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Which Way Home? Comparing and Contrasting Three Approaches to Home Agent Staffing for Call Centers

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Better agent retention and performance. More flexible staffing. Expanded recruiting reach. Lower operating costs. More environmentally responsible. Improved business continuity planning. Not a bad bunch of benefits -- and all can be yours if you just send your contact center agents home.

The Rundown: Home Agent Programs

Executives: Home agent programs can lower operating costs through the potential to decrease overhead, improve agent turnover (and thus lower hiring and training costs), and increase customer loyalty thanks to higher agent performance.

They also fit into enterprise environmental initiatives.

Directors and Managers: Home agent programs can increase your labor pool and allow for the expansion of call center operating hours.

Determine which agents on staff now are up to the task of working from home. Evaluate tools and strategies to enable remote agent models and keep home agents connected to the contact center and the organization.

Make sure you have a strategy in place to evaluate existing agents for work-at-home programs and/or to recruit and hire the best candidates for remote agent programs.

Supervisors: Available tools and strategies can help you monitor and influence remote agent performance and continue your existing peer coach and mentoring programs.

An ever-increasing number of contact centers are introducing home agent programs into their staffing models. According to the ICMI 2008 Contact Center Operations Report, one in five centers surveyed already use home agents to some extent, with three in four of those centers indicating that telecommuting has had either a "positive" or "very positive" impact on the center's effectiveness. (Only one contact center reported a "negative" impact.)

Research venture after research venture and case study after case study reveal that home agent initiatives are a very good idea for customer care organizations. It has taken a while for executives and directors in most organizations to get comfortable with the idea of such a non-traditional work arrangement, but advances in “virtual” technology along with the aforementioned reports of telecommuting success have quelled key concerns. In many organizations today, the questions surrounding home agent programs are less about “should we do it?” and more about “how should we do it?”

This article compares and contrasts the three most viable home agent staffing approaches, and aims to help you determine which one – or ones – are best for your organization.

Send existing agents home. This is the most common home agent staffing approach, particularly for contact centers that are testing the telecommuting waters with a new/pilot program. The allure of this approach is obvious: Using agents who have worked in your center for some time enables you to select those whom you have witnessed performing at a consistently high level, who are fully engaged, who already understand the inner workings of the organization, and, importantly, who have demonstrated a strong ability to work independently.

Knowing that your home agent candidates already possess the latter attribute is important since one of the biggest problems that centers must contend with after introducing a home agent program is feelings of isolation and loneliness among agents who thought they would like telecommuting. That said, many managers say that even agents who seemed ideally suited for home-based work sometimes struggle with the isolation issue.

“Most agents have mental models of work and rituals that they do each day in the call center,” says Drew Daly, senior director of sales for World Travel Holdings (WHT), which has 180 home agents in place. “And when they start working from home, they lose a lot of the things they were used to doing and getting every day, and it changes their relationship with work.”

Daly strives to set up home agent candidates for success via clear communication about the reality of at-home work, and by having them speak with staff who already telecommute. “We try to be as proactive as possible and paint the picture so that when people get home it isn’t a matter of ‘oh, I want to come back now.’” In addition, the contact center goes out of its way to keep home agents in the loop and actively involved in events, contests and projects via frequent email, chat and phone communication.

Many centers offer existing agents an opportunity to work from home as way to reward experienced high performers – providing them with a coveted work arrangement that compels them to not only continue providing excellent service, but also to stick around for years to come. According to the ICMI study, 34.8% of centers with telecommuting programs reported that that turnover among home agents was “substantially lower” than that of onsite staff, with another 24.2% indicating that home agent turnover is “somewhat lower” than that of traditional agents. (Only three respondents said that home agent turnover was higher than onsite staff attrition.)

Sending existing staff home can also increase retention of top performers who might otherwise leave the organization because of personal status changes; for example, it's not uncommon for an agent to have to move due to a job transfer of a spouse or to care for a sick/aging loved one who lives in another city. Progressive centers consider offering telecommuting as an option in such instances to avoid losing valued agents' skills and knowledge.

The existing agent approach to telecommuting is not totally free of disadvantages. For one – assuming your center selects high performers with ample experience – you'll be taking some of your top agents offsite, which can hinder peer mentoring and coaching. Seasoned veterans in most centers either formally (via mentoring/buddy programs) or informally assist less experienced staff both on and off the phones – particularly brand new hires who “onboard” more quickly and smoothly with the support of agent leaders on their team.

However, this potential drawback should not deter managers from sending top agents home, says Donna Fluss, president of DMG Consulting. “When you move some stars out of the center, you're giving other people a chance to rise to the top and be recognized. There always the next level of agents to step up.”

To help reduce the negative impact of having high performers working remotely, leading centers strongly encourage online communication and phone calls between home agents and onsite staff to create a sort of “virtual helpdesk.” Some centers have even developed internal “chat rooms” where agents can easily tap one another's knowledge and expertise on the fly. Jim Borum, senior vice president of Client Services at RDI Marketing Services says that chat is more powerful as an internal communication tool than it is as a customer contact tool at his contact center. “It's wonderful!” says Borum. “Whether an agent needs help while on a phone call or during a chat session with a customer, they can initiate a chat with an expert and get the assistance they need in near-real-time.”

