



There's Never Been a Better Time for Home Agents

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Home agents are not a new idea. I worked with centers with home agents over a decade ago, and there were probably some before that. Today, however, there is an alignment of business needs, operational and technology capabilities that creates a positive “perfect storm” to consider home agents. If this storm is not yet on your radar, perhaps it is time.

The need for home agents

Call centers suffer from typical challenges of high turnover, difficulty finding and retaining good staff, and staffing for varying workload demand. The need for peak handling – whether across the day, week, or month – often results in over or under staffing that can have high costs or negative impact on the customer experience. With staff cost at 60-80% of the center budget, using staff efficiently is critical. While having flexibility for the day-to-day variations is important, many centers have learned first hand the importance of business continuity and disaster recovery. Home agents can help disaster-proof a center that is vulnerable to Mother Nature’s wrath, as well as other threats to buildings, staff, and transportation routes.

Besides these typical challenges, companies today can benefit by making positive moves that address environmental, economic, and political issues. Reducing commuters helps the environment and the clogged roadways. With gasoline prices soaring, staff want to reduce their personal costs. One only need look at the publicity JetBlue and Willow have gained from their home-based staffing approaches to know that exposure like that is invaluable for public relations and marketing.

These challenges and opportunities collectively point to the need for home agent programs, if they are a fit for the company and its technology. So let’s look at the trends that are making home agents more feasible than ever.

Business trends promoting home agents

Greater comfort with telecommuters in general, and knowledge of how to do it right from an HR and legal perspective is a great starting point for building a home agent program for a call center. Most businesses are also trying to find innovative ways to cut or control costs, while finding the right staff to meet their needs. They handle a variety of media from customers – not just phone calls, but email, text chat, faxes, and more. And they handle more complex and diverse contacts, requiring more skilled staff. Customers handle the easy contacts through self service on the web or IVRs, leaving the more difficult tasks for CSRs. All of these trends point to the opportunity to hire home-based staff for the center. Often, that staff will be more qualified than the “typical” call center agent, and is seeking something more from their work situation – but not necessarily higher wages.

The need for business continuity and disaster recovery capabilities is another key trend. Business leaders must show that they have considered the possibilities and the options, and put a prudent plan in place to sustain business in the event of a natural disaster, terrorist event, or flu epidemic. In fact the bird flu risk brings a new dimension to this trend, as it is likely to create a greater and more sustained impact if it hits, even keeping healthy and able staff home out of fear of exposure. Sound



like a good opportunity for home agents? Today's business trends clearly highlight the need to look at alternative staffing programs.

Technology trends promoting home agents

Another key element of our positive perfect storm is technology. Voice over IP offers centralized management of a distributed environment, using a single routing and reporting engine for all media. Home agents can hook up across the Internet using a secure VPN. The system doesn't care if agents are at home, in the center, or at another remote location. In addition, today's observation and tracking tools - quality monitoring, reporting, performance management tools (scorecards/dashboards), speech analytics, productivity tracking in CRM – give even the biggest control freaks in the center all the tools they need to monitor agents that can't be physically seen, but can be seen and heard in many other ways. Knowledge management tools, as well as presence and messaging tools, change the need to walk down the aisle to the “gurus” for a tough question. Now their specialized knowledge can be at the fingertips of agents in-house or at home. And if needed, agents can access the specialists readily through presence and messaging tools. Online training tools provide the upfront and ongoing training agents need, regardless of their location. All these technology tools help overcome the typical objections raised to home agent programs.

Innovative home agent approaches

Home agents are being used or planned for in a number of innovative and creative situations. Here are a few to consider:

1. High cost/skill resources such as engineers and nurses – These people are hard to find for a regular job, much less a 24x7 call center. These specialized skills are easier to come by if the people can work from home, and they will more readily support off hours, emergencies, and peaks.
2. Disabled staff – Many people have all the skills and abilities to be call center agents but can't commute to or work in a regular work environment. However, they can be great contributors to customer satisfaction in the comfort and safety of their own homes.
3. Entrepreneurial agents – Some centers hire entrepreneurs as agents. They sometimes build their own “mini-call center” with others in their area. They are motivated by and rewarded for the volume handled, and thus work the busiest times.
4. Rehire staff part-time – Many people test the waters of retirement with mixed success, and desire to remain connected. They also can carry a wealth of knowledge and customer skills. Even if they have moved, they can make great part-time agents working from home or a satellite office.

Benefits of home agents

When implemented with all the appropriate planning, policies and procedures, and technology tools, home agents can deliver big benefits. Centers using home agents can achieve big benefits through decreased turnover and increased retention, increased productivity, and improved customer service. Happier agents are better, more productive, more loyal agents. Using home agents can reduce lost time to disability and absence. Centers with the option of working from home have also found a broader hiring pool, especially for part-time or odd shifts. And of course, if peaks and resiliency are part of your strategy in designing a home agent program, you can achieve big benefits there as well. Depending on your facilities, you may also reduce or avoid facilities and utilities costs.



Getting started

So if home agents sound like they may help solve some of your center's challenges, and deliver some of the benefits you seek, it's time to get started. First define a strategy. Define the problems you are solving and how you will use home agents. Use a cross-functional team that includes staff from your center, IT/telecom, HR, and legal departments to define the program. Address the people, process, and technology issues – both in establishing home agents, and supporting and developing them over time. Don't forget to apply change management techniques so that your culture evolves with your new program. Start with a pilot and define your measures of success. Chances are you will find value in home agents for your company, customers, and agents.

Some additional resources are available to help you with your program. Consider contacting these helpful resources:

- Telework Coalition – www.telcoa.org
- National Telecommuting Institute – www.nticentral.org
- Gil Gordon and Associates – www.gilgordon.com