

The Work-at-home Agent

Improve engagement and business
continuity

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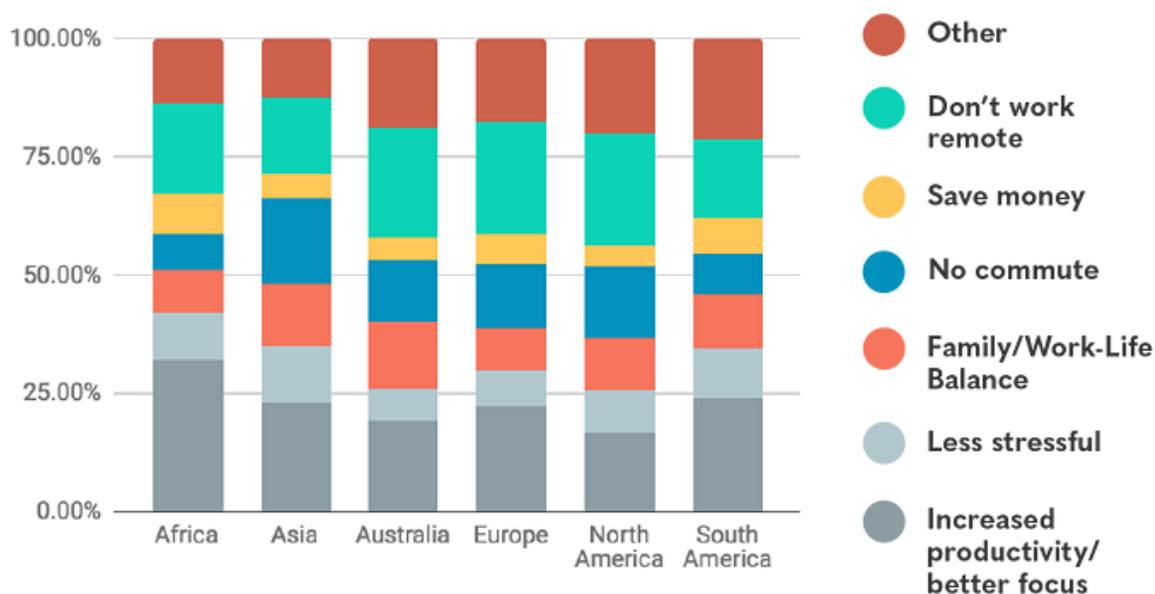
This paper discusses benefits and options for adopting a home-based agent model. Many factors contribute to the desire for businesses to invest in a work-at-home program including higher agent productivity, reduced attrition, broader talent pool, lower operational costs and response preparedness.

Introduction: The proof is in the numbers

For contact centers, the home-based model has continued to develop as an established trend. Most contact centers are already using at-home agents or considering implementing an at-home agent program. These agent-centric operations offer access to automated remote technologies that make the lives of both agents and customers easier.

According to a special analysis of the U.S. Census and Bureau of Labor Statistics by [Global Workplace Analytics](#), between 2005 and 2017, the number of people telecommuting increased by 159%.

There's good reason for such a focus on working from home. According to a 2019 analysis by Owl Labs, global employees' top reasons for working remotely are: increased productivity/better focus, to avoid a commute, and to achieve better work life balance. The same report shows that people who work from home at least once a month are 24% more likely to report feeling happier and more productive at their jobs.



The real motivation for deploying and managing the at-home agent is based on one simple principle: improved agent satisfaction leads to increased customer satisfaction which results in improved customer loyalty. The predominant reason for implementing a telework model is to increase agent satisfaction and retention.

More Flexibility for Better Business

An at-home agent solution provides mutually beneficial flexibility to both the business and the agent.

Part of delivering outstanding customer service is empowering agents to not just do their job well, but to enjoy the job they are doing. **86%** of CX executives rank Employee Experience (EX) as the #1 factor in delivering Customer Experience (CX)⁸. Agent satisfaction is dramatically improved when an agent experiences the benefits delivered through the at-home model: flexibility, improved work/life balance, a

more comfortable working environment, and a crucial decrease in expenses related to commute time and costs.

For many businesses, the core reason for implementing a telework model is to increase agent satisfaction and retention. “A nine-to-five job in an office is out of the question... I don’t think I could put a price tag on being available for my kids – working from home is a godsend,” comments Amy R., a Frontline Call Center agent. “I save over \$300 per month on not having to buy gas, eat lunch out, purchase work clothes or pay for dry cleaning. Being an at-home agent is like getting a raise and adding hours to my day. It simply makes my life easier.”

[In a recent study](#), among agents who report being *very satisfied* (27%) with their jobs, 36% of those select ability to work from home among a leading factor contributing to high satisfaction. For those who report being stressed *most of the time or always*, insufficient paid time off is the leading cause of stress, followed by having too many channels to support, not being able to work from home, and low or noncompetitive compensation.

Often the at-home agent can draw from their own experience with the product or situation to more effectively address a customer’s needs. Companies can match an agent’s background to their knowledge of a product or industry to more effectively meet the interests of the customers.

High-quality agents with specialized expertise is a key component to driving customer satisfaction and therefore customer loyalty – no matter where they work. The good news: companies employing at-home agents can choose from an expanded labor pool. Without geographic restrictions, a highly-skilled agent can be recruited from anywhere in the country. This is part of the reason the at-home agent model attracts more educated and experienced individuals.

It is important to keep in mind, not all agents are good candidates for the at-home model. It is essential to recruit someone who learns quickly, is reliable, enjoys working alone, is self-motivated, can manage their time well, pays attention to detail, and possesses strong communication skills.

Responding to the Customer

Contact center analyst firm, Frost & Sullivan, reports the median age of an at-home worker is 38, while the average age of an on-premises call center agent is 23. Additionally, more than 80% of home agents have some college-level education; this is only true of 35% of agents in brick-and-mortar centers³.

Given the at-home agent has had more life experiences, they are typically more responsive and empathetic to customer needs. For example, most of us learn a new level of patience as we become a parent or perhaps start working full time. And, with a deeper understanding of the customer comes a higher-quality employee.

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Since the at-home worker often seeks out this kind of position for personal reasons; the inherent benefit to the company is a strongly committed, more loyal agent. The same Stanford University research found there was an overall 50% decrease in attrition among home-based workers. Many companies have reported a sharp increase in retention rates, above 80% or more with at-home agents, while traditional call centers agents’ retention is dramatically lower, less than 25%³.

It is hard than ever to keep staff motivated and engaged and retain them for the long haul. Based on our [research](#), satisfaction has a high correlation with engagement. Despite many stressors and challenges, 42% of respondents report being extremely engaged with their organizations; this correlates strongly (90%) with those who report being satisfied or very satisfied. And, satisfied, engaged agents deliver

quality service that engages and satisfies customers; these same agents are more likely to be motivated to stay in their current jobs and make a career out of customer service.

Once the decision is made to allow agents to work from home, and providing the right tools and continued engagement, the employee normally wants to do whatever they can to keep the position. The enhanced flexibility often ends up being a better match for their lifestyle, and therefore increases their commitment to your company.

On the employer side, there is now also an immediate ability to respond to spikes in call volume with an at-home worker who can take calls on an as-needed basis. Call abandons are reduced, and companies can offer a greater range of open hours to receive inbound calls across all time zones.

Lower Operational Costs

At-home agents tend to be more productive than their office-based equivalents. According to a Global Analytics report⁵ teleworkers measure 35-40% more productive. A [two-year study](#) by Stanford University found that there was an impressive increase in work productivity among people who worked from home, as much as a full day's work each week. Not only are they gaining time daily by doing away with a commute, they are able to stay more focused with less distractions when working from home.

In 2018, there was an estimated \$5 billion in [cost savings](#) for US companies with employees who worked remotely part time. A big chunk of the savings [can be attributed](#) to the cost to maintain a brick-and-mortar center. According to [PGI News](#), the average real estate savings for a full time remote worker is \$10,000 per employee per year.

These cost savings don't just add up, the bottom-line impact is invaluable. Companies receive a greater opportunity for increased revenue from the upturn in agent satisfaction for less than it was costing with a contact center.

Business Continuity

Unfortunately, disasters happen. Whether it is weather related, an illness outbreak, or terrorism, contact centers need to account for all possibilities in their Disaster Recovery/Business Continuity plans. A home-based workforce further ensures operational stability. An executable recovery plan in the instance of disaster at an office-based facility will greatly increase the value and reliability of the company. The ability to distribute agents in different locations will not only ensure execution of a disaster recovery plan but will also more directly ensure disaster avoidance.

