

OCCUPATIONAL OUTLOOK HANDBOOK



CUSTOMER SERVICE REPRESENTATIVES

NATURE OF THE WORK

Customer service representatives are used by many different types of firms to serve as a direct point of contact for customers. They ensure that their companies' customers receive an adequate level of service or help with their questions and concerns. These customers may be individual consumers or other companies, and their service needs can vary considerably.

All customer service representatives interact with customers to provide information in response to inquiries about goods or services and to handle and resolve complaints. They communicate with customers through a variety of means—by telephone; by E-mail, fax, regular mail; or in person. Some customer service representatives handle general questions and complaints, whereas others specialize in a particular area.

Many customer inquiries involve routine questions and requests. For example, customer service representatives may be asked to provide a customer with their credit card balance or to check on the status of an order. However, other questions are more involved and may require additional research or further explanation on the part of the customer service representative. In handling customers' complaints, they must attempt to resolve the problem according to guidelines established by the company. These procedures may involve asking questions to determine the validity of a complaint; offering possible solutions; or providing customers with refunds, exchanges, or other offers, like discounts or coupons. In some cases, customer service representatives are required to follow up with an individual customer until a question is answered or an issue is resolved.

Some customer service representatives help people decide the types of goods or services that would best suit their needs. They may aid customers in completing purchases or transactions. Although the main function of these representatives is not sales, some spend time encouraging customers to purchase additional products or services. Customer service representatives also may make changes or updates to a customer's profile or account information. They may keep records of transactions and update and maintain databases of information.

Most customer service representatives use computers and telephones extensively in their work. Customer service representatives frequently enter information into a computer as they are speaking to customers. Often, companies have large amounts of data, such as account

information, that is pulled up on a computer screen while the representative is talking to a customer so he or she can answer specific questions. Customer service representatives also usually have answers to the most common customer questions or guidelines for dealing with complaints. In the event that they encounter a question or situation to which they do not know how to respond, workers consult with a supervisor to determine the best course of action. They generally use multiline telephone systems, which may route calls directly to the most appropriate representative. However, at times, they must transfer calls to someone who may be better able to respond to the customer's needs.

In some organizations, customer service representatives spend their entire day on the telephone. In others, they may spend part of their day answering E-mails and the remainder of the day taking calls. For some, most of their contact with the customer is face to face. Customer service representatives need to remain aware of the amount of time spent with each customer so that they can fairly distribute their time among the people who require their assistance. This is particularly important for those whose primary activities are answering telephone calls and whose conversations are required to be kept within a set time limit. For those working in call centers, there is usually very little time between telephone calls. When working in call centers, customer service representatives are likely to be under close supervision. Phone calls may be taped and reviewed by supervisors to ensure that company policies are being followed.

Job responsibilities also can differ, depending on the industry in which a customer service representative is employed. For example, those working in the branch office of a bank may assume the responsibilities of other workers, such as teller or new account clerk, as needed. In insurance agencies, a customer service representative interacts with agents, insurance companies, and policyholders. These workers handle much of the paperwork related to insurance policies, such as policy applications and changes and renewals to existing policies. They answer questions regarding policy coverage, help with reporting claims, and do anything else that may need to be done. Although they must have similar credentials and knowledge of insurance products as insurance agents, the duties of a customer service representative differ from those of an agent as they are not responsible for seeking potential customers. Customer service representatives employed by utilities and communications companies assist individuals interested in opening accounts for various utilities such as electricity and gas, or for communication services such as cable television and telephone. They explain various options and receive orders for services to be installed, turned on, turned off, or changed. They also may look into and resolve complaints about billing and other service.

WORKING CONDITIONS

Although customer service representatives work in a variety of settings, most work in areas that are clean and well lit. Many work in call or customer contact centers where workers generally have their own workstation or cubicle space equipped with a telephone, headset, and computer. Because many call centers are open extended hours, beyond the traditional work day, or are staffed around the clock, these positions may require workers to take on early morning, evening, or late night shifts. Weekend or holiday work also may be necessary. As a result, the occupation is well suited to flexible work schedules. About 20 percent of customer service representatives work part time. The occupation also offers the opportunity for seasonal work in certain industries, often through temporary help agencies.

