



April, 2010

Short Message Service (SMS) Home (Office) Making

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You have carefully looked at the arguments for and against having work-at-home agents (WAHAs). You decided that the well-reported benefits: cost savings, lowered attrition, higher productivity, widened labor pools, business continuity and greener environment offset the challenges: security, training, supervision and maintaining connectivity between home agents and your organization.

Now you are looking at how to structure your WAHA program. This article will touch on the key pieces and processes you will need to have in place for it to be a success.

Setting Goals

First, set out the goals and measure them to evaluate WAHA program performance. These can be cost reduction, attrition and improved key performance indicators (KPIs) such as average handle time, first call resolution and sales per hour or day. The objectives will determine program scale and scope.

Telus is one of Canada's largest communications carriers. It has an active and expanding WAHA program. Out of the firm's 5,500- to 6,000-agent (numbers vary from turnover) roster, about 1,000 agents at present and will add 400 by the end of 2010 will be working from home. This will be achieved by moving existing agents from on-premise contact centers to their homes.

The Telus WAHA program goals include higher call quality agent productivity, lowered attrition and reduced facilities costs. It measures agent performance prior to and after they go home. The firm reports that its WAHAs have one-tenth the turnover of onpremises staff. Each agent retained saves it approximately \$30,000, including replacement hiring and training cost and the estimated impact to call quality when it loses a trained agent.

Home Connections

Program planning and setup requires paying careful attention to voice/data connections. One of the most critical choices is PSTN versus VoIP for voice. VoIP is less expensive; the downside is that quality, while greatly improved as broadband providers have upgraded their networks to offer it to homes, is often not quite that of PSTN. There are still on occasion issues such as jitter and latency affecting conversations and in some cases leading to dropouts.

Telus does not use VoIP for its WAHAs; it had tested the technology out recently and found the quality still poor. On the other hand, Convergys, a large teleservices firm which has an extensive AHA program, permits VoIP but prospective agents must pass an online quality test before the firm will approve them using it.

Another issue is bandwidth, and what to specify to home agents. It will depend on how much information you are pushing and pulling through the pipes. Telus has found that 3 Mb down and 1 Mb up is usually sufficient for desktops. Convergys requires a minimum 1.5 Mb down and 512kp up.

There needs to be failover at the server end. The Canadian carrier has a triple redundant virtual private network (VPN) server solution so that if one drops out the WAHAs can connect into either of the two remaining units.

There is debate over computer ownership. Employer-owned is preferable over agent-owned because it provides greater security by having complete control on what is on it, but is more expensive. A third option has emerged which is the locked-down desktop, pioneered by West, where employers take remote control over agent-owned machines while the agents are working. Agents cannot access their personal files, print or save to storage.

Telus is exploring a fourth choice: thin-client appliances. They are less expensive, more secure as no data resides on or can be downloaded from them and use less energy and space. The firm is presently testing thin-client devices with on-premise agents and is considering piloting them for WAHAs as early as the third quarter of 2010.

A critical component for home agents is IT support. They are on their own, so to speak, though with help desk support no more than a phone call or a mouse click away. Michael De- Salles, strategic analyst, Frost and Sullivan, recommends that companies set up their support policies and suppliers ahead of time. This would include communication procedures with help desk personnel, acceptable downtime and backup plans. Ian Cruickshank, Telus manager, workforce management, suggests having troubleshooting guides available so that WAHAs can fix simple problems backed by dedicated IT support teams.

Ensuring Security

Security and data privacy is a key concern of senior management and of teleservices' firms clients with WAHAs because the information is being handled in private residences outside of corporate control. One of the biggest challenges is limiting the risk of viruses and malware spreading from home machines. For that reason WAHA-using companies typically prohibit or advise against using Wi-Fi routers because criminals can gain access to home computers through them. They often require dedicated broadband connections to PCs; no other devices are allowed to run off them.

DeSalles recommends what many providers are requiring of home agents today; authentication via multiple password layers and biometric voice login for access to networks and applications.

Security can also be enhanced for the most critical cases such as financial and healthcare data by locked-down desktops mentioned above. Yet it also adds to costs, he points out.

In addition and as enhancement to some of these methods Telus uses authentication factor 2 (i.e. two passwords or logins for security.) It also uses a hardware firewall NAT device (router) deployed at WAHAs homes that provides more basic firewall protection for PC connected to the Internet plus a software-based firewall and virus protection software on every PC.

Telus masks agents' screens for credit card, social insurance and other critical information. It also requires WAHAs to have secure offices: those with a quiet environment free of noise or distractions and a lockable door in their homes. It checks prospective home offices before allowing agents to work from home including seeing if their monitors can be read by others.

Ergonomics

Enabling ergonomics in home offices to ensure comfort and productivity and to avoid injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome and tendinitis is just as important as it is on-premise offices. This includes requiring agents select spaces with no glare on screens, indirect lighting, buying adjustable chairs and workstations and equipping or asking them to buy high-quality headsets.

Headsets are as critical in homes as they are on-premises but for different reasons. While there is no din of other voices in home offices as there are on-premises there are unavoidable and unpredictable sharp sounds like truck back firings or sirens. There are also occasions when WAHAs may need to step away from their desks, such as to sign for a courier delivery or instruct a contractor where to make repairs.

