

Customer Service Initiative

Enabling Organizations to Do the Right Thing

The Why and How of Work at Home Call Centers

Presented By:

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I was trained in customer service at the formative age of 16, and it has become my life's passion. Within the first eight years of my career, I held every call center position you can think of before transitioning to the technology side. After a few years administering Private Branch Exchange (PBX) and Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) Systems and running telecom departments, I made the leap from telecommunications to the data side and began working for a large Customer Relationship Management (CRM) vendor. It was in this role that I had my first work at home experience.

I've been working from home for almost a decade now. When I first started, I thought I would never leave my job because I would never find another one that allowed me to work from home. What I discovered was that the best jobs actually encourage people to work from home. Ten years and several positions later, I'm excited to see so many people working from home and enjoying it!

My expertise is in helping businesses get the most out of call centers, and the call center industry is designed to work well at home. As you'll see, work at home call centers make economic sense for businesses and employees, and they can improve both your workforce and your customer service.

But won't employees get distracted if they work at home? No. People who have worked in the call center business know it's easy to stay focused. Flexible and part-time schedules offer shorter working hours that allow agents to be fresh and more focused. This encourages employees to give the job their full attention, and when customers are calling, they better be answering. With current technology, organizations can comfortably manage a remote workforce, ensuring they meet customer service expectations. Employees and employers can track workflow through systems that tell you how many calls, emails, chats, and callbacks are waiting. With improved technology and flexible schedules, employees are happier and customer service is improved.

Keep in mind that home-based call center customer service is not for everybody – agents must be passionate about answering the call in a timely manner and providing the support customers are asking for, when they are asking for it. In my experience, the people who have a passion for good customer service are also passionate about doing their jobs well and are great candidates for telecommuting from home.

This paper outlines why more and more companies are making the shift to work at home call centers and how to do it successfully.

WHY USE WORK AT HOME CALL CENTERS

The answer is simple. Work at home call centers allow you to differentiate yourself from your competitors by improving service while saving money at the same time.

- **Save Money.**
 - Companies can save thousands of dollars per year per employee by using remote work at home agents. (1)
 - Flexible scheduling removes excess low volume and high staff costs, because employees no longer need to report to a central call center for a minimum four-hour shift.
 - Reduced real estate, overhead and facilities costs.
 - Reduced hardware and software costs (if agent provided).
 - Lower salary costs. Most call center agents will happily accept a job working from home for \$11 per hour instead of driving into an office for \$12 per hour. These lower salary rates reflect the value to the agent of flexible scheduling, and the agent's savings in gas, dry cleaning, food, wardrobe and other costs of commuting. And, for every remote employee, those savings are passed along to you.
 - One successful example of telecommuting is the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (PTO) in Alexandria, VA. Rod Turk, Director of IT Security, and Chief Information Security Officer, says the PTO has saved over \$11 million because of the reduced need for office space thanks to telecommuting. (2)

- **Improve the Caliber of Your Workforce.**
 - Work from home agents often have more life experience than the typical in-house hire, and their broad experience will benefit you. People eligible to work from home are comfortable and established in the workforce, and have the means to provide the technology needed as well as the isolated office space. This life experience translates into empathy for your customers, and that means better customer service.
 - Jill Blankenship, President of Frontline Call Center in Washington, was asked about the results she experienced after implementing a work at home model. Her response was entirely positive: *"Our remote workforce includes the following profile: Age: 35+, 80% College, 85% Experience in Sales & Customer Service, 40% Management Experience, 30% Bilingual. Our agent profiles show higher education levels with excellent service/sales skills and the result is better KPIs and higher levels of first call resolution. Because of their experience, home agents can deliver high quality customer experience which in turn leads to better customer retention rates and higher sales conversions."* (3)
 - Improving the caliber of your workforce has a direct impact on your ability to deliver world-class customer service and, as Jill mentions, increase your sales conversions. By upgrading your workforce, you will improve your customer's experience, and customers will always do business with companies that exceed their expectations and give them impressive treatment.

