



Frequently Asked Questions: At-Home Agents

As more and more call center leaders consider, implement and scale the work at-home agent model, they face many of the same issues. Knowlagent invited Michele Rowan, a veteran in the at-home arena, to answer some of the most frequently asked questions.

Michele is CEO of Customer Contact Strategies and specializes in helping call centers move customer contacts home. As former VP of Hilton Hotels Corporation, Michele led the expansion from 200 to over 1000 agents. She has written a 'Go Home' Tool Kit, and conducts workshops on the subject throughout the US. See <http://www.gohome.us.com/> for both.

Did you ever have security issues or concerns with your at-home

agents? Yes, we certainly had concerns. When you're moving people out of a brick and mortar environment where you can't see them, it raises a lot of questions and anxiety level. We created a list of what those risks were in the at-home environment, then came up with contingencies on how to minimize those risks. For concerns around privacy of data, we used a locked down connectivity product in the form of a live CD that enabled connection *only* to the company's proprietary software. Agents could not access their personal email or any other software program while working. We used a locked down security system that prevented our agents from copying, pasting, printing or going outside of our proprietary software. That was important to us and that was something we felt we had to get right before we could scale the program with confidence. Today, companies use both jump drives and/or live CDs to section off a dedicated operating system – it is very successful and much lower cost than providing PCs or thin clients, as evidenced by the big at-home outsourcers who have been using dedicated operating systems for years.

Regarding PCI compliance and credit card data, we used the same encryption techniques in house as we did at home. To fully meet PCI compliance we had to implement dual factor authentication, which is not difficult or expensive, just a two-step ID process (vs. one for in-house agents). We used a vendor who had a great turnkey solution – happy to share for anyone who wants that information.

In terms of a secure physical environment, what's to stop somebody from looking over the shoulder of an agent and stealing data? Nothing, and that's why you have to rely on your selection process to select the right people. But this risk exists in-house as well; it is an extremely low one (risk, that is).

Do you really hire people without seeing them? At Hilton, we hired people within close proximity of our contact centers. A large percentage of the selection process took place on line. Our long term vision was to hire and train people virtually (like the large outsourcers do) to untether ourselves from geographical restrictions and hire the very best talent we could hire. The technology is fully mature and low cost.



Is your recommendation to clients to hire agents to start at home rather than start in the center and graduate them to work at home? It depends on an organization's objectives. If a company simply wants to relieve themselves of some facilities costs and they' are not really growing, they can move their existing workforce home (but don't expect dramatically different results from these agents as their habits are well-formed). If an organization wants to take advantage of higher levels of engagement, incremental revenue, creative compensation and benefits models, and reducing costs in some other areas, then hiring agents at home as your in-house agents turn over, is a great strategy.

Do agents really need to come into the office? No, they don't need to come in to the office, nor do they want to and they will tell you that, if you ask them. In a truly virtual environment, both recurrent training and one-time training can be delivered as effectively or more effectively via virtual means. With one-time training, live virtual classrooms are utilized where even system training can be conducted, with agents practicing and trainers able to observe their navigation and keystrokes (as effectively as a physical classroom). In terms of recurrent training, best practice is to develop modules, put them on line and in lower call-volume periods (and other scheduled sessions) agents retrieve the designed training (or it is pushed to them when training integrates with work force management). Pushing training to agents (integrated with work schedules) used to be expensive, but it's not any longer, and we should all be using it. It pays for itself with productivity improvements, and the value-add of consistently delivered training (by taking your classroom trainer and coach personalities out of the mix) is extremely valuable.

Do at-home agents typically get hired from a separate job description? If so, what is different? At-home agents need a couple of things that are exclusive to their position (vs. brick & mortar): 1) a dedicated work space that is free of distraction, 2) the ability and desire to work independently, and 3) strong technical skills. In my view, the balance of knowledge, skills and abilities (assuming the in-house and at-home position are like-for-like and not a unique job or offering) are usually identical, constituting a very similar job description.

Should you test or assess specific skills for an at-home agent that you do not consider for a brick & mortar agent (technical savvy as an example)? I think the majority of skills should be assessed universally amongst contact center professionals (in-house and at-home). With that said, very strong technical skills are required at home, as there can be more disruptions to service (i.e. ISP, soft phone, VPN). Recovery time at home, to ensure continuity of customer service, must be minimal. Troubleshooting ability is just as important as technical savvy for this very reason.

I recommend requiring a set of minimum connectivity, hardware and speed guidelines as part of the job posting, along with skills like basic use of the Internet, search engines, and whatever tools agents will have to use frequently. It also makes sense to include system diagnostics as one of the final stages in your application process. I also recommend including some IT navigational skills in the application process, similar to the following:

- a. You send the applicant to a diagnostics site that checks for software and



hardware minimum requirements, firewalls, speed.

b. Applicants are provided with a set of instructions to run the diagnostics.

c. While your system is checking the agent's computer for basic requirements, you are evaluating the agent's basic knowledge level of troubleshooting, and technical savvy. I have both participated in and observed this method in play and it is extremely effective.

A very good point was brought up in this question that is worth expanding upon. Some at-home baseline functionality, like ISP connectivity, can sometimes be outside of our control in terms of continuity of service. It is important to closely monitor and manage up time, and if there is a significant variance from in-house vs. at-home agents, you must understand it and bring it in line, or it can quickly cannibalize the success of your program. It is equally as important to establish accountability for up time and call/connectivity control with your agents from the time of hire. In other words, if an agent is dropping calls or has extensive handle time as a result of some at-home technology that is not working properly (assuming it is not company equipment or technology issue), we can help but the primary responsibility sits with the employee. Agents that have patterns of unresolved downtime, regardless of why, might not be a good fit for the at-home position.

