

Difficulties and Challenges Faced by Call Center Agents while Using English: A Case Study on Two Global Call Centers.

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Abstract

The number of multinational call centers is increasing day by day in our country but still it is challenging to find expert agents to the companies because lack of efficient English speaking employees are not available. This research intends to find the difficulties and challenges faced by the Bangladeshi call center agents while communicating in English within the call centers. There are two call centers which are the part of the research study and both are the global multinational organizations where the agents need to communicate strictly in English. The data has been collected through research instruments like survey questionnaires, focus group discussion and observation. The researcher

chose convenient sampling where 60 agents and 8 managers participated in the study. The findings were interesting because different types of problems came out and after a thorough analysis using both quantitative and qualitative methods, some recommendations have been made for using English in Bangladeshi call centers.

Keywords: Call Center Agents (CCA), Bangladeshi Call Center (BCC), Efficient English Speaking Employee (EESE).

Introduction

A call center is a centralized office used for receiving and transferring a large volume of requests by telephone. A call center is operated by a company to administer incoming consumer inquiries for product support or information. Outgoing calls for telemarketing, clientele, product services, and debt collection are also made. A call center is also known as a contact center (Reynolds, 2010).

Inside the call centers language barriers are playing an adverse role which is the major cause to destroy the reputation of the particular company. According to Derry (2002), language barriers may be based on agents and customers speaking different languages, and can also result from differences in regional dialects and accents, and bad phone connections. Experiencing language barriers can easily cause frustration on both the agents' and customers' side, while preventing call centers from providing accurate and efficient customer service to your clients. You may not think so but even one unhappy customer can harm your business' reputation. In fact, a recent study has shown that 95%

of customers tell at least one other person about bad customer experiences with a company.

Background of the study

Call centers are divided into inbound and outbound depending on who initiates the calls. The term inbound call center is used when the customers initiate the calls, to obtain a service. Outbound refers to a call made by an agent to the customer, to sell a product or conduct a survey. Combinations of the two are also possible. Inbound call centers are the most interesting form a modelling point of view as this is where most of the challenges are, due to the stochastic nature of the calls. Outbound call centers can decide when the house takes place, whereas there is a large element of uncertainty associated with inbound call centers. For this reason, this research focuses solely on inbound call centers (Datamonitor, 1998).

The most obvious reason for a person to call a call center is to do business with the company; such as: a bank or a support hotline. For outbound call centers, it can even be a sales person calling and try to sell service or goods, often at the most

inappropriate times. This may be the source for a bad reputation a call centers may have (Gilmore, 2001).

Objectives of the study

- To investigate the discourse of call centers and specifically focuses on the generic and lexicogrammatical features exist in the discourse of the agents with the clients.
- To focus on the performance of the speaking and listening skills of the agents.
- To analyze the development and relationship between English listening and speaking skills within a call center.
- To analyze the manager's perception on the performance of the agents.

Statement of the problem

According to Holds worth and Cartwright (2002), in the international call centers of Bangladesh, there are a lot of issues which need to be resolved to turn this industry into a profitable story. One of the major problems of the employers of the call centers that they can't find suitable agents for the job.

The reason might be, to be a good agent in an international call center, one needs a good command over English, which most Bangladeshi students are lacking. Also they may not completely understand the native accents of some customers. They are too shy or not confident enough when having a conversation in English.

Significance of the study

In call centers, the interpersonal relationship construed through the verbal exchanges is critical to the success of the call. The Customer Service Representative (CSR) and the customer communicate with each other only through telephonic communication. Due to the sensitive nature of the calls, it is difficult to base the study on the actual audios of the calls. However, one should not only pay attention to what is said but also to how it is voiced (Ruyter et al., 2001).

Literature Review

According to Aksin (2007) to have an effective communication with customers, businesses

and brands need to know what their customers want. In many cases, customers have an ideal customer experience where they would deal with the company seamlessly. For the brands to make that happen, they have to know what skills their employees need to have. Most of the time, companies hire call centers to do their customer service for them. For call centers, they need to train their agents to have an effective communication with customers. They need to train every agent's communication skills to be an effective communicator for the benefit of the company. A call center agent with clear and crisp enunciation and communication skills would make an ideal customer experience for the consumer. Whether it is in English or other languages, knowing what to say at the right moment to make the customer understand is another league of its own.