Hire new home agents. Many emerging companies have a continual need for increased staff, but have limited office space. Hiring new home agents gives such organizations virtually (no pun intended) unlimited expansion capabilities without having to invest in any new facilities. This is a big benefit from both a cost and an environmental standpoint, as any kind of construction reduction is a good thing. According to research by Frost & Sullivan, buildings in the U.S. account for:

- 65% of electricity consumption
- 36% of energy use
- 30% of greenhouse gas emissions
- 30% of raw materials use
- 30% of waste output (136 million tons annually)
- 12% potable water consumption

Another big advantage of hiring new home agents is the ability to vastly expand the contact center's recruiting reach to find highly qualified staff. By breaking down the traditional walls of the hiring process, companies move from the local labor pool into the regional, national or even international labor ocean. And because the agent positions are of the work-at-home variety, talented candidates who might otherwise not have considered a job in customer care often come out of the woodwork to apply.

“The home agent approach has helped to attract a more professional, educated and mature employee,” says Tim Cook, vice president of North American Operations for Hilton Reservations & Customer Care, which takes telecommuting to the extreme with over one thousand home agents – just about its entire frontline workforce.

Daly has had the same experience at WHT. “We are able to tap into a labor market full of talented people who yearn to work from home. Offering home-based work really sets us apart from our competition, as well as other call centers in our area that aren’t in our industry.”

Hiring virtual staff also enables companies to expand hours of operation and serve customers in various geographic locations without having to set up a new contact center in various cities or impose unattractive schedules (i.e., late nights and/or early mornings) on existing agents.

The downside of hiring new agents, of course, is that you are trusting people who have no proven track record with your company – and perhaps no experience working from home – to handle your valued customers with little to no direct supervision. And in the case where the center has hired agents working from home in another region, managers are reliant solely on virtual training and coaching, which, says Fluss, sometimes isn’t enough. “If a home agent isn’t performing well, the first thing you do is try coaching them over the phone, but new agents in particular sometimes need ‘face-to-face’ time with managers or supervisors, and that isn’t feasible when centers hire an agent in a different geographic area.”

Daly acknowledges that hiring new agents to work from home has its challenges, but points out that it can be done successfully with the right tools and processes in place. For instance, WHT has a rigorous recruiting and assessment program in place that helps to pinpoint who will be the “right fit” for home agent work – “who is able to work independently, who is able to learn remotely,” says Daly.

But most important is the comprehensive virtual coaching and training and practices WHT employs. “We are a true virtual organization. We train remotely – doing everything ‘full on’ with webcams, conference calls, chat rooms, shared desktops, etcetera. And we have been very successful. People need to open up their minds and realize that there are new models for training, support and education. I mean, just look at all the online universities. It’s really just a control issue.”

Contract with a virtual outsourcing firm. For contact centers that want to reap the benefits of home agents but don’t have the time or the technology to set up a full-fledged telecommuting initiative internally, contracting with one of a growing number of virtual outsourcers is an attractive option. Outsourcers like Alpine Access (www.alpineaccess.com), LiveOps (www.liveops.com) and Arise Virtual Solutions (www.arise.com) are each staffed with thousands of geographically dispersed at-home agents who collectively can handle any contact type via any channel – phone, email, chat, even Web calls. In addition, they have management teams who have years of experience working with home agents.

Leading virtual outsourcers have developed advanced platforms that support the entire virtual network, and can easily integrate with clients’ systems. Virtual outsourcers are typically able to attract high caliber staff, who are enticed by the opportunity to develop an independent home-based career in customer care. Client centers love that virtual outsourcers already have the people, processes and technology already in place, and they don’t mind paying a healthy chunk of change for such a no-hassle – or at least low-hassle – approach to home agent staffing.

“Working with a firm that already has the best practices in place can be an excellent way to get into telecommuting, says Fluss.

While virtual outsourcers can be a bit “spendy,” they provide a level of staffing flexibility unmatched by inhouse operations. Client centers can pay for the home agents they need, when they need them, and can quickly add additional staff to keep up with growth.

"We could not have scaled to the volume that we have, at this speed, without the flexibility of the LiveOps On Demand platform," says Tammy Valdez, vice president of client services for LifeLock. "We can quickly launch and track a campaign, get feedback on call volume and then make changes on the fly to maximize results."

But it's not all pie in the sky. The challenges that come with using a virtual outsourcer are pretty much the same challenges centers face when using any outsourcer, says Fluss. "When working with an outsourcer that happens to use home agents, you need to manage the relationship the same way you would when working with a traditional outsourcer. Standard best practices with regard to selection, cost, performance management, etcetera, apply."

Consider a Hybrid Approach

With each home agent staffing approach bringing several potential benefits – some overlapping, some unique to each method – it's no surprise that many leading centers use two or even all three approaches. As already shown, WTH sends existing agents home in addition to hiring new home agents. So does Hilton Reservations and Customer Care. Each of these centers reports very impressive results, including increased agent retention, quality, productivity and attendance.

Other organizations, such as 1-800-Flowers, use a combination of their own home agents and those of a virtual outsourcer. This blended approach makes perfect sense for 1-800-Flowers, which seeks to reap the key benefits of telecommuting year-round but also be able handle its dramatic peak seasons (Christmas, Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, et. al.) without having to continually hire then lay off staff.

There is no undisputed “best” home agent staffing method or combination of methods; what is ideal for one organization may be impractical for another, says Fluss.

“Each company must evaluate their specific needs and culture. “There are a lot of criteria to consider – it's not a ‘one size fits all’ decision.”