



Exclusively for ICMI Members

# CALL CENTER MANAGEMENT Review®

Strategies & Solutions for Call Center Professionals Worldwide



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## Companies and Agents Benefit from Work-at-Home Program for Disabled

*Home-agent placement firm helps contact centers “go virtual” for a true win-win for agents and employers.*

Many companies are currently contemplating home-agent programs, wondering if they truly work, what the benefits might be and how to get started. While some may develop their own in-house telework initiatives, others turn to organizations like the National Telecommuting Institute (NTI), which specializes in home-based training and job placement for individuals with disabilities.

NTI’s home agents are trained successfully through totally remote approaches, and offer great flexibility in shift and peak coverage. In addition, because NTI receives funds from federal and state vocational rehabilitation agencies, their virtual staffing services to commercial call centers are, in effect, government subsidized.

Sound too good to be true? It’s not. This may be your call center’s future calling, so read on.

### A Unique Opportunity to Launch Home-Agent Programs

Dr. MJ Willard, executive director of NTI, started the organization 11 years ago. She has a lot of experience and a

passion for NTI’s mission. NTI takes a consultative approach to helping companies ease into home-agent programs. Dr. Willard recognizes that companies have to feel innovative to try a telecommuting program, yet also have to see real benefits and low risks. Because of NTI’s experience with many virtual call center pioneers, NTI can guide the call center through the process of setting up a pilot. Their service includes finding home-agent candidates and step-by-step advice on how to train them remotely and manage them. With this free guidance from experienced resources, companies can avoid expensive mistakes.

“Our best client is a company with full-time workers and full-time benefits that is looking to go virtual and add flexibility while reducing costs,” Dr. Willard states. “Some companies may be considering going overseas for the savings, but see high risk. We can offer good savings—approximately 35 percent savings over in-house agents versus perhaps 50 percent savings through offshoring—but with much lower risks.”

## NTI: An Attractive Virtual Staffing Option

NTI, a non-profit 503 (3)(c) corporation based in Boston, is the only multistate virtual staffing agency focused on call center-related work that offers quality monitoring and customer service representatives from the disability community. Executive Director Dr. MJ Willard looked hard at various employment options for her constituents when seeking the best situations to make this population attractive to employers. Call centers proved to be the winner.

NTI recruits nationwide, and works with various federal, state and local agencies to help identify candidates. The organization has great scalability through access to nationwide databases of people with disabilities. NTI's agents are generally quite flexible in the hours they work, across all time zones. Sixty-eight percent of its candidates have some college education. And hitting a hot button for many companies today, Dr. Willard adds that "most of our agents don't need health care coverage since they have government-sponsored insurance. They just need a home-based job."

NTI handles all of the administrative burdens of a multistate workforce at cost. This includes the new-hire paperwork, unemployment claims, workers compensation and statutory benefits. In addition, Dr. Willard points out that "commercial clients of our staffing agency can obtain a tax credit of \$2,444 per disabled person hired." Federal and state agency funding help to subsidize NTI's costs, allowing them to offer call center co-employers a very attractive virtual staffing arrangement.

Through the years, NTI has learned that training, while one of the biggest concerns for companies embarking on a remote-agent program, is really not an obstacle. NTI and their clients have found ways to recreate the classroom experience remotely, using technology. Call center after call center report that the results for students trained remotely are comparable to classroom-trained agents.

## Success Stories

What are the performance results and cost-savings that contact centers might anticipate? Let's look at a few examples of NTI clients' home-agent initiatives.

### THE ANSWER GROUP

The Answer Group (TAG), an outsourcer handling tens of thousands of sales and service calls per day, found NTI's home-based agents to be a compelling way to meet their business goals. According to Executive VP Dennis Quinn, the marketplace demands that they infuse their company with talented people, and NTI offers exactly that. NTI's agents currently handle quality review for TAG, and will likely expand to other tasks. Quinn adds that, "We believe going virtual with at-home agents will be very important to the future of contact centers."

When asked about the biggest challenges he anticipat-

ed and how they tackled them, like others, Quinn cites training and inculcating remote agents into the culture. TAG succeeded in both regards using new, proprietary technology and training techniques and a team approach that exposes agents to the culture and "makes them feel a part of something." TAG's blue-chip customers all feel great about the program, knowing it is delivering reliability, dependability and low turnover to optimize performance and value.

