

# Overcoming the Challenges of Contact Center “Home-Sourcing”

Discover the key challenges contact centers face in utilizing at-home agents and the best ways to overcome impediments to ensure a cohesive, productive working environment for those in the center and at home.



## Executive Summary

This paper examines the case for desktop messaging, providing corporate, team, and individual employee information, especially performance metrics. These metrics serve as the key strand that enables successful contact center home working by tying work-at-home staff (WAHS) agents and supervisors to each other and to their organizations. Desktop messaging permits effective and productive corporate-to-staff and supervisor-to-front-line agent communication, including to those supervisors and agents who are mobile and in the field. It facilitates team and agent-to-agent interactions by providing vital information for them to act on. The paper looks at technology methods that answer to the communication challenges in implementing WAHS programs, thereby ensuring corporate cohesion and meeting performance metrics to guarantee productivity goals.

## Introduction

You can *go home again* for contact centers with work-at-home staff (WAHS). More organizations are doing just that, and for good reasons. These include:

- Reduced facilities costs
- Lower turnover
- Decreased recruitment expenses
- Higher productivity, creating up to \$20,000 per employee/year in net benefits\*
- Avoiding environment-damaging commuting, which for evening and night shift agents and supervisors can also be dangerous
- Business continuity

Together, these reasons add up to a strong return on investment (ROI) for WAHS.

Contact centers are strong candidates for telework because their tasks involve using computers and various channels of communication: voice, e-mail, SMS, chat and social media that can be accessed from anywhere thanks to rapid residential broadband network expansion. Contact center agents are thoroughly monitored, benchmarked and scorecarded to ensure compliance, quality and performance via solutions that can be connected to wherever the employees are. Home offices have been made secure, protecting corporate information with methods such as data encryption, staff authentication, remote desktop lockdowns that cut off access to non-work applications during working hours, and screen wipes.

\*Telework Coalition (TelCoa), [www.telcoa.org](http://www.telcoa.org)

Yet for all these gains, companies are concerned that contact center WAHS will lose corporate cohesion, miss vital information and not be as productive as they would be if they were in traditional employer premises offices. Front-line agents working from home risk missing essential metrics that track and enable organizational, group, team and individual actionable performance. Often, they’ll also miss critical announcements such as call spikes and internal information such as awards, new staff and benefit changes. Senior management continues to be worried about security when data is accessed off-premises. These reservations also apply to contact center programs handled by business process outsourcing firms, which limits them from permitting more of their contact center agents to work from their homes.

At the contact center level, managers and supervisors fear having WAHS will add one more burden they have to cope with. Having metrics and alerts transmitted off-site provides a new worry — did the agents receive them and are they acting accordingly? In turn, WAH agents can feel left out of the loop with their employers, supervisors and co-workers.

Employers and supervisors have to ensure and be assured that their employees work well as parts of smoothly-functioning teams. WAHS need to know about what is going on inside their firms and with their group and personal performance. These inputs allow WAHS to maximize their own contributions, thereby benefiting the entire organization.

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*For WAHS programs to be successful they must have buy-in from all levels: senior executives, department heads, managers, supervisors and agents.*

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### Communications Requirements, Options and Challenges

Effective communication is key to achieving organizations’ objectives. There are four distinct dimensions that shape organizational communications. These are:

#### 1. Corporate-to-staff

Corporate-to-employee communication entails relaying the organization’s missions, objectives and strategies. It also involves transmitting specific instructions to key staff to carry out these items, including performance expectations, policies and budgets, and disaster plans and procedures.

## 2. Supervisor-to-front-line agent

Supervisor-to-front-line agent communication entails relaying the directives from senior management by instructing and motivating front-line employees, monitoring and evaluating their performance against specific criteria and providing training and coaching to accomplish goals. This also includes ensuring that emergency procedures are followed.

## 3. Team-to-team member

Teams communicate amongst themselves to understand instructions and problem-solve to accomplish tasks and meet goals. They also aggregate and relay concerns to supervisors.

## 4. Agent-to-agent

Individual agents communicate with each other to get advice on carrying out specific tasks and to benchmark and learn from each other. They also discuss issues encountered in the work and what is happening in the organization, such as job openings.

