

Increase productivity, increase jobs

South Africa could easily create 250 000 jobs in the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector, many of them servicing overseas customers, within a couple of years if the country could get its productivity right. However, according to Patrick Coleman, CEO of Customer Service Engineering (CSE), South Africans need to correct their misunderstanding of what productivity is, which is not job losses but job gains.

For many in the contact centre and business process services industry, productivity is a dirty word and almost exclusively associated with job losses and longer working hours. It is seen solely as a drive for increased efficiency and for 'doing the same with less', in other words, getting the same work done with fewer staff.

Many businesses have had experiences that have hurt the operation and left managers and staff averse to anything that sounds like a 'productivity drive'. In most cases, these are invariably the result of poorly designed and executed interventions based on the same flawed understanding.

According to Coleman, there is another side to the productivity equation that is focused on 'doing more with the same'.

This looks at how the operation's outputs can be improved and expanded through innovations that improve quality, performance and value - as opposed to reducing input costs such as salaries.

"The fact that this approach is so regularly overlooked is all the more baffling when you consider that, unlike reducing inputs, expanding outputs offers almost limitless growth potential - which is guaranteed to create jobs in the long run."

Measuring output

In the call centre environment, an operation's output is a served customer. This might sound obvious, but Coleman believes that less than 5% of South African contact centre operations measure their outputs in terms of customers. Most will measure volumes of calls or documents handled. It is a crucial distinction because an operation might be handling thousands of calls an hour, but if it takes a customer five calls to get a single query resolved, it is far from productive.

Ultimately, improving the output of a contact centre or back office operation equates to improving the quality of the work being done. This is not simply a case of training staff better; it is also about planning processes better and giving staff the right systems to be able to do their jobs. Output quality has to become a key focus - it has to be made tangible through a continuous process of measurement, monitoring and improvement. Customer service operations need to continuously check the entire process they go through to create their 'product' (a served customer).

New jobs crucial

The South African BPO sector is well positioned to take advantage of the booming global market for customer services, but the drive for productivity needs to be fearlessly prioritised in order to attract new investors and create new jobs in the sector.

The government has declared 2011 a 'year of job creation'. It's a laudable goal and one that recognises a chief failing of the country in recent years. Yet, for South Africa to create jobs, the country needs to be a great deal more competitive - and one of the key ingredients of competitiveness is productivity.

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