

## Case Study

### Norwegian Cruise Line

#### Overview: Communicating for Quality Customer Service

Employees on the “front line” who interact with customers on a regular basis can play a powerful role in shaping a company’s reputation in the minds of its customers. To ensure a positive customer experience, recruiting best-in-class staff is crucial for any company, in any industry. One qualification that is sometimes hard for recruiters to measure when processing job applications is the candidate’s communication skills.

An employee’s ability to effectively and appropriately communicate with customers can be the critical element that makes one company’s customer service top-notch and another’s second-rate. Language skills are often intricate and difficult to master, especially when learned as a second language, which can further compound the recruiter’s job when making hiring decisions for a service industry.

For Norwegian Cruise Line (NCL), operated by NCL Corporation Ltd., providing an excellent customer experience is a focus for their organization. The level of English proficiency of its staff was identified as a key factor impacting the overall quality of their customer service. Fifteen percent of customer complaints were related to employees who did not understand the needs of guests because of a language barrier.

#### Background: Norwegian Cruise Line Discovers Recruitment Need

As a leading and innovative global cruise company, NCL recruits on an ongoing basis and worldwide, often through 40 job fairs throughout the year. With the introduction of new ships to the fleet, thousands of positions need to be filled quickly, in addition to managing new hires to maintain service on existing ships. In a given week, NCL interviews approximately 300 candidates – in person, over the telephone and online – requiring efficient hiring tools to identify talent who have the proper skill set for the available positions and personality to fit into the company culture.

Excellent customer service is paramount for NCL. To achieve this goal, it is important for employees to have the ability to communicate clearly with passengers, particularly among the customer-facing staff. Since the majority of NCL’s customers are American, they expect to communicate in English. Therefore, employees must have an appropriate level of English proficiency to manage guests’ needs and provide quality customer service.

#### Challenge: Quickly and Accurately Test Applicant English-language Skills

Because of the global nature of NCL’s recruiting efforts, being able to measure English proficiency of its new hires and existing staff was a problem – particularly among those who speak English as a second language.

NCL recruiters realized that for customer service and guest satisfaction to improve, applicants must be screened for English fluency during the hiring process. This presented a unique challenge for NCL – to find a state-of-the-art English proficiency assessment system that complemented and did not interfere with the current recruiting process. The added step of evaluating applicant’s language skills needed to

be easy for recruiting staff to administer and provide fast, automated results, while consistently and accurately processing applicants from various countries in person, over the phone or compute.

## **Solution: Integrate Leading Language Assessment Tool into Recruiting Process**

NCL recruiting found a solution in the Versant English Test – a quick, objective and accurate assessment of spoken language skills – powered by the patented Versant technology, and provided by the international media company Pearson. The tool is based on years of research in speech processing, statistical modeling, linguistics, and testing theory.

Once an NCL recruiter determines they are interested in further screening of a candidate, they will administer the Versant test to measure the candidate's level of English proficiency. The Versant Test Development team developed a customizable benchmarking system solution, based on the demands of NCL's business, to establish an acceptable test score that job candidates must meet or exceed. Versant evaluates an individual's ability to understand spoken language on everyday topics and to respond appropriately at a native-like conversational pace. The system generates scores based on the exact words used in the spoken responses, as well as the pace, fluency, and pronunciation of those words in phrases and sentences.

The Versant test fit NCL's business needs because it can be conducted over the telephone in 10 minutes with results provided directly to the recruiter online within minutes after an applicant completes the test.

The results provide NCL recruiters with the ability to evaluate critical success factors for customer service satisfaction, such as:

- The applicant's ability to accurately understand customers
- The applicant's ability to communicate effectively with customers
- Consistent language proficiency levels across all staff
- Objective identification of quality applicants

## **Results: Increased Customer Satisfaction and Retention Rates**

One year after implementing the Versant test as part of their recruiting process, NCL no longer receives complaints from guests about the staff's ability to communicate in English.

"We received complaints in the past, but since implementing the English assessment test, we haven't received any," said Miriam Torres, director of recruiting at NCL. "Versant was the right solution for us to ensure we hire high-quality applicants, especially as we introduce new cruise ships and continue to hire new staff."

With Versant, NCL recruiters have been able to administer the tests to their geographically dispersed applicants efficiently and have improved customer service across the board. Versant has been used for hiring and screening of more than 1,326 applicants since its implementation, and employee retention has increased 20 percent due to hiring staff with the right language skills.