MetricNet®

Metric of the Month: Agent-to-Supervisor Ratio

By Jeff Rumburg

Every month, in the Industry Insider, I highlight one key performance indicator (KPI) for the service desk or desktop support. I define the KPI, provide recent benchmarking data for the metric, and discuss key correlations and cause/effect relationships for the metric. The purpose of the column is to familiarize you with the KPIs that really matter to your support organization, and to provide actionable insight on how to leverage these KPIs to improve your performance.

Agent-to-Supervisor Ratio

The agent-to-supervisor ratio is simply the number of frontline agents divided by the number of supervisors for a service desk. It is a measure of management span of control and managerial efficiency. The comparable metric for desktop support is the number of technicians divided by the number of supervisors in desktop support. In this article, we will use service desk examples and benchmarking data, but the principles discussed apply equally to the ratio of technicians to supervisors in desktop support.

Why It's Important

Service desk managers and supervisors often ask me about the proper ratio of agents to supervisors. Five to one? Ten to one? Twenty to one? Like most KPIs, there are tradeoffs involved with this metric. If the ratio is too high, management span of control is too broad and agents can be working without the proper level of oversight and supervision. This, in turn, can lead to a multitude of issues ranging from low morale to inadequate training, coaching, and feedback. By contrast, a ratio that is too low indicates that a service desk is top heavy: it has too many supervisors for the number of agents. This, in turn, leads to higher costs—specifically, higher cost per contact.

There are at least three techniques that are commonly used to determine the proper ratio of agents to supervisors. The first technique is a bottom-up modeling approach that catalogs all of the duties and responsibilities of a supervisor and then assigns a time value to each responsibility. A typical supervisor, for example, might be responsible for team meetings, agent coaching, overflow and/or problematic calls, team meetings, working with vendors, managing or participating in projects such as ITIL training, and numerous other duties. The time com-

mitment required for these activities can be estimated and then summed up to determine the monthly supervisory workload for the desk.

Let's say, for example, that a particular service desk has sixty-five agents and an estimated supervisory workload of 1,200 hours per month. Since there are approximately 172 working hours in a month, we can estimate the supervisory headcount to be about seven (1,200 supervisory hours per month ÷ 172 work hours per month = 7 supervisors). The agent to supervisor ratio for this desk would therefore be 9.3 (65 agents ÷ 7 supervisors = 9.3 agents per supervisor).

The second approach relies upon industry benchmarks to provide guidance on the proper ratio of agents to supervisors, while the third and final approach for determining this metric is to look at confirming metrics such as agent job satisfaction. Both of these approaches are discussed below.

Benchmarking Data for Agent-to-Supervisor Ratio

Industry data from MetricNet's benchmarking database shows that the average ratio of agents to supervisors is 8.5, but ranges widely, from a high of 21 agents per supervisor to a low of just 1.8 agents per supervisor.

Figure 2 (following page) shows the relationship between agent job satisfaction and the agent-to-supervisor ratio. As the ratio decreases, agent job satisfaction increases, presumably because adequate supervision contributes to the agent's morale and well-being. However, diminishing returns come into play at lower ratios, and there appears to be very little benefit in reducing the ratio to less than five agents for every supervisor. Finally, it is worth pointing out once again that the tradeoff here is one of cost versus the benefits of a lower ratio. While high levels of agent morale and job satisfaction are just one of the benefits of a low agent-to-supervisor ratio, cost per contact will continue to increase as the ratio decreases.

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Please join us for next month's Metric of the Month, **customer satisfaction**, the most important measure of quality for a support organization.

Jeff Rumburg is a managing partner and cofounder of MetricNet, LLC, the leading source of service desk and desktop support benchmarks for IT service professionals worldwide.

Figure 1: Industry Benchmarks for Agent-to-Supervisor Ratio

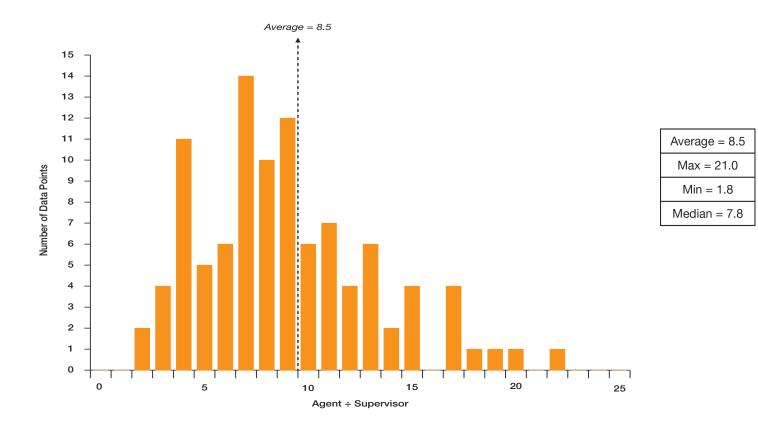|	
Average = 8.5	
Max = 21.0	
Min = 1.8	
Median = 7.8	

Figure 2: Agent-to-Supervisor Ratio vs. Agent Job Satisfaction