Remote Contact Center 101

9 Steps for Achieving Success

Contents

Today, it is more than possible to operate a remote contact center that provides top-notch customer service. The benefits of a remote contact center are numerous. As compared to an on-premises call center, remote contact centers are less expensive to operate. Companies can recruit agents from a wider range of geographic locations, and may employ agents who otherwise could not work for you. Employees enjoy greater flexibility in their work by being able to work from home, which can be particularly useful for scheduling employees to work outside of standard business hours.

The consulting firm Booz, Allen, Hamilton recently performed a study of remote contact centers that quantified the benefits of utilizing remote agents. The attrition rate for remote agents was only 10 percent, significantly lower than the attrition rate for on-premises agents. Remote agents were 25 percent more productive, and the average age of an agent was significantly higher. In general, older agents have the maturity and work experience to provide better customer service than younger agents. And because the recruitment pool for remote agents is much larger, organizations can be more selective in their hiring processes.

Remote agents have a 10% attrition rate, which is significantly lower than for on-premises agents, and at-home agents are 25% more productive.

Booz, Allen, Hamilton

Clearly, remote contact centers offer decided advantages. However, there can also be unique challenges. By following these best practices for call center management, companies can maximize their prospects for success.

1. Obtain the right tools.

To set your contact center up for success, you'll need to equip remote agents with the right tools to perform their job. Basic requirements include:

- **Computer, headset and Internet connection:** Since most modern call centers are VoIP-based, a quality Internet connection is essential. Many companies provide these technological capacities to remote agents, as this can simplify troubleshooting processes for the IT department.

- **Call center software:** Most companies opt for web-based call center software applications that agents can easily access on their computers without having to install additional software.

- **Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software:** CRM helps agents perform better by providing them with detailed information about every customer they speak with. A web-based CRM program is a contact center necessity.

- **Call recording:** For purposes of quality assurance, employee evaluation, and training, you will need to have mechanisms in place for recording every call. Most call center software programs include this feature.

- **Collaboration tools:** Just because employees are working remotely doesn't mean that they're not part of a larger team. To instill a collaborative work ethic, use chat and video conferencing tools so that managers and employees can stay connected.

2. Use workforce management tools.

To manage the logistical operations of your remote contact center, you will need workforce management (WFM) tools. These tools allow managers to not only create schedules, but also to monitor adherence to schedules in real time. Many WFM solutions are specifically designed for use by contact centers.

Workforce management (WFM) tools allow managers to not only create schedules, but also to monitor adherence to schedules in real time.

A quality software program can even help companies optimize scheduling by taking into consideration patterns of call volume, agent availability and flexibility, and other critical factors when generating schedules. In short, a high-quality WFM program is essential to take advantage of the flexibility offered by a remote contact center.

Here are some critical features to look for in a WFM software solution:

- Forecasting and scheduling
- Performance management
- Real time adherence
- Agent notifications and web access
- Automated WFM
- At-home scheduling
- Real time dashboards

COMPARE BUSINESS PRODUCTS

- Vacation and overtime planners

3. Start a robust recruitment and hiring pipeline.

The right customer service agents will make your remote contact center thrive, so it is especially critical that you develop procedures for recruiting the best candidates. One advantage of operating a call center remotely as opposed to on-premises is that the pool of available candidates automatically expands. Some best practices for hiring and recruitment:

Think carefully about the qualities you're looking for in agents: Since you can afford to be more selective in hiring agents, you have the ability to more narrowly define the parameters of whom you would like to hire. Consider your company's goals and culture. What kinds of individuals would best fit into your business?

Recruit widely: To widen the pool of potential employees, advertise job openings widely. Online recruitment (with social media or paid advertisements) can be an effective tool that brings in many applicants. Think globally in your recruitment practices. Hiring international agents can bring many benefits to your team, including increased flexibility in time zones.