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- **Improve Service Levels.**
 - Agents that work from home report higher job satisfaction, resulting in reduced employee turnover or churn. (4)
 - Agents are usually part-time employees, and flexible scheduling improves employee satisfaction. Companies are no longer tied to the four-hour shift; instead, agents' time can be scheduled in smaller and more frequent increments because they work from home.
 - The service level improvement that results from reducing employee turnover and providing both employee and employer with scheduling flexibility is one of the main reasons companies migrate to work at home operations.

- **Unlimited Hiring Pools.**
 - Experienced and qualified people want to work from home.
 - By allowing agents to work from wherever they are, companies are no longer limited to a local hiring pool. Instead, you can hire the most qualified, best service providers from everywhere.
 - Jill Blankenship, President of Frontline Call Center, experienced 114% business growth by expanding her hiring pool to include agents who work from home.

- **Reduced Carbon Footprint.**
 - Working at home eliminates the time, energy and greenhouse gases spent commuting.
 - Telework researchers Kate Lister and Tom Harnish reviewed data from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Transportation, General Services Administration and other sources, and found that if 33 million Americans worked from home, Gulf oil imports could be reduced by 24 to 48 percent, greenhouse gases could be reduced by up to 67 million metric tons a year, and we could save as much as 7.5 trillion gallons of gasoline each year, for a total of \$110 million in savings every day. (5)

- **Create New Jobs in the U.S.**
 - The recent economic downturn has shed a lot of light on U.S. jobs that have been outsourced to foreign countries. Companies that want to support our economy and create green jobs in the U.S. will see less of an impact on their margins if they bring offshored call center jobs back to the U.S. by way of a remote workforce.
 - One way to strike a balance between cost savings, creating jobs, and improving service is to route phone calls to U.S.-based work at home agents while still routing email and chat interactions to resources outside the U.S. This improves service by minimizing the risk of misunderstandings due to verbal enunciation differences, while still allowing for cost savings in a globalized economy.

Every benefit of work at home call centers adds up to competitive differentiation while saving money.

Microsoft recently released a survey regarding companies who use remote workforces:

"Strategic use of a remote work force and supporting technologies can be a competitive game-changer in this down economy, especially for small and midsize businesses (SMBs)

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that have historically trailed large enterprise companies in adopting remote working practices," said Michael Park, corporate vice president of the U.S. Small and Midmarket Solutions & Partners Group at Microsoft. "After surveying those areas where SMBs employ a large percentage of the local work force, our findings suggest that businesses that currently leverage remote workers are enjoying an advantage over their competitors." (6)

The long list of reasons to have a work at home model for your call center will only get longer as more companies and more agents explore the possibilities of working at home. So, now that we know why we should use work at home call centers, the big question is how to effectively execute the plan.

HOW TO EFFECTIVELY IMPLEMENT WORK AT HOME CALL CENTERS

There are four steps to successfully move your operation to a work at home model. First, outline your business processes and understand fully how you interact with your customers and callers. Identify the work patterns. Second, build your project plan. Make sure to include the pieces listed below in a logical and realistic format and timeline. Third, migrate slowly - start by allowing your best performers to work from home as an incentive, and adjust your schedules and hiring practices based on part-time and full-time shifts. Finally, measure your results. If you aren't meeting your service level and cost goals, use root cause analysis to determine the areas that require improvement. To get the most out of your work at home call center, measure your results on a regular and ongoing basis.

The following pieces must be in place for your remote call center to be successful:

- **Positive Corporate Culture.**
 - **Start with a strong onsite culture.** A company cannot generate team spirit virtually if they haven't created it locally in their own building. Many companies choose to make their internal operations a "well-oiled machine" and then allow agents to work from home when they reach peak performance – as an incentive program. This is a great way to migrate to a remote work at home model. Agents with whom you are comfortable and who are well established within the company are perfect for launching your work at home model. They can help eliminate any kinks before you hire new agents who will start off working from home. It's important that you don't just send existing call center agents home without them earning the privilege. Companies that fail at the work at home model do so because they send everyone home to work and expect it to be easy. It's a difficult transition to make and your top talent should pave the way first.
 - **Extend inclusiveness.** Remote agent workforces need to feel like they are part of the team. Ensure inclusiveness by extending your corporate culture to all of your remote agents. Once you've established a strong internal culture, find ways to mirror that culture online for the people who work from home. Invite them to participate in projects focused on new technology or new business processes you are planning to roll out. Be sure to include them in team meetings, policy and product updates, scheduled company meetings, and any company-related social events.
 - **Link onsite and offsite workers.** Create a balance and a relationship between part-time work at home agents and full-time employees that work onsite. Most companies have a

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- person who is the lead contact at their corporate location to keep the company and the remote agents connected. In some cases, where product fulfillment is part of the business, you'll need to have more contact people available to "walk out to the warehouse" and make changes to or pull orders. Companies providing services rather than products will have less need for full-time onsite staff, but in most cases they will still need some type of liaison between the company and remote agents. Make sure agents have a way to communicate with someone internally to support them for escalated calls and complicated transactions. Encourage your onsite representatives to treat your remote agents like they are customers. Be sure to help these relationships blossom.
- **Allow flexible hours.** Because it's difficult for someone to stay connected without interruption for eight straight hours during the day, call center agents that work from home perform better if they are part-time agents. Part-time flexibility is a major benefit to both the agent and the company – but make sure the agents work enough each week to stay abreast of what's going on at the company and to stay current with systems.
 - **Shift Paradigms for People and Policy.**
 - **Managers.** While attending a recent contact center vendor conference, I was shocked by the number of people who reacted negatively to the idea of work at home call center agents. Then, it dawned on me – this is a paradigm shift. Management needs to shift its thinking from a model that requires hovering over employees to a model of empowered and trusted agents. The tools and technology available today allow managers to set center-wide goals and hold agents accountable to deliver on them, all without hovering. Current technology allows managers to see who is doing what, when they are doing it and what it looks like after they're done. Accountability is still paramount, but the methods of ensuring accountability are changed. Some managers aren't ready to trust this new model and can drive themselves nuts trying to micro-manage remote agents. Be sure your management team is staffed with high-minded good leaders who are willing to get their hands dirty, not micro-managers who cannot delegate or trust. This new paradigm of trust and accountability must be established for a remote contact center to be successful. And don't forget the consequences – no one's behavior ever changes without consequences.
 - **Agents.** The nice thing about the work at home model is that it attracts top talent. As mentioned by Jill Blankenship earlier, you will attract established customer service professionals with broad life experience. These agents often have higher education rates and even management experience. In evaluating potential work from home agents, be sure to use an online assessment tool that includes key indicators for self-direction, home office establishment, soft skills, and personality profiles that match your culture.
 - **Policy.** Have a formal written policy in place for work from home agents. The policy should cover schedule adherence, legal obligations regarding customer and company privacy, and the use and support of equipment (i.e., will the company or the agent provide equipment such as computers, phones, headsets, etc., who is responsible for support of the equipment). This policy should also include guidelines regarding the work at home office environment, such as no traffic noise, pets, television, etc. Be sure to clearly spell out performance goals and measurements and establish timely and consistent feedback sessions.

