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Call Centers: Job Option at Home

You've heard of offshoring. What about home-shoring? That's a term some use to describe companies' tapping U.S. workers to answer tech-support and customer-service calls -- from home.

These at-home workers handle hotel and airline reservations, roadside assistance, tech support and sales calls. Retirees and near-retirees watching retirement accounts shrink may find such work-at-home opportunities a way to earn extra cash.

Hilton Hotels employs about 900 work-at-home reservation agents, while outsourcing companies such as Alpine Access, Arise Virtual Solutions and LiveOps, among others, hire agents to handle various types of call-center work for their clients.

Agents Wanted

Despite the economic slowdown, some of these firms plan to continue hiring. For instance, Hilton expects to hire more at-home agents in January, says Russ Olivier, a senior vice president at the company. Alpine Access will hire 250 more agents this year, and 1,200 in the first quarter of 2009, says Chris Carrington, CEO of the Denver-based firm.

He says the growth is driven largely by companies moving call-center operations back to the U.S. from overseas -- in part because wages and other costs are rising in other countries, but also because communication difficulties can result in customer backlash.

The jobs often require some experience. Mr. Carrington says Alpine hired just 2% of applicants this year. And while flexibility is a perk -- in general, agents set their schedules about a week in advance -- many of the jobs are part time, with pay ranging from about \$8 to \$14 an hour. Many of the companies don't offer benefits.

You'll need to have a quiet work space -- a barking dog or noisy children will present a problem. (The calls are recorded, so agents can't pretend it isn't happening.) These jobs also often require equipment: A relatively new computer, high-speed Internet access and a dedicated phone line.

And some companies require a fair amount of up-front investment. Arise Virtual Solutions, based in Miramar, Fla., requires agents to be stand-alone incorporated businesses. That means paying an incorporation fee -- most states charge about \$100, but it can run higher. Plus, Arise requires applicants to pay \$99 for an 18-hour online training course. While 98% of applicants pass the course, those who don't forfeit the fee, says Mary Bartlett, an Arise vice president.

Arise agents must also undergo training for the specific firm whose calls they'll handle -- this training costs \$25 to \$200, depending on its complexity.

Getting Past the Hurdles

For Mary Ann Lawrence, an Arise agent for eight years in Pembroke Pines, Fla., the hurdles were worth it. "It was a bit of an investment, but not huge," she says. "It was enough to make it where I was serious about it, but not enough that if I changed my mind I'd be like, 'Oh my God, what have I done?' "

The 58-year-old retiree said she works about 30 to 35 hours a week, handling roadside-assistance calls for AAA. She says she finds it rewarding to help people.

Still, work-at-home companies vary widely. Alpine Access hires its agents as employees, both full and part time. Full-time workers enjoy subsidized health-care insurance, and part-timers can buy into the company's group health plan, but at full price. There's also a 401(k) plan available to full- and part-time workers. Applicants are paid for the hours they spend training, and the sole cost -- other than setting up a home office -- is \$45 for a background check once you've been hired.

Do Your Own Check

Before handing money to any work-at-home company, be sure to check out the firm with the [Better Business Bureau](#). Make sure the company has a high rating and few unresolved complaints.

Along with legitimate players, the industry is also rife with scams: The high number of complaints about work-at-home scams puts the industry at No. 46 of about 4,000 industries tracked by the Better Business Bureau.

Also, before signing up, know what you're getting into:

What are the total up-front costs, including training, equipment or background checks?

How will you be paid -- by the hour, per call, or per minute on the phone?

Will you be paid for the time spent training?

The Better Business Bureau says the most common work-at-home scams refer to "assembly work at home," "envelope stuffing," "online business at home," and "chain letters." Also be wary if the emphasis is on recruiting others to join, rather than selling a product -- that may well be a multilevel marketing scam.