchange.

COMPUTER TELEPHONY A term that describes the process of applying computer intelligence to telecommunications devices, especially switches and phones. The term covers many technologies, including computer-telephone integration through the local area network, interactive voice processing, voice mail, automated attendant, voice recognition, text-to-speech, fax, simultaneous voice data, signal processing, video conferencing, predictive dialing, audiotext, collaborative computing, and traditional telephone call switching.

COMPUTER TELEPHONY INTEGRATION (CTI) A term for connecting a computer (single workstation or file server on a local area network) to a telephone switch and having the computer issue the switch commands to move calls around. The classic application for CTI is in call centers. Example: A call comes in. That call carries some form of caller ID or ANI. The switch "hears" the calling number, strips it off, and sends it to the computer. The computer does a lookup and sends back the switch instructions on what to do with the call. It might send the call to a specialized agent or maybe just to the agent the caller dealt with last time.

CONVERSATION TIME The time spent on a conversation from the time the person at the other end picks up to the time of hang up. Conversation time plus dialing, searching, and ringing time equal the time a circuit will be used during a call.

COST-PER-CALL ANALYSIS A measure of the profitability of a call center, often expressed in reports generated by ACDs. Cost-per-call takes into account the cost of labor, phone service, and equipment reflected against revenue generated. This measure is used more and more as an alternative to "performance measurement" that accounts more strictly for the length of time spent on calls.

CUSTOMER SERVICE Provides, usually in response to a customer initiated call, information such as locations of retail dealer product information, technical support, complaint handling, order status, service information, or emergency response.

DATABASE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM A computer program (or programs) that lets you create, maintain, and access a database. Some popular database management systems for PCs are dbase III and IV, Paradox, and Foxpro. There are other database management systems for other types of computers. Don't confuse the database (the actual information or data on your computer) with the database management system (the software that controls it). A database management system is called DBMS for short.

DIRECTORY ASSISTANCE Formerly known as "Information." DA is provided by the local telephone company. In most states, the local phone company charges for this service. Most local phone companies will give a caller the person's address, as well as the person's phone number if the caller asks for it. A caller can usually only get two numbers per phone call. Directory assistance is an important resource for updated telephone lists and skip tracing. (People often move within the same city or town.) Directory assistance databases are now available online and on CD-ROM through major list and list processing vendors. Using these products can be less expensive and less time consuming than calling directory assistance for every two numbers that need checked.

ELECTRONIC MAIL Process of sending messages electronically from one computer terminal to another.

ETHERNET A local area network system that operates over twisted wire and coaxial cable at up to 10 megabits per second.

EXCHANGE The first three digits of a local telephone number. All telephone numbers with the same exchange are served by the same central office. With the right software (or a very large list) you can find out a company's location (city, state, etc.) if you know the area code and exchange.

FAX-ON-DEMAND A fax system that lets a caller select and retrieve documents using a combination of IVR and fax technologies.

FAX MACHINE A device that sends or receives a copy (a "facsimile") of printed material to or from a remote machine over standard phone lines.

FAX SERVER A computer with one or more fax boards installed and hooked up to a local area network whose primary purpose is to act as a fax station for all the users on the network. It sends faxes from any PC on the net, as well as receives them and prints them out on a dedicated laser printer. Many fax servers also include voice boards that add fax-on-demand capability for people calling from the outside.

FULL-TIME EQUIVALENT (FTE) A way of measuring staff levels, especially for budgets and scheduling. It simply means the number of staff-hours required has been divided as though each person is working a full-time schedule. It tells you what your staffing needs would be if your needs were covered only by full-time agents.

HEADSET A telephone device that replaces the handset (or receiver). All headsets consist of an ear piece and a microphone - but these elements can be arranged in a variety of ways. Now made of plastic, headsets are light and comfortable.

HOLD To temporarily leave a phone call without disconnecting it. You can return to the call at any time, sometimes from other extensions. While the terms on-hold and in queue are in many ways interchangeable, putting a call on hold infers a passive state. It's already routed and waiting to be activated again. When a call is in an ACD queue, many things are happening to route the call to the next available agent. The call is active and waiting to be routed.

HOLDING TIME The total time beginning from picking up the handset, dialing a call, waiting for an answer, speaking on the phone, to hanging up and replacing the handset in its cradle.

HOTLINE Customer service application that allows a customer to call a specified number to express their concerns or to seek information.

