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More call center work done at home

An operator is standing by - at home.

Companies that supply customer service agents to businesses around the world say they are saving money and attracting better employees by letting them work from their own houses. Using Internet telephone technology, the operators are able to answer questions and hear out complaints as if they were working in a sprawling call center in an office park.

"It gives us access to some high-quality labor that wouldn't work in a call center," said Andrea Ayers, president for customer management for Convergys Corp., an outsourcing company that is ramping up the number of agents who work from home. "This gives us more staffing flexibility, and we can make it work with their lifestyle."

Convergys and rival companies say they're being swamped with applications. The first spike came a few months ago, when gas prices topped \$4 a gallon. Now, they're surging again as unemployment soars.

Home agents often start at \$8-to-\$10 an hour, earning more depending on the skill and knowledge required for specific clients. Besides gas, home-based operators save on car maintenance and the cost of keeping up an office wardrobe.

Sharon Castor had never given much thought to working at a call center, and even less to going back to an early rising, traffic-fighting work life she had for nearly three decades before retiring. But after the ailing parents she helped care for passed away, she was getting antsy after five years off and needed some extra income.

"I said, 'I need to do something, but I really don't want to go back downtown every day again,' " said Castor, who used to spend 90 minutes each morning getting ready for work and then driving from her northern Kentucky home to her job as a Procter & Gamble Co. staffer in downtown Cincinnati.

After researching at-home work opportunities - "there are a lot out there who make all kinds of promises" - she came to Convergys.

Soon, she had converted an extra bedroom in her home into an office, where she helps customers with insurance matters and other questions on behalf of a health-care company. It's among the

many companies that don't want their use of outsourced customer service made public; Convergys says it does work for more than half of the Fortune 50 biggest businesses.

The Cincinnati-based outsourcing company has been rapidly expanding its at-home work force. It has some 1,200 home agents and expects to triple that next year.

"We're ramping up very quickly," said Ayers, whose company has 75,000 employees worldwide.

An industry expert notes that using home agents also means companies can cut down the costs of running their call centers. Donna Fluss, president of DMG Consulting, said technology advances and growing experience in coaching and managing virtual staffs are making it more practical for home employees.

"We now have the technology, we have a growing number of best practices," Fluss said. "If you manage it properly, it has real benefits."

Convergys' home agents use Voice over Internet Protocol (or VoIP) for communications through broadband Internet connections, and computer firewalls keep information secure. Agents communicate with managers and colleagues by instant messages and online chats, and managers can monitor their work virtually.

Castor has her office decorated with photos of her grandchildren, and she can light scented candles if she likes. Staying in pajamas or sweat pants for work soon grew old, but she does sometimes wear shorts to work in warm weather.

Some colleagues miss having co-workers to take breaks with or exchange repartee, but not her.

"Being at the center, it's so noisy," she said. "Here, it's nice and quiet. You can concentrate a lot more."

Christopher Carrington, chief executive of Alpine Access, said the 10-year-old business that specializes in using at-home agents is booming. And applications are up 10 to 15 percent over a year ago.

The Denver-based company started slowly, but the spread of high-speed communications has enabled it grow from fewer than 1,000 agents in its second year to more than 7,500. He said many U.S. companies who outsource prefer to use U.S.-based employees - called "homeshoring" - instead of those in call centers in India or other countries.

"Our cost is minimal," Carrington said. "We don't have to build a building. We do all the training virtually."

Arise Virtual Solutions, a 10-year-old company based in Miramar, Fla., is also seeing rising interest. The company contracts with home agents who work as incorporated entities, creating their own small home businesses.

"The economic downturn has allowed us to be even more selective," said Mary Bartlett, an Arise vice president. She said the company is attracting people with extensive sales and technical support backgrounds, such as veteran real estate agents who need work because of the nation's housing slump.

The company spends a lot of time questioning, testing and training people before giving them work to make sure they are right for at-home business.

"Everybody wants to work at home, but it is not right for everyone," Bartlett said. "Working at home requires you to be very disciplined."

Emily Eubanks of Fairburn, Ga., began working with Arise a year ago after she decided her 80-miles-a-day commute in Atlanta's heavy traffic to her telephone-company job was wearing her down, besides eating into her income with gas and car maintenance costs. Working at home also saves on lunches and dry cleaning, she said, and instead of rising at 6 a.m. to get to work by 9, she sleeps in and starts working in the afternoon.

"I'm able to pick my own schedule," she said.

She's been hearing from a lot of friends who have lost their jobs or want a change, and recently held a seminar in her home on her work.

"I had so many people calling me wanting to get information, I just got some hot dogs and potato chips and invited everybody over at once," she said.

Among her clients is the American Automobile Association, so Eubanks sits at home lining up tow trucks for motorists stranded on the highways she no longer has to battle.