Active listening, the right communication style, and showing common courtesy goes a long way toward proving to customers that you do care, and the company does care about them. Effective listening skills and excellent communication skills can literally mean the difference between success and failure of the business for whom you work. Your ability to respond to customers, regardless of their issues, is the mark of an excellent call center agent. Your attention to detail, your sense of reliability, and your ability to respond are basic characteristics that allow you to get your job done well. Make sure you understand your company's standards and policies so that you know exactly what you are expected to do with a variety of customer issues. Learn the boundaries of what you can, and absolutely cannot, offer them in an attempt to appease ruffled feathers, dissatisfaction regarding a product or service, or other types of complaints (Visser and Rothmann, 2008).

According to Jeong (2012), the relationship between a customer and a call center agent primarily addresses two core themes which are Language and Customer Satisfaction. Most studies emphasize the impact of language and communication on the overall satisfaction of the customer. The first theme identified is related to the language used between the non-native English speaking agents and customers who generally come from English speaking countries (Lockwood, 2007).

However, problems and difficulties rise due to language barriers between the two stakeholder groups. Visser and Rothmann (2008) analyzed seven

phone calls between a customers and call center agents from the Philippines and found that all seven calls had problems related to the inability of the agent to fully address the customer's request, that caused frustration to the customer. Other difficulties include agent's inability to deal with frustrated, aggressive or demanding customers; and vague or complex requests. Hence, linguistics mechanisms (e.g. proper use of technical and functional IT terms) should be used between the agents and customers for proper communication so that the correct actions can be undertaken by the agent to assist with the customers' demands.

The proper use of language can create a common ground between the agent and the customer, forming a better understanding and trust which may help to resolve some of the issues caused by language barriers. Also, given the fact that the dominant language in call centers is English, it is important to provide a proper training in English (e.g. common phrases, British/Australian/American accents) to the agents for more effective communications with customers (Talencinkaya et al.,2009).

Research Design

Strategy can be used for exploratory, descriptive and explanatory research. Some of these may be used for a deductive approach while other for an inductive approach and also fall somewhere in between. No strategy is superior or inferior in any way so the priority when choosing a strategy should be placed on the aim of the research and the capability to answer the research objectives. Some of the greatly used research strategies are e.g.: experiment, survey, case study, actions research, grounded theory or archival research. Additionally, by conducting a survey the sample can be collected from a representative rather than the whole population.

Sampling

Based on the defined research questions, sampling frame and time constraints the appropriate choice non probability sampling provides alternative techniques to select samples based on the subjective judgment. Convenience sampling is based on the need to obtain the sample as quickly as possible and the researcher has little control over the contents. Generalization will be possible in a statistical sense to the population. Possible biasness may be from the implementation of continence sampling. However, this issue is less valid to the population. The target samples for this research are employees and

managers of two global multinational call centers. The sample population compromises of employees working in an inbound customer service call center, therefore similar management and performance measurement methods are in place. This will also ensure lower possibility of a sample biasness.

By implementing convenience sampling technique, researcher will distribute the survey into 2 departments in the call centers. Based on the duality of respondents there are two questionnaires, both with exact same questions, directed at either employee or manager. There were 60 agents and 8 managers who actively participated in the study.

Data Collection Method

Saunders et al., (2007) states that the quantitative data collection method is preeminently used as a synonym for any techniques or analysis procedure that generates or uses numerical data, while quantitative analysis is used for non-numerical.

In this study, data collection method is quantitative and questionnaires are used as a data collection tool.

In order to correctly edit and collect the questionnaires' the use of Cooper and Schindler's (2008) coding method will be applied. That is by assigning numbers to each answer the researcher will be able to group the responses and easily analyze them statistically.

For the statistical analysis the researchers used SPSS software, MS Excel which allows to run frequency tests and overall median and mean score to a have proper result.

