



Ask Affy

Need advice? Ask Affy!

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I recently took on the new role of pioneering a home agent program for our call centre. How can I ensure that the agents selected FEEL the same sense of “team” that travels with working in a contact centre?

A

Excellent question, Andy, and one that we often hear from our clients. While we have taken great strides in figuring out the technology and processes to support our home-agent programs, we still struggle with the most important element of our service strategy - how to engage and motivate our agents.

In a typical “bricks and mortar” site we know the disadvantages: long commutes, transportation costs and decreased flexibility to attend to personal items. Eliminating these from our work life may sound attractive, however, there are intangible trade-offs that shouldn't be overlooked, like feeling the cultural buzz of an organization or the social aspect of working side by side with colleagues. These are extremely important and should not be underestimated.

Many centres that have been successful in launching home-agent programs do the following:

1. Communicate a realistic picture to an agent of what to expect.
2. Take time to launch a pilot program to test and learn.
3. Take steps to replicate the best parts of being in an office.

Let's begin with the first step. Those who qualify for the home-agent program complete a self-assessment exercise to help them understand their own social needs. Self-awareness coupled with an honest and clear dialogue will help them make an informed decision.

Launch your pilot in two phases. The first phase is on site at your location where a “home office” is simulated. Being isolated from the rest of the centre will give your agents a taste of what it feels like to have telephone and electronic media as the only means of communication and an understanding of the competency required to fix their own basic technical issues.

This simulation provides an opportunity to assess if the agent is the right fit prior to investing in the technology and resources required for the transition. The second phase would be the actual transition to the home.

Lastly, integrate as many leading practices into your program to keep engagement and enthusiasm high. The practices listed below are integral for success:

Set clear expectations and hold home agents accountable for their results.

There should be no difference in performance management program between in-house and home agents. The key here is that all agents are clear on what is expected of them.

Simulate a daily “pre-shift” huddle with a “good morning meeting”.

Incorporate simple video and Web conferencing technology to allow the “virtual team” to see their teammates and say good morning to them every day. This simple practice reinforces that everyone is part of an extended team and reminds them to use the tools available to reach out for support.

Give home agents ongoing coaching.

As their coach, it’s important that you “get on the court”. Leaders can’t establish the foundational credibility that they need to be an effective coach if they have a superficial knowledge of what the agents face every day. Use live remote monitoring to listen to a call and then simulate a side-by-side coaching session directly after by using the same coaching methodology you would with your in-house agents.

Provide subject-matter experts for the same hours that home agents work.

An intangible benefit to being in an office environment is having the ability to lean over to your buddy and ask a quick question. To make your home agents feel fully supported, use virtual chat rooms, connectivity to instant messaging and easy access to real-time escalation support that complement their hours.

Include home agents in incentives and awards.

Publish results with the same frequency that you would in-house. If you’re using a team board and updating it daily, replicate an electronic version of the team board that gets sent out daily. If you’re doing timed or random incentive initiatives on the floor, find a way to mimic that electronically.

Bring home agents on-site at regular intervals.

To help the home agents stay connected to your company culture, allocate workstations for them, and ensure that you have a structured agenda and purpose for each visit. Make these visits worth the home agents' time...they didn't drive across town for a group hug! If your home agents visit your call centre each month, they feel that they belong to the company, they can bond with their support teams, and they can meet their team leaders for one-on-one coaching.

Andy, you have stepped up to an exciting and rewarding challenge! By following the guiding principles of replicating the call centre environment to the "home environment", you should be well on your way to a successful home agent program. Good luck!



Laura Soletto, Senior Advisor & Master Coach, wrote the response to the Ask Affy column this month for Afshan Kinder, who is a Partner with Switchgear Consulting, one of Canada's foremost consulting groups for contact centres specializing in accelerating revenue growth, lowering costs, and taking Employee and Customer Satisfaction to a higher level. Results are achieved by unleashing the natural leadership of front-line managers for in-house and outsourced centres.