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The Virtual Call Center: A Look at How Technology Makes it Possible

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One of the major accomplishments of the outsourced customer care industry over the past two decades is convincing progressive executives that outsourced agents provide equal or better service to their in-house staff. There are still many organizations that continue to feel comforted by having their customer care staff on premise. That is, until those executives learn how technology now makes it possible to create an exact replica of a company's call center organization in a virtual environment.

Imagine a room full of customer service representatives answering phone calls. As one call comes to a close, the representative hears a tone or whisper through the ear piece indicating a waiting caller. Using the company's network, the representative pulls up the customer's order, makes adjustments, answers questions and completes the transaction. Now imagine that this exact same process takes place in the same way, with the same outcome, but the agent is part of a remote workforce handling these calls from home. Thanks to recent technological advancements such as increased speed and improved bandwidth, the home is now a viable workplace.

When considering the transition to an outsourced, home-based call center solution, companies need to find a partner that will work with them to adapt their existing processes to a remote situation. Agents only need Internet access, a computer and a phone to become completely indistinguishable from a company's internal workforce. The diagram below shows an example of how an outsourced agent can be managed as an at-home worker with the visibility and controls of an on-premise employee.

- Using a personal computer, the agent or employee logs into the outsourced call center's Web portal or "Web Center."
- This log in data is then analyzed and authenticated. Agents should only be able to log into critical systems when they are scheduled to work.
- Once the Web Center recognizes the agent, a local dial-in number is provided.
- After the person's computer is connected to the Web Center and his or her phone is dialed into the voice router, the agent is ready to begin answering calls.

Behind the Curtain

The ease of access for agents can sometimes be confused with a simple operation. In fact, to make it possible for dispersed agents to continuously receive and complete calls requires a complex system of networks, servers and applications. For example, at Alpine Access we have recently partnered with Global Crossing to enhance our operations using a VoIP network. Although we do not utilize VoIP for ‘last mile’ connectivity with each agent for quality and security reasons, employing VoIP within the infrastructure backbone drives a more efficient and effective technology solution for our clients.

Networks such as Global Crossing’s can take a phone call and convert a person’s voice into bits of data, allowing it to be transported and controlled through the computer. This allows agents to be virtually connected to a call router so that they can be notified of waiting calls by a computer screen pop up or a whisper in a head set, exactly like in a physical call center environment. Skills-based routing capabilities are enhanced through these means. As calls come in, the call distribution switch routes them to the best available agent. From your customer’s perspective, today’s technology makes calls handled by an at-home agent as seamless as if they are located within company walls.

A call center’s “Web Center” is in essence the spine of the entire operation. By connecting consumers with corresponding companies and agents, this data hub uses mirroring technology to virtualize existing applications, allowing companies to enjoy the financial and business benefits of a highly qualified remote workforce.

Additional technology must-haves for companies to look for when choosing a call center partner include the ability to record 100 percent of calls and the availability of trunk taps, which let the client listen to live calls. These are two simple ways to monitor call quality and can be useful in maintaining consistency. Another important area to investigate is the redundancy and disaster recovery capabilities of your partner’s operations. Because the Web Center handles the majority of functionality, it must be protected. Looking for a solution that provides a layered architecture so you can choose what level of redundancy and protection is most appropriate for your organization is highly recommended.

With the commoditization of personal computers, plummeting storage costs, improved security features, and the advent VoIP networks, it is now realistic to create a customized, dispersed workforce that can exceed the productivity of your in-house staff with the same or better levels of visibility, security and control. Developing a truly secure, efficient virtual environment is not easy. Asking the right questions and doing your research ahead of time is critical for selecting the best outsourced partner to support your business needs and improve your bottom line.