

## AGILITY FACTOR



# The Case for Home Agents

By Jay Minnucci, Service Agility

**Balancing the benefits and concerns of home agent programs.**

**Key considerations to help your decision.**

Chances are, you either have some type of at-home agent program already in place, or at least have discussed it with the key decision-makers in your organization. Research firm IDC is estimating that 300,000 call center agents will be working from home by 2010. Input from the major outsourcing companies makes it sound as though that estimate is low, as they cite “homesourcing” as a key area of growth for the coming years. Clearly, it is an idea whose time has come.

### The Payoff

What is it that is fueling the high interest level? Call center leaders who have experience with home-based agents can tick off a number of benefits. Some of the more common include higher productivity, increases in employee satisfaction, and reductions in rent and utility costs. There is nothing wrong with any of those, but there are other advantages to a home agent program that do not get a lot of press coverage, yet may be more valuable:

- **Tapping into new markets for staff.** A homesourcing program exposes you to many more sources of great staff, and there are very few things more important to running a successful call center than the quality of your people. The sidebar below provides more details on how this can help you to expand the applicant pool.
- **Building better support systems.** When you
- **Covering peak time periods more effectively.** Imagine how much more efficient you would be if you could schedule staff for a one- or two-hour shift, or for split shifts when call demand warranted. A telecommuting program can make this a reality, making it much easier to meet objectives with the fewest possible resources.
- **Strengthening your disaster recovery plan.** Home agents provide one more alternative to dealing with a disaster. That helps to reduce the risk in your center under a number of different scenarios, as spelled out in more detail in the sidebar on page 9.

With such a comprehensive list of benefits, it's easy to understand why the number of home agents con-

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tinues to increase. Over the past 10 years, the advantages have piled up while most of the key obstacles to success have been addressed — but not all of them.

### Critical Concerns

The potential is promising, the pay-off can be substantial, the concept has proven itself out — and yet, it is not for everyone. The first concern that contact center leaders typically have when starting an at-home agent program is about the technical viability in their environment. This month's Tech Line column (on page 1) provides a complete overview of the technology involved in setting up remote agents. The good news is that hardware and software requirements are not going to hold you back. The industry has enough experience behind it to make it work just about anywhere.

So what are the obstacles you have to address? There are two major ones, and they both involve security. If your center does not maintain any confidential information, and does not perform financial or other sensitive transactions, then security concerns will not be a hindrance. Where confidential information is an issue, though, your two major concerns involve guarding against both high-tech and low-tech crimes.

Your IT staff will handle the high-tech issues. This typically involves locking down home PCs and using the right firewalls. Most technology teams have been installing and upgrading these safeguards for many years, and they likely have experience with remote workers in other parts of the enterprise.

Low-tech security concerns may not sound as onerous, but they could represent the single greatest issue slowing down the implementation of home agent programs. If, for example, you take credit card numbers over the phone, what would stop someone at home from writing the numbers down and selling the information on the street? If your answer to that question is not strong enough to put a customer's mind at ease, then you may have to rethink your strategy. Routing non-sensitive calls to a home agent team might be the answer, but only if you have enough of these and can isolate them easily. (See the Feature Article on page 1 for more on staff-related data security issues.)

## How Home Agents Fit into Your Disaster Recovery Plan

As of this writing, the swine (or H1N1) flu has just reached Level 6 (out of 6) on the pandemic scale. While the number of people infected right now is quite low when compared to the total population, the events that are unfolding exemplify how important it is to have pandemic planning as part of your overall disaster recovery plan. With schools closing, fears rising and officials advising against nonessential travel, the impact in the workplace is already taking shape.

Home agents can be a terrific component of a disaster recovery plan, adding flexibility under a number of different scenarios:

- At the "light" end of the scale, home agents can help a center to maintain satisfactory service levels during localized temporary weather situations, such as a snowstorm.
- Home agents can help you address any of the "building damage" disasters

that can occur (fire, flood, sick building syndrome, etc.). Every home agent you have is one less workstation required at a backup site. With a robust number of home agents, you can limit backup space requirements to housing equipment rather than people.