"If we have a snowstorm that makes getting to work difficult for our Raleigh office, we can send agents to another location to continue taking calls or they can work from home," says Jeff. "I like to call it our 'MASH unit,' because we can literally pick up our whole call center, move it elsewhere and never miss a beat. We've even taken phone calls from the back seat of a van driving down the highway." "I'm confident in CXone's ability to service our customers if a disaster happens," he says. "It also reinforces our company's dedication to customer service, because I no longer have to make difficult calls to our affiliates to explain why our contact center is down again. Jeff Kennon Director of Customer Experience NeoNova"

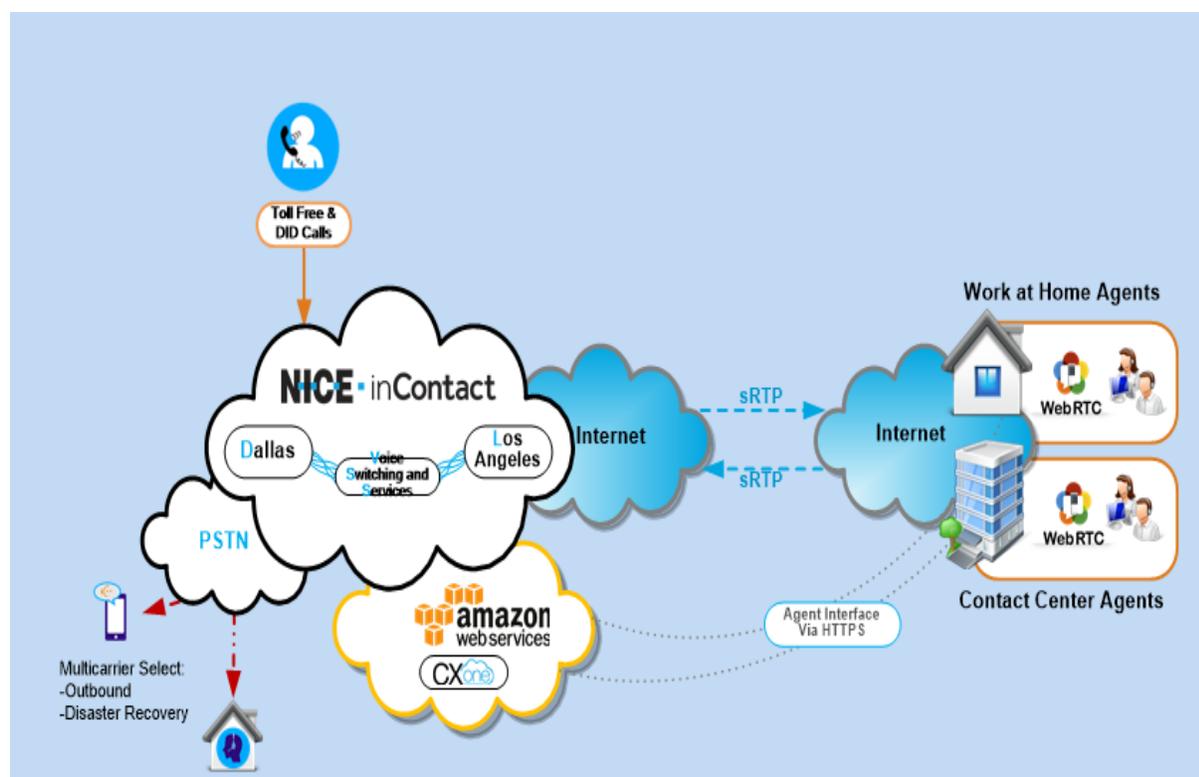
Whether recovering from a temporary outage or a more long-term natural disaster, at-home agent flexibility gives a peace of mind that company functions can continue to move forward, and customer's needs will be met.

Having agents at-home will also result in reduced absenteeism. During the high-risk flu season, for example, on-site employees are more likely to get sick and increase the spread of contagious illness. At-home workers, on the other hand, greatly decrease this potential problem. During a pandemic this same arrangement can ensure reduced spread and continued operations.

The At-home Model

Traditionally, there are two options available when utilizing the at-home agent model: a traditional carrier solution (premises-based), or a cloud- (network-based) solution. Which option is best suited for an at-home agent model?

While a premises-based solution has traditionally been the most practiced, it is often an overwhelmingly expensive option for most contact centers. A cloud-based solution is designed for at-home agent capability, without the need for hardware. The networked-based solution handles the IVR, CTI, ACD and recording capability functions in an efficient manner with quick on-demand installation.



And the contact-center-as-a-service (CCaaS) is responsible for upgrades and maintenance of the hardware and software. A well-architected hosted solution does not impact existing on-site infrastructure and produces unlimited options for where employees can work. Calls are delivered to the next available skilled-agent regardless of their geography.

Value propositions for CCaaS:

- Rapid access to state-of-the-art technology
- Consistently updated with new developments
- Avoids technology lock-in, ever-green
- Ability to scale as business needs change from month- to-month
- Flexible/customizable
- Improved security, performance, availability
- Built-in business continuity, disaster recovery, resiliency

Cloud solutions offer a wide range of flexible management. Contact center managers and IT departments gain total control over which features and reports each at-home agent can access. These security features allow enterprises to share their contact center technology resources among different business units, locations and customers without compromising data privacy or the unique contact handling needs of call queues.