Neil Hooper, senior manager, contact center marketing, Plantronics points to the Savi Office line which enhances WAHA environments, by letting users connect to multiple communication applications and devices – corded desk phones, softphones and PC-audio with a single headset. Noise-canceling microphone, wideband PC audio and integrated DECT 6.0 technologies provides clear communication while letting WAHAs roam up to 350 feet from their desk without compromising on clarity.

Assessing WAHAs

The opportunity to work from home is very popular with existing employees and jobseekers alike, observers report, yet not everyone is suitable for it. That requires creating unique WAHA hiring and assessment programs.

DeSalles recommends building hiring profiles based on customer service experience such as in related fields such as hospitality and retail. While generally more mature than their on-premises counterparts, WAHAs are expected to be self-starters and good problem-solvers. The profiles should also include having IT troubleshooting skills.

There are differences in what to look for in WAHAs than for on-premise agents. While there are overlaps in basic competencies and skills, Dawn Lambert, FurstPerson senior manager, selection and assessment, says her firm has found four – autonomy and initiative and perseverance and time management – that stand out as much more important for AHAs than for on-premises

agents. These assessments must be applied to agents being hired directly to work from home and for those moving from on-premises to home offices.

WAHA recruitment and assessment including for voice competency can be carried out virtually, without ever having to see the applicants.

FurstPerson's Hire@Home solution includes a contact center simulation set in a home office environment with Web-based training and a remote trainer as part of the assessment. It also includes computer diagnostic tools that can evaluate the job candidate's technical environment. It can also assess them for problem-solving abilities and basic IT set-up that may indicate their IT troubleshooting skills.

Alpine Access, a pure-play WAHA teleservices firm uses 100 percent virtual screening for its applicants. They must confirm that they meet its computer, Internet, phone, headsets and home office requirements. They then take a specialized course via the firm's Alpine Access University that assesses their capability and commitment, utilizing videos and interactive exercises, followed by a skills exam that employs simulations to prove that they can do the work. Once prospective WAHAs pass these Alpine Access then sets up phone interviews from which it decides whether to make job offers based on the applicants' skill sets matching available positions.

Screening for applicants who have the skills and if preferred experience for your WAHA-located positions increases the likelihood of them performing well. It also reduces initial training and ramp-up times.

Telus carefully interviews WAHA candidates by front-line managers using pre-prepared Interview kits. They look for behaviors that are consistent with agents that are self-starters, self-motivated and able to work in physically isolated environments. They also seek those who can utilize alternate/ non-face-to-face means of communication like LiveMeeting, e-mail, chat, phone, text message, and have good basic PC skills. It informs agents what is expected of them.

Scheduling, Training, Managing and Communications

WAHAs, because they do not have to commute give more versatility to scheduling by enabling and filling split-shifts, shorter part-time shifts and greater availability to handle sudden and unexpected spikes. Assigning them is no different than that for on-premise agents; the tools and methods are the same.

“The task of forecasting and scheduling at-home agents can sound unwieldy,” says Bill Durr, principal global solutions consultant, Verint Witness Actionable Solutions. “However, with browser-based functionality right at the desktop, agents and supervisors have the ability to manage shift preferences and view published schedules, conduct rule-based partial day shift swaps and submit wait lists requests. They can also view the status of time-off requests down to 15-minute intervals and conduct performance-enabled shift bidding.”

The challenges come with the training and coaching. Even where agents come into the office initially and periodically (see later this article) there will be many instances where the learning and supervising occurs remotely.

The answers lie in e-learning for initial and ongoing training that can be backed by, where instructor or supervisor intervention is required chat sessions or Web conferencing where agents can be given and walked through lessons and simulations. Workforce optimization tools can schedule sessions based on agent and/or instructor or supervisor availability. IMs, calls and e-mails can be used for follow up.

“Many contact centers utilizing WAHAs need to be more creative with the different methods they use for communication to encourage ongoing dialogue and accountability,” says Dina Vance, senior vice president at Ulysses Learning. “The key is to create accountability around the touch points to ensure they add value to the overall performance. The profile of the home based agent is proving to be people with strong work ethics and a desire to do a good job.”

Sitel, which has some 400 WAHAs which it calls HomeShore agents and plans to add 200 more has enhanced its e-learning functionality by using inContact’s hosted RightTime technology. It allows Sitel to ensure delivery of continuous based training and communications are delivered to their agents’ desktops in real time.

Another key and related issue with WAHAs is their lack of connectivity with supervisors and colleagues and vice-versa. Ulysses’ Vance recommends putting in communications means such as internal social networking to enable group collaboration and problem solving.

Convergys recently modified its desktop proprietary messaging tool to incorporate SMS, which enables it to quickly notify agents even if they are not on-line via their wireless devices, thereby giving the virtual equivalent of seeking someone out in the break room or hallway. The tool also has one-button screen share and chat capability, enabling instant support from a supervisor, as well as personal number concealment are two other key functions of the tool.

