

Phone cowboys: Picking up transferable skills for any career

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You may think you work well under pressure – but have you ever had to calm down an upset or angry customer on the phone? Effectively leading, and resolving, a business conversation is a valuable skill in your job hunting toolkit – and working at a call centre will sharpen your customer-service skills. In fact, many employers – across various sectors – are looking for call centre or customer service-related experience in prospective new hires.

Call centres will give you first-hand experience of working on the front lines of an organization, giving you a good overview of how it functions. “Being front line at the call centre, you will learn all the pros and cons of what the company offers and solutions or workarounds to many of the challenges,” says Michael Shouldice, senior recruitment officer at Athabasca University.

Call centre jobs will provide you with firsthand experience in negotiation to help improve your written and verbal communication skills – qualities that are useful in just about any career.

“Call centre experience is great for any industry where effective communication aids in success,” says Richard Elmes, who specializes in sales coaching. “It also teaches students to be service-oriented - I don’t know of any industry that would not fall into that category.”

Call centre employees often deal with disgruntled callers who want immediate solutions. You’ll learn how to master gauging the customer’s temperament and how to mold conversations appropriately. “Call centre staff would likely also have been trained on how to deal with difficult people and on negotiations,” says Shouldice. “Of course, if they are in a quota driven environment they will also have learned a lot about time management and prioritization.”

Working at a call centre strengthens what are known as soft skills – personal qualities and interpersonal skills that complement technical and knowledge requirements, or hard skills, that employers are seeking. When job hunting, new grads are advised to highlight the soft skills, such as time management and resource allocation, problem solving, listening, presentation and analysis, they learned while working in a call centre.

Shouldice, who has worked for and coordinated centres in Toronto and Alberta, says new grads should learn how to master articulating their call-centre experience when job hunting. “It’s not about spinning what you did at the call centre into something you think another employer wants to hear, it’s about really telling them the stories about how you changed people’s days by getting resolution to their problems,” he says.

Elmes says you should stress the benefits you learned while working in call centres, by highlighting the skills you picked up which are likely to be highly transferable throughout your career. This information should be highlighted in interviews as well as on your resume, says Elmes.

“All the skills that they learn in their call centre role will help them to be effective team members and especially effective leaders,” he says.

If you decide that working the phones at a call centre is not the job for you, you may not have far to look for another job; many call centres hire from within for supervisory positions. Shouldice points out that the key to taking advantage of the benefits of call centre employment is by looking at the big picture.

“It's not the number of calls that you took during your time there nor how fast you answered them,” he says. “It is about what you did while taking those calls and the steps you had to go through to reach a resolution.”

If you choose to move into another career, however, rest assured that your days of helping to create happy customers at a call centre will serve you well in many fields of employment. Jp
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