IDLE Not busy. Used to describe a telephone or telephone agent in a call center.

INQUIRY When a potential customer calls, writes, or comes to your office and asks for information on your product or service.

INTEGRATED ACD/PBX A phone system with enhanced call routing features that support the most complex of call center applications. They are particularly attractive for sites requiring full integration

with administrative business processes or that need to be networked into the corporation's communications network. They also offer the opportunity for small centers to expand.

INTERACTIVE VOICE RESPONSE (IVR) There are several ways to think about interactive voice response. It is a system that is connected to a computer system that lets you enter information from that system either through a telephone keypad or the spoken word. It also may allow applications to be processed in the IVR's system off loading processing requirements in the host computer.

LOCAL AREA NETWORK (LAN) A system connecting a set of computers and peripherals over short distances. It allows users at multiple computers to use the same files and share printers. A LAN will typically link devices in a single building, but it can stretch as far as about 10 kilometers. Larger than a LAN is a MAN (Metropolitan Area Network) and WAN (Wide Area Network), which have different properties.

METROPOLITAN AREA NETWORK (MAN) A network that connects sites a maximum of 50 kilometers apart at speeds of 1 to 200 megabits per second.

MULTIMEDIA The ability to use a variety of access methods to the call center, including voice, Internet, or data and video.

MUSIC-ON-HOLD Background music heard when someone is put on hold, letting them know they are still connected.

PBX/ACD A PBX with automatic call distributor (ACD) features. This arrangement can work well for smaller through the largest of call centers. It's also a great way to try out the idea of an ACD or call center. If your PBX has this feature, use it. An ACD takes a lot of processing power. If your call center grows too large (just how large will depend on your PBX and a host of other things), the ACD feature can bog things down for the whole system. Make sure that the system has a risk processor and a distributed architecture to allow unimpaired growth.

PEAK HOUR When used with an automatic call distributor, the peak hour is when the number of calls coming into your center are at their highest level. ACDs track and report on calls by hour. Some allow information to be tracked in either smaller or larger time increments.

PEAK LOAD A higher than average quantity of traffic. Peak load is usually expressed as a 1-hour period, often the busiest hour of the busiest day of the year. [See BUSY HOUR.](#)

PEAK PERIODS Times when the number of calls coming into a call center is at its highest level. You can adjust ACDs to respond to peaks by adding more agents to busy agent groups if you use the MIS reports to track them, or ACD forecasting software to predict when those peaks might occur.

PERIPHERAL EQUIPMENT Equipment not integral to, but working with, a phone system. An example might be a printer or television screen on which calling traffic statistics are displayed or a voice mail system. Lucent Technologies once called PBX peripheral equipment "applications processors," because they process specific applications.

PREDICTIVE DIALING A method of making outbound calls that uses advanced software to estimate the correct number of calls to place, and the number of agents that will be able to handle those calls.

PRIVATE BRANCH EXCHANGE (PBX) A PBX is an intelligent switching system, capable of allowing users to dial out without operator assistance and often to receive calls directly without operator assistance, which brings us to the call center. When most people think of call centers, they think of large rooms filled with people tied together by an ACD network and thousands of lines. That's the popular picture, but it's not the whole picture. Small call centers outnumber large ones. The fastest, easiest way to start a call center at your business is to take the people who answer calls, take orders, call customers, etc., and link them on a data network. Then, add ACD features to your PBX ([see PBX/ACD](#)) using one of many recently developed software applications, and you can simulate the big-business look and feel with small-business flexibility. Building call centers out of high performance PBXs is one of the fastest growing segments of the call center market.

QUALITY OF SERVICE Sometimes used as a telephone-carrier equivalent to [SERVICE LEVEL](#). To a telephone carrier, it means a measure of the telephone service quality provided to a subscriber.

QUEUE A holding area for calls waiting to be answered in the order in which they were received. Calls in a queue may have different priority levels, in which case, calls with a higher priority are answered first.

QUEUE MANAGEMENT The process by which the switch, or the network, or any decision-making entity, lines up calls (and other "transactions" like faxes and IVR requests) and chooses the order in which those transactions occur. Managing the queue involves a graceful combination of randomness (you never know what the caller will do), prioritization (some callers may be more important than others, and with the proper tools in place you can know who they are), and pre-defined choices (for example, calls for service can stay in queue longer than call for sales, or vice versa).

