

# ***Fluency Coaching™ Accelerates Learning and Productivity Ramp-up***

**Carl Binder, Ph.D.**

Senior Partner

Binder Riha Associates

carl@binder-riha.com

**Lee Sweeney**

Manager, Premier Customer Marketing Call Center

AT&T Wireless Services

lee.sweeney@attws.com

# Executive Summary

The business unit manager (second author) of a Customer Retention call center sought to improve the productivity of newly hired representatives, shorten the duration of training, and eliminate the need for re-training during representatives' first few weeks on the job.

To perform optimally, representatives needed specific product knowledge at the tips of their tongues, the ability to address a range of customer problems and issues, and to interact fluently and confidently when speaking with customers. They needed to be comfortable and able to serve customers with the utmost attention and regard while maintaining high levels of measured call productivity.

A team of supervisors and lead representatives worked with the unit manager and consultant (first author) to shift from a more conventional new-hire training program to one based on principles and methods introduced in *The FluencyBuilding™ Workshop*. In the new program, over half the time spent in class was high-intensity timed practice designed to produce specific ranges of measured fluency in multiple learning channels (i.e., “behavioral modalities”).

The new program *shortened training from about three weeks to ten days and increased productivity by about 60% above the call center benchmark* within two weeks of starting the job.

# Components of the Intervention

## Expectations and Feedback

- The Call Center Manager, Supervisors and Lead Reps all set high expectations for participation and acceleration (learning) to measured levels of fluent performance.
- Exercises included goals expressed as *count per minute performance ranges*.
- The program included *many* timed practice activities per hour with immediate posted feedback.

## Tools and Resources

- The team redesigned paper job aids and reference materials to support *fluent* access.
- Supervisors, Lead Reps, and peers served as *Fluency Coaches*, in training and on the job.

## Consequences and Incentives

- Coaches offered frequent praise, “cheerleading” and recognition of personal best performance.
- Practice exercises included friendly competition and other activities in which fluency “wins.”

## Skills and Knowledge

- Practice included knowledge elements for verbal interaction and screen codes for navigation.
- Trainees practiced online look-ups, data entry, and using job aids to achieve fluent *access*.
- Practice activities included *multiple learning channels* and action sequences.

# From Conventional to Fluency-based Training

## *Conventional Training:*

- Lecture/discussion-based
- Facilitator responsible for learning
- Train on *everything*
- Mostly passive learning
- Final test is primary classroom measurement
- 100% “ceiling” on measurement (test) does not distinguish fluency from initial accuracy.

## *Fluency-based Training:*

- Practice-based
- Employee responsible for practice to fluency
- Focus on *need-to-know*
- Mostly active practice
- Continuous timed measurement & feedback
- Time-based fluency criteria distinguish fluency from hesitant and “merely” accurate.

