



Wireless Worker: Call Center Agent

These headset-wearing agents must be able to access layers of corporate data when answering customer queries.

May 15, 2006 (Computerworld) -- A shroud of unhappiness long blanketed call centers, where many agents would trudge to jobs they dreaded, only to face edgy callers needing customer service that was difficult to provide. Equally dismal was the outcome of the interactions with customers, since seven in 10 callers were likely to hang up dissatisfied, according to a poll by Opinion Research Corp. in Princeton, N.J.

Turning the tide on this gloomy arrangement, however, is a major work-from-home trend in the call center industry. Fueling this sea change are voice-over-IP (VoIP), wireless and computer-telephony integration (CTI) technologies, which make it easier to equip people to work from home.

Now able to lure more-seasoned workers into these hard-to-fill positions, U.S.-based contact centers are doing more than improving efforts to appease callers. Top officials at these call centers say they are also feeling more confident in the face of offshore competition. Both trends stem from the fact that at-home workers, especially those in tedious positions, almost always turn out to be happier employees.

Such is the case with Brenda Bayliss, a home-based call center agent for Alpine Access Inc., a Golden, Colo.-based provider of call center services whose clients include J.Crew, Office Depot, 1-800-Flowers.com and the Internal Revenue Service. "I can easily immerse myself in the virtual work realm," she says. To save employees like Bayliss from having to commute to a mega call center, Alpine Access has invested in technology that gives home-based agents access to the same programs and support available to those who work in the office.

"By using a computer linked to my home phone and logging into the Alpine Access Webcenter, I am 'transported' to work and can handle customer service calls from home," says Bayliss.

"Everything I do for work is through my home computer -- answering the calls, accessing customer information, asking questions in chat sessions with coaches and supervisors when necessary, and utilizing instant messaging technology for additional communications options."

Indeed, CTI and VoIP technologies are driving major changes in the industry, as is the ability to deploy specialized software necessary to present at-home agents with the screens they need to provide the answers callers need. "Knowledge management tools, along with improved desktops, also make it easier to get to the right information to serve the customer's needs," says call center consultant Lori Bocklund, who is president of Strategic Contact Inc. in Beaverton, Ore.

Investment in these tools often proves more reasonable than building or outfitting major call centers to house employees, says Bill Patterson, vice president of operations at eCallogy , a Bountiful, Utah-based contact center that handled scores of calls during the 2002 Winter Olympic Games. Further, the drive to outfit agents at home yields immediate results -- higher retention rates and more-experienced agents. "We are attracting a higher-quality agent," says Patterson.

To set up its 40 at-home agents, eCallogy adopted InContact call center software from UCN Inc. in Bluffdale, Utah. Using employee-provided Windows-based PCs and a dedicated phone line, eCallogy is able to "pop" pages to at-home agents and allow them to work in tandem with supervisors stationed in operations centers. When fielding difficult calls, agents often use instant messaging or chat rooms to find answers, Patterson says.

The flexibility of working from home isn't completely without its price, though the trade-offs are minimal for the right personality type, according to Bayliss. "You have to be a self-starter and dedicated to working independently," she says. "One of the biggest challenges that agents working from home face is being technically savvy enough to handle the large number of screens and programs necessary to work efficiently."

To help agents such as Bayliss manage customer service screens, Alpine Access blends the use of its automated call distribution system with a Java-based softphone. Developed internally, the softphone allows agents to connect to the company's full suite of software so they can pull up vital customer service and account history information, according to Rick Owens, vice president of technology at Alpine Access. "In general, CTI continues to improve the customer service experience for both the end caller and the agent," he notes.

Wireless Policies

For fear of dropped calls, Alpine Access and many other call centers with remote employees prohibit at-home agents from taking calls on cell phones. Wireless accessories are a different story. "Headset technology continues to improve for comfort and range of motion. Most of our agents use wireless headsets," says Owens.

Even centers that don't offer the option of working from home are trying to make agents more comfortable with wireless options. "Our managers have cordless headsets," says Steve Boyce, management information systems director at Aargon Collection Agency in Las Vegas, which must forgo at-home work arrangements for legal reasons.

Companies in other industries don't have such tight restrictions on cell phone use. For instance, executives at Exclusively RNs LLC in Colorado Springs realize that to attract nurses willing to take calls, the company must accept the reality of cell phone use.

"Our nurses work after-hours, when doctors' offices are closed," explains Anne Afshari, co-founder of the OB/GYN answering service. "We understand [that cell phone use] becomes necessary when it's time to pick the kids up from school."

Sarah Hartman, a registered nurse and avid user of wireless technology, has taken more than a few cell phone calls from expectant mothers while on the go. "I use my cell phone with a headset -- can't imagine trying to do this without a headset," she says. "My laptop has a Wi-Fi connection. My next investment will be a wireless connection for my printer."

To add flexibility, call centers are also relying on electronic means of training at-home workers. "All training is readily available by instant messaging and conference calls, and it's built into the available data on my company's Web site," says David Randall, a call center agent at LiveOps Inc., a Palo Alto, Calif.-based call center.

LiveOps has even set up an electronic tool that at-home agents can use to create their own schedules, says Chief Technology Officer Lloyd Tabb. "Online chats and forums build a sense of community," he says. Further, the call center electronically measures agents' productivity to ensure that the freedom built into the arrangement works for both the company and employee.

Indeed, at-home opportunities seem to be working for the call center industry as a whole and just might save substantial work from being shipped offshore to places where labor is cheaper, according to Jack Heacock, senior vice president at The Telework Coalition in Washington. "When we refer to telework, we separate it into two big camps -- call center agents and everybody else," he says. "In the call center industry, the number of home agents is growing by leaps and bounds."