ROUTING TABLE

1. **Incoming Phone Calls:** A routing table is a user-definable list of steps which are instructions dealing with an incoming call. Ideally, these steps should be addressed and the call treatment begun before the call is answered. A routing table should consist of minimum steps that include agent groups, voice response devices, announcements (delay and informational) music on hold, intraflow and interflow steps, and route dialing (machine based call forwarding). A significant issue in the structure of routing tables is "look-back" capability, where no single previously interrogated resource is abandoned by the system (i.e., an agent group is ignored, even though an agent is now available, because the ACD does not consider previous steps in the routing table).
2. **Outgoing Phone Calls:** For a specific calling site, this table lists the long distance routing choices for each location to be dialed. There may be only one choice (route) listed for some or all destinations, or there may be several choices for some destinations. (It depends on how many outgoing lines and trunk groups you have.) If there are several choices, then they will be ranked by some criteria (least cost, best quality, etc.).
3. In data communications, a routing table is a table in a router or some other inter-networking device that keeps track of routes (and, in some cases, metrics associated with those routes) to particular network destinations.

SCHEDULING Making the timetable of agent hours and shifts for your call center. Takes into account vacation days, breaks, training time, lengths of shifts, and forecasting information. A call center software management package (also known as workforce management software) helps you do this.

SCHEDULING SOFTWARE Often used to mean the same thing as "call center management software," scheduling software is actually one function in a complete call center management software package. Scheduling software uses historical records of past call traffic to create a staff schedule for some future day, week, or month. It assumes that similar periods will have similar needs.

SERVER A server is a shared computer on a local area network that can be as simple as a regular PC set aside to handle print requests to a single printer. It may be used as a repository and distributor of data.

SERVICE LEVEL Usually expressed as a percentage of a statistical goal. For example, if your goal is an average speed of answer of 100 seconds or less, and 80% of your calls are answered in 100 seconds or less, then your service level is 80%. Call centers in different industries have vastly different criteria for measuring successful service. Clearly, a catalog retailer has a vastly lower stake in the outcome of any one call than a cruise line does. Each industry builds their own call center metrics to reflect that.

SUPERVISOR The person responsible for regulating call flow in and out of a group of agents. On a network, the person whose job it is to keep the system up and running.

TALK TIME The length of time agents spend placing or answering calls (as opposed to the time between calls that they spend updating records, sending out literature, or going to the bathroom). In outbound call environments, where agents dial out manually, typical talk time is close to 20 minutes per hour.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS Electronic transmission of audio, video or data information.

TELEWORKER A person who works from home or some place distant from the company's office. A teleworker may send completed work in, and pick new work up, via a modem in a PC. A teleworker may also be on the phone at home answering calls on behalf of the company, and entering the results of those calls (i.e., reservations on airlines, orders for catalogs) on a PC connected by phone lines to the company. A teleworker may use one phone line, like an ISDN BRI line or simply use two analog phone lines - one for talking on and one for PC's data. Or, a teleworker may simply use one analog phone line and a protocol such as VoiceView. Call centers are increasingly relying on Teleworkers (also known as telecommuters or "agents-at-home") as a way to keep from being overloaded during unforeseen peaks in call volume.

TOLL FREE NETWORK Inward telephone service allowing callers to call without charge or operator intervention. The call recipient pays for the call.

TRUNK A communication line between two switching systems. Switching systems typically include equipment in a central office (the telephone company) and your customer-based equipment (PBX or ACD). A trunk with 24 channels is commonly called a T1.

TRUNK CAPACITY Number of outgoing or incoming circuits connecting your site to the telephone company.

UNINTERRUPTED POWER SUPPLY (UPS) A battery which provides power to your phone system when the main AC power fails especially during, blackouts and brownouts. Hospitals, brokerage companies, airlines, and hotel reservation services must have battery backup because of the integral importance of their phone systems to their business.

VOICE RESPONSE UNIT (VRU) A term that can refer either to an interactive voice response unit, an automated attendant, or a simple "play a message and pass the call on" unit. The term is commonly used in call centers to mean the automated voice system that greets the caller before the caller gets to a live agent. In some cases, this is an IVR system that deals with the entire transaction. In other cases, it is an IVR system that prompts the caller for an identification number, pulls up a customer record, then routes the call based on that information, and presents both call and information to the agent.

WORKFORCE MANAGEMENT (WFM) Call center workforce management is the art and science of having the right number of agents, at the right times, to answer an accurately forecasted volume of incoming calls at the desired service level.

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