What is the most appropriate supervisor-to-agent ratio for at-home agents?

Generally, at-home agents are of higher caliber than in-house agents as documented by Frost & Sullivan research. The part-time at-home workforce demographics include:

- average age of 38 (vs. in house of 23)
- 80% with some college (vs. 30% in-house)
- 40% with some management experience

For organizations that hire to this demographic, a slightly higher supervisor-to-agent ratio could be warranted, in that this more-experienced and mature workforce requires less instruction, coaching and touch. My recommendation for a launch, however, would be to use identical ratios to in-house with adjustments later once processes and leadership are settled and comfortable in their roles.

If an organization is considering varied processes or business practices for at-home agents vs. in-house, or is considering hiring at-home agents more closely aligned to the demographics of in-house agents, then the ratio will need to be carefully reviewed at start-up.

In all cases, training for supervisors on how to manage an at-home work force is required. It is different, and requires an adjustment to competencies and time management. If you don't properly prepare your supervisors on what to expect, you will cause heightened stress and poor performance.

What equipment does the at-home agent need and who provides it? There are two approaches to at-home equipment:



- The company purchases and provides all or some and what is not provided, the company makes recommendations on purchases (i.e. desk phones and headsets).
- The employee owns all equipment, and the company makes recommendations on what and where to purchase goods. The company sets minimum requirements around memory and the operating system for the employee-owned computer.

In both cases, at-home agents need an ISP connection and dedicated work space including desk and chair. They need a computer (either company provided or employee owned) with recommended RAM of 512MB or higher; they need the required operating system dictated by the company, and they need a monitor and keyboard.

In addition, home agents need voice connectivity equipment and the type of equipment is based on the method the company chooses to deliver voice calls to the agent. If VOIP will be utilized with computer access, then a sound card and microphone are required. If a hybrid of this or a standard PSTN connection is going to be used, then a headset with a speaker is required, and possibly a business class phone. When calls are delivered on a standard PSTN land line, I recommend a Plantronics S11 or S12 headset that can be purchased at many office supply outlets. Plantronics is the leading supplier of headsets and by far the best in terms of quality.

Do at home agents typically get paid more or less per hour than B & M agents? The market place is completely mixed when it comes to compensation; it is really based on an organization's objectives and required agent competencies. Many companies have one consistent compensation program across both in-house and at-home populations while other organizations (i.e. Hilton Hotels, McKesson Health) pay their at-home agents a reduced starting wage in exchange for the benefit of working at home and additional perks (i.e. building their own work schedules). The at-home professional population recognizes the fact that their auto insurance premiums drop, their cost of commute drops to zero, and they are given back approximately 2.5 hours per week in time they had previously invested in readying and commuting to work. Time is an incredibly valuable commodity, as we all know, and organizations that can couple that with a flexible scheduling model (or other value-add benefit) will be successful reducing their starting wages by 10-20%, as many companies have.

How can/should social networking be used to keep at home agents connected? Social networking, in my opinion, is a baseline requirement for any organization today and particularly for home-based employees that don't have the benefit of face-to-face interactions.

Contact centers are highly fluid environments. Change is continuous, fast-paced and sometimes unpredictable in terms of scope, timing and required response. The ability to effectively reach agents with updates in real time is critical. Equally as important is the capacity for agents to search, data mine, cross-reference and troubleshoot real time to leverage every customer experience. Virtual tools are best, whether agents are in-house or at home.



A high-powered, centralized help desk is key for an at-home work force with both voice and chat utilities. I recommend the help desk integrate both product support and first line technical support to enable 'one stop shopping' for at-home agents (who have more frequent technical issues than in-house agents, particularly in the early days of employment). Scouring the inquiries into the help desk and continuously updating on line reference tools (knowledge banks) and training goes in tandem with providing guidance. Wikis and bookmarks are also great for continuous improvement of on-line knowledge banks and training materials.

E-mail, intranet-based messaging to the desktop (for urgent messages), chat, virtual team meetings (via chat or voice) all have their place and value. Structuring communication vehicles along with established discipline around how and when to use them is very important, in my opinion, so that your agents reach for the time sensitive information first, based on the structure that you have designed. In the absence of this organized approach, employees self-select the priority of pushed information, which will unlikely match the priority that was intended and ultimately may leave your employees and customers behind the information curve.

On -line vehicles such as Linked in and Twitter are great tools for internal promotion and connection as well as external, and you can now buy off-the shelf Facebook-type software for a low cost. Social networking clubs such as book clubs and Scrabble tournaments are engaging and low maintenance.

About Knowlagent

Over 200,000 users around the world reduce labor costs with Knowlagent's agent management software every day. By automating traditional call center management processes, Knowlagent's on-demand solutions for training, coaching and hiring *reduce* spending attributed to off-phone activities while improving the key metrics that matter most to you. With Knowlagent, you can optimize frontline performance faster and more affordably than ever before. For more information on how you can spend less *and* get better with Knowlagent, call 888-566-9457 or visit us online at www.knowlagent.com.

Additional At-Home Agent Resources

[Managing A-Home Agents Benchmark Survey - November 2009](#)

[At Home Agent Bookmark Collection – Best of At-Home Agent Articles](#)

[Webinar Archive: Long Time, No See: How to Keep At-Home Agents Connected](#)