

Call Centres Rising to the Challenge of Youth Unemployment

For motivated, driven candidates, a career in a call centre has a great deal to offer

As South Africa celebrates Youth month, it would seem that there is simply no disguising South Africa's youth unemployment crisis and the misery that it brings for so many young people and their families. South Africa has the third highest unemployment rate in the world for people between the ages of 15 to 24, according to the World Economic Forum (WEF) Global Risk 2014 report, which also states that more than 50% of young South Africans between 15 and 24 are unemployed. Only Greece and Spain have higher unemployment in this age range than SA.

In the midst of seemingly insurmountable challenges, South Africa's burgeoning call centre industry brings with it the means of providing young job seekers with access to decent work, skills training, work experience, further specialised education for those who put in the hours and effort, as well as economic and social relief for many South African families. But it's not an industry for the faint of heart or for anyone looking for an easy ride.

"Call centres are at best pressured work environments and in particular outbound call centres focused on sales demand candidates who have a great attitude, a solid work ethic focussed on service and an insatiable desire to outperform their own targets, and that of their peers. Demand for both entry and management level call centre employees is growing as businesses – both local and global - refocus on their core business, outsourcing those business processes that are not core to the likes of call centres – for example sales, customer enquiries, policy administration, claims fulfilment and so on. South Africa is ideally positioned for call centre activity because of its infrastructure, stable investment environment, large talent pool and time zone," says Dirk van den Berg, Chief Operating Officer of O'Keeffe & Swartz, an outbound call centre specialising in the sale of simple insurance products.

For a self-starter, this is an industry where value is placed on aptitude and attitude, rather than formal tertiary qualifications, which for many young South Africans remain painfully out of reach. In its 2013 financial year alone, O'Keeffe & Swartz employed 1248 previously disadvantaged young South Africans who found gainful career opportunities with the company, selling simple insurance products covering almost two million South African lives.

"We are especially proud of the role we play in job creation and further training opportunities for thousands of young, previously disadvantaged South Africans every year. We sell up to 60 000 insurance policies every month on behalf of our clients using direct marketing methods. Our clients include the major banks and insurance companies in South Africa, and for the young people who join our business, its incredible experience of the inner workings of some of South Africa's largest corporates, as well as the insurance industry which is growing in response to South Africa's emerging middle class," adds Dirk.

In an outbound call centre, the focus is on telemarketing of products and requires agents who are driven and motivated to make sales and ultimately determine their own earning potential at the end of the month.

“Typically for most of our agents it’s their first exposure to the working world. Once they have made it through the initial assessments, they will undergo a month of intensive training covering sales techniques, product training, compliance training and finally testing of their newly acquired skills before they make their first sales call,” explains Dirk.

Granted, it’s an industry with a high turnover of staff as many see it simply as a stepping stone to get experience and then move on. Secondly and probably most pertinent, sales is a tough task master. Call Centres are typically fast-paced environments, more so outbound sales call centres. New agents who find they aren’t cut out for the job usually do so very quickly, but people who do well in this kind of environment and are motivated by the pressure, thrive and so do their careers. Staff churn in the call centre environment is traditionally high. Agents who have a natural ability for sales and the ability to shake off a significant amount of rejection generally stay in the environment as they thrive on the challenge to boost their income potential, rather than be limited by a fixed pay cheque every month.

“At O’Keeffe & Swartz we focus heavily on employee engagement programmes, provide favourable uncapped commission on policies sold and incentive structures, and work hard to be an employer of choice in the industry. One of the ways that we achieve this is by ensuring that the highest levels of ethics and integrity go into all our processes – sales are always done in an ethical manner and as an authorised financial services provider, we support the objectives of the Financial Services Board (FSB) in terms of consumer protection by ensuring that our market conduct is always fair and transparent. While we operate in a performance environment, it’s not ever at the expense of good governance and sound business principles – it’s a philosophy that underpins all our dealings, and we can see the difference it makes to our agents knowing they are in an environment where healthy competition is always underpinned by solid values.

“We keep our people motivated and focused on their career paths. For agents who thrive in a performance environment that provides favourable rewards, we provide structured career paths and always look to develop talent from within our own ranks for senior positions. We are very proud to have many talented people who started out at the rock face as agents, got promoted to senior management positions, and have been with the business for many years,” adds Dirk.

“We believe that our call centre provides an exciting and challenging work environment for hundreds of amazing young South Africans from all walks of life who are the heart and soul of our company. Our people strive to be the best and are supported by extensive and ongoing training, along with an environment that encourages personal achievement and career progression. We are passionate about our people, and committed to helping them create better lives not only for themselves and their families, but for the millions of South Africans who are positively impacted by the insurance solutions we sell,” concludes Dirk.

For many young South Africans, the country's call centres hold the promise of a better life, gainful employment and a solid career path with further education opportunities. While it may be true that few people would initially describe a call centre position as their 'dream job', many of the reasons that sit behind the occupational stigma are outdated. Agents who are able to stay focused and motivated typically get promoted from within, and there is serious opportunity to grow your career in a call centre. The truth is, for the right candidate, a career in outbound sales call centre has a great deal to offer.