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FM call centre

TALK OF THE TOWN



Prodgers gets to grips with the role of operator under the guidance of Artemis Papademetriou

In the first of a series of articles, industry veteran Lionel Prodgers returns to the floor of FM service delivery, this time at Mace Macro's call centre in Camden Town

Photography: Sam Kesteven

It was with much trepidation that I set out for my day at Mace Macro's office in Camden, home to the company's fm24 central call centre. As I was introduced to the supervisor, Julie Shaw, two thoughts went through my mind: am I up to the challenge and will I make a terrible fool of myself?

I have to say, that within moments of meeting Julie and the team, my mood began to brighten. I was immediately struck by the buzz – a room full of chatter is surprisingly calming. Artemis Papademetriou, one of the 17-strong team of operators, kindly explained the system and the many inter-dependent processes.

It all looked terribly clever but very complicated to navigate and my mind soon wandered. Although I was there to be an operator, I was somewhat distracted by the technical side of things: the infrastructure, organisation and logistics of the whole operation.

I don't envy the people who go on the call centre's training course because there's a great deal to remember. A lot of information is available but the system doesn't prompt you on some of the finer details. For example, if a company in the US calls in the afternoon, you have to remember to greet them with a 'good morning'.

It's fair to say help desks have come a long way since I first started in FM in the mid-1980s. I've seen the gradual evolution from calls being fielded by an office administrator with a pen and notepad, to a single telephone service and on to call centres and help desks. Like most people, I've talked to help desks from time to time but I had no idea how much data is available at the click of a mouse these days.

Fm24 is a help desk services company specialising in delivering customer care and service support for the FM sector. The first thing that struck me was the diversity of its role. It is multi-client based, international and it's open 24-hours a day, all year round. Each of the operators has to become familiar with the different characteristics and requirements of the 16 client companies and all their employees. It's almost like a concierge service.

It's very interesting to see how all this is

organised – from the logistics behind the work rota to the systematic approach which answer a broad range of calls. Developments in IT technology have certainly made the whole process much more seamless than it used to be.

One of the things which impressed me most was the depth of information behind the screens. First off, the caller's company name appears automatically so that the operator can respond as the bespoke help desk. Each client is given a unique reference number to ensure that the problem can be monitored to the point of resolution.

The operator has so much information at their fingertips that they can confidently tell the customer how long it's going to take to respond. You can see the workflow, the messaging going out to contractors and the email being sent to confirm that the job has been completed. All this activity is logged on the system and the data is then sent to the clients. The data then enables the clients' FM teams to pick up on recurring problems and work out where there is room for improvement.

Because the help desk is open 24 hours a day, the nature of the calls is incredibly diverse. Arti told me one of the most unusual calls she has received in her five years at fm24 came in the small hours of

the morning from a man whose car was locked in a company car park. "He was huffing and puffing and very indignant that he couldn't get his car off the site," she told me.

The problem was resolved when a cleaner was contacted and asked to set the unfortunate driver free. "I think he must have been lonely as he kept me on the phone for about an hour," Arti recalled. "It can't have been much fun being stuck like that but I couldn't help wondering how he ended up going back to his car at two o'clock in the morning."

The strangest call that came in during my shift was rather less dramatic: someone complained that a vending machine hadn't dispensed change from the purchase of a Snickers bar. For a while I wasn't convinced about the efficiency of dealing with such a trivial issue, particularly as the call lasted 10 minutes. However it has to be said that 'Snickers man' had his 45p hand-delivered within minutes.

Looking back on the day, I am left with a great deal of respect for the help desk operators. They are the face of the company and they interact directly with the customer – much more so than the managers further up. I was under the impression that remote help desks wouldn't have this personal touch. I think it's probably a great benefit that

CAREER SNAPSHOT

A SMOOTH OPERATOR

Lionel Prodgers is one of the top 20 pioneers of FM. In 1984, he founded Facilities and Property Management which he later sold to Chesterton International and become managing director of their property asset management division. His FM software solutions management firm, Ark e-management, was acquired by Integrated FM in 2006. Prodgers was BIFM chairman from 1997 to 1999 and chairman of EuroFM from 2000 to 2005. He is now a director of Agents4FM, an international consultancy working for blue-chip companies.



“IF THERE’S BEEN A WEEKEND OF RAIN, ALL THE CALLS ON MONDAY MORNING WILL BE AROUND FLOODING AND LEAKAGE”

operators are encouraged to visit the UK sites they support and gain valuable insight about the clients, buildings and services they work with every day.

As for my own performance? I can’t lie, I didn’t exactly excel but then I didn’t embarrass myself too much either. I learned a great deal and, from now on, I shall be extra courteous whenever I contact a help desk.

Artemis Papademetriou’s response:

It usually takes three weeks to train a new recruit, so Lionel was definitely jumping in at the deep end. He was very calm and interested in how the system worked from the inside out. I could tell that he knew a lot about IT even if he wasn’t familiar with our particular system. I’m sure after some proper training he’d make a great operator.

Lionel told me he was surprised by how much the

elements affect our traffic trend: if there’s been a weekend of rain, all the calls on Monday morning will be around flooding and leakage. However, most of the calls that came in during Lionel’s shift related to air conditioning, blocked toilets or vending machines. These are the most common types of problem we deal with.

When it came to the Snickers bar call, Lionel wasn’t convinced that it was a productive way to deal with such a small incident. I explained that if we didn’t get these calls, we wouldn’t acquire the valuable data on plant and machinery efficiency for our clients. The caller could have wasted a lot more of his working day resolving the problem himself. The company is paying for a service, so they need to get the most out of it. Lionel could see the sense in that so I hope he felt his day was a productive one. **FM**