



January 09, 2008

## **The Largest Talent Pool**

### **How the Home-Based Agent Model Offers Unrivalled Access to Agents**

By [Christopher M. Carrington](#)  
CEO, Alpine Access

Flexibility. It's what makes virtual call centers stand out from traditional brick and mortar operations. It's what creates economic efficiencies and keeps employee attrition low. It's also why the home-based agent model can adjust staffing levels at a moment's notice. Yet, to offer true flexibility you need agents. Lots and lots of pre-qualified, skilled agents.

Many times companies seek out the virtual call center model because they need to get up and running fast. There simply isn't enough time to recruit agent applicants, interview each person, conduct background checks and train everyone. This is where the home-based model provides a distinct competitive advantage.

#### **Access to Applicants**

Virtual call centers have access to an enormous pool of applicants for two main reasons. First, they aren't limited to hiring within a specific geographical region like traditional centers. Second, working from home is a desirable situation. Very desirable. In fact, at any given time, virtual call centers can have a database of over 100,000 applications from across the United States. In addition, these companies get hundreds of new applications every day. Contrast this with the typical response to a job posting, and it's clear this is a big advantage. So, where do these people come from? How do they hear about home-based agent positions? The truth is that most of the applications come from word of mouth. Home-based call centers have to spend very little on advertising or recruiting because so many potential agents hear about the positions through stories in the news, friends, or their own proactive research.

#### **The Selection Process**

With so many applications, home-based call centers are in a unique position to hire only the most qualified people from thousands and thousands of prospects. However, sifting through the prospects to find the best of the best can be time-consuming and challenging. To overcome this obstacle, some companies have developed sophisticated technology solutions that scan each

application and store the information in a database. These databases can be queried many different ways to produce lists of potential agents that fit specific criteria. For example, consider a client that needs 300 agents who speak fluent Spanish and have previous experience working for financial intuitions. In a matter of minutes, virtual call centers can search their pool of applicants and produce over a thousand candidates that meet these initial requirements. This type of access to agent candidates would take months to replicate in a physical environment, not to mention be extremely expensive.

Going from 100,000 applicants down to 1,000 almost instantly is impressive, yet the selection process does not stop there. The next step is to have each of the qualifying candidates take an online computer test to determine if the applicant truly has the type of personality for home-based work. While the flexibility of working from home is appealing, it isn't for everyone. Home-based positions take focus, dedication and the ability to concentrate on the task at hand. Personal interruptions or distractions are unacceptable when delivering premium customer care.

After the personality test comes an assessment of the person's telephone skills. This phone screening replicates the experience an actual customer would have with the potential agent. It is an important tool for assessing the agent's ability to receive and follow directions over the phone, as well evaluating how clearly the person speaks and listens.

The candidates that have passed these first steps are then interviewed by human resources. Using a list of questions developed over years of hiring customer service agents, the interview process is honed to a science and is extremely effective in identifying the top performing candidates.

Once offered agent positions, each applicant must pass a thorough background check. This last filter has proven to be an especially helpful step in hiring only the best agents in the nation. Yet, finding and hiring top agents is only the first piece in providing quality customer service. Home-based call centers also offer a time-saving advantage through their virtual training programs.

### **On-Boarding**

Once agents are hired to exact client specifications, they complete a rigorous training program mapped as closely as possible to the training received by a company's in-house staff. To do this, training teams first attend on-site client training classes. They then combine this knowledge with client-provided materials and adapt it to the virtual environment.

While elements of each program differ slightly, the typical curriculum for training a dispersed workforce includes:

- Virtual training sessions;
- Self-paced learning materials;
- Trainer led classes.

## **Partnership Approach**

Of course, hiring and training agents for a client should never be done in isolation. Any reputable virtual call center should have a partnership approach, working closely with the client to customize each step in the process. Your outsourcing company should sit down for an initial detailed consultation. This provides an opportunity to clearly define the best agent profile for answering your calls and will help form the database selection criteria. You should also be involved in developing screening questions for the personality tests and assessing phone skills. Finally, you want to work with a company that will allow you to be as involved as possible in creating the training curriculum and delivering the material. Only through close collaboration can you ensure the agents on your account will meet your expectations.

Whether you are a new company looking to outsource the entire customer service function, or an established institution needing additional resources to meet increased demand, virtual call centers can usually get you up and running quicker and with better results than handling it yourself. With access to a large talent pool, a streamlined selection process developed from years of experience, and a willingness to work hand-in-hand with their clients, home-based agent call centers are a clear choice for companies who are serious about providing the best possible customer service experience.