The means by which organizations and all levels of individuals in them communicate will be shaped by their working environments. These can be categorized as employer premises, field/mobile and home, i.e. telework.

There are distinct communication methods to connect to each employee in them. These methods include:

- *In-person communication* encompasses corporate, staff and group or team meetings, individual conversations (such as between supervisors and front-line agents and agent to agent) and group, team and individual training.
- *Paper communications* include memos, forms, reports and individual letters including those faxed.
- *Electronic* methods range from calls (one-on-one, audio conference, broadcast), text-based (e-mail, instant messaging, outbound notifications, SMS), corporate Web (Intranet and internal social media) to electronic reporting (wallboards and desktop messaging), over landline and mobile devices.

Employer premises environments (e.g. traditional contact centers) are characterized by employees traveling to fixed employer-controlled locations to perform their tasks either in-whole or in-part. All three communication methods: in-person, paper and electronic are used.

Field/mobile environments are defined by employees working at remote sites, in-transit and at temporary locations. The communication tools are limited to electronic means except if/when employees report to employer-premises. The electronic methods can be affected by technical issues such as wireless signal sags or dropouts, bandwidth restrictions and device screen-size limitations. Paper communication is often not practical or desirable.

Home/telework environments are identified by employees operating from fixed employee-controlled locations, with employers having rights to control them only to the extent needed to ensure performance and corporate security. Teleworkers, i.e. contact center WAHS, may also work in the field or may be mobile. The means of communication is primarily electronic unless they have to meet or work at employer premises with supervisors and colleagues. The electronic tools must fit into and be suitable for small separate or partitioned offices in houses or apartments, emitting little or no noise to avoid reaching other occupants or neighbors; they should not be readily visible from outside the home offices. The electronic methods must permit information to be seamlessly transmitted to WAHS and be in identical formats to that received by workers at employers’ premises so that all employees for whom the messages are directed to are on the same page as their colleagues *regardless of location*.

WAHS have typically been “tethered” i.e. traveling to offices and centers periodically. The trend is for more of them to be “untethered,” or free from this requirement and hired and located over a far wider geography. Firms are loosening the tethers so that they can hire and retain the best staff regardless of location, reach out to those with special skills not available locally, such as multiple-language fluency, and strengthen business continuity by permitting contacts to be handled by WAHS that are out of harm’s way.

There is also another plane to communications and that is when programs are outsourced, handled by the outsourcers’ contact center agents working in employer-premises, in the field/mobile and at home offices. Organizations need to ensure that the same metrics they use are delivered to outsourcing firms, and in turn to their staff, to ensure consistent and trackable performance. Outsourcers require this information when stipulated in their service level agreements so that they can meet the contracts’ specifications.

## Home-Based Communication Challenges

As noted in the introduction, the home/telework environment provides to contact centers significant cost savings, productivity, flexibility, green and business continuity benefits. There are several challenges, though, that must be addressed before these can be fully realized:

1. To assure senior managers that WAHS are as motivated and committed to their organizations as their

employer premises counterparts. That they are successfully accomplishing goals metrics-based performance in a data-safe, low-IT-cost home environment.

2. To demonstrate to supervisors that WAH agents are receiving vital information and are meeting and exceeding requirements transparently i.e. they forget that these employees are not even in the buildings, thereby proving the ROI of WAHS programs to them and in doing so getting their buy-in.
3. To avoid serious information gaps, such as in transmitting performance metrics, heads-ups on call spikes or system outages when contact center agents work from home. Supervisors should not have to spend their valuable and expensive time relaying these messages by phone, e-mail or IM.
4. There is the need for quick-ramp up to achieve immediate results. The communications tools must be user-intuitive to minimize time/resource-consuming training. This facilitates rapid onboarding of untethered agents, especially those who have never worked in contact centers and are subject matter experts such as accountants, engineers, medical professionals and technicians reachable by unified communications or directly through professional assistance services.
5. There is also the issue of business continuity. Many organizations’ plans include having agents and supervisors relocating, staying home or going to remote and temporary sites in the event of a disaster. Communication tools must be easy to install and gain access to on agents’ and supervisors’ remote desktops and laptops.

