

# Convergys Customer Care

## Executive Summary: Home-Based Agents



### MEETING A NEED

With the need for contact center agents growing quickly, studies show that highly educated, flexible and cost-effective home-based agents are likely, over the next decade, to fill the gap.

- The number of customer service representatives in the United States is expected to rise 23 percent between 2004 and 2014, to 2.5 million (US Bureau of Labor Statistics)
- Annual replacement needs for customer service representatives amount to 510,000 positions a year (US Bureau of Labor Statistics)
- Seventy to 80 percent of home-based agents have college degrees, versus 30 to 40 percent of in-house agents (Gartner)
- Contact center costs are reduced 8 to 30 percent by using home-based agents (Gartner)
- Some companies report that home agents have proven to be 15 to 20 percent more effective at up-sell or cross-sell conversions, although these calls typically take longer to achieve these results (Gartner)
- The number of home-based agents is expected to triple by 2010, to 328,000 (IDC)

While home agents may ultimately serve all industries, those industries with particularly strong needs for quality agents and high agent retention—such as technology, telecommunications, cable, business-to-business and automotive—are especially well-suited for the home-agent option.

### THE CONTACT CENTER COMES HOME

With home-based agents, contact centers can offer higher-quality customer interaction and more flexibility in adjusting to demand fluctuations.

Contact centers have become the center of customer care operations. They're handling more transactions, with a greater complexity. So it's increasingly important that they have skilled agents available whenever they're needed. Home-based agents are helping companies get closer to that goal.

More Americans are finding advantages in working at home. And the trend is likely to increase, notes IDC, the market

intelligence firm. As gasoline prices fluctuate, so does the cost of commuting. But high housing costs are making it difficult for workers to live near their offices. Meanwhile, a looming wave of retirees—many with considerable skills and experience—will be looking to supplement their income without the hassle of a commute.

For employers, too, having home-based employees is an attractive option. They benefit from the increased productivity of workers who are not distracted by long commutes. They save on the cost of purchasing or leasing real estate as well as building and maintaining facilities for office-based workers.

### THE HOME AGENT OPTION: HOW IT WORKS

Thanks to advanced technologies, home-based agents who are dispersed over hundreds or even thousands of miles can be just as closely integrated and monitored as agents sitting next to each other in an office. Hard to imagine? Here's how it works.

In a typical setup, the home agent supplies his or her own land-based high-speed Internet access and a suitable home office workspace. The agent is provided with a customized PC, a headset and a secure VPN device used to connect to the contact center's server farm. The contact center's call routing software then funnels calls to the agent, depending on skill profile and availability.

The home agent accesses the same

applications and sees the same scripts as the office-based agent. For the sake of security, the customized PC and accompanying software prevents agents from installing applications, printing, copying or downloading data. For further security, calls can be fully recorded, and software can report unauthorized attempts at data access.

Though they're working from home, home agents remain strongly tethered to their colleagues and supervisor. Data can be collected and managed in exactly the same manner as in an office-based center. Supervisors can record agent calls, or listen to them live. Agents keep in touch with teammates and supervisors through instant messaging.

Home-based employment has proven an appealing option for parents, caretakers, retirees, the disabled and people based in rural areas. For employers, recruiting home-based workers means access to a larger pool of applicants, one less limited by geography or demographics. Critically, these employees often exhibit increased job satisfaction, which has led to reduced attrition and absenteeism. Research by Gartner indicates that home-based contact center agents are more likely to have college degrees and professional qualifications than are agents at brick-and-mortar centers. As a result, recruiting home agents may be an especially good way for an employer to attract employees with specific qualifications, such as licensed insurance agents, registered nurses, accountants and real estate agents.

### A Flexible Workforce

For contact centers, seasonal changes, new product introductions, publicity or an advertising campaign can result in rapid and extreme shifts in demand. This can be a daunting challenge for workforce management, given the nature of shift work and the costs and burdens associated with hiring and firing large numbers of workers.

Home-based workers are well positioned to assist in meeting this challenge. Home agents are more apt to work split shifts, to pick up smaller shifts for overtime and to work hours outside of their normal shifts, all of which facilitate the handling of call spikes.

Home agents can also become an important part of any organization's business continuity plan. Emerging threats such as increased natural disasters, terrorism or a pandemic disease are prompting executives to explore how to continue operations after the loss of a headquarters or other major facility. Home

## LEARNING: TOOLS FOR SUCCESS

For contact center agents, training is not just about studying scripts or systems. It's also a time to build rapport with colleagues and supervisors and to build skills through close interaction with instructors and high-performing tenured agents. Some home-based agent trainings are sorely lacking in these areas, however. A purely Web-based training approach, if poorly designed, risks leaving agents feeling isolated and insufficiently prepared for the challenge of handling live calls.

In Convergys' telecommuting model, home-based agents receive their initial training onsite, along with their contact center-based colleagues. Skills are built through simulations and the instructor's careful monitoring of each agent's strengths and weaknesses. After classroom training, agents spend about a week "nesting" together, taking calls with the assistance of

supervisors. In addition, they are given the opportunity to sit with successful veteran agents and to listen to calls in real time.

Agents work onsite for about a month before they are given the option of working from home—but only if they meet minimum performance standards. If, later on, they fall below these standards, they are called back to the contact center for additional training.

For agents, however, training is not a one-time affair. With products and services constantly changing, agents must continually upgrade their knowledge and skills in order to serve and sell to customers effectively. Toward that end, team leaders can schedule and hold a Web-based continuation training session for their home agents when necessary.

agents can keep open vital lines of communication with customers or other stakeholders such as employees and suppliers.

While home agents may never replace traditional contact centers, they are destined to become an important complement to both offshore or onshore solutions. In addition to the flexibility factor, home agents with more advanced qualifications

are well suited to service higher-value clients and resolve more complex inquiries.

The home agent option requires new approaches to recruiting, training, monitoring and security. Fortunately, new technologies have made this a viable alternative. And the critical need for top-quality customer care agents has made it an idea whose time has come.

For information on our products or services, visit our website at [www.convergys.com](http://www.convergys.com) or call:

- United States  
1 800 344 3000  
1 513 458 1300
- Singapore  
+65 6557 2277
- United Kingdom  
+44 1223 705000
- Brazil  
+55 11 5504 6800

Convergys and the Convergys logo are registered trademarks of Convergys. Convergys refers to Convergys Corporation and its wholly owned subsidiaries. ©2007 Convergys Corporation. All rights reserved.  
ES3001 Home-Based Agents 04-2007