## Time Allocation for Program Activities

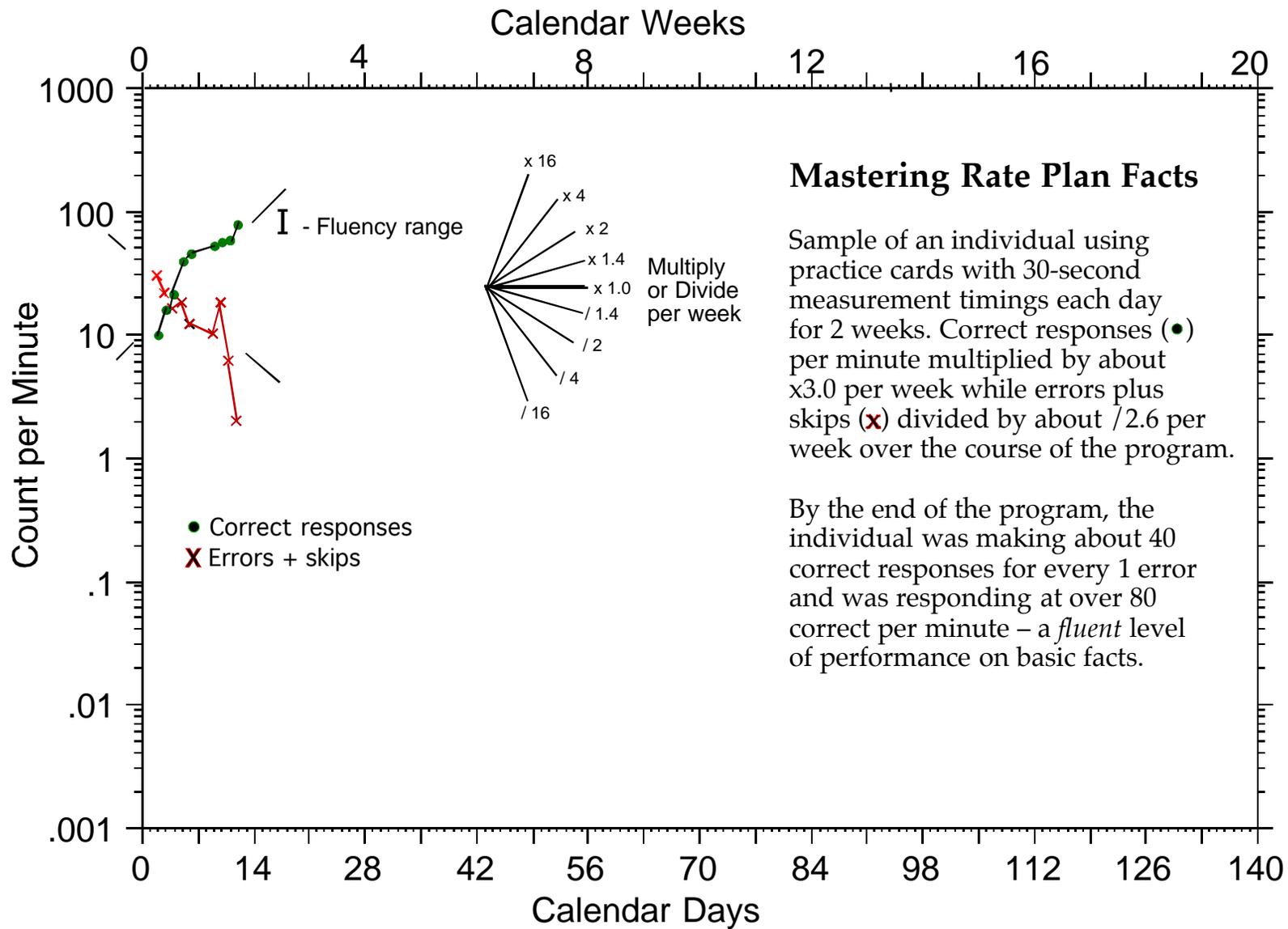
<i>Program Activity</i>	<i>Conventional</i>	<i>Fluency-based</i>
• Classroom lecture/discussion	70%	25%
• Review and application of job aids and reference materials	10%	15%
• Fluency practice activities	0%	55%
• Observe tenured performers (“chair riding”)	10%	0%
• On-the-job training	10%	5%

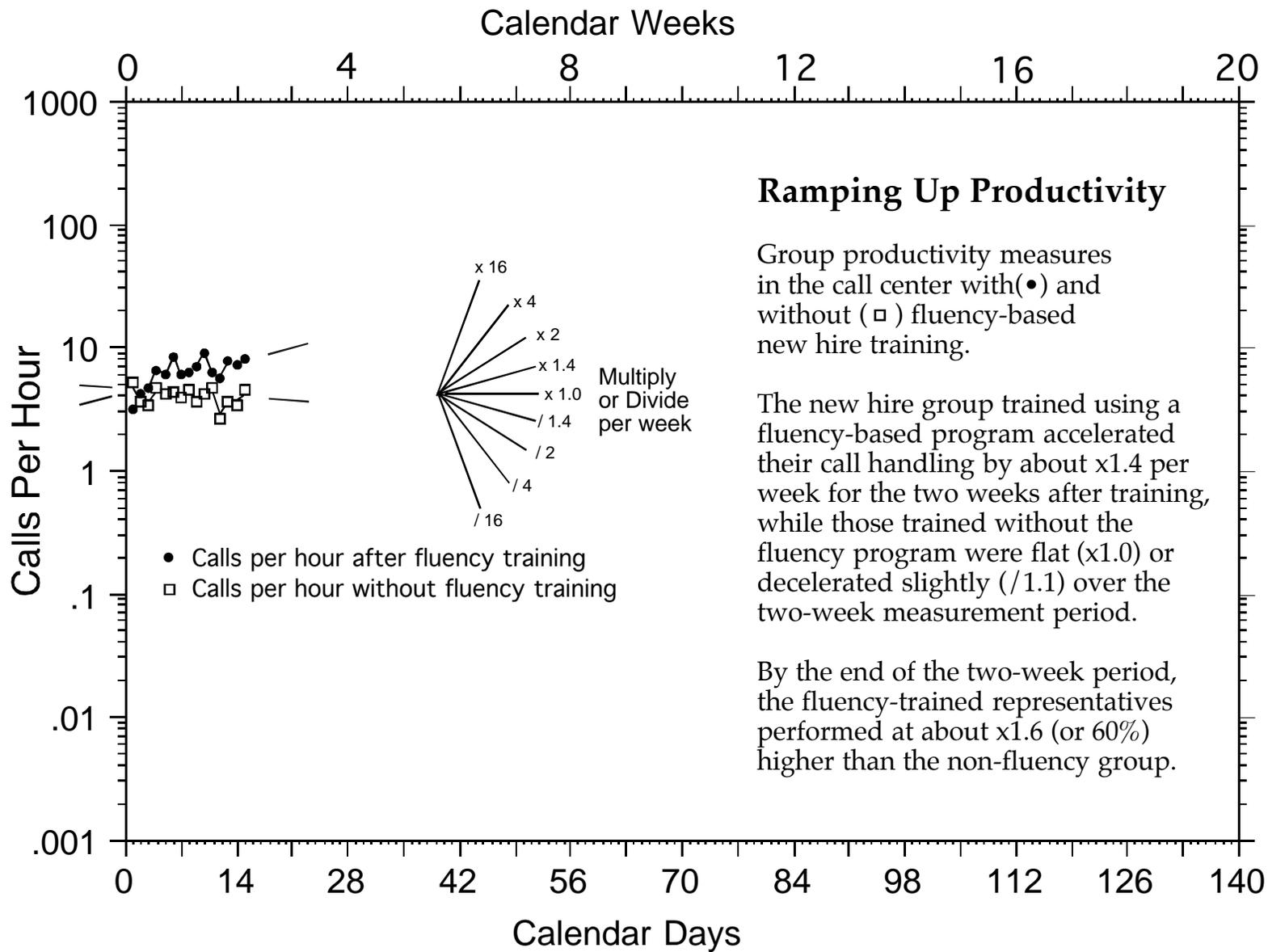
# A Partial List of Fluency Practice Exercises

