

Employee Retention

“Continued focus on (employee) turnover is of critical importance, because of the direct relation of turnover to improvements in labor costs and client satisfaction”

-Finley Peter Dunne

CASE CHAPTER 6

Telecommunication Giant on Retention: Struggling to Retain Employees in the Customer Service Department in Bahrain

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Overview

Afro is a leading telecommunication company in Bahrain with a major share in the private and commercial consumer market sectors. The company started operations in the year 2000 and has been doing quite well in terms of customers' and clients' satisfaction since then. The company offers a wide range of services and products related to them, such as mobile connection both pre-paid and post-paid, corporate connections, home broadband, mobile phones, and fiber optic connections for the businesses. The company has a good reputation and aims to work with a progressive approach to ensure they become the market leader. Afro is one of the only three telecommunications providers in the country, which is why; they must be cautious in taking any move or strategy to ensure they do not lose their customers to others. As per manager corporate communications, the company is hitting hard to ensure they progressively maintain and increase their market shares.

Bahrain

Bahrain is a small oil-based economy in the Middle East region. The country got independence from Britain in 1971 and is governed through

a constitutional monarchy system. Bahrain is one of the countries with more expatriates compared to the locals. The foreigners account for nearly 55% of the total population. The country is divided into four governorates, which are capital (central), Muharraq, Southern, and Northern. Bahrain has a modern economy with the availability of all high-tech facilities. The people of Bahrain are known to be very humble and welcoming; hence it is center of attraction to thousands of tourists visiting the Middle East. Despite being an oil-rich economy, the country is on the move of diversifying its focus from natural resources with the long-term aim of becoming a sustainable economy under the visionary leadership of His Majesty King Shaikh Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa (Bahrain, 2019).

Telecommunications Sector in Bahrain

The telecommunication sector in Bahrain has three providers who, amongst themselves, have a competitive interaction since Bahrain is a small economy. Amongst them, two are the private, and one is a government-run company. Afro being a private company, has a high competition to face, particularly from the government-run company since it has a long history of existence in the country and so the number of corporate and private clients. The sector comes with major attractions for its customers and corporate clients to attract more people. Seasonally, the company also offers free mobile sim cards to attract new users. Upon asking concerned personnel in the company, she asserted, *'we have to look for promotions consistently, offers and packages to retain existing and attract new users.'* This statement leads to understanding what type of competition and competitive situation Afro telecom is going through.

Trouble with Afro

Besides fierce competition and tough market conditions, the company is also facing the issues from within. These principally relate to the retention of employees whereby; the business has been struggling to retain employees, particularly the local Bahrainis. The problem has been

principally going very severe in the customer service division, where Afro strives to keep a good number of local Bahrainis who are bilinguals to serve Arabic and non-Arabic speaking customers. The issue went so severe last month in the customer service that they had to close two of the customer contact and support service outlets. According to Senior Manager customer services Ms. Amal,

'Employee retention in sales is a major issue with businesses everywhere, but it seems that Afro is reaching the stage of criticality in this for some reason. There is a need to explore why it is happening and how to control it'.

Looking at the statements of Ms. Amal, it seems that the issue is quite grave, but the organization is yet to uncover the actual cause(s) to objectively respond to it. The company has been competitively working, however, keeping in view the limited market in the country (Bahrain), they cannot afford high turnover which at a later stage, results in high turnover and multiplying staffing expenditures.

Talking further with Ms. Amal regarding the issue of employee retention, she kept repeating her statement of being unaware, and that the company needs to take measures to address the issue. In a way, she seemed reluctant to give any clues or reveal any more details on the matter under question.

Discussion with the Senior Manager, Customer service at the Head Office

Interestingly, Mr. Amir Al Bari, who serves Afro in the capacity of Senior Manager Customer Service at the head office, unveiled many details on the matter. Though, it was not easy to get hold of him because of his busy schedule and for the fact that he stays in the head office. Mr. Bari has been working in Afro for the past eight years, whereby, he progressed from the junior officer to the current position. Mr. Bari not only expressed willingness to enhance our understanding of the issue but also highlighted his ongoing engagement on the matter. The discussion underwent several questions to which Mr. Bari gave detailed answers.

Question: How do you see Afro as a company?

Mr. Bari: *Afro is a leading telecommunication company in Bahrain and highly regarded for its network, connectivity, service, and packages. We at Afro have visionary leadership that is keen to take the company to the next level and be the market leader in the future, INSHALLAH. The customer numbers are growing every month, and this is evidence of our attractive services, network coverage, and satisfaction of our clientele.*

Question: What do you think are the strengths of Afro?

Mr. Bari: *As I mentioned, Afro has many strengths; we have state-of-the-art technology with the latest systems in place to provide the best service and coverage. We are well engaged with our existing customers, which I believe is our strength. With the aim to provide most competitive offers, we frequently revise our packages to give the best deals to our customers.*

Question: How do you see Afro from the perspective of an employee?

Mr. Bari: *Afro is a very good company when it comes to employees. Everyone is respected here, provided with competitive compensation, and above all, it has a good reputation in the market. So, when you say that I am part of Afro, people respect you.*

Question: How the company takes care of its employees if you would like to elaborate further on this?

Mr. Bari: *Employees are provided with excellent career opportunities. Afro pays competitive salaries and ensure no one is underpaid. Apart from that, Afro also provides a wide range of employment benefits. We have counselling department also for our staff to assist employees in need of emotional support and so on.*

Question: How do you see the customer services of Afro?

Mr. Bari: *Afro`s customer service is good. We try our best to serve customer in the best way possible. Our team at the head office is dedicated to ensuring all*

our customer service staff members across the country provide excellent services to our customers.

Question: Do you think it is challenging to be in the Customer Services department?

