

The following article, from the pages of *Customer Service Newsletter*, discusses additional benefits of using at-home service reps.

— **Editor**  
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## The competitive edge: Send reps home to work

The workplace is being radically redefined. More and more customer service departments across the country are sending their reps home ... to work. "Companies are finally realizing that the activity we call 'office work,' doesn't have to be done in the place that we call the office," says telecommuting consultant Gil Gordon of Gil Gordon Associates.

Telecommuting programs offer customer service managers the opportunity to cut operating costs, increase employee productivity and retention, as well as the ability to compete effectively against companies with more resources, he adds.

### Extended hours of service

"One of the attractions of telecommuting in the customer service environment is the ability to provide extended hours of service to your customers," he notes.

For example, by having just one rep who works at home from 6 p.m. to midnight, your customers, on both the East and West coasts, will have the convenience of being able to call after work or during the evening to place orders. And, your company saves the expense of keeping the office open for that extended time.

A substantial savings for many companies comes from a reduction in office space. Perkin-Elmer Corp., a scientific equipment manufacturer, based 300 customer service and sales employees in their homes, and was able to close 35 branch offices, according to the Wall Street Journal.

However, "contrary to a lot of the reports, most telecommuting programs are going on in small businesses," Gordon says.

Why? Smaller companies don't have the organizational red tape to muddle through, and thus, can try innovative projects much easier. Also, small businesses and call centers are often forced to innovate. For instance, he says, "if a company has six CSRs and one is sick or is going to be out for a few weeks — that has a much greater impact on the other five than if it were a large call center."

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### Working at home increases reps' productivity

Less than one year after Ameritech-Cellular began its Work-at-Home project, productivity for participating customer service reps is up by a minimum of 9%, says Customer Service Manager June Rhodes. And at the same time, she adds, their work stress levels are down.

The company tracks its at-home reps' performance using methods similar to those used for in-house reps, and compares the data. The increased productivity is attributed for the most part to a lack of interruptions in the home. "They're able to be more focused at home," Rhodes notes.

And an added benefit: The at-home reps provide emergency phone coverage. "We found it extremely beneficial in the winter months," she says. "We got hit really hard last winter. I was able to page my work-at-home reps and let them know when people might be coming in late due to weather. So I was always ensured phone coverage."

### Coping with rapid growth

Ameritech-Cellular initiated its telecommuting program with two specific goals in mind, says Vanessa Lipske, manager of office administration.

First, "because we're constantly running out of space," she says. "And second, we would eventually

like to offer customers 24-hour service. And, we know that people don't like working late hours because of potential crime. This project makes the transition to more flexible hours easier."

The company's rapid growth rate has been a strain on office floor space, Rhodes agrees.

Currently, there are 105 reps in the customer service department. According to Rhodes, that number is up by 50% over the last four months. "Finding space for all of these people is ridiculous," she stresses. "Being able to send them home has been an added incentive to this project."

### Experimenting with diverse home environments

Initially, the company selected four specific reps to participate in a trial run of the project. "The reps were picked primarily because we wanted a diverse group," Rhodes says. The four included: a single mother, a CSR with no children but many pets, a male, and a technical rep who needed more access to the database system than the others.

The goal of the experiment was to make sure the program could work in various home environments so that it would be possible for anyone in the department to telecommute.

"We knew it was successful when we could ensure that we didn't hear dogs barking in the background, or that reps were, indeed, taking their children to daycare like they were supposed to," she says.

### Reps must qualify to go home

Currently, the Work-at-Home project includes 14 full-time reps and one part-time rep. Eventually, Rhodes states, the company would like to outsource as many as possible. "We've opened up the program to whoever is interested — but they have to qualify."

To qualify, reps must have at least six months' on-line experience; be able to act independently; make their own decisions; and be highly self-directed. In order for them to meet these criteria, she notes, they have to feel very self confident in their work ethics.

Those who show interest in the program are groomed by their managers on the areas they need to improve in to get to that self-confidence level. "And their individual performance must merit going home," she adds.

However, the aptitude to work at home "is very much a matter of individual temperament," says Gil Gordon. "It just doesn't work for everyone."

Rhodes agrees: "A lot of our in-house reps are staying in house primarily for the social aspect of work. Personally, I couldn't stand being at home all the time. I like the social atmosphere of the office."

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### Stress in the home

A major concern among managers is that reps working at home won't be able to effectively separate their home and office lives.

And, says Gordon, "That's an excellent reason why some CSRs may not want to do it. On the other hand, some reps may feel more comfortable dealing with stress sitting at home in a T-shirt and cut-offs with their feet up on the desk, rather than being in the office."

It's important for reps who work at home to find a separate, dedicated work area. "It has to be a space that they can walk out of — by closing the door or putting up a screen," he states. "Because if the work is staring them in the face, they're never going to be able to get away from it. And one of the keys to successfully working at home is knowing when to leave the 'office' and turn it off."

## Recouping the expense

Setting up a telecommuting program can be expensive in the beginning. Also, getting buy-in from upper management may be tough. Depending on the type of system you use, hardware costs can range up from \$1,500 per rep.

However, if your reps stick with the program, your return-on-investment is fairly quick.

“Make sure you get a firm commitment from your people who are going to participate,” says Vanessa Lipske. “Have them sign a waiver that they will stay with the program for a certain amount of time, considering the amount of money that you’re going to invest in the program.”

For instance, at Ameritech-Cellular, the investment was approximately \$2,500 to \$3,000 per rep. The company asks for a six-month commitment from its reps to recoup the costs involved in setting up the home systems, says Rhodes.

## Increased employee morale

Reps at Ameritech-Cellular enthusiastically welcomed the project, Rhodes says. “They loved the whole concept: working out of their homes; not having to commute to and from work every day; and not having to worry about what to wear.”

In fact, since the work-at-home project began only one rep will be returning to the office this fall. She has fulfilled her six-month obligation, but she’s returning to the office primarily because of job opportunities, Rhodes says.

“There is the down side of working at home. You’re not in the loop — you don’t hear what’s going on or where the potential job opportunities might be. The rep who’s returning is very concerned about her career and growth. The rest of them are happy as clams.” ■

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