Be open to a wide range of applicants: Critical qualities for a customer service agent include strong communication skills, an amiable personality, the ability to work independently, and an appreciation of teamwork. In identifying applicants that possess these attributes, don't be afraid to go outside of the box a little. Employees with accents can be excellent customer service agents, as can part-time workers. While technical abilities are important for many customer service positions, those can be learned more easily than so-called "soft" skills.

With the right agents in place, your remote contact center is positioned for success.

4. Provide quality training.

Training serves several critical functions. First and most obviously, it prepares employees for the job. But training also is important because it helps initiate new employees into the culture of your company. This is particularly critical when onboarding work-from-home employees.

When onboarding work-from-home employees, it is important to develop a standardized training protocol that is both helpful and true to the ethos of your company.

Develop a standardized training protocol that is both helpful and true to the ethos of your company. So don't just give new employees a 100-page manual and leave it at that. Training videos can be a great tool, as can written materials, infographics, etc. In your videos, teach through concrete examples. Going through demo call scenarios can be very helpful for new agents.

And don't just make training a one-time thing. Ongoing education helps employees to improve their skills, while also building company culture.

5. Use call center metrics.

Measuring the performance of your contact center and agents is critical. Most call center software solutions will provide tools for data collection and analytics, including in many cases dashboards to measure performance in real time. These are some Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to watch out for:

- **First call resolution:** What proportion of calls are resolved without having to transfer or return the call?

- **Percentage of calls blocked:** What percentage of callers received a busy signal?

- **Average time in queue:** How long did callers have to wait on hold, on average?

- **Average abandonment rate:** What proportion of callers hang up before reaching an agent?

- **Average handle time:** On average, how long is a call?

Other metrics that are critical for a remote contact center include service level, agent turnover rate, average speed of answer, and schedule adherence.

It is important to note that many agents dislike having their performance measured by quantitative metrics alone. For this reason, it is a good idea to clearly define expectations and evaluation procedures.

6. Listen in on calls with call monitoring.

Call monitoring is a critical tool for quality assurance and for providing employees with the training and guidance they need to succeed.

To make optimal use of call monitoring tools, don't just plan to listen in on a call whenever managers have the time. You need to implement a system for maximum effectiveness. Here are some tips:

> **To make optimal use of call monitoring tools, don't just plan to listen in on a call whenever managers have the time.**

- **Clearly communicate the purpose of call monitoring to your agents.** From the perspective of an agent, call monitoring can be terrifying. To ensure that call monitoring serves its intended purpose, make sure employees understand that call monitoring exists to help them succeed rather than to take note of failure. Oftentimes, it is a good idea to incorporate live call monitoring into the training process.

- **Designate a quality assurance team.** Most contact center managements spend so much time putting out fires that they may not have a whole lot of extra time to devote to quality assurance. To ensure that call monitoring doesn't fall by the

wayside, assign a team (or at least an individual) to monitor and score calls. When agents are provided with consistent feedback about job performance, they are better able to develop their abilities.

- **Develop a standardized procedure for scoring call quality.** When formulating your standards, keep your most important KPIs in mind.

- **Use call monitoring to get to know your customers**. Call monitoring isn't just a tool for improving contact center performance, but can also help to shape your entire business strategy. If you're consistently hearing similar frustrations from customers, consider how your business can effectively address them. Even satisfied customers can provide you with ideas for marketing and other critical business functions.

When you take advantage of call monitoring, your entire business becomes better.

7. Implement best practices for employee management.

High agent attrition can easily torpedo a remote contact center. Hiring and training new agents consumes time and other resources, while an excess of agents finding their footing will hamper operations. In order to retain customer service agents, create a working environment that is helpful and supportive.

Good communication is key. Make sure you clearly establish expectations with all new employees. Important considerations include (but are by no means limited to) procedures

for troubleshooting, employment status, scheduling policies, job responsibilities, and protocols for escalating calls to supervisors.

Managers should form a personal relationship with each remote agent, and regular contact should be part of the manager/agent relationship.

