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Remote Control: Monitoring Virtual Agent Service Providers

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AAA Arizona and 1800Flowers.com might have business models that are about as similar as night and day, but they do have one thing in common — like a number of other leading corporations, they both have partnered with virtual agent service providers that use home-based contact center agents to field outsourced calls.

Plagued by the perennial problems of employee retention, scheduling flexibility, quality control and cost reduction, contact center managers are increasingly turning to remote work in order to remedy these issues quickly. According to a 2002 survey conducted by Jupiter Research, 65 percent of the 512 contact center executives that were polled plan to use home-based agents at some point in the future.

As the industry cautiously considers using remote agents to reduce costs and improve service, tightly held beliefs about the value of "face time" still exist. Enterprising contact center executives will need to make a strong business case for virtual agents by demonstrating the value of remote work and by addressing concerns related to implementation and supervision of virtual agents.

The Case for Virtual Agents

Remote work presents a compelling value proposition for contact center managers. For instance, according to an April 2002 survey of contact center executives conducted by software provider Workforce Systems Inc., 77 percent of contact center managers report less than 20 percent annual employee turnover when using remote agents. This is in stark contrast to the astronomical churn rates to which the industry is accustomed. The contact center managers employing a virtual workforce also noted a 12 percent increase in productivity.

The decreased employee attrition and rise in productivity may be attributed to the quality of life benefits offered by remote work. By eliminating commuting time and expenses from a home-based agent's routine, the result is an agent with a more balanced personal and professional life and increased job satisfaction. Satisfied agents stay onboard and perform

better, thereby reducing the recruitment and training costs associated with high employee turnover.

Additionally, remote work not only opens up under-utilized labor markets, including the elderly, stay-at-home parents and the disabled, but it also offers managers increased scheduling flexibility. Virtual agents are more suited to working split shifts, which can help accommodate the peaks and valleys in daily call volume. When this increased efficiency is coupled with reduced equipment, real estate, recruitment and training costs, the savings can be significant. Jack Heacock, a call center and telework consultant based in Parker, Colorado, estimates that remote work can reduce the average per-agent cost from \$35,000 to somewhere between \$10,000 and \$15,000 per agent.

However, despite the long-term savings, contact center executives shy away from launching in-house remote-work programs because they lack the expertise and experience that is needed to set one up successfully. Instead, many companies are opting to partner with outsourcers that use home-based agents so that they can mitigate the investment risk while enjoying the quality and flexibility that come with using carefully trained and supervised remote agents.

Supervising a Virtual Agent Service Provider

The challenge for virtual agent service providers is create a seamless extension of the in-house contact center without the perceived benefits of in-person supervision of agents. This issue is further complicated when these agents are not employees. Some managers may balk at engaging a virtual agent workforce because they believe it will be more difficult to manage and will require drastic modifications to their approach to supervision.

Bob Smith, executive director of the International Telework Association & Council, dismisses such fears. "The management technique does not really change, it is more about making full use of technology tools that allow the supervisor to see the agent's screen during a customer call, hear the call live, and advise the agent via instant messaging."

Smith continued, "In fact the technology has improved to where it enables the supervisor to monitor the call even more closely and to advise the agent with reduced distraction. These improvements in supervisor monitoring are part of the reason we have increased productivity by home-based customer service representatives."

While physically sitting next to virtual agents is not an option, managers can use information technology to supervise virtual agents as if they were sitting in a brick-and-mortar contact

center. Management can listen in on calls, record virtual agents' conversations with customers, digitally supervise the productivity of agents, and ascertain that customer data is secure. Very often, these tasks can be achieved by using technology that already is in place within the contact center: automatic call distributors (ACDs) and secure private networks (SPNs).

Automatic Call Distributors (ACDs): ACDs have traditionally been used to automate the processes of queuing and routing for in-house agents, as well as reporting on their voice and digital activities. ACDs do not care where an agent is sitting, so they can easily be extended to a workforce of remote agents, each operating out of his or her own home. Like their in-house counterparts, home-based agents can access a Web-based interface that provides real-time voice, data and communications services.

Additionally, ACDs are bi-directional, allowing managers to monitor all of these digital interactions from a remote location or from the in-house contact center. The built-in or add-on reporting and monitoring functions of the ACD work in the exact same manner for virtual agents. Management can easily see whether or not a home-based agent is on a call, listen in, oversee on-screen keystrokes, digitally record customer interactions, as well as measure average call length, hold time, hang-up rates and other key performance indicators.

Secure Private Network (SPN): A main concern of using home-based agents — and particularly outsourced ones — is whether or not sensitive customer information can be safeguarded when transmitted over the Internet to an agent's home. Because a secure private network allows agents, both in-house and remote, to connect to a Local Area Network or intranet, it ensures the security of customer data on the entire network. There are a number of vendors, including Netifice and Echopass, that offer secure private networks that allow virtual agents to access the in-house network, enter data, and use e-business software just like in-house agents do.

Equally important, secure private network providers offer intrusion monitoring services that ensure that only the right people are accessing private customer data. Additionally, just like with the in-house network, shared file systems can be monitored on the directory and file levels so that management always controls what information is available to the home-based agents and can monitor what information they have accessed.

Factors to Consider When Selecting a Virtual Agent Service Provider

Although technology has made the process of monitoring home-based agents almost identical to the techniques used to monitor in-house agents, questions about training, scheduling, and agent selection still remain.

Training: With a dispersed workforce, it can be more difficult to get all of your agents — in-house and those from a virtual agent service provider — in the same place at the same time. When investigating virtual agent service providers, management should inquire about how training is done. E-learning technology is one option, in-person training is ideal. Virtual agent service providers may offer to have their certified instructors be trained by your contact center staff so that they, in turn, can train their home-based agents, which provides your management team with additional support.

Scheduling: Since scheduling is a large selling point for the virtual-agent model, contact center management should be sure that a virtual agent service provider supplies a scheduling solution that simplifies the process rather than complicates it. Companies should seek out an outsourcer that allows managers to offer available hours to the home-based agents rather than vice versa. Also, agents should be able to be scheduled in flexible blocks of time so that managers have the ability to scale up and down at a moment's notice for any unpredicted spikes or drop offs in call volume.

Selection: The quality of virtual agents is clearly a primary consideration, and management should ensure that they have an integral role in this process from the start. Before committing to a relationship with virtual agent service providers, contact center executives should investigate how their agents' qualifications and historical performance stack up against that of their own in-house employees.

If contact center executives can find an outsourcer that provides the right answers to these questions, companies can effectively use a virtual agent service provider to address staffing, cost and quality control issues while all but eliminating location from the contact center equation.