Desktop messaging systems, important for at-premises agents as they deliver individual, team and group statistics and announcements become critical for WAHAs because they are out of office, enabling key information to be supplied to them and to make them feel involved.

Inova Solutions’ Desktop Presenter™ application is preconfigured; WAHAs can install the solutions out of the box. Desktop Presenter connects to Inova’s LightLink™ middleware when the WAHAs first login, displaying critical KPIs and messages on the agents’ desktops. Desktop Presenter also offers added security by offering authentication by Microsoft Windows usernames in addition to IP addresses. Utilizing usernames minimizes the risks of others gaining access to confidential information, such as family members getting on WAHAs’ computers.

One tool to consider is video. Laura Shay, director of product marketing, Polycom, points out that video captures non-verbal communications, which enables clearer understandings and fewer follow-up questions, resulting in shorter calls.

DeSalles isn't so sure though if video adds value. Where would video be better than doing online coaching with an application he asks?

“For example let's say you have a salesperson who doesn't know how to close,” he says. “Do you want a Webcam conference with them or have a telephone conference to show them the proper way to do via an avatar or online video or something you can score or measure?”

Dr. Turgut Aykin, president of ac(2) Solutions, says contact center managers should look at what other organizations have done successfully for training and connectivity. He points to IBM's Global Services, where he had once worked, has used teleworkers since the 1990s. IBM worked around these issues with online training, webinars and courses. It required X amount of training per year; employees must demonstrate proof. IBM also had weekly conference calls involving the entire unit; teams within them also had conference call huddles.

Satellite or Constellation?

Once you know what materials and methods there are to structure a WAHA program you have the choice of two designs: satellite i.e. having agents within two to three hours driving time of existing contact centers or branch offices; or constellation i.e. WAHAs not having to reside in travelling distance. The selection will affect costs, agent assessment and training, technology, security, management and social connectivity.

Michele Rowan is president, Customer Contact Strategies, an at-home agent consultancy. The satellite model maintains a large span of control with little change to business process, except technology. Organizations can begin to move agents home with a single focus of getting technology right. Social connectivity – between agents, supervisors and colleagues is continued – WAHAs remain fully engaged in on-premise centers' activities with frequent on site visits, as often as the company deems necessary.

The satellite model requires frequent on-site visits that can impact agent retention, she point outs. It also adds readying and commuting time that WAHAs would rather do without, “and they will tell us that,” says Rowan. Satellite also places limitations on leveraging many of the cost-saving and performance-maximizing of virtualizing hardware and software to a single server covering the entire enterprise or to a vendor-or-third-party provided hosted environments. These methods do away with costly and duplicate computer rooms, servers, licenses and IT staff.

The constellation model, when combined with closing on-premises centers offers the most cost savings. It also unleashes geographical restrictions on hiring, providing unlimited talent pools at their disposal. Business continuity is also superior; a snow storm in the northern plains is no longer an issue when agents can be brought on line in the South.

Constellation deployments have limitations including individual state (and in Canada provincial) labor law, workers' compensation and general liability regulations that can vary greatly, and can be tedious to manage. Also, group gatherings and face-to-face meetings, even if only desired a few times per year, can be challenging with wide agent deployment.

“The ideal approach is to start with a satellite model and get really good at operating in a mixed environment,” advises Rowan. “Build out virtual technology in tandem with fine tuning operating performance. And when ready, expand into the constellation model a few select markets that meet your business objectives.”

Telus currently uses the satellite model; WAHAs live within 100 miles by road of its eight contact centers located in Burnaby and Prince George, B.C., Edmonton and Calgary, Alta., Barrie and Toronto, Ont. and Montreal and Rimouski, Que.

WAHAs travel to the nearest contact center two days a month so that they can reconnect with team managers and peers face to face and for continued training. If their connectivity or PCs fails they are able to come back to the nearest contact center and continue working while the issue is being resolved.

Telus has been looking at moving to the constellation model to tap larger labor pools. It is developing its e-learning capabilities to convert agent training into a completely virtual learning curriculum. It has also audio/Web conferencing and is piloting webcams with select agents.

“The major obstacle has been training,” explains Telus’ Cruickshank. “Once we have that virtual training capability then potentially we’ll be able to hire from anywhere.”

Putting It Together

Regardless of what model you pick or migrate to you need to create a formal written policy that outlines what is expected from the agents and your company.

DeSalles says these policies must cover a wide range of items including home office environments such as voice/data connectivity, noise levels, lighting, ergonomics and basic home security. They should set out hours to be worked and availability and require agents to report absences, illnesses and tardiness. They should also stipulate the KPIs agents are expected to meet. To ensure compliance agents should be required to sign off on them so that they and you know that they have read and understood them.

Telus’ Cruickshank points out that multiple departments: HR, health and safety, IT, insurance, labor relations and legal need to weigh in on the program and policy setup. His firm has created one that is backed up with home office pre- and post-launch assessments for individual candidates by specially-trained managers, followed by twice-yearly periodic inspections.

“Setting up an at-home agent program is complex; it requires a lot of thinking and consideration,” explains Cruickshank. “We’ve been able to do both very well by making sure that we have structured the program in a way that finds the best agents.”