Managers should form a personal relationship with each remote agent, and regular contact should be part of the manager/agent relationship. Let agents know what they're doing well and where they need to improve. Conducting weekly online meetings is an effective way not only to impart necessary information, but also to build team camaraderie between remote workers.

When employees perform well, be sure to reward their efforts. A simple "good job" can do a lot to make an employee feel positively about their work. Great performance over an extended period of time may warrant a bonus or another reward. There are lots of ways, big and small, to let employees know that their work is appreciated.

8. Utilize a good CRM system and train agents in how to use it effectively.

CRM (Customer Relationship Management) software is a crucial tool in any customer service agent's arsenal. With CRM, agents can gain access to a 360-degree view of a customer, including demographic information, purchase records, and records of prior interactions with the company.

To make optimal use of CRM, select a high-quality software program that meets your business needs. When working with remote agents, it is almost always best to select a SaaS (web-based) program that agents can access through a computer. SaaS solutions eliminate the hassle of needing to install and update software programs on individual computers. Mobile CRM capacity may also be important for contact centers with remote agents.

Develop standardized procedures for recording customer interactions in the CRM program. Many programs even allow full call recordings to be associated with customer records.

Not only should you provide new agents with training in how to use CRM during the onboarding period, but it is also useful to provide ongoing training so that more experienced agents can learn about all of the features that CRM has to offer.

9. Provide employees with opportunities to connect with each other.

Working from home can be an isolating experience for many employees, so it is critical to make employees feel like part of a team even when they're working from the living room. Many remote contact centers benefit from providing agents with chat systems and message boards so that they can be connected to each other. This provides employees

with more vested interest in your company and provides them with opportunities to learn from one another.

Other ways to increase connectivity include daily newsletters, video conferencing, special events, and even in-person events if possible.

Don't be concerned by limiting interactions to business. Giving employees a venue to share pet photos and other trivia can boost team morale. Remember that in a non-virtual workplace, employees bond with one another socially as part of doing their jobs. Remote workers should be provided comparable opportunities.

Virtual Contact Centers: Worth the Risk

Although there are some unique challenges that come with implementing and managing a remote contact center, increasing numbers of companies are succeeding. Following these best practices will help your remote contact center get off on the right foot.

References

"How to Hire and Manage At-Home Call Center Agents." https://www.talkdesk.com/blog/how-to-hire-and-manage-at-home-call-center-agents-2/ [Accessed 18 July 2016]

"How to Successfully Manage Remote Call Center Agents." http://www.avoxi.com/blog/how-to-successfully-manage-remote-call-center-agents/ [Accessed 18 July 2016]

"How to Effectively Use Call Monitoring." http://www.avoxi.com/blog/how-to-effectively-use-call-quality-monitoring/ [Accessed 18 July 2016]

"9 Tips for Managing Remote Contact Center Agents." http://kovacorp.com/9-tips-for-managing-remote-contact-center-agents/ [Accessed 18 July 2016]

"11 Tools for Employing At-Home Workforce of Call Center Agents." https://www.talkdesk.com/blog/11-tools-for-employing-an-at-home-workforce-of-call-center-agents [Accessed 18 July 2016]

"11 Key Features You Should Look for in Any WFM Solution." http://pipkins.com/SiteAssets/articles/11KeyFeaturesInAnyWFMSolutionPt1.aspx [Accessed 18 July 2016]

"Everything You Need to Know About Remote Call Center Agents (But Were Afraid to Ask)." http://www.icmi.com/Resources/Technology/2013/10/Everything-you-need-to-know-about-remote-call-center-agents [Accessed 18 July 2016]

"An Overview of Call Center Key Performance Indicators." https://www.talkdesk.com/blog/call-center-management/an-overview-of-call-center-key-performance-indicators/ [Accessed 18 July 2016]

"Remote Call Center Agents Can Offer Cost Savings and Other Benefits." http://searchcrm.techtarget.com/answer/Remote-call-center-agents-can-offer-cost-savings-and-other-benefits [Accessed 18 July 2016]