To analyze these challenges and find solutions, let’s look at the common key electronic communication methods and see what they are best suited for:

- Individual and audio conference calls are the best means next to in-person in enabling two-way, real-time interactions, and transmitting tone and inflection that capture and transmit emotion. Calls are most effective at conveying high-importance issues, such as performance problems. Broadcast calls, delivered live by logging in or in pre-recorded messages are excellent for imparting strategic messages such as corporate changes and directions, for motivations and for emergency alerts. They are not as effective as transmitting statistical information; they require note taking or supplemental collaboration tools.
- Text-based communication methods permit interactions and deliver key information such as

announcements, performance metrics and disaster response procedures that can be reviewed and retained. The data and announcements they deliver are not, however, real-time or directly actionable.

- Corporate web sites or intranets supplemented by social media, provide detailed corporate and specific and customized department and team information. The social media functionality hosted on them permits interactions between all employees: management and front-line agents. Intranets and social media convey corporate culture and values. Their limitations include clutter and distraction — there is a lot of information in which vital data for agents may get lost. More importantly, it may not be possible to customize metrics and announcements to specific contact center agents. Bandwidth and visibility may be an issue for field/mobile workers. Such interactive sites also consume considerable internal IT resources to set up and maintain.
- Dashboards are a standard means that deliver real-time performance metrics to managers, supervisors and agents. They are not, however, geared to transmitting other messages to staff, such as awards and corporate announcements.
- Electronic reporting, delivered through wallboards and desktop messaging to PCs, laptops, smart phones and other portable devices supplies organizational, departmental and team general information. This includes corporate messages such as announcements, awards, policy changes, and emergency notifications. These messages supply actionable corporate, department, team and individualized metrics that can be measured against performance standards, and against the results achieved by other individuals, teams and departments. Electronic reporting is targeted, clutter-free and easily understood by agents (including by those who have never worked in contact centers before). It is also very secure, low-bandwidth, and requires minimal IT resources. Depending on the tools, electronic reporting can be accessible from anywhere.

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*“Electronic reporting via desktop messaging is the best answer and solution to the concerns contact center executives, managers and supervisors have about enabling WAHS.”*

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### Why Desktop Messaging

As demonstrated, all of these communication tools have advantages and downsides. Therefore each of them

complements each other. Yet on the key issues of communicating corporate information and performance metrics, electronic reporting via desktop messaging is the best answer and solution to the concerns contact center executives, managers and supervisors have about enabling WAHS.

*Only* electronic reporting communicates corporate to staff messaging that enables and promotes organizations’ culture cohesiveness, departmental, team and individual performance metrics and emergency notifications real-time, in a single integrated environment. Thanks to screen-pop functionality, electronic reporting also provides immediacy, grabs attention and drives calls-to-action. While dashboards and intranets come close to and complement electronic reporting, they do not offer the complete package.

Desktop messaging takes electronic reporting, which in contact centers has traditionally been displayed on wallboards, and makes it virtual, delivering the information to WAH agents’ and supervisors’ computers. It also delivers them to field and mobile staffers’ or supervisors’ laptops and other portable electronic devices. Because it is written to fit on these tools, the messages are only accessible to those users. Audible alerts can be raised or lowered to suit the environments.

Desktop messaging supplies peace of mind for supervisors and agents because it is powered by the same solution and therefore has a similar look and feel to contact center wallboards. It therefore supplies vital information instantly, for quick action.

In short, desktop messaging permits every contact center agent to receive the same actionable messages including metrics *regardless of working environment*. Managers need not transcribe messages to other formats like e-mail/SMS or IM or make additional calls to WAHS.

Moreover, the simplicity of desktop messaging means that new WAH agents can onboard more rapidly with minimal outside assistance. They do not have to travel to employer premises centers for training. That also saves resources and bolsters productivity.