Mr. Bari: Yes! But every job role has different challenges, I would also say. Here we need to understand why customer service is challenging. It is because of the demanding job responsibilities that require you to behave in a certain manner all the time, frequent customer contact, and the working pattern of the department. However, people who join Afro or any other company in the customer service department, indeed come with specialized skills too that enable them to handle this challenging role. Not only this, at Afro, we provide them with the necessary training as well to manage all aspects of customer service.

Question: How do you see employees' retention issues at Afro's Customer service unit?

Mr. Bari: Customer Service departments in all companies go through many criticalities solely due to the nature of the job and its responsibilities. There is a great deal of understanding and patience required when you serve in this unit as there is frequent customer interaction, which at times becomes very exhausting, demanding and psychologically draining and so people who fail to cope up with it end up leaving the quitting the job.

Question: So, what about retention? And how serious is that?

Mr. Bari: Afro is currently facing the issue with regards to employee retention. We received 18 resignations in the past two quarters from this (customer services) department, particularly from physical customer contact outlets across Bahrain. The issue is serious and becoming increasingly worrisome for Afro because such incidents often result in a triple down effect.

Question: What challenges are you facing as a result of this?

Mr. Bari: Many! We had to shut some of our customer service outlets because of it in the recent past. Then, recruiting new employees is again a big

process and takes time and effort besides the cost. In addition to that, we have had to assign existing customer service staff members on long shifts (with overtime allowance for sure) to cover the slots. But this is not appealing for everyone and also not a good strategy or a permanent solution to the issue.

Question: What are the reasons behind this catastrophe?

Mr. Bari: Well, the HR department conducts exit interviews, and they have informed us that mostly people are concerned about leadership involvement, working environment and long shifts at Afro. When I attended a few exit interviews last month, and in fact, one or two weeks ago, I realized people had more issues with long working shifts. I even asked the employees being interviewed (in the exit interview) that they were aware of the nature of the customer service job and the department responsibilities that it always operates in 'shifts pattern' everywhere, then why did they decide to opt for jobs in this department and surprisingly, majority were unable to answer.

The reason why I am telling you this is that I believe some people think it is easy to just speak to customers and handle some queries but it is a different ball game altogether. It requires a lot of patience, humbleness, energy and engagement. Parallel to this, I believe there is a lack of career orientation as well; some people don't have a good idea of what they are aiming for in their professional life. However, this does not mean that I disagree with the existence of these issues at Afro, but there could be, and certainly are other reasons as well when it comes to employee retention. It's a two-way thing.

Question: Is management aware of all this? If yes, what steps have they taken?

Mr. Bari: Afro has a culture of keeping the management well informed on all matters related to our internal and external stakeholders ranging from suppliers, customers to employees. So yes, the administration is aware of it, and I am part of the team working on issues specifically related to the customer service department.

Regarding the steps, certain things take time for approval as the Board of Directors are required to be involved which undergoes, several rounds of

discussion, keeping in view the policy line of the company. Besides, sometimes there is a strong need for the development and refinement in the bylaws or procedures of the business to address a certain issue which again goes through a hectic process of discussions on related legal and corporate aspects, approvals before any development and/or implementation of new implementation plans takes place.

What I am trying to say is that, things are under discussion on formal grounds, and we are on it, but it will take some time to finalize our final course of action for this issue.

Question: Is Afro considering employees' concerns as well in its efforts towards resolving this issue of employee retention in the Customer Service department?

Mr. Bari: *Of course! there is no doubt about it. Things are under consideration from all the domains.*

Question: What if your view about your competitors? Do they have similar problems?

Mr. Bari: *Afro is a competitive business entity, and we keep a close eye on our rivals. They, too, have similar issues however, the severity may vary from one company to another.*

Question: Have you tried to trace where the majority of the employees leaving Afro, particularly from the customer service department, end up?

Mr. Bari: *We don't have much knowledge about it. If one aspires to remain in the telecom sector, then certainly they will look for other companies in the market.*

Discussion with Some Employees at Afro Customer Services

Employees (five in total) of the company were also brought in the debate through interviews from different customer service outlets of Afro across Bahrain. On general grounds, majority of the employees

asserted working environment, long shifts, and lack of leaders/managers` empathizing attitude. Upon request for further explanation on leaders and managers, one employee mentioned that occasionally we have rude customers and managers do not intervene to support us. They are only concerned about the customers who are disappointed from us.

One employee also indicated to the fact that Afro is more concerned about its customers, which is why we don't see much of a healthy working environment for employees. The concept of supportive teams is not there and the managers are not ready to help us when we need them for urgent domestic issues such as leaving early in an emergency or going out of the workplace for a while and so on.

On question regarding the long work shifts, majority of the employees agreed that Afro`s Customer Service department has long working hours. They also accepted that that it is the same in other companies in the telecommunications sector. Interestingly, they also expressed awareness of this prior to joining the customer service department. The employees further explained that, since many employees are quitting from this department, the burden comes on the rest who end up working for long shifts with hardly one break in between to pray and/or eat.

Conclusively, the issue of employee retention at Afro seems considerably serious. What appears to be worrisome is that both management and employees are highlighting somehow similar reasons for it but, there hasn`t been much done to address it till date. Moreover, the management of Afro seemed to be viewing this issue with a different perspectives which may delay the finalization and implementation of objective action on the issue.

Discussion Questions

Q1. How do you see Afro and its position in the Telecom sector in Bahrain?

Q2. How challenging is working in the customer services department? Justify.

Q3. What are the top three issues you will highlight that Afro is facing with regards to employee retention separately from the perspective of management and employees?

Q4. How serious do you think is the management of Afro towards resolving this issue?

Q5. To each of the top three issues pertaining employee retention in the customer service department, what strategies you would advise to Afro?

Suggested Readings

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