

## **CALLS TO THE CLEVER COUNTRY**

By Michael Meredith

The introduction into parliament of Senator Steve Fielding's proposed anti-offshoring Bill has injected new life into the debate around the outsourcing of contact centre jobs to overseas operations, and has caused me to think once again about the advantages of keeping customer contact jobs within Australia and the opportunity we have to become a centre of excellence within the Asia Pacific region.

Senator Steve Fielding is planning to introduce the proposed Bill, entitled the "Keeping Jobs From Going Offshore Bill", into Parliament in the near future, possibly as close as June 09. The Bill seeks to stop the offshoring of jobs to other countries.

Over the past 10 years, Australian companies have identified the potential benefits of outsourcing back office and contact centre functions offshore, driven largely by cost savings. By offshoring, companies sought to make large operational and labour savings. A concept that was harvested in the US, many Australian organisations have adopted this business trend.

### **THE BLOWBACK**

However, in recent years there has been a significant blowback effect, with companies bringing offshore call centre operations back to Australia. The reasons for this shift back are numerous, but the underlying issue is cultural alignment and quality.

While Australian contact centres cannot fully compete with the direct cost savings of offshore outfits, the positive elements of the local industry and the deeper issues of using international operations have seen companies increasingly using Australian operators.

Beyond the low labour costs of offshore contact centres, many companies have discovered that the success of these operations is stunted by a lack of local infrastructure, a shallower resources pool, and political and social instability in the offshore country. However, it is language and cultural issues that have been proven to be the largest issue when using offshore contact centres.

In surveys conducted both here and overseas, there is a clear indication that customer satisfaction levels are reduced when dealing with offshore contact centres. In addition to issues such as technological lag, simple things such as the language barrier or cultural differences can be enough to affect a customer's call experience.

Good customer relations comes down to agent intelligence and training, but often a successful call comes down to local knowledge, which enables the agent to build a natural rapport with the customer. While training, technology, and data can be transferred to offshore centres, local understanding and cultural alignment are ingrained within Australian agents, making customer contact more natural and more conducive to successful call resolution.

The need to ensure customer satisfaction is never more important than during financially testing times such as the ones being felt currently in Australia and on a global scale. As belts are tightened, customer retention is crucial for business success and contact centres play a crucial role, having now become the public face for many companies and a point of contact that can make or break a customer relationship.

There is no doubt that offshoring does have some proven benefits in terms of cost, and this will ensure a general business trend to offshore non-core elements of business will continue. Agents based offshore can handle high-volume, low-value transactions, and some back office functions can also be delegated to overseas operators. However, when it comes to customer contact roles, the high standard of Australian contact centres and the cultural connection local agents can make with customers should influence companies to keep these types of jobs onshore.

## **THE AUSTRALIAN INDUSTRY, THE STANDARD**

Since its inception 20 years ago, the ATA has helped to guide the contact centre industry from its infancy to the highly professional industry it has become today. This growth has come as a direct result of a concerted effort across the industry to develop and adhere to industry standards.

The standards for the industry have been developed over a long period of time, but in recent years have been agreed upon in a more concrete fashion with the introduction and implementation of the ATA's Contact Centre Standards and Accreditation (CCSA) program. This Standard helps participating contact centres address all elements of operations including training, infrastructure, process, and performance to ensure customers are receiving a consistently high level of service throughout the industry.

Beyond technological advancements and the depth of skills within the resources pool, Australian contact centres are in a strong position to promote themselves over offshore counterparts by demonstrating these high standards time and again, resulting in higher levels of customer satisfaction. Customers appreciate quality of care and professionalism above all else in their interactions with contact centres, and it is these traits that have proven to be the biggest benefit for companies keeping customer contact jobs within Australia.

The introduction of a Standard has also raised the interest of other international markets interested in promoting professionalism within local contact centre industries, and the ATA has begun working with regional associations and APPCAL in looking at ways of developing a standard that could apply to contact centres throughout the region.

## **THE OPPORTUNITY**

With Senator Fielding's proposed Bill acting as a catalyst for renewed debate about the value of offshoring, I see an opportunity for the Australian contact centre industry to yet again impress upon Australian businesses the high value service available within our own country.

Given the economic climate we find ourselves in, the Federal Government needs to be looking at ways to support the local contact centre industry, for example through increased investment and training programs. The Australian industry is already a strong example to the rest of the world as to the professionalism and customer service that can be achieved, but support from government and business can help Australia become a centre of excellence within the region.

By continuing to develop the standards of the contact centre industry, Australia can become world leaders in terms of customer service and professionalism. This will

provide Australia with a valuable skills base in the future, with contact centre agents being able to provide expertise to call centre industries around the world.

I believe it is in Australia's best interests to protect the local contact centre industry, and to continue to foster the culture of professionalism and customer service that has been developed over the past two decades. Senator Fielding has brought the offshoring issue back into the political arena, and it is important that both government and business identify the opportunity Australia has in encouraging the growth and development of our contact centre industry and take action to seize this opportunity.

### **About the Author**

Michael Meredith is the CEO of the ATA, the peak industry body for call intensive, service centric organisations and teleprofessionals.