In that fashion, desktop messaging establishes a common pathway between management, supervisors and agents. For example, a WAH agent can look at her team’s sales stats and cheer when she sees them beating another team. A supervisor on a laptop while at a conference can IM an agent at their home about why they took too long to finish a call as they both look at the same statistics. An agent can send an e-mail to a colleague congratulating them for winning a corporate excellence award.

## Inova Desktop Presenter™

Inova Solutions’ Desktop Presenter is one very versatile example of desktop messaging for WAHS. It offers several key features that meet the communication challenges home-based employees/contact center agents face. These include:

- **Uniform Real-time Delivery** - Corporate, departmental, team and individual front-line agent messages, statistics and alerts are delivered in a variety of formats. This messaging mimics that seen in employer premises contact centers, including tables, charts and graphs, message marquees and virtual wallboards. There are pop-to-top and taskbar views that save screen real estate and refrain from obscuring other critical applications on the smaller WAHS desktop monitors or laptops.

All of Inova’s reporting and emergency notification solutions are powered by and integrated through Inova LightLink™, a middleware application that provides a real-time infrastructure that captures and communicates information. LightLink hooks into the other contact center systems: ACDs, CTI and workforce management systems and extracts just the data required to feed key metrics. It also supplies alerting and messaging features that visually call attention to significant events with instruction on how to respond. Messaging can also be sent instantly, supplying a perfect tool for informing individuals or agent groups about unexpected occurrences such as a system outage.

- **High Security** - Desktop Presenter is client-only; LightLink sits behind firewalls, which protects data from unauthorized access. WAHS authentication is by Microsoft Windows® usernames, which minimizes the risks of others, e.g. family members, gaining access to confidential information via employees’ computers and by IP addresses. This multilayered or multifactor security helps prevent thieves from breaking into organizations’ systems through staffers’ homes and mobile devices.
- **Ease of Installation** - Desktop Presenter enables quick ramp-up and minimizes IT costs. The application is preconfigured; all WAHS have to do is load the application into their computers and it connects to LightLink when they first login. No on-site IT staff assistance is needed. Supervisors have full control over the content, size, location and appearance of each desktop client. These features enable Desktop Presenter to be installed and ready in case of situations that require employer-premises agents and supervisors to work from home or remotely from their laptops.
- **Deployability in Outsourcing Environments** - LightLink can traverse firewalls to permit Desktop Presenter to be installed on outsourced agents’ computers; it operates within the WAHS’ VPN (virtual private network) connections.

- **Automation** - Once thresholds and messages are defined, messages are sent automatically. This automation saves managers from the time-consuming task of monitoring metrics then rushing to redirect agents. Desktop Presenter handles these tedious tasks automatically, allowing managers to focus on more productive tasks.

### Conclusion

Working from home is an ROI-enhancing alternative to traditional on-premises workplaces, especially contact centers. The key to making it successful is to ensure and be assured that their WAHS meet and exceed performance expectations and be on the same page as every other employee as to what is happening in their organizations in real-time. Desktop messaging tools, such as Inova Desktop Presenter, make WAHS programs successful by delivering actionable, real-time corporate, departmental and performance information in an intuitive, easy-to-deploy, low IT footprint and secure application. Cohesiveness in communication places everyone, from the CEO to the supervisors and the agents, on the same page.

*The savings with Inova Desktop Presenter are substantial. For example, a contact center with 150 agents and 10 supervisors per shift, each earning \$55,000/year and collectively spending eight hours per day redirecting information, has a monthly redirecting cost of over \$4,500. Keeping and transmitting messages in the same format with Desktop Presenter, powered by LightLink, reduces this monthly cost by \$2,750 a month.*

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### About Inova Solutions

Founded in 1984, Inova Solutions is a global provider of real-time visual communications solutions that help inbound and outbound call centers, public transit systems, schools, manufacturers and others instantly communicate vital information. Inova specializes in middleware and software that aggregates and reports contact center data from multiple sources and relays the most relevant metrics to managers, agents and other constituents. This information can be displayed on LED displays, LCD digital signage, web-based dashboards and computer desktops. For details, visit [www.inovasolutions.com/call-center-reporting](http://www.inovasolutions.com/call-center-reporting).