



April 24, 2010

Hello, how can I help you? Scoring a job as a home-based agent

By Christine Frietchen

If you've been looking for a legit way to make extra money working from home, you've no doubt run head first into a minefield of scams, schemes and dubious "opportunities." Some of this stuff is for real, but [selling Avon or Tupperware](#) takes a really outgoing personality, and there's no guarantee you'll actually make money doing it. Come-ons to [stuff envelopes](#) or [process rebates at home](#) are a joke, and they can end up costing you money. But we've found one that's the real deal. If you've ever called customer service for your bank, cell phone provider, or a store, chances are good that you've spoken to an agent who was actually working from their home. And guess what? You can do it too.

It's no secret that companies have saved millions on customer service costs by outsourcing to India or the Philippines, but there's been a backlash. Consumers are frustrated by service reps' poor English or heavy accents, so companies are rethinking their outsourcing, increasingly using home-based workers -- either their own employees, or by contracting with a company that hires, trains and pays home-based employees or freelancers. It's called "phonesourcing," "homeshoring" or a "home-based call center" and pretty much anyone can apply to try it, provided you meet some fairly standard requirements. According to a [Forbes.com article on the industry](#), "Independent market researcher IDC projects that the number of American home call-center workers will grow from 110,000 today to 325,000 in 2012."

The promise: Work in your pajamas, set your own hours, and work for a real company.

The reality: This work-at-home job is the real thing, and you'll make at least minimum wage; most companies say their agents make between \$8 and \$12 per hour. Some companies offer paid training, but many don't, plus you'll need a pretty robust home-office setup, a quiet place to work and a dedicated phone line. The most successful workers have a thick skin (for handling disgruntled or stressed out customers), plenty of patience and are good listeners.

Most companies have similar requirements from applicants, and if you don't have a clean background and aren't moderately computer savvy, this isn't for you. Because agents will be

asked to handle credit card numbers and personal information, the requirements are stringent. Here are the basics:

- **Tech requirements.** You need a good computer, large monitor, wired cable or DSL Internet connection (most companies won't let you work on a wireless connection), and reliable home-phone line (many require a landline phone, not VOIP or a digital phone, and no cell phones). Most companies require a Windows-based computer, no Macs.
- **Skills assessment.** Companies will require a speaking test, typing test and computer aptitude test.
- **Interview.** You'll usually have a phone interview later in the application process.
- **Background check and sometimes a credit check.** Customer service agents will often be working with customers' private information, including credit-card info, so you should have a clean record.
- **A quiet, comfortable place to work.** Call-in customers want to think they're talking to a company employee in an office. Noises from traffic, TVs, other telephones or kids are all no-no's..

What's the catch?

Companies differ in how they hire people. For example, Alpine Access hires agents as actual part-time employees, which means they collect taxes and offer some some benefits like paid training and overtime. But there will also be a minimum number of required work hours, and you'll be expected to work assigned shifts. Other companies, including LiveOps, Arise Virtual Solutions and Working Solutions engage people as freelance workers -- that means you'll need to pay your own payroll taxes as a self-employed individual. Training isn't usually paid and some companies require you to incorporate yourself, a process that costs \$100 to \$200. There isn't usually a time commitment, which could be a bonus if you can't handle a regular shift schedule, but we did read some complaints that available shifts fill up fast.

Not all applicants are accepted. According to [Alpine Access](#) human resources manager Remi Webber, only 3% to 5% of applicants get job offers out of 150,000 applications per year. Tim Whipple, vice president of community operations for LiveOps, says that of the 2,000 to 4,000 applications that are started each week, between 2% and 10% are accepted. (Whipple does note that a large number of people begin the application but never finish it, however.)

What does it take to succeed?

Alpine Access' Remi Killeen-Weber told us that successful work-at-home employees are "Internet athletes" who have strong computing skills and are quick learners. Self-motivation and the ability to work independently are essential qualities: "You need to have the personality to be able to do that," says Killeen-Weber, who notes that among people who drop out, "some are not successful in that environment." Lastly, Killeen-Weber notes that you won't be able to field calls and care for a child at the same time. That means this type of work isn't a good fit for you if you don't have help with child care (we did, however, read lots of comments from parents who work after their kids have gone to sleep).