### LARGE NATIONAL RETAILER

A major national retailer was looking for ways to increase quality while reducing costs in a very competitive market. After considering offshoring, they concluded that NTI offered a closer population to tap into with lower risks and strong benefits for all. "The NTI agents we've brought on board are excellent," says the call center manager. "They are very committed and flexible." Agents readily volunteer for the on-call list to handle peaks.

The retailer also found remote training to be as effective, if not more so, than classroom. Assessments at the end of each training day ensure that agents are progressing on track.

Email, portals with daily statistics, discussion boards, quality monitoring and weekly 30-minute team meetings with stats and updates all help to keep the agents in touch and in tune with the goals. Feedback from the agents, reflected in surveys, is very positive, too. "Awesome" is a common word used to describe the training, and once on the phones, one agent remarked, "I'm a different person because of this job!"—a comment that reflects the opportunities, benefits and value a program like this can bring.

### INTERNAL REVENUE SERVICE

In addition to private sector transactions, NTI's agents handle government calls, as well. For call-volume peaks in January and February, 350 part-time agents handle forms calls for the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). Seasonal peaks, as well as the daily peaks, are a big reason why the IRS turned to NTI.



Ed Grabowski, an NTI home agent, handles calls for the IRS.

“We needed people who could work from home on selected schedules within our desired hours for peak handling,” states Anna Howington, senior tax analyst. “We couldn’t staff up and down based on call demand with our traditional employee, who is a 40-hour worker.”

The value of the NTI program became profoundly clear when the IRS had to handle disaster package calls in the wake of hurricane Katrina. “NTI quickly brought back seasonal help, even to work on a couple of Saturdays when it was critical for us to meet demand. We wouldn’t have been able to do it with our normal workforce.”

At the IRS, as with the other examples, the NTI agents show they’re not just flexible, they’re good, as well. “It’s invisible to customers—they’re not aware that they’re not talking to an IRS agent,” says Howington.

These companies and federal agencies have demonstrated that a multistate virtual workforce composed of people with disabilities can work, and work well. They pursued an innovative idea, and addressed their fears and concerns head on. As one manager put it, “You go into it thinking, ‘How can we manage our center when we can’t see what the agents are doing?’ But you quickly find out that you can manage using the same tools. You really just need a different mindset.”

The results thus far have been positive, with further rollouts planned. And Dr. Willard of NTI is always ready

for the next company: “We’re looking for more call centers that are willing to try something different in pursuing a solution that will work better for their company than conventional options.”

## What the Agents Have to Say

And what about the NTI agents themselves? How do they feel about the work?

Dana Morong is an NTI home agent in Massachusetts. He connected with NTI while working with his local rehabilitation counselor. At the time, Morong needed a “true work-at-home” job, which he realized was difficult to find.

Today, with a year of experience under his belt, Morong knows he has found the right fit. “The training was excellent. It was like a big classroom, and we all helped each other along.” Morong highlights weekly meetings with the team and supervisor as key to staying connected and up to date. Messaging tools are used frequently to ask each other questions. Morong gets feedback on monitored calls, as well as reports and statistics on his performance. Sounds like a typical in-house call center agent setup, doesn’t it?

Maria Kirchhoff is another NTI agent, based in Michigan. Living in the country compounded her commuting challenges, so a home-based job was really what she needed. Michigan Rehabilitation Services helped to connect Kirchhoff and NTI. After Internet and phone-based screening for the hiring process, she was “at work” and training within a month. Training included routine tests, role-plays and independent reading. “It was very effective,” Kirchhoff says. “I love my job because I connect with people from my living room. I like to use the computer, and have found people to be very helpful. [Coworkers] help each other out through messaging, and inquiring if anyone else is having the same problems.” Kirchhoff, like Morong, cites the team meetings, monitoring and messages with supervisors as helpful to her success. Both Kirchhoff and Morong pitch in for peak han-

dling of increments as short as 15 or 30 minutes.

Kirchhoff sums up the opportunity of being a home-based agent with the NTI program this way: “The more you put into it, the more you get out of it. For anyone with a disability who can’t get out of the home, this is the perfect job.”

NTI, along with the companies previously noted and their customers, would all agree that these agents put a lot into their jobs, so that perfect job for them is a perfect fit for all. ■

For more information on NTI’s program, visit its Web site at [www.nticentral.org](http://www.nticentral.org), or contact Dr. MJ Willard at [mjwillard@nti.org](mailto:mjwillard@nti.org), 415-389-1703 or 800-619-0111.