- **Use Current Technology.**
 - **Landing page.** In order to create a successful remote workforce, you have to use tools that keep everyone connected and on the same page. First, all agents should sign-in to a “landing page” each day before their shift. Use this page to welcome them to work, provide updates on products and services, post organizational updates, quotes of the day, success stories from the team, and login access to the applications they use to do their job.
 - **Web collaboration.** There are several readily available web collaboration and online meeting tools with desktop sharing that can help keep distributed teams connected. Make sure you choose one that includes voice and web camera features so all participants can talk and see each other throughout team meetings and one-on-one coaching sessions. Desktop sharing is essential to allow sharing screens when delivering training or technical support to your remote agents.
 - **Group chat.** Group chat ensures that lines of communication remain open. Many companies have found that using a group chat application can be more efficient than working in the same building with each other. Agents can post questions to the group when they are interacting with customers and the entire online agent pool can respond – removing the agent-to-supervisor bottleneck and giving the entire agent pool immediate access to the answer.
 - **eLearning.** In addition to the online tools mentioned above, eLearning and web-based training are primary components for training your remote workforce. Be sure to choose a solution that includes Learning Management. It’s the only way to track individual training progress and it also helps measure the success of your agents.
 - **Telephony and multi-channel communications.** Many companies don’t buy hardware. Instead, they use hosted telephony and multi-channel solutions. Hosted solutions tend to be easier to install and provide to your agents. Typically, with a hosted platform, agents only need a phone line in their office. In contrast, using hardware-based on-premise solutions can require purchasing and providing expensive equipment for remote agents to install themselves, which leads to an elongated on-boarding process and extensive ongoing technical support. Your decision should depend on what you’ve already invested and your specific telecom staff and resources. For larger companies who have invested heavily in on-premise hardware, research what your current vendor offers before jumping to a new hosted provider. Follow your company’s preference on “Buy vs. Build vs. Hosted.” Make sure the solution you choose has a robust call recording and reporting solution to help remotely manage your workforce without micro-managing or hovering. A tool that provides call voice recording along with screen capture can add extra certainty to your coaching and feedback sessions.
 - Mike Swartz, Senior Vice President of Operations at Folica.com was asked about his recent hosted multi-channel platform installation. His enthusiastic reply: *“We can expand our number of agents with almost zero capital risk in buildings and equipment. From a technology standpoint, it is much easier to implement expansion of remote agents than traditional brick and mortar expansion projects.”* (7)
 - **Online recruiting and interviewing.** Requiring candidates to meet with you in person puts you at the mercy of nearby geography and cuts out many qualified candidates. By using

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- online recruiting and interviewing, you can access an unlimited hiring pool. Make sure your online recruiting and interviewing platform enables desktop readiness to ensure the candidate is technically ready to work for you. You may also want candidates to provide a recording of a generic call to ensure they have the soft skills you are looking for.
- Doug Taylor, CEO of Recoverex Inc., started using an online recruiting and interview tool when he decided to build a remote workforce. Here's what he had to say about the benefits: *"When we started to use the online recruiting and interviewing solution we saved a lot of time and money. By using pre-screening tests we limited our live interviews to candidates that not only had the soft skills to do the job well, they had the technology tools required to support their job function. Our hiring reach became global and the candidates we interacted with directly were of the highest quality."*
(8)
 - **Online scheduling tool.** Remote scheduling and schedule adherence tracking are not easily managed using spreadsheets. Large volume contact centers can continue to use existing workforce management tools, just make sure you can publish schedules for review and editing by your remote workforce. If you don't have a large call center, look for a scheduling tool that allows you to post schedules and notify employees of changes or coverage requests. It's also helpful if the tool you choose allows agents to swap schedules and automatically notify their supervisors.
- **Safeguard Security.**
 - Security is one of the biggest concerns that companies have when migrating to a work at home model, but it does not have to be an obstacle. Safeguarding security requires a balancing act between providing agent access to your private data and making sure that data remains secure.
 - Different industries have different security requirements. Solutions include VPN (Virtual Private Network) connectivity, secure login to a corporate intranet, dummy terminals that lock down and don't capture information that is accessed, and many others.
 - Work closely with your legal and information technology departments to make sure you remain compliant with industry regulations while using the most cost effective approach. Legal agreements should be put in place to ensure agents are bound by the privacy terms and conditions that you promise to your customers.

SUMMARY

Considering today's economic climate and competitive landscape, now is the time to use creative solutions like a work at home contact center to find new economic efficiencies while providing customers with the ultimate experience in excellent support. Successfully implemented work at home call centers are the single best way to differentiate yourself from competitors, improve the quality of your workforce, reduce your carbon footprint and save money at the same time. By following the steps detailed above, and fully understanding your processes and behaviors before diving into technology and timeline decisions, you can put a work at home call center to work for you.

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