

How to Make the Telework Model Work (Aug 11)

Having the right IT infrastructure, technology, training platform, and employee forecasting/scheduling tools is the key.

Tue, 08/16/2011 - 00:00

By Rob Duncan, COO, Alpine Access, and Simon Angove, CEO, GMT Corporation

In today's mobile information age, remote working is now a business imperative. According to a recent Microsoft survey of more than 4,500 U.S. information workers, more than half reported that their companies have a formal telework policy. As Microsoft Corporate Vice President Ron Markezich says, "Ten years ago, telework was seen more as an employee benefit. Today, businesses around the world are seeing telework as a necessity." The benefits are easy to see, but many companies are hesitant to explore this seemingly revolutionary style of contact center management. Implementing an effective "work from home" policy in your contact center cloud will benefit both your workforce and your bottom line.

With higher gas prices and longer commutes, telework is a viable option to give employees better work-life balance, especially since the latest advances in supporting technologies enable remote working effectively. For employers, telework provides access to a larger talent pool worldwide, greater employee diversity, and lower overhead costs. As such, the telework model is a win-win for employees and employers.

Founded on the at-home model, Alpine Access, a virtual contact center services and solutions provider headquartered in Denver, proactively implemented telework more than 10 years ago. Alpine Access pioneered the at-home/telework model for the call center industry to take advantage of the operational efficiencies and risk-adjusted cost model to deliver better service levels through the highest quality employees. By having the right IT infrastructure, technology, training platform, and employee forecasting/scheduling tools, you can make the telework/at-home model work for your business.

IT Starts with the Right Infrastructure

Once you have decided telework is right for your business, you must deploy the right technology to effectively manage your workforce and reduce operating costs—all while improving customer satisfaction and employee retention. Cloud-based business collaboration technologies, such as Microsoft Office 365 and GMT On-Demand, enable remote working and provide significant cost savings.

As part of the technology considerations, you should develop or leverage social media platforms to enhance your company's corporate culture through the at-home model. For example, Alpine Access created a social media platform with a "virtual water cooler" where agents can set up their own online groups to socialize with colleagues and receive feedback and support from team leads—mirroring similar interactions to a brick-and-mortar call center but in a virtual setting.

With e-mail, texting, instant messaging, and social media, remote workers can stay tapped in with their managers, and by leveraging on-demand workforce management applications, you can even schedule employees in the right place at the right time—making the at-home model work.

Training Your Most Important Asset - The Virtual Workforce

It only takes one bad customer experience to change the perception of your brand. Your employees are your brand ambassadors. To increase retention and motivate employees, training is the foundation to your success.

We've all sat through day-long corporate training sessions, but how much did you really learn after a day of lecturing? In the past, everyone was taught the same way, at the same pace, in a brick-and-mortar classroom. In fact, most at-home providers take the same approach and simply put their training content online while conducting lectures over the phone. The result is highly isolated employees who find it harder to learn, high attrition rates, low learning retention, and inefficient class time.

In the contact center, poor training is the No. 1 reason agents quit within the first 30 days. As such, Alpine Access created a proprietary virtual learning program called Alpine Access University for its agents to increase knowledge retention in less time. This cloud-based e-learning platform takes training to a new level; its learning programs combine interactive instructor-facilitated classes with personalized, self-directed courseware and socially based learning. Alpine Access found that its University program shortened training time, reduced attrition, increased speed to proficiency, and resulted in best-in-class employees.

Alpine Access University is organized around three core components: learning design and development, learning communities, and learning technology—creating a virtual learning environment to support the at-home agent model. Alpine Access began with a foundation of customer service fundamentals and best practices, then layered on company- and industry-specific information. By using virtual communities of learning to support different learning styles, Alpine Access University reduced training time by 20 percent and lowered employee attrition by 17 percent—saving time and money.

Using Alpine Access University as a model, here are several best practices when creating and delivering an effective virtual training program:

- Provide opportunities for your current trainers and subject matter experts to co-facilitate with expert online instructors.
- Encourage employees to engage with and solve real-world problems within a community of other learners and teachers.
- Remember that training never ends. Employees continue to learn as they work, so build a strong social network that enables remote learners to enjoy the support of a peer-to-peer community.

Scheduling and Forecasting in Balance

Every phone call with a customer is an opportunity to deliver a sense of personal satisfaction and leave them with a positive impression of your brand. For contact center agents, like many “transaction” employees, staffing is a balancing act—overstaffed means your bottom line suffers; understaffed means your service levels take a hit. Thus, effective workforce management balances staffing needs with forecasted customer demands—and delivers better customer service at a lower cost.

The right scalable, on-demand workforce management system can help you reach the following business goals:

- Support a distributed workforce globally by communicating to each employee in his or her local time;
- Manage workload better by identifying the at-home information workers who are available for immediate extra hours and how have the skills needed per task, send a mass notification to them, and limit the number who sign up for these hours.
- Schedule workload based on employee preferences, allowing your workforce to increase their availability both on a one-time and long-term basis. Also, giving the agents a tool that helps them define their own availability can drastically reduce the amount of overhead spent on dictating schedule template requirements.

An on-demand workforce management solution provides all the benefits of an on-premise workforce management solution—reduced labor costs, increased revenues, and improved customer

satisfaction—without a large, upfront capital investment, further improving the financial benefits of using the at-home model.

With the right IT infrastructure, technology, training platform and employee forecasting/scheduling tools, the telework model work can easily work for your business. As Microsoft's Ron Markezich recently stated, "The ongoing rise of telework reflects the new realities of today's mobile information age," and this model will continue to gain momentum as it enables people to conduct business from anywhere in the world at any time.

Rob Duncan is chief operating officer of Alpine Access, a provider of virtual contact center solutions and services. Simon Angove is chief executive officer of GMT Corporation, a provider of workforce optimization solutions for the contact center, branch office, and back office department.

Training Magazine, ©2011 Lakewood Training