ON-DEMAND IS IN DEMAND

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ONLINE TALENT PLATFORMS ARE SHAPING THE FUTURE OF WORK.

BY SUSAN HASH,
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Say what you will about the gig economy, the concept holds high appeal for contact center agents who crave more control over their schedules. Although recent reports suggest that the size and rate of growth of the gig economy have been overinflated, the growing emphasis on flexibility and better work-life balance indicate that on-demand work will be increasingly in demand in future work environments.

The prevailing assumption is that digitally savvy younger workers are at the forefront of the gig movement; however, studies show that the ability to work flexible hours remotely appeals to older generations, as well. Aspect Software's 2018 survey of 500 customer service reps revealed that, while just over half (51%) of young millennials and Gen Z reps were interested in moving to an on-demand job, 41% of all survey participants between the ages of 18 and 55 also expressed interest.

While companies have been slow to adopt gig work models as of yet, it's an approach that the majority of business executives are currently considering. According to Mercer's 2019 Global Talent Trends report, 79% of executives say they expect contingent and freelance workers to substantially replace full-time employees in the coming years. For their part, more than half (54%) of the employees surveyed said that managing their work-life balance is one of the top five things their company can do to help them thrive at work (compared to 40% in 2018 and 26% in 2017), and the majority (82%) said that they would be willing to consider working on a freelance basis to gain the flexibility they desire.

Outsourced On-Demand: Agents as Contractors

As more companies rethink their approach to work, Mercer reports that many are experimenting with methods of intelligently matching the work to be done with the supply of skills. This includes pulling from talent pools both inside and outside the company—for instance, by partnering with contingent talent agencies that can provide access to a broader range of skills and expertise.

To get a better sense of where this model can be highly effective, I turned to **KIM HOULNE**, Chief Executive of Working Solutions, an on-demand contact center outsourcer based in Dallas. Houlne is a pioneