



In Queue

The fun, informative and interesting newsletter for
the call center industry.

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Quotes

"It is no coincidence that in no
known language does the phrase 'As
pretty as an Airport' appear."
-Douglas Adams

Home-Based Agents: The Real and Surreal

The most frequent question I am asked by both call center managers/directors and reporters is "What are the trends in home-based agents." I will share with you what I tell them. Working from home is not for everyone. I have worked from home in the past and too often work bleeds over into family time and family time takes away from work. Let me offer you an example of why people like to keep these lives separate. Working with call centers in the US and in Europe, I have found many that have chosen to literally build benefits into the structure of the call center in an attempt to recruit and retain employees. One such benefit is childcare. On the surface this seems like a great idea. However, in most centers I have researched, all of the models have been a failure. Why? Because as ideal as discounted child care seems, the reality is that when people leave their home and go to work, they take on their work personality. When they come home, they become husband, wife, friend, partner, mother, father, etc., but not worker. People like to keep these lives separate. When a call center worker has a child in daycare within the center, the child has direct access to the parent, making the worker immediately a parent. The same is true for people who work from home. Keeping these lives separate is difficult and most find it easier to escape home and go to work and then escape work and go home. That said, here are some main points about home agents.

- Home based agents are a reality; companies like Jet Blue have made the model work.
- Just because a technology, like Voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP) allows such a model, does not mean it is the right model for everyone.
- A different type of demographic is needed to work from home. Most of the people have to be self-starters meaning that most will be older, more mature, and more experienced than a traditional call center agent.
- Managing call center workers from home is not the same as managing call center workers in cubicles outside your office.

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Fun Facts

In a recent NACC survey of call center workers, a question asked if the respondent was considering their call center jobs as a career.

Surprisingly 56% said "Yes" with the remaining 44% "No." To keep your best agents it is imperative that you have a career-path option for them since 56% are expecting to make this job a career.

Source: NACC State of the Industry Report #3 2005: A Labor Survey of the Industry, p. 42

Picture of the Week



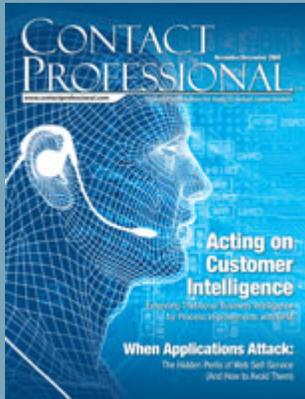
This image is a teaser and a reward for loyal readers. Keep this image in mind, don't forget about it. In a few months I will get back to you about what this image means and the exciting project behind it.

There is much that is conveyed through non-verbal communication that will have to be translated into new management styles. Additionally, some managers have told me that they do not want to be responsible for agents that are at home because they believe they do not really have control over that agent's success or failure, but realize that if there is a failure, they will still be held responsible.

- Work at home agents are great for offering people flextime, for a company who does not want to spend capital on a new center if they are at capacity, for disabled persons who cannot make it into a call center, women who are pregnant and nearing birth, and many other scenarios. However, working from home agents are not a panacea for all centers or all problems. It is a market, it is going to grow, but it will not supplant the existing brick building and endless rows of cubicles anytime soon just as telecommuting has not replaced the need to show up for 8am meetings on Monday at the office.