Framework of the Questionnaire

The design of the questionnaires has been based upon the literature review. There were five Focus group discussion (FGD) questions for the agents which were monitored by the researchers and recorded with two mobile phone recorders so that maximum information can be repeatedly analyzed by the researchers. The same set of questions will apply to the employees. The questions are to be in sets and be multiple choice questions. Firstly, question based on basic information and service duration are to be the implemented. Scale answering of sub questions on control agents having particular tasks. Managers are to be surveyed based on the results and performance of the targets. The final questions are to

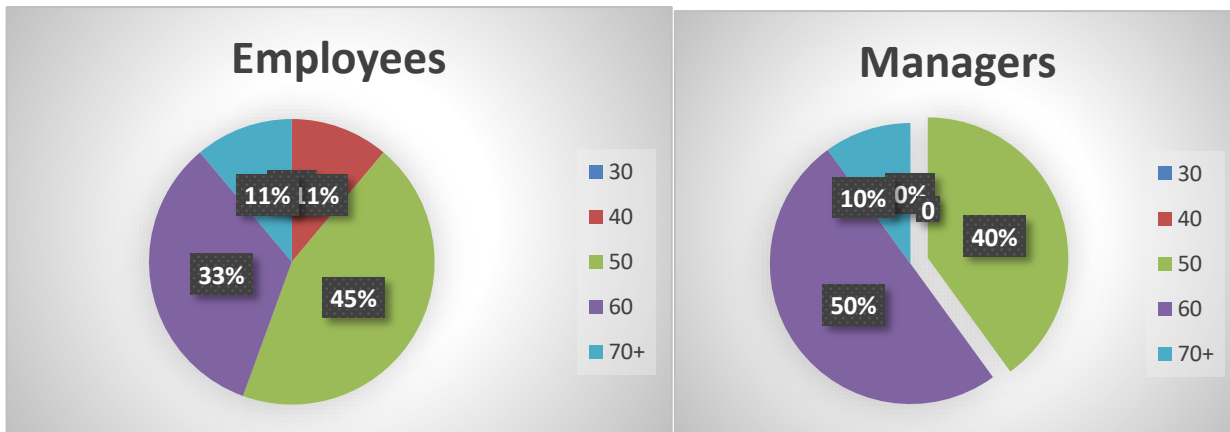
be sub questions and a Likert-scaled answer frame from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Data Analysis and Results:

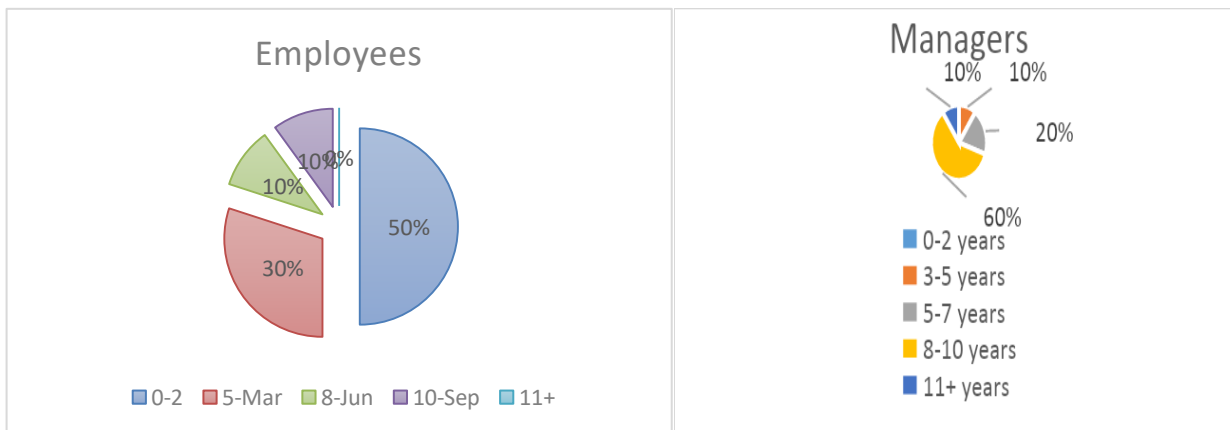
Section - 1 of the questionnaire consists of these questions, related to amount of call taken a day, the length of employment.

Question 1: What is the average amount of calls taken a day?

