

Does Amazon Have a Call Center?

Just imagine the king of Web retail delivering back-office services. That kind of automation over the current wave of pretender delivery methods is preferred any day.

By Naomi Bloom

Do you remember when you first discovered Amazon.com—when you bought your first book, received your first recommendation, read and wrote your first review, or bought your first non-book product with Amazon as your vendor?

Is this not the user experience we have come to expect when we conduct business over the Web? So if Amazon.com can offer this to everyone who shows up, speaking a zillion languages and with very different levels of computer literacy, access speeds, and personal literacy, why shouldn't HRM delivery system customers expect the same from their HRM self-service experience with IBM, Accenture, or ADP, or from SAP or Oracle?

Even as I've been getting updates on the latest and greatest from my HRM software vendor and HRO provider colleagues—and there are some really worthwhile developments here—I can't help but contrast what I'm seeing in our industry with the best of the commercial web sites. Nor can your employees, managers, applicants, etc.

I started my career when there was still the nice personnel lady down the hall who explained that your taxes would go up if you moved to one area, someone who could pull the latest bus schedule to the office out of her drawer. She quietly advised that you'd be seen as unprofessional if you signed up for that touch-typing class and caught you up on the latest organizational changes and the office gossip.

Well, those nice and knowledgeable HR staff members have long since been retired without replacements, contributing their headcount to the business case for self-service and shared services. But we have lost so much in the process that should have been and could have been baked into our self-service capabilities in the same way that Amazon has tried to bake into its system that nice little book store lady who remembered our purchases, recommended books we might enjoy, limited the works our children could buy, and caught us up on the latest neighborhood gossip. Where is the dynamic and personalized content, business rules, advisory, analytics, etc. in what we collectively call the embedded intelligence in today's HRM self-service?

For most of us, embedded intelligence in HRM

self-service boils down to a few data edits, the occasional balanced scorecard, some role-based routing for reviews of draft performance appraisals, and some static information on our benefit plans. Perhaps HRM self-service, as delivered by the ERP/HRMS vendors, is so unlike Amazon with its many millions of customers because even our largest employers can't spread the cost of such self-service far enough to make the investments needed.

But what about those HRM BPO providers approaching scale? What about ADP and Accenture and others like them? Couldn't they make the business case for terrific self-service by reducing to a bare minimum their call-center facilities and by eliminating the obvious mistakes and less obvious misunderstandings that might stand between these BPO providers and profitability? Is there just too much intelligence needed in HRM self-service to free us from the offshored, dummed-down, industrial-engineered call centers? Is there just no defensible business case to be made for more informed manager decisions about the people side of the business or about a more engaged and well-informed workforce?

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I'm of an age that's supposed to favor the human touch over the computer, but I can tell you that I'll do business with a competent commercial web site any day versus winding my way through impenetrable telephony menus, enduring what feels like decades of Musak hold, trying to understand that call-center rep (CSR) speaking in a rural southern drawl, only to learn that I've already forgotten more about the topic at hand than that CSR has ever known. Give me Amazon.com any day over what passes for self-service in the world of the HRM delivery system.

So just imagine the possibilities that await the first HRM BPO provider who's able to get this right. Could they, like Amazon, become the distribution platform of choice for all manner of adjunct products and services to your workforce? **HRO**



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