Your Call Center as a Restaurant

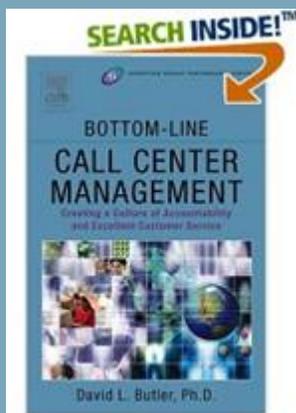
I am constantly seeking out metaphors to talk to people about their call centers or to explain to people that call centers come in all sorts of sizes, shapes, colors, and styles. One such metaphor I used recently was to compare call centers to the food and beverage industry, the place I started working when I was 16 years old. People have choices in what they want to eat, where they want to eat, and how they want to eat it. Similar choices are made with call centers. Is your call center a 4-star restaurant, with high end service, multiple people waiting on you, and food made only after you have ordered it, but with a hefty bill at the end? Or is your call center like a mid range chain restaurant like Chili's or The Olive Garden where people get a good meal, decent service, and for a mid range to expensive price? Maybe your call center is more like a fast food establishment, like McDonalds. Food is prepared in advance (hello scripts) and special orders to upset us, but if you want to fill your stomach with average food that tastes the same no matter where you go and is inexpensive, then this is the place for you. Another potential is the old reliable vending machine. Maybe you are not really interested in taking calls anymore but would rather the customers become more self-service oriented, like vending machines, put it out there, they put their money in, make the selection, and shazam, instant food or drink. Clearly the fastest way to get something that someone needs. Which one of these restaurant analogies best represents your call center?



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Elections and Call Centers

Call centers played a role in recent politics and elections, within the US and overseas. Within the US, the *Billings Gazette* (11-6-06) reported that candidate for US Senate, Jon Tester, used a purple 18 wheeler trailer known as "Barney" as a mobile action call center for his campaign making up to 10,000 calls per day with 24 staffers on the phones. The idea is to drum up support, via the phone, for the get out the vote effort since it was believed, correctly so, that the candidate and the party that gets more of their people to the polls will win the election. Interestingly, the Montana senate election was close; Tester won 49% of the vote with his opponents winning 48% and 3% respectively. Because Tester won, as a Democrat, this gave the US senate a margin of 51 Democrats and 49 Republicans, shifting the balance of power from one party to the other. If Tester would have lost, the 50-50 tie in the Senate, keeping the Republicans in control of the Senate. In short, call centers, specifically the "Barney" call center has played a pivotal role in changing the political landscape of the US during this election cycle.

Overseas, in Russia, call centers are also being leveraged by politicians, but in a slightly different manner says the ITAR-TASS news agency (10-22-06). President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, is leveraging what is known as the "unified call center" which takes questions by phone and the internet for the president. The president (or more likely his advisors) chooses the "most important and interesting questions" to address in a live interview on television and simulcast on the radio. The fifth such interview occurred on October 25th of this year. As of October 22nd, the call center had received 447,972 messages with 432,567 coming in by phone and 15,405 by email for President Putin. Though Russia is quite culturally different in many ways from the West, it is clear that the Russians are learning how to leverage the power of toll free numbers and call centers for political gain.

Call Centers Misunderstood

In a recent article (10-22-06) in the *Herald Tribune* (Southwest Florida) the journalist, Devona Walker, was examining the idea of falling incomes and the growing divide between the wealthy and the poor. Within the article the author quotes James Sherk of the Heritage Foundation (a conservative group). Sherk, in describing some of the trade offs in globalization states, "Sure we are sending call center jobs and tech support overseas...but look at what we

American's are doing: The research and development, the creative end of the process, the knowledge and information jobs that reward skills and reward high levels of education."

There are several issues I have with Sherk's quote. One, not all call center jobs are going overseas. In fact, if James were to read the NACC State of the Industry Reports, he would know that more jobs have been created within the US in the call center industry than any other market. Additionally, the presumption in his quote is that call center workers are offering little or no value, most are poorly educated, and are not part of the "information jobs" to which he refers. In fact, most call centers do add value, and are recreating themselves to offer more value to the customer over time. Additionally, most call center workers, according to our research, have a year or two of college completed beyond a high school diploma, far from being near the lower end of education. My fault is less with Sherk and the Heritage Foundation since I believe he is actually stating is a common perception about call centers. The fault lays with us, as an industry, for doing a poor job at educating the public on what call centers actually do, the number of people that they employ, the education level of the workers, and that in fact that call centers are part of the information technology value chain.

Please help me, the NACC, and the full call center industry and community to get the word out about call centers, what they really do and the value that they add to companies, communities, and the US economy.

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