Call centers may be crowded and noisy, and work may be repetitious and stressful, with little time between calls. Workers usually must attempt to minimize the length of each call, while still providing excellent service. To ensure that these procedures are followed, conversations may be monitored by supervisors, which can be stressful. Also, long periods spent sitting, typing, or looking at a computer screen may cause eye and muscle strain, backaches, headaches, and repetitive motion injuries.

Customer service representatives working outside of a call center environment may interact with customers through several different means. For example, workers employed by an insurance agency or in a grocery store may have customers approach them in person or contact them by telephone, computer, mail, or fax. Many of these customer service representatives work a standard 40-hour week; however, their hours generally depend on their employer's hours of operation. Work environments outside of a call center also vary accordingly. Most customer service representatives work either in an office or at a service or help desk.

Customer service representatives may have to deal with difficult or irate customers, which can be challenging. However, the ability to resolve customers' problems has the potential to be very rewarding.

EMPLOYMENT

Customer service representatives hold about 2.5 million jobs. Although they are found in all industries, more than 325,000 customer service jobs are in retailing.

TRAINING, OTHER QUALIFICATIONS, AND ADVANCEMENT

Although most customer service representative jobs require only a high school diploma, because employers are demanding a higher skilled work force, many customer service jobs now require an associate or bachelor's degree. High school and college level courses in computers, English, or business are helpful in preparing for a job in customer service.

Training requirements vary by industry. Almost all customer service representatives are provided with some training prior to beginning work. This training generally includes customer service and phone skills; information on goods and services; information about common customer problems; the use of the telephone and computer systems; and company policies and regulations. Length of training varies, but usually lasts at least several weeks. Because of a constant need to update skills and knowledge, most customer service representatives continue to receive training throughout their career. This is particularly true of workers in industries such as banking, in which regulations and products are continually changing.

Because customer service representatives constantly interact with the public, good communication and problem-solving skills are a must. Verbal communication and listening skills are especially important. For workers who communicate through E-mail, good typing, spelling,

and writing skills are necessary. Basic to intermediate computer knowledge and good interpersonal skills also are important qualities for people who wish to be successful in the field.

Customer service representatives play a critical role in providing an interface between customers and companies. As a result, employers seek out people who are friendly and possess a professional manner. The ability to deal patiently with problems and complaints and to remain courteous when faced with difficult or angry people is very important. Also, a customer service representative needs to be able to work independently within specified time constraints. Workers should have a clear and pleasant speaking voice and be fluent in English. However, the ability to speak a foreign language is becoming increasingly necessary.

Customer service jobs are often good introductory positions into a firm or an industry. In some cases, experienced workers move up in the firm into supervisory or managerial positions or they may move into areas such as product development, in which they can use their knowledge to improve products and services. As they gain more knowledge of goods and services, customer service representatives in insurance may advance to other, higher level positions.

JOB OUTLOOK

Retail employment of customer service representatives is expected to increase by 11 percent from 2014 to 2024. In addition to many new openings occurring as businesses and organizations expand, numerous job openings will result from the need to replace experienced customer service representatives who transfer to other occupations or leave the labor force. Replacement needs are expected to be significant in this large occupation as many young people work as customer service representatives for a few years before switching to other, higher paying jobs. This occupation is well-suited to flexible work schedules, and many opportunities for part-time work will continue to be available, particularly as organizations attempt to cut labor costs by hiring more temporary workers.

Customer service is critical to the success of any organization that deals with customers. Strong customer service can build sales and visibility as companies try to distinguish themselves from competitors. Advances in technology, especially the increased use of the Internet and the expected growth in electronic commerce, should result in rapid employment growth among customer service representatives. Web sites, E-mail, and more recently, wireless communications, are proving more efficient because they provide targeted customer service. As more business is conducted over the Internet, more customer service representatives will be needed over the next decade to answer questions, provide assistance in navigating Web sites, make product recommendations, and quickly and efficiently respond to the growing volume of E-mail.

Bilingual jobseekers, in particular, may enjoy favorable job prospects.