

Hotliners' technical and relational competencies. Study in an IT services centre.

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Starting point

Work situations where an expert in a given area is consulted, at a distance, by users (or clients) asking for advice, information, services or troubleshooting are numerous (call centres, online insurance or bank services, hotline, IT helpdesk...).

IT Hotline

IT experts consulted over the phone by users when facing problems with their IT software and/or hardware.

- refers to the technical support given to users/clients,
- over the phone, via a single number,
- « Proximity at a distance » services allow to save time by avoiding useless travel,
- contributes to the firm reputation and to client loyalty.

→ Remote troubleshooting, by phone and/or through remote maintenance.

Study of the hotline conversations

- Communication in real work situation, exchanges during the activity itself,
- Functional communications (« looking at the content of the work done »),
- Telephone conversations (legitimately without gestures) : the only shared channel is verbal, therefore an effort is made to compensate the lack of extra-verbal helps,
- Operational communication and oriented towards a clearly defined goal and shared by both interlocutors: to fix the problem.

→ Transactions or situations of interaction regulated by a set of rules, and organised around roles and the protagonists' expectations (commercial context with temporal constraints).

Hotliners investigate the problems, look for clues useful for their diagnostic, adapt themselves to their interlocutors, guide them towards the resolution of their problems...

Users are considered as informants of their problems: they know what happened before the failures, know the frequency or regularity of the problems, see their consequences, give possible links with other malfunctions...



Theoretical background

- In the field of social or interpersonal interactions, focusing on their verbal form: verbal communication (over the phone) and more precisely communication in the work place, in situations where the relation is one of service (where an expert in a given domain is consulted).
- Conversation analysis inspired by the Interlocutory Logic model.

Study of a hotline

- Hotline of an IT company Service Centre,
- « Inbound » type of hotline (incoming calls) with possibility to intervene on the site and to do repair in a specialised workshop (15 people in total).

Methodology

- Non-participatory observation of the Hotline and the service Centre everyday activities,
- Recording of the phone conversations between users and hotliners,
- Collective and individual interviews with hotliners.

Results

General structure of communications

Opening (greeting/introducing oneself)

Definition of the initial space of the problem by the user

Search for information or clues by the hotliner

(Explicit) identification of the problem

(Explicit) decision about the actions to be taken

Guidance towards problem resolution and/or remote troubleshooting

Closing (thanks, greetings)

Conversation control by the hotliner

- Asking series of question (most often simple, close ended, with reformulations, ...) to obtain precisions or more information,
- Guiding, when necessary, the interlocutor to obtain these precisions when they are not directly available.

Being a hotliner is having:

- **Technical competencies** in computers and user brought problem resolution. This is made manifest in the conversations by: *searching for information and clues to identify the source of the problem, posing a diagnostic, bringing solutions, taking decisions on what to do or where to go, guiding towards resolution...*
- **Relational competencies (in communication)** to maintain the relation with the caller. This is manifest by: *explaining, verifying, anticipating and reformulating to the user, adjusting oneself to the situation (through a vocabulary change, for instance), using verbal regulators (marking attention or that one is listening), avoiding conflicts, diminishing negative attitudes, showing empathy or humour, de-dramatising, using techniques to allow one not to lose face...*

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