

Implementing Remote Agents

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Today's contact and messaging centers face more specialized challenges than ever before. Along with the normal business pressures to increase revenues and reduce costs, they must also provide high-quality service that attracts and keeps customers. To reach this goal, they must balance the need for service with a work environment that helps draw and retain skilled agents. One method to meet these goals is the use of remote agents working from home.

The Benefits of Using Remote Agents:

Remote agents offer many advantages such as:

- **Expanded labor pool** – It is easier to recruit and retain skilled agents by providing flexible employment options to those who do not want to commute or relocate.
- **Lower operating costs** - Having agents working from home means a much smaller contact and message center facility is required.
- **Employee flexibility** - Access to a pool of qualified remote workers enables a center to easily add extra agents during a promotion or disaster recovery situation that causes an unexpected call spike. Also, remote workers are typically receptive to non-traditional hours such as part-time work or split shifts.
- **Lower telecommunications costs** - Routing calls over the IP network can dramatically reduce costs for both inbound and outbound calls.
- **Improved productivity** - Remote workers are generally more productive than on-site workers. A study of 1,500 AT&T telecommuters showed that telecommuting increased employee productivity by 10% with employees typically gaining a full hour a day. Other studies show similar or even greater productivity gains.
- **Better agent retention** - Work-at-home options help to improve agent retention, reducing training costs (a major expense) and other overhead.

Considerations in Using Remote Agents

If you are considering remote agents, here are some essentials you should address to ensure your remote agent experience, as well as that of your customers, is the best it can be:

- **Defining your situation and need** - The first step is to identify your goals. Are you expecting remote agents to provide more flexible scheduling for call spikes, peaks, or seasonal increases in volume? Cost reductions? Access to higher qualified agents not available within your center's hiring radius? Remote agents can offer all these benefits and more. But keep your expectations realistic.
- **Identifying and recruiting your workforce** - Remote work is not for everyone. Key attributes of a successful remote agent include: self-starting, discipline, personal motivation, a dedicated interest, experience in your industry, flexibility to schedule themselves for all hours, punctuality, and an overwhelming desire to succeed. The most successful remote agents view their work as a profession and not just a job.

- **Structuring your training program** - Expanded Web access and improvements in distance learning techniques make training of remote agents easier today than in the past, thus, your agents can be anywhere in the world. In contrast, if you use traditional classroom training, you'll need to recruit from within an hour's drive of your classroom.
- **Selecting the right technology and infrastructure** –There are three main considerations when designing a remote agent call center: network-based ACD, the call-handling application, and security.
 - **Network-based ACD** - Voice switches today are built with the ability to route unlimited calls to agents, either in a center or remote location over a phone line. The latest technology, VoIP, allows calls to be directed down the same line as the data application, reducing infrastructure costs and complexity. Utilizing this technology, some equipment providers have introduced products that enable you to operate internal or remote agents without procuring any infrastructure, allowing you to pay “per minute”, “per seat”, or a fixed cost per month.
 - **Call-Handling Application** - The need to provide and track customer communications and transactions is necessary to obtain, keep, and maximize profitability. The Call-Handling and Reporting Application for remote agents should employ the same capability and ROI model used for your internal center.
 - **Security** - Making the right decisions on your security requirements are critical to the launch of a remote agent project. Similar to in-house options, there are many levels of security available when looking at a remote agent strategy. Remember that the strategy is not to be *more secure*, but to provide an equally secure environment for your remote workforce.
- **Managing the remote workforce** - Managing remote agents requires that you have a quality control processes incorporated into your organization's procedures. This ensures that the same high standards of your in-house agents are mirrored with your remote agents. Quality surveys, real-time remote monitoring capabilities, and instant messaging are all essential tools for managing externally. The key to remote agent success is to structure your compensation plan properly and focus your management strategy on the process, not the individual remote agent.
- **Measuring your success** - Expect the learning curve with remote agents to be similar to what you experience with internal agents. Wait a few months before you begin your assessment, and then ask if remote agents have allowed you to obtain the objectives that you originally set out to achieve. Remember, your review must go beyond financial metrics alone and include data on customer satisfaction. Remote agents usually cost less than facilities-based agents and can often generate more satisfied customers. So expand your analysis beyond the bottom-line impact and look at the top-line. You will probably be pleasantly surprised.

Alston Tascom, Inc. knows the benefits and advantages provided by remote agents and remote hosted offices. The design of the Evolution System includes remote capability as a basic function. Evolution uses Commercially-Off-The-Shelf (COTS) hardware for both internal and remote workstations. The same workstation is used for both applications.

In the system design, Evolution took into consideration the major essentials necessary for remote agents and remote offices:

- **Remote Agent Network Connectivity (Network Based ACD)**– Remote Agents can be connected to the system via:
 - Dial-Up connection – requires two telephone lines, one for voice and a second for data. Ideal for agents in your local calling area who are part-time or used for overflow at peak times. They are in normal rotation with your internal agents. These agents have access to client data, messaging capabilities and managerial functions, if granted this function.
 - Broadband connection – using DSL, requires one DSL connection for voice and data. Ideal for agents in your local calling area. Remote agents will be in normal rotation with your internal agents. Most often, these agents are full time employees working a normal shift. These agents have access to client data, messaging capabilities and managerial functions, if granted this function.

- **Call-Handling and Reporting Applications** – The Evolution System uses Microsoft SQL for all client data from screen-pop client information to message storage, on-call scheduling, delivery instructions, etc. This information is presented to the remote agent in the same format as the internal agent. Remote agents have the same capabilities as an internal agent. Additional, every call is tracked from ring to hang-up and beyond. Wrap-up time and administrative time is documented as well. Agent and client statistics are readily available for screen display or printing. This allows you to easily assess agent productivity and client profitability and, at the same time, manage your remote agents.

- **Security** – The Evolution system provides the security you need for your data and system protection. Further, system redundancy can be as extensive as you desire.

Remote Agent capability to readily available to Evolution System users utilizing any of the connectivity methods described above.

Alston Tascom, Inc, also, offers a Hosted version of the Evolution System utilizing VoIP. This means that you can have a virtual office or remote agent anywhere you have web capability. Our Hosted system provides virtually all of the same features as are available on an In-House Evolution System. Your agents can be centrally located in an office, work from home or any combination.

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