<b><i>Learning Channel</i></b>	<b><i>Performance Statement</i></b>	<b><i>Fluency Standard</i></b>
See/Say	Respond to practice cards that prompt key facts, terms, and associations.	60-80 / minute 1 or zero errors
Hear/Say	Respond to questions or prompts from a facilitator or partner covering the same content as practice cards.	15-25 / minute correct
See/Say	Say 4-digit screen codes in response to screen names on practice cards (needed for rapid online access in CRM software system)	80-100 / minute 1 or zero errors
See/Write	Facts about phone rate plans, prompted by worksheet	30-50 /minute with no errors
Free/Abb	Recall and jot down (abbreviate) as many facts as possible about a topic in a brief interval	40-60 / minute correct
Hear/Say See/Say	Respond to questions or objections read from cards or stated by partner, covering key points accurately, succinctly and clearly	Confident normal pace
Hear/Do S& Say	Navigate Customer Care intranet to find specific product and procedure information requested by partner or facilitator	10-20 / minute correct
See/Mark	Find opportunities for improved language in transcripts of interactions with customers, applying service quality criteria.	8-12 / minute

# Using Learning Channels to Specify Behavior

<i>Possible Inputs</i>	<i>Typical Outputs</i>	<i>Learning Channel Examples</i>
See	Say	<b>See/Say</b> to read words from a job aid
Hear	Write	<b>See/Mark</b> to select choices on a discrimination worksheet
Sniff	Mark	<b>See/Say</b> to answer questions presented on practice cards
Touch	Do	<b>Hear/Do•Say</b> to find and report requested info from intranet
Taste	Abbreviate	<b>Free/Abbreviate</b> to brainstorm ideas for later discussion
Free		<p><b><u>Notes</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Free</b> is the specified “input” when there is no external stimulus for each response (e.g., in brainstorming).</li> <li>• When there are combined inputs or outputs, the convention is to use a dot, as in <b>Hear/Do•Say</b>.</li> </ul>





# Lessons Learned

By extending the FluencyBuilding™ performance improvement methodology to new-hire training in an outbound customer call center, we learned many things, including:

- Trainees *preferred* fluency coaching programs to conventional training and they *learned more*.
- *Fluent* performance “out of the blocks” accelerated productivity ramp-up to exceptional levels.
- Providing trainees with challenging performance criteria plus tools for self-managed practice can result in self-initiated practice outside of the formal classroom program.
- Software system “look-up” practice can be more efficient with pairs than solo.
- Training Supervisors and Lead Reps as fluency coaches is better than using dedicated trainers.
- By adding far more focused practice, we can shorten overall training time by as much as 1/3.

## For More Information

**Publication:** Binder, C., and Sweeney, L. (2002). Building fluent performance in a customer call center. *Performance Improvement*, 41(2), 29-37. Provides additional detail.

**Web Site:** [www.Binder-Riha.com/publications.htm](http://www.Binder-Riha.com/publications.htm) The *Helpful Resources* page on Binder Riha Associates’ web site has a wealth of downloadable articles and white papers about fluency.