

Commute to work in 30 seconds

Many work-at-home 'opportunities' are scams, but a few are on the level - especially for customer-service reps and executive assistants, says Fortune's Anne Fisher.

By Anne Fisher, Fortune senior writer
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(Fortune) -- Ah, the wonders of technology. The next time you call an 800 number to place an order from a catalog, a Web site or an infomercial, you may be speaking to a customer-service agent who is working at home.

The same is true anytime you call a small business - a real estate agency, a graphic-design firm or a public relations consultancy, for instance - that may have limited (if any) formal office space: The person answering the phone may be a "virtual assistant," acting as receptionist, appointment secretary and e-mail manager from his or her own home.

We all know that plenty of call-center jobs have been outsourced to India and elsewhere overseas in the past few years, but another trend, sometimes called "homeshoring," has gotten comparatively little attention.

Take Alpine Access: The company handles calls for retailers like J. Crew and 1-800-Flowers using 7,500 home-based agents - more than 80 percent of whom have 4-year college degrees, with an average of 17 years' work experience. They're in it mainly for the chance to set their own hours and avoid having to commute. Alpine says it gets about 80,000 job applications a year. You can apply online at www.alpineaccess.com.

Altogether, according to a recent study by tech research firm IDC (www.idc.com), about 112,000 home-based agents are now working in the U.S. IDC predicts that number will grow to 300,000 - or roughly the population of St. Louis, Mo. - by 2010.

The customer-service company that gets the most 800-number calls - its agents handle about a billion per year - is Convergys (www.convergys.com), which right now is tripling the number of its home-based agents from 1,000 to 3,000. (Convergys also has 60,000 employees in its 55 U.S. call centers.)

Hiring at-home agents "is great for our customers, because it gives them more flexibility, and for our at-home agents because they set their own hours," says Marty DeGhetto, senior vice president of operations at Convergys. "They also save on gasoline and other expenses of commuting to a call center."

Home workers are cost-effective, too: The IDC study found that the typical cost to employ an agent in a call center is \$31 per hour, versus \$21 per hour for someone working from home.

Many Convergys agents say they like the job because it lets them spend more time with their families. Evan Saunders, who works for Convergys from his house in Valdosta, Ga., used to live and work in Jacksonville, Fla., where he says his daily commute was "at least an hour each way. It took a big chunk out of my day. I don't miss it."

Now, he starts work at about 10 a.m. and takes between 50 and 75 customer calls a day, knocking off at about 6:45 - and his "commute" takes 30 seconds. "I like having lunch with my family," he says.

Word gets around and, perhaps not surprisingly, Convergys says that the number of applications it receives from people who want to be home agents is "overwhelming." To apply, go to www.convergysworkathome.com. It may take some patience: The company is taking information from prospective agents and says it "will contact applicants as jobs become available."

Customer-service reps aren't the only people who are finding ways to work at home these days. Virtual assistants - who do everything that executive assistants usually do in an office, only they do it from home - are in demand too, again because hiring people who provide their own office space is a cost-effective option, especially for businesses with small staffs that want to keep overhead to a minimum. Computers and high-tech phone features (call forwarding, audio-conferencing and so on) make it practical to do administrative work efficiently from a distance.

To look into opportunities in this field, check out Staffcentrix (www.staffcentrix.com), which has been matching people with virtual-assistant jobs since 1999. The site is chock-full of job leads and other resources. Co-founders Christine Durst and Michael Haaren have also written a terrifically useful book, "The 2-Second Commute" (Career Press, \$14.99), available from the site, that is a must-read for anyone considering a home-based job.

Want more suggestions for ways to cut that time-wasting, gas-guzzling daily commute out of your life? Take a look at another column on this topic that I wrote some time ago, "Want to Work from Home? Maybe You Can" (November 23, 2005).

I'll continue to keep an eye out for work-at-home opportunities that aren't rip-offs, and report them as I find them. Speaking as someone who's been working at home since 2000, I recommend it! Every now and then it gets a little lonesome - you do miss out on the water-cooler buzz and camaraderie of working with colleagues in an office - but, for me at least, the advantages outweigh the downside.