Tim Whipple of LiveOps agrees; the most successful agents "treat this like their home business." Whipple also says you should be friendly, patient and articulate, and "able to be nice to any kind of person." Resourcefulness is also key; Whipple defines this as "people who can find answers rather than being given the answers."

The bottom line and special cautions

Phon sourcing -- becoming a work-at-home call-center agent -- looks like a reasonable way to earn some extra money, especially if you already have the necessary computer and phone equipment. On the downside, the work itself can get tedious, and you have to be happy working on your own. Lastly, this type of job demands your full attention; you're not going to be able to cook dinner or change a diaper while fielding calls. At online working-at-home forums like [Workspace.com's section for at-home agents](#), people doing this kind of work say it can be slow to get started, and the work can sometimes be tedious, but most are happy making a little extra money, and being able to work unusual hours (such as at night after the kids are asleep).

Lots of advocates (and ConsumerSearch, too) caution against any type of work-at-home opportunity that requires you to shell out some cash before you're hired. In the case of becoming an at-home agent, fees for background checks are common to almost every company we found. Companies, including LiveOps, argue that asking applicants to pay for the background check cuts down on frivolous applications. Whipple assures that only people who have made it through all of the initial screenings are asked to undergo the background check, so you won't be asked to pay for this until the company has ascertained that you have been otherwise accepted. We found this to be true of other companies as well, so don't hand over any money until you've passed the initial skills tests and interviews. Steer clear of companies that demand payment upon initial application. The background check should be one of the final steps.

Where to start

The following companies are the best-known phon sourcing firms; many are accredited by the Better Business Bureau. All have detailed FAQ sections, so you can get a good idea of what's required.

Alpine Access. People with some prior customer-service experience are preferred. Training is paid, but a 20-hour per week commitment is required. Killeen-Weber says there are opportunities for advancement as well. Clients include Office Depot, the IRS and AOL. There's a \$45 fee for a background check when accepted. Hourly rates start at \$8. The company is accredited by the Better Business Bureau.

Arise Virtual Solutions. Applicants are required to incorporate themselves in addition to other aptitude and technical requirements. Arise will help you do this, but it's at extra cost to you (approx. \$100). A background check costs \$11 to \$24, depending on where you live. The certification program costs \$100. Arise Virtual Solutions is 12 years old and is Better Business Bureau accredited. Pay rates average between \$10 and \$14 per hour.

Convergys. No fee for a background check, but a 16-hour per week commitment is required. Convergys isn't accredited by the Better Business Bureau, but does have a rating of "A."

LiveOps. This company hires freelancers, but you don't need to be incorporated. There's a \$50 fee for a background check for those who pass the initial screenings and aptitude tests. Average hourly pay is about \$10 to \$15, according to Kristin Wahl, director of communications. There's no minimum time commitment, but you'll need to reapply if you haven't worked in more than 42 days. Training for specialized industries is available but not paid. The 10-year-old company is accredited with the Better Business Bureau. Clients include some infomercial products, and agents this year fielded calls for Hope for Haiti, a charity fundraiser.

TeleTech. Paid training is included, and employees can take advantage of a matching 401K program after they've worked for six months. A 20-hour per week minimum commitment is required. Payment rates vary based on skills required. The company isn't accredited by the Better Business Bureau, but it still has an "A" rating.

West Corporation. Paid training is offered, and the pre-hire background check costs \$30. Employees can opt to buy group health insurance. West Corp. is accredited by the Better Business Bureau with an "A+" rating. According to an article in Time magazine, about 85% of West At Home employees are female.

Working Solutions. Workers here are freelancers, not employees. Once you take a series of online tests, you'll have to wait for the company to match you with an opportunity, which can take up to several months. Payments and hourly requirements are determined by the project, starting at minimum wage. Training is not paid and the company is not accredited by the Better Business Bureau; it has a "B-" rating.