

At-Home Agents

A Model for the Future

Overview

The At-Home Agent Model has rapidly changed call center operations. According to the National Association of Call Centers, more than half of the contact centers in the United States today (53 percent) have some percentage of their agent population functioning from a home office.

The benefits of using remote agents make a compelling case for companies who are looking to streamline operations, provide improved customer service, decrease call center costs, and increase agent retention and job satisfaction.

Two trends have contributed to the rise in at-home agent popularity. Dissatisfaction with customer service in centers outside the U.S. has been reflected in lost revenue for companies. Customer satisfaction has been shown to be one-fifth higher in U.S. centers and first call resolution 34% higher. Rising wages in outsourced centers in other countries, combined with decreased customer satisfaction, has prompted many companies to return their business to the U.S., providing more jobs domestically and recruiting from more qualified labor pools.

The At-Home Agent Model attracts employees from diverse situations who want to work and are willing to fill non-traditional schedules; but, they may either lack the ability to commute or desire to not work in a traditional brick and mortar environment. The at-home agent paradigm is perfect for disabled persons, individuals with small children, and retired personnel wishing to work part-time. Companies have discovered that there

are many potential employees with flexible schedules that can be used to accommodate hard-to-fill schedule gaps.

Companies wanting to improve their customer experience are now looking to the at-home agent model, in part due to the characteristics of at-home agents. At-home agents are typically at least 38 years old, bilingual, and many have management experience. At-home agents tend to possess maturity and professionalism, exhibit superior work ethics, and prefer the autonomy of working remotely.

According to Michele Rowan, At-Home Agent expert and President of Customer Contact Strategies, “Home-based call center agents tend to be more highly educated and experienced, have less stress and are focused on meeting callers’ needs.”

This paper discusses three primary benefits of using at-home agents:

- Lower call center costs
- Improved customer service
- Improved employee satisfaction and retention

Lower call center costs

Companies experience bottom line savings through reduced call center operating costs. Reduced operating costs associated with at-home agents include lower starting wages and reduced benefits, less need for brick and mortar facilities and support staff, increased labor pool with flexible scheduling options, and reduced training costs associated with increased agent retention. Additional cost savings are found with part-time agents who receive reduced benefit packages required for full-time employees.

The At-Home Agent Model reduces the need for large call centers and accompanying support staff. The agent pool is limitless with remote agents, and various configurations of scheduling options are possible. Staffing for special events, holidays, and vacations is simplified by remote agents with flexible schedules. Remote agents can also accommodate spikes in call volume on short notice.

Virtual training allows agents to live outside geographical boundaries of the call center and receive the same training as on-site agents. Once initial training is completed, ongoing training can be deployed for remote agents the same as for on-site personnel through E-learning technology.

Improved customer service

Experts report that excellent customer service is directly related to agent satisfaction. At-home agents have been shown to create a better customer experience resulting in increased customer loyalty. Customer loyalty due to improved service translates to

increased revenue. With first call resolution at 34% for U.S. centers, remote agents are able to take customer service to the next level and increase customer loyalty.

Agent productivity is the key to call center success, including excellent customer service and consistently reaching service level objectives. When agents are out of adherence or underperforming, service levels can be severely impacted. In-house agents encounter interruptions throughout the day that affect productivity. At-home agents are proven to be more productive than on-site agents, with reported increased productivity of up to one-hour daily. Working in an environment with fewer, or no, disruptions allows agents to focus on meeting service level objectives.

At-home agents mitigate the effects of a disaster and increase operational stability by having agents in multiple locations who can continue to work during an outage or natural disaster. Remote agents can fill the gap when internal problems arise in on-site call centers by answering calls with no disruption of service.

Improved employee satisfaction and retention

Employee satisfaction leads to agent retention. Replacing agents is a major cost consideration for companies with high employee turnover. Recruiting and training costs can significantly impact a company's bottom line profit margin. Retention rate for at-home agents is 80% versus 25% for in-house.

Agent morale is a key factor in retention. Remote agents are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs because of being empowered by having control over their schedules,

allowing for improved work/life balance. While software tools are available for helping increase agent control over schedules, the at-home model supersedes software solutions offered to on-site agents. Remote agents can create schedules unique to their availability. Schedules can be segmented throughout the day and vary on a daily basis.

At-home agents bring a level of professionalism to their job that enhances the quality of service delivered and increases not only customer service, but agent retention as well.

Reports by contact center analyst firm, Frost & Sullivan, suggest the average age of at-home agents is 38, compared to 23 for on-site agents. More than 80% of at-home agents have college education and management experience, compared to 35% of on-site agents. At-home agents are more likely to value their employment and view it as a profession as opposed to “just a job”.

Conclusion

Many companies are implementing the At-Home Agent Model for purposes of improving customer service and increasing customer loyalty, as well as increasing retention through improved agent satisfaction. The At-Home Agent Model accomplishes both of these objectives.

Additionally, the current economy is driving the At-Home Agent Model because of reduced operating expenses. Estimated annual savings per at-home agent is approximately \$25,000, including reduced facility requirements, training, and

supervisory demands. Experts report the on average cost of an on-site agent at \$31 per hour, compared to \$21 for at-home agents.

The benefits of having an unlimited labor pool from which to choose is invaluable for meeting last minute scheduling demands, filling peak call volume time slots, or continuing service during emergencies. Remote agents can be located anywhere in the country and are available for hard-to-fill time slots, enabling contact centers to offer extended hours or accommodate non-traditional operating hours.

The At-Home Agent Model creates a win-win situation for both agents and companies by improving efficiency and saving money.

About Pipkins

Pipkins, Inc. is a leading supplier of workforce management software and services to the call center industry. Pipkins' *@HomeVantage* gives organizations the ability to effectively manage their agents and can be used with *Vantage Point* or integrated into another workforce management system to leverage existing technology. Pipkins' systems forecast and schedule more than 300,000 agents in over 500 locations across all industries worldwide. For more information, visit www.Pipkins.com.