A Platform of Products

Having the right technology with the ability to route and deliver interactions to remote agents lays the foundation for an at-home model. But a truly successful at-home model should include a comprehensive platform of products to optimally manage the at-home agent.

The right hiring tool should be a vital part of your call center platform. It is essential to help reduce attrition and to identify candidates with the right skills, personality traits and cognitive abilities to ensure best fit for both your organization and for a remote role.

Once the right candidate is hired, an effective training program is key to educate agents on how to do their job well. Without the right technology, effective onboard training could be a major challenge in staffing at-home agents. But, leveraging cloud-based coaching, quality management, and training software makes it easy to provide agents with personalized, virtual training regardless of where they are located. Virtual training programs offer targeted information, while certifying agent proficiency through testing and certification.

Like training, effective workforce management contributes to the overall experience and satisfaction of the at-home agent. Workforce management (WFM) technology gives agents the ability to have a voice in the scheduling process to balance their needs, regardless of location. Managers can effectively track and optimize staffing, analyze call flow demand, seamlessly communicate schedule changes, and monitor schedule adherence of at-home agents.

When your agents aren't physically sitting in your contact center, you can't use their smiling faces post-interaction to keep a pulse on how well customer call are going. But quality management and survey tools are a great mechanism to understand immediate customer feedback to agents and managers to effectively pinpoint service improvement opportunities and highlight successful processes.

A More Valuable Outcome

The benefits of the home-based model are compelling. From cost efficiency to disaster recovery to reduced attrition, the established trend of the home-based model resonates with many of us. But why are these benefits so worthwhile? Because within these benefits is an even more valuable outcome.

For many companies, the real motivation for deploying and managing the at-home agent is based on one simple principle: improved agent satisfaction leads to increased customer satisfaction which results in improved customer loyalty.

With the customer care market continually evolving, the method for increasing loyalty, of both new and current customers, is an ever-present discussion. Measures to stay on top of consumer behavior and market competition are increasingly difficult.

Conclusion

The options available to customize your work-at-home system are nearly limitless. Customer loyalty and retention give companies a competitive advantage when times are tough. In a down economy, companies need to reduce their capital expenditures, but certainly can't afford to reduce their investment in the quality of service in their contact centers. In fact, just the opposite is more likely the case. The at-home agent model has shown proven benefits for contact centers, most notably in customer loyalty and employee retention. NICE inContact believes the at-home worker model will only continue to grow, and that a hosted CCaaS platform provides the right solution for growth.

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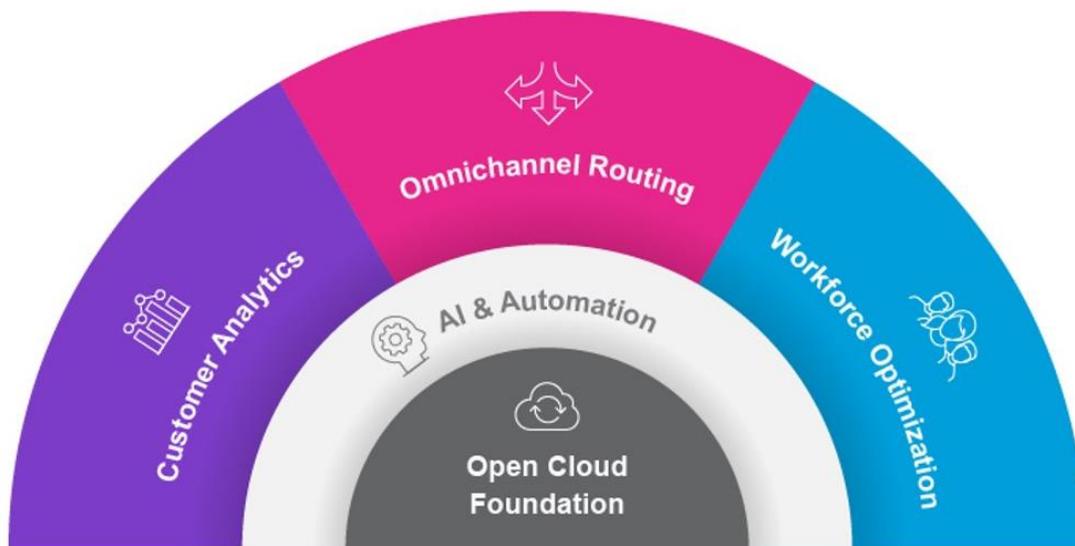
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