- At the serious end of the scale, home agents are the most effective way to prepare for a pandemic. Not only can you continue to provide service during an outbreak, but you can also provide the highest degree of safety from infection for your employees.

A home agent plan will not address every disaster. If, for example, all your home agents are local, a hurricane could very well disable your offices and many of your home agents. However, it will provide a great option for many situations — and unlike other components of a typical disaster recovery plan, it is tested on a daily basis.

## Expanding the Applicant Pool

Agents are the lifeblood of any contact center. Hiring the right staff for the job is at or near the top of the list of critical success factors for your operation. Part of the equation related to hiring has to do with the numbers — attract more applicants and you increase your chance for a great hire. Here is how a home agent program can help you to expand the applicant pool:

- Increase the geographical area from which you draw. Even if you require home workers to come into the office a few times a month, you can still expand your search area for applicants. Staff may not be willing to drive 50 miles to your site every day, but driving that distance twice a month could be perfectly acceptable to many applicants.
- Offer more shifts. If you can only offer standard full time shifts in the office, a home agent program can open you up to those workers who have some time restrictions, such as students and stay-at-home moms or dads.
- Tap into the disabled workforce. For some of the differently-abled, getting to an office on a daily basis is difficult or impossible. Yet this can be a stable, productive, reliable workforce, and an at-home arrangement opens your operation to their potential.
- Eliminate transportation problems. Many good applicants do not have a car, or cannot afford the transportation required to get to your office five times a week.

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If you can pass the security hurdle, there are still a number of issues to address before getting started. Yet all of the remaining issues are manageable. If you are ready to tap into the benefits of a home-based staff, some careful planning and discussion is all that is needed to get you on your way.

### Key Considerations

Like any initiative in your center, the deci-

sions you make during the program design phase will have a great impact on success. Some of the questions you need to ask, along with aspects to consider, are listed in the table below.

A home-based agent program can be a great investment for you and a terrific benefit for your staff. Contact center leaders get few opportunities to improve customer satisfaction, employee satisfaction and costs all at one

time, so don't let this one pass you by! 

Jay Minnucci is Founder and President of the independent consulting firm *Service Agility*.

✉ jaym@serviceagility.com

☎ 215-679-5250

## Questions and Considerations for a Home Agent Program

Question	Considerations
How do I select staff for the program?	Successful implementations start by moving experienced office-based agents to the home. Those selected meet the home environment requirements, surpass all performance objectives, and possess the self-discipline required to work at home. Direct hires into home-based positions do not typically occur until the program is well established, if at all.
What must the staff member supply?	The home agent provides the real estate, and you should define the requirements (room with hard-wall separation, noise restriction, etc.). Usually, the company provides all the equipment. Companies will normally provide the furniture, but not always.
How do we monitor and coach staff?	You can consider a requirement to come into the office occasionally – this can range from once a week to once a quarter. But more and more, companies are getting comfortable with managing from a distance, using text messaging and Web-based tools for training and coaching. And since today's phone systems provide the same visibility into performance regardless of location, you will have all the information you need at your fingertips.
Are there any legal issues to consider?	At a minimum, you have to understand how workers' compensation laws apply to home workers in your state. There are likely other legal issues, as well (such as the employee agreement discussed below), so you will need to consult with legal experts as you design the program.
What if an agent starts struggling after moving to a home office?	You should have written agreements with staff when they move to a home office. The agreement should cover not only performance objectives, but also should clearly spell out what the employee is providing and that you reserve the right to visit their workspace to ensure compliance. If the employee is not meeting any of the program requirements, they should understand that the opportunity to work at home can be taken away.
Since commuting costs are eliminated, can I pay staff less?	Most companies do not reduce pay when someone moves from the office to the home. Instead, the home agent is expected to cover some non-traditional hours, and is relied upon for extra paid hours if a disaster strikes.

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### Pipeline Publishing Group, Inc.

PO Box 3467, Annapolis, MD 21403

443-909-6951 | info@contactcenterpipeline.com | [www.contactcenterpipeline.com](http://www.contactcenterpipeline.com)