Most frequent responses from agents were 3 (50 calls) and 4 (60 calls) which were represented by 28% and 24% respectively. Majority of the managers 40% chose answer 4(60 calls).



Question 2: How long have you been working in your current job?



Amongst agents it is visible that there is a group of 8 employees who are possibly newly hired and their employment duration is between 0 to 20years. There are 4 agents working in the company between 3 to 5 years. Most agents have been working in the company for 7 to 5 years, with 43 respondents and a large group of 30 employees are there for past 8 to 10 years.

Majority of managers have been employed in the organization for past 8 to 10

years and the group consist of 18 respondents. While only 1 manager has answered 5 to 7 years and 2 managers answer 11 years plus.

Section-2 compromises of 5 FGD questions where 70% agents said that they are comfortable in speaking English but 30% agents feel uneasy or sometimes awkward while speaking in English.

On the other hand, 75% agents feel that they can easily find help if needed to answer

different types of customers' queries but 25% agents denied the matter.

The third question was about their training where 80% agents said they get benefited from frequent training but 20% agents still lacked expertise in their communication after having the trainings.

The fourth question implied that whether they can get help from call quality session or not?

80% agents said they learn a lot but another 20% denied the fact.

The last question was about their received calls and anxiety related to their performances and among them 70% agents said they don't feel worried when they are asked many things too fast in one call but 30% agents feel nervous and get confused when they are asked many things too fast in one call.

Table – 1 (Frequency distribution and mean score)

Category -1: Agent's attitude

Choices	q.1: learning more from call quality session		q.2:inability to comprehend		q.3:too many things from one call		q.4:increase of ACHT makes me more active	
	frequency	%	frequency	%	Frequency	%	frequency	%
Strongly agree	20	33.3	21	35	11	18.3	20	33.3
agree	28	46.7	34	56.7	20	33.3	28	46.7
Neither agree nor disagree	6	10	2	3.3	14	23.3	6	10
disagree	2	3.3	2	3.3	11	18.3	2	3.3
Strongly disagree	4	6.7	1	1.7	4	6.7	4	6.7
Total	60	100	60	100	60	100	60	100
Mean	3.96		4.10		3.39		3.99	
Overall Mean	3.88							
Choices	q.5: motivation for work		q.6:angry customers makes me nervous		q.7: satisfy my confidence level		q.8:successful linguistic training helps me	
	frequency	%	frequency	%	Frequency	%	frequency	%
Strongly agree	10	16.7	21	31.7	11	18.3	21	31.7
agree	30	50	17	28.3	26	43.3	17	28.3
Neither agree nor disagree	11	18.3	10	16.7	8	14.8	10	16.7
disagree	7	11.7	8	14.8	10	16.7	8	14.8
Strongly disagree	2	3.3	5	11.6	7	11.7	5	11.6

Total	60	100	60	100	60	100	60	100
Mean	3.87		3.67		3.85		3.58	
Overall Mean	3.80							
	q.9: better oral fluency		q.10: little training doesn't help much		q.11: too much information makes it complicated		q.12: communicative training helps in my career	
Choices	frequency	%	frequency	%	frequency	%	frequency	%
Strongly agree	27	45	18	30	6	30	27	45
agree	22	36.7	31	51.7	25	41.7	22	36.7
Neither agree nor disagree	7	11.7	6	10	18	10	7	11.7
disagree	3	5	4	6.7	10	16.7	3	5
Strongly disagree	1	1.7	1	1.7	1	1.7	1	1.7
Total	60	100	60	100	60	100	60	100
Mean	4.18		4.02		3.42		4.18	
Overall Mean	4.15							

Section-3 comprises of 12 questions suggesting that call monitoring or call quality session is too intensive has a response of 61.5% agents that agree and only 47.6% managers that agree. Question 3 in that section that agents feel worried because they have to mention too many things in the call and 74.4% of agents strongly agree and agree, while managers are actually 76.2% that strongly agree and agree. The following question claims that agents could help customers better if they could stay longer on the call. The results are suggesting that 86.1% of employees are in an agreement with this statement. In regards to feeling motivated by good performance results 87.2% of employees agree. Sub question number 6 states that angry costumers have a negative impact on agents well-being 68.8% of agents agree .Another question relates to satisfaction agents get when they can help their customers, nearly majority of employees,94.2% strongly agree and agree 75.5%.,When asked if agent's performance

targets limit the quality of the service they provided 81% agents strongly agree.

