

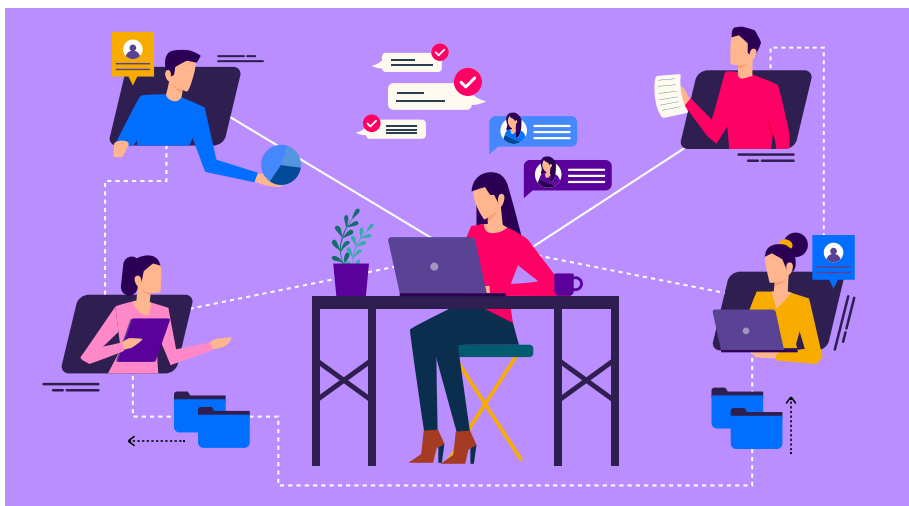
HOW TO MAKE WORK WORK AGAIN

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The potential for hybrid customer service after COVID-19.

BY KIM HOULNE, WORKING SOLUTIONS



It's mind-numbing how much is being written about COVID-19. Too much to absorb, much less process.

Yet amid the lockdowns, layoffs and reopenings, we're forced to figure out what could actually work—aside from pontifications about the need for business resiliency. (Many will need resurrection first.)

Because now—and on the other side of the pandemic—everything is, and will be, different. The question then for any business to ask: “How will it be different?”

The answer, articulated and actionable, will dictate outcomes—surviving and succeeding.

With this mindset, here are a few pre-sumptions:

- A best-case for a workable (read that as safe) COVID-19 vaccine in the United States is late 2021.
- Sporadic lockdowns can be expected

to continue as outbreaks appear in new regions of the country or recur in hotspots such as New Orleans and New York.

- A second wave of the virus coupled with the normal flu season could mean even more activity in the fall and winter than we saw in March and April, especially in communities not yet exposed.

With that, cue in the consultant: The pandemic “will reveal not just vulnerabilities but opportunities to improve the performance of businesses,” as the authors of a [McKinsey report](#) write. “The result: a stronger sense of what makes business more resilient to shocks, more productive, and better able to deliver to customers.”

Ah, there's that word again—resilient.

Stated another way: “Are you tough enough to endure? Smart enough to change?”

Options to Consider

Being different is difficult to do if pricey legacy systems outweigh future investments, making leadership tight-fisted and slow to change. And while brick-and-mortar call centers might be old school, their economies of scale are tried-and-true. With COVID-19, old school isn't necessarily safe anymore.

Perhaps now is the time to rethink the traditional call center, realizing any service operation solely locked into brick-and-mortar risks being locked down again, today or tomorrow. And that costs—plenty. In lost people, productivity and performance.

Going forward, businesses could merge their call center operations with at-home agents, creating hybrid customer service that combines centralized *and* distributed workforces. This blend offers an option to keep running things somewhat normally, given the times.

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Alleviating Exposure

There are versions of a distributed-mortar model in use where a company has a mix of onshore, nearshore and offshore customer service. Often, agents are housed in physical facilities, though, which are hard to defend against COVID-19. Social distancing doesn't work well in close quarters.

Even common occurrences, such as hurricanes, can expose spread-out brick-and-mortar call centers. This occurred when Hurricane Matthew disrupted a client's customer service, forcing its centers in Bermuda and central Florida to evacuate within days of each other as the storm moved north.

With a blended mortar-and-remote operation, resources can be rebalanced. If circumstances overwhelm a call center, work can be moved out of harm's way to remote agents elsewhere.

Remote Offers a Way

Becoming even more versatile would be converting call centers into on-demand, virtual operations—all manned with work-from-home agents. With COVID-19, more companies—from online medical monitoring to social-distanced (but still social) exercise—are exploring this most fluid of options.

So, what does it take to develop and run an on-demand customer service? At its core, two things are vital: flexibility and scalability. They enable a fast-flex workforce to shift resources, say, from disease hotspots to less-infected areas.

FOR VIRTUAL TO BE VIABLE, IT MUST BE UNDERPINNED BY:

1. A flexible network that spans the distance, safeguards operations and protects customers.
2. Well-distributed, skilled agents led by managers who know how to engage remote workers.
3. Always-on communications to connect and operate in real-time as circumstances dictate.



Renewed Interest

None of this is new. On-demand, remote customer service is decades old. It's proven for businesses, large and small.

Current events and anticipated aftershocks, however, are generating renewed interest for remote operations by companies

caught off guard by the coronavirus. And sadly, it isn't going away anytime soon, regardless of business reopenings, political pronouncements and wishful thinking.

Face it, wholesale abandonment of brick-and-mortar call centers isn't really practical. Instead, what's sensible is developing parallel, remote capabilities that are integrated, distributed and secure to ensure nonstop customer service. And it has to be more than the next step. Doing so should be the next breath any business takes if it plans to survive and succeed. ☎



Kim Houlne turned an idea into an industry, pioneering [virtual contact center outsourcing](#) across the country. Her home-based agent model was founded in 1996. Prior to this she held senior management positions in consulting.

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