

By Michael K. Jeanes, Clerk of the Superior Court

Clerk's Office Earns Two National Achievement Awards

The National Association of Counties awarded the Clerk's office achievement awards for two programs that improve customer service in Maricopa County. The Clerk's employee cross-training program won an award in the category of Personnel Management, Employee Training and Benefits. The Clerk's Interactive Voice Response Call Management System (IVR) won an award in the category of Court Administration and Management.

Cross-Training Programs

Like the private sector, the Clerk's office is leading a new kind of workforce. Years ago, more people were attracted to long-term, steady work where their career would develop from entry level to management and retirement with one employer. More often today, employees seek personally meaningful work, schedule flexibility, and new challenges. The Clerk's office has long offered flexible work schedules and teleworking options. The office remains an attractive employer because of its mission of helping our community access and receive justice. More recently, the Clerk's office implemented a cross-training program that adds variety and challenges to this important work for courtroom clerks and customer service staff.

The Clerk's office is the official record keeper and fiduciary agent for the Superior Court in Maricopa County. With more than 650 employees serving more than 157 judges and commissioners at nine locations, training and consistency become very important. On average, it takes four months to sufficiently train a courtroom clerk to work on their own in a judicial officer's division. Historically, courtroom clerks were initially trained for only one case type.

Once assigned to a division, approximately 80 percent of a courtroom clerk's time is dedicated to the courtroom, taking notes of court proceedings. This in-court time, while interesting and educational, limits the time they have to obtain additional training. This approach resulted in a slim margin of experienced clerks available to cover court proceedings while new clerks were trained. For greater flexibility and a more versatile, engaged pool of clerks, more training was imperative.

Saturday trainings allowed the time necessary to cross-train clerks on multiple case types. Grant funds allowed the office to provide the training without using general fund dollars. As a result, the office increased the number of courtroom clerks available to cover multiple case types while improving the value of the position through new information, challenges, and variety the training and assignments provide.

Other areas targeted for cross-training were the filing counters, marriage licenses, and passport services, which are available at multiple locations. Increasing customer demand resulted in longer lines and wait times. Cross-training between these service areas created a more unified approach, allowing customers to receive more timely service, while improving the overall judicial process. Once implemented, the average wait time for marriage license or passport customers at the Clerk's Southeast Adult facility was reduced by approximately 50 percent in February 2016, as compared to February 2015. Over the same time period, customer demand increased by 10 percent.

Interactive Voice Response Phone System

The Clerk's office implemented the IVR system in May of 2014 to better respond to an average of 30,000 telephone calls each month. Before the IVR, callers could directly dial more than 70 published desk phones and might then be transferred to one or more of more than 100 other telephone numbers before getting the assistance they needed. Before the IVR, the phone system did not adequately measure call volume, call type, and transfers. This limited the office's ability to route calls effectively or monitor the quality of assistance.

Partnering with the County and its vendor, programming was the only cost of development for the Clerk's office. The telephone-button operated menu system that resulted allows callers to select options for routing directly to the appropriate area of the Clerk's office based on their needs. The new system eliminated over 200 individual telephone numbers and provided the public with one main telephone number to call when contacting the organization: (602) 37-CLERK (372-5375).

Most desk phones were eliminated and replaced with a system that lets staff manage call queues and incoming calls directly on their computers. The new system reduced monthly telephone charges for individual telephone lines, as well as the cost of telephone equipment. Additionally, the IVR system measures and monitors call queues in real time, allowing better use of staff time and collecting statistical data.

The Clerk's office now adjusts call handling to cover what is needed at any time, based on analysis and activity within the queues. Callers can also get information without speaking to staff, as the menus are available 24-hours per day, 7 days a week. Staff are only available during normal business hours, which previously limited what can now be accessed through the IVR. The IVR system has served the primary goal of improving the customer service experience for callers, while improving call management, statistical reporting, and quality assurance.

Whether at a service counter, in a courtroom, or on the phone, the Clerk's award-winning initiatives strive to make the customer service experience better for Maricopa County's four million residents and beyond. Unfortunately, the public still expects slow, ineffective service from most government agencies. All Clerk's office staff take pride in feedback from customers who are pleasantly surprised at getting fast, accurate, respectful results from the professionals in the Clerk's office.