Sub question number 9 states that agents provide excellent service at the expense of their states with which 90.7% of agents strongly agree and agree. Next question states that managers in the organization have a very god understanding of what the costumers want 90.7% of employees strongly disagree .Next question is related on stress and stress that agents would provide better customer service if they had less work stress to which 87.2% of employed agree. Sub question number 12 states that agents have too little time to do follow ups, with which 82 agents strongly agree and agree 94.2%.

Next question states that agents feel overwhelmed with information required to do the job and here although 41 agents agree 47.7% at the same time 32% disagree with it.

Table – 2 (Frequency distribution and mean score)**Category -2: Manager's attitude**

	q.1: learning more from call quality session		q.2: inability to comprehend		q.3: too many things from one call		q.4: increase of ACHT makes them more active	
Choices	frequency	%	frequency	%	Frequency	%	frequency	%
Strongly agree	3	37	6	24	1	13	4	50
agree	5	63	2	76	7	87	4	50
Neither agree nor disagree	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	0
disagree	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
Strongly disagree	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0
Total	8	100	8	100	8	100	8	100
Mean	3.88		3.86		3.60		3.76	
Overall Mean	3.72							
	q.5: motivation for work		q.6: angry customers makes them nervous		q.7: satisfy their confidence level		q.8: successful linguistic training helps them	
Choices	frequency	%	frequency	%	Frequency	%	frequency	%
Strongly agree	2	17	4	50	0	0	6	70
agree	4	53	3	35	4	50	2	30
Neither agree nor disagree	1	15	1	15	3	35	0	0
disagree	1	15	0	0	1	15	0	0
Strongly disagree	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	8	100	8	100	8	100	8	100
Mean	3.67		3.87		3.58		3.85	
Overall Mean	3.78							
	q.9: better oral fluency		q.10: little training doesn't help much		q.11: too much information makes it complicated		q.12: communicative training helps in their career	
Choices	frequency	%	frequency	%	frequency	%	frequency	%
Strongly	0	0	4	52	0	30	0	0

agree								
agree	0	0	3	47	5	61.9	3	28.6
Neither agree nor disagree	0	0	1	10	0	0	1	14
disagree	6	62	0	0	3	38.1	4	57.4
Strongly disagree	2	38	0	0	0	0	0	00
Total	8	100	8	100	8	100	8	100
Mean	4.02		4.10		4.10		4.08	
Overall Mean	4.10							

Section-4 of the questionnaire comprises of 12 same questions with an answer range from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The first question in this set states that 62.9% of managers who agree with the statement. Second question is suggesting that call monitoring is too intensive has a response of 47.6% managers agree with it. Question 3 in that section that agents feel worried because they have to mention too many things in the call and 76.2% and 24.8% managers strongly agree and agree. The following question claims that agents could help customers better if they could stay longer on the call. The results are suggesting that managers that agree with it is 52.4%. In regards to feel motivated by good performance results 87.2% of employees agree while all managers agree (100%). Sub question number 6 states that angry costumers have a negative impact on agents well-being and from the manager's perspectives also however the result is higher at 76.2%. Another question relates to satisfaction agents get when they can help their customers, and managers also agree with the percentage of 95%. When asked if agent's performance targets limit the quality of the service they provided agents strongly agree and agree at 75.5%, however 81% of managers disagree with this statement. Sub question number 9 states that agents provide excellent service at the expense of their states with which 90.7% of agents strongly agree and agree, and only 28.6% of managers strongly agree, while majority of managers disagree (61.9%). Next question states that managers in the organization have a very good understanding of what the costumers want

90.7% of employees strongly disagree and disagree while 47.6% of managers agree and 52.4% strongly agree. Next question is related on stress and stress that agents would provide better customer service if they had less work stress to which 87.2% of employed agree and agree while 61.9% of managers also agree however 38.1% of them disagree. Sub question number 12 states that agents have too little time to do follow ups, with which 82 agents strongly agree and agree 94.2% and only 28.6% of mangers agree while majority disagree 57.1%. Next question states that agents feel overwhelmed with information required to do the job and here although 41 agents agree 47.7% at the same time 32 disagree (37.2%). On the managers side opinions are also divided both 3 managers agree and 3 disagree and only 2 managers strongly agree. Question number 12 states that getting for different business area helps career agents development whit which majority disagree (41.9%) and strongly disagree (25.6%), and on the contrary majority of managers agree (42.9%) and strongly agree (52.4%).

