



Number of at-home agents to skyrocket

By Barney Beal, News Editor
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The number of home-based customer service agents in the U.S. is set to explode over the next four years, according to a recent report.

Already capturing the imagination of contact center managers and self-service organizations, thanks to the flexibility they provide, home-based agents are expected to number 300,000 by 2010, nearly triple the current figure of 112,000, according to Framingham, Mass.-based IDC.

Labeled homeshoring by IDC, the practice of allowing contact center agents to work from home is being driven by several factors.

"One area is [Voice over Internet Protocol] improvement," said Stephen Loynd, senior analyst with IDC and author of the study. "Anyone with an Internet connection, a computer and a phone can get up and running."

Additionally, rising gas prices are helping to convince employees to work from home at least part of the time. Escalating housing costs in urban centers are forcing longer commute times and providing further incentive to work from home, Loynd said.

A backlash against offshore outsourcing of contact center jobs and relatively stagnant U.S. wages should also contribute to the growth of the number of home-based agents, as companies look for agents familiar with American culture and the English language.

"When you put all these things together and consider this as the contact center matures, homeshoring is about to hit a growth spurt," Loynd said.

Another indicator of this growth is the success of home-based agent outsourcers like Alpine Access Inc. in Golden, Colo., and Willow CSN Inc. in Miramar, Fla., as well as application providers for home-based agent tools and software and hardware vendors like Avaya Inc. in Basking Ridge, N.J., and Aspect Software Inc. in Westford, Mass.

Contact center agents who work from home can be more productive and enthusiastic, according to Loynd, and show better employee retention rates, a significant cost in the contact center

industry. Additionally, the ability to work from home provides greater flexibility in scheduling working hours and responding to spikes in call volume.