

What's Driving the Home Agent Explosion?

As senior executives continue to embrace the evolution and importance of the contact center, there is a growing sophistication in the demands of Fortune 1000 companies with contact center needs and their new reliance on agents who represent their branded customer experience. Remote home agents are a direct outcome of this important trend of satisfying customers, as demonstrated by studies showing that nearly 20 percent of all U.S. enterprises are currently using re-

move home agents to support their corporate growth goals.

Companies with high-volume contact center requirements have discovered that traditional bricks and mortar facilities cannot compete with the emerging home-based agent model. In fact, experienced executives have found that the remote agent model provides a measurable return on investment and superior customer service for up to 15 percent less than the pay scale for a conventional outsourced

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Success

BY TIM HOULNE

bricks and mortar facility, according to Forrester Research. Distance learning is also now an acceptable medium for training agents, with the benefit of reduced training duration in a distance learning environment adding to the cost savings.

Another factor in the home agent boom is offshoring fatigue. Many executives tried offshoring contact center jobs to India and other countries, only to find there are cultural and linguistic barriers. Add geopolitical uncertainties,

data privacy concerns, increasingly complex transactions and the new focused reliance on customer loyalty and the benefits once hailed from offshoring don't seem as great.

The number of home-based agents employed by the \$30 billion U.S. contact center industry — estimated at more than 110,000 at present — is expected to triple by 2010, according to IDC. There are also significant facilities savings. Its value proposition centers *(Continued on page 34)*



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on a more educated, technology-savvy workforce with a superior retention rate and a reputation for high-quality customer support. Employing high-quality agents has become a basic requirement for today's more selective corporate buyers who understand long-term customer loyalty and value.

The growth of this market has arrived, in part thanks to wider adoption of the Internet, enhanced voice services, Internet protocol (IP) technology and more sophisticated, browser-based customer relationship management (CRM) software, which can emulate the look and feel of the software that nearly all companies use in their contact centers.

In our non-stop, Internet-enabled global economy, there are two driving forces behind the remote agent growth trend. Executives want:

Contact center agents available around the clock, trained on their products or services, ready to handle any transaction when a current or prospective customer calls. Contact centers have to be ready with polite, knowledgeable agents ready to answer questions, resolve issues and take orders — on the first call. A missed call is now recognized as a missed opportunity and perhaps a lost customer. Outsourced contact centers to have nearly unlimited scale-up and ramp-down capabilities to meet seasonal needs — such as holiday buying seasons and benefit enrollments — or the demands placed on them by commercial

or federal contracts. In some cases, the outsourcers themselves need to outsource some of their contact center work, just to meet the service level commitments of their contracts.

Industry product offerings are maturing and designed to better leverage the home-based agent market. Working Solutions, a leader in the remote agent industry, recently introduced several new "Agents OnDemand™" services specifically designed to cater to the diverse

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needs of customers in the financial services, health care and travel/leisure industries. These offerings better enable contact center leaders to flexibly respond to the unique and fluctuating customer call patterns for their industries with the knowledgeable agents they need, when they need them. Staffing requirements can be scaled up or down in 15- or 30-minute increments to closely match call volumes, while maintaining pre-deter-

mined business service levels.

Much like the supply chain process leveraged by auto and PC manufacturers, the remote home agent industry provides specific agents on a "just in time" basis to meet spikes in demand, while profiling agents to closely meet specialization requirements. Companies can save money and increase customer satisfaction by outsourcing their contact centers to providers who leverage industry-specific professional home agents.

McKesson Health Solutions L.L.C. of Broomfield, Colorado is a Fortune 20 subsidiary that earned a Texas Medicaid contract to perform disease management outreach to 30,000 participants. Rather than use internal registered nurses, they contracted non-clinical calls to Working Solutions, which used remote healthcare agents to handle transactions. "Working Solutions was up-and-running on the contract within two weeks," says Mike Modiz, vice president of operations.

The need to satisfy customer requests in real-time, using industry-specific agents, will only increase the need to outsource functions like contact center support. Companies will place a higher demand on outsourcers to deliver more experienced, specialized agents, since customer relationships and the branded customer experience are such vital components of their businesses. The remote home agent revolution is just beginning. CP

Distance Learning: Effective, Fast, Lower Cost

The key to a successful home agent implementation centers on distance learning for your contact center agents. The learning environment needs the right blend of three instructional strategies for the agent to become a competent representative of your brand:

- Direct instruction by the trainer
- Independent practice by the agent
- Group practice.

By first identifying and using agents who possess your client's ideal experience, background and skill sets, you can eliminate the basic skills lessons and concentrate on the client's core product or service curriculum. Typical in-house contact center training encompasses all aspects of the company, basic/advanced agent skills and general computer tutorials before beginning product or service instruction.

Distance learning techniques, on the other hand, use action-oriented learning activities that fully involve the agent and can only be taught with a high level of participation. Distance learning is active instructional strategy that increases the agent's ability to represent a company's brand while reducing the upfront training costs associated with typical contact center training.