Conclusion and recommendation

The research unit employs majority of agents for the past 5 to 10 years, and only 14% are newly hired. This may prove difficult in certain management as noted by the Tatichi (2010) culture within the company may obstruct changes or erase of adjustment to require for longer employed staff.

The research clearly indicates that more experienced staff members are more comfortable in using English while speaking with customers.

While fresher agents are less comfortable and unable to successfully communicate in English. As discussed in the literature review, it is impossible to achieve customer satisfaction while being unable to understand the customer wants and needs.

Interestingly, not only employees but also management are aware of the low skill levels in the tested unit. Majority of agents agree that they could stay for a call longer they would be able to better communicate and provide better service. The limitations caused by lack of linguistic training although it is denied by management. Moreover, maximum agents strongly believe that management doesn't understand what the customer wants and needs as the result of a language barrier.

Another strong viewpoint from employees is that their suffering from a lack of time spent on follow ups. Not all calls can be closed within 3 minutes, especially when trying to communicate with the customers in English. This standpoint is not recognized by management who believes that the time and training given to them is enough. More linguistic based training could improve average head time, Holman (2007) also reported that call center employees require ongoing training. In turn, agents who believe the company is interested in investing in their skills will give back to the organization and be willing to work harder.

Finally not forgetting the most important variable in this scenario the customer, agents in the tested sample are definitely interested in helping the customers by better understanding them . To the extent of forfeiting their own resolves, which more likely are linked to their bonuses, in order to provide better customer service. It is clear that the agents are willing to go the extra mile, maybe they should be given a chance, more leniency, more training and more opportunities to communicate effectively in English.

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Appendices

Employees' Survey:

Section-1:

1. What is the average amount of calls you take in a day?
 - 30
 - 40
 - 50
 - 60
 - 70+

2. How long have you been working in your current job?
 - 0-2 years
 - 3-5 years
 - 6-8 years
 - 9-10 years
 - 11+ years

Section-2:

3. FGD questions for Agents:

Questions
1. You are comfortable talking in English
2. You can always easily find help if needed to answer a customer query.

3. Your training helps you to improve your performance.
4. Agents learn a lot in call quality session
5. You often feel worried because they mention too many things, too fast in one call.

Section-3:**4. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?**

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I learn a lot from my call quality sessions.					
I find myself unable to understand what they say sometimes.					
I often can't mention too many things in English in one call.					
I am willing to have a high AHT (average call handling time) if it means I can better communicate and help a customer					
when I get good performance results I feel motivated to work harder					
Angry customers have a negative impact on my well-being					
I feel satisfied when I can help customers					
I often find my level of linguistic training limit the quality of the service I provide					
I could help my customers better if I had better speaking skills.					
I have a hard time because of too little training					
I am overwhelmed with information when I need to do my job					
Getting trained for different communication areas					

help my career development					
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Managers’ Survey:

1. What is the average amount of calls your agents take a day?

- 30
- 40
- 50
- 60
- 70+

2. How long have you been working in your current job?

- 0-2 years
- 3-5years
- 6-8 years
- 9-10 years
- 11+ years

Section-4:

5. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly Agree
Agents learn a lot from call quality sessions					
Agents may find themselves unable to understand what customers are asking for sometimes.					
Agents can’t mention too many things in English in one call.					
Agents could help customers better if they could stay longer on the calls					
When agents get good performance results they feel motivated to work harder					
Angry customers have a negative impact on agents well being					
Agents often find their level of linguistic training limited on the quality of the service they provide					
Agents could provide better customer service if they had more training on their oral and listening					

skills					
Agents have a hard time while they have too little training					
Agents are overwhelmed with information when I need to do the job.					
Getting trained for different communication areas help agents' career development					