Working Solutions

Virtually Changing the Contact Center Business

Out of Sight, Out of Mind?
Not in the world where Tim Houlne does business. As CEO of Working Solutions, a leading provider of contact center services, Houlne can't see the team of contact center agents that forms the backbone of his company. They could be working anywhere across the U.S. And soon, across the globe.

Yet thanks to a powerful voice and data network, these agents and the out of sight quality they deliver are a cinch for Houlne's management team and his customers to manage.

By empowering highly-skilled professionals to work at home on their own schedule, ten-year-old Working Solutions has tapped into a source of talent that's almost unlimited.

"We're really about changing the way this business is done," says Houlne. "Taking advantage of technology, taking advantage of this distributed skilled workforce. In some ways, that's a new way of thinking."

Other operators may be restricted to the talent pool within commuting distance of their center. "For Working Solutions, the nation is our recruiting pool," says Houlne. "Broadband enables anybody to work as effectively and efficiently in a home environment as in a corporate environment."

Tapping into Talent
Working Solutions began as a professional services organization with a distributed workforce. "To this day that DNA – meaning the professional in the home – has held us above the rest of our peer group," Houlne says.

Working Solutions helps its Fortune 1000® customers improve quality, reduce costs, deal with emergencies and adjust the size of their operations to meet changing seasonal and business demands.

"Our ability to attract a more experienced, educated agent enables us to identify forward-thinking organizations that realize having that agent work for their company will increase loyalty, increase sales conversion rates and certainly increase customer satisfaction ratings," Houlne says.

Its talented workforce (70 percent have some college education, nearly one third have a degree and many have a second degree or additional certification) enables Working Solutions to augment in-house contact centers with agents who serve key customers in complex interactions that require what Houlne calls 'dynamic thinking.'

"We will generally take the more complex calls where our agents are required to react based on a customer's response," Houlne says. "The best way to describe it is that it's not scripted."

Flexibility Over All
While his agents deliver flexibility on behalf of clients, Houlne has found that's also what they seek in a job.

"We did an economic preference study of our agent community," he says. "What was most important was not the income, it was the flexibility – working out of their homes, choosing the projects and the hours that they work.

"Now we manage our workforce to provide even more flexibility. If somebody is scheduled for a specific shift, they can log onto the workforce management site and take themselves out. It's our responsibility to fill that schedule with alternates that we train at our own expense."

Operating as independent contractors, agents respond well to the Working Solutions style of management.

"The message boards speak for themselves," Houlne notes. "Some of our competitors are still more about control. We are more about empowerment. It's quality of life that we have to manage to."

But flexibility and empowerment come with a laser focus on results. Working Solutions benchmarks its performance against its customers' internal contact center operations, and often surpasses them.

Networking for Results
Agents must have broadband at home, but that's just part of the hiring process. Before they take calls for clients in such industries as healthcare, travel and leisure, financial services, telecommunications and consumer products, they must pass extensive tests to show they

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have the ability to meet clients' high expectations. In some cases they're expected to be users of the client's products.

Though it has thousands of agents working for dozens of clients across the country, its sophisticated network and advanced call management systems enable Working Solutions to monitor individual agent performance down to the individual call.

In addition to the wider availability of broadband access to agents' homes, the company has capitalized on growing computer processing power, carrier-based network-grade automatic call distribution (ACD), interactive voice response (IVR) and speech facilities and Internet protocol (IP)-enabled hosted customer relationship management (CRM) applications.

Redundancy in both servers and network links keeps the company working when trouble strikes. In fact, providing backup support for customers whose primary contact center operations are knocked out of service is an important line of business.

"Taking advantage of the distributed network helps us, especially when it comes to disaster recovery products," says Houlne. "We have a distributed agent, not tied to any one broadband provider, and we have a network provider that allows us to move traffic to various spots should the demand shift or an outages occur."

No Bricks and Mortar
Though the virtual contact center model has many advantages, Houlne says savings on real estate – bricks and mortar – are largely offset by increased spending on network technology. And that's fine with him.

"The myth is we have less cost, and the reality is that we probably have more costs wrapped up in security and IP-enabled applications and VPNs than our counterparts," he says. "We recognize network technology as the enabler. Not technology for technology's sake, but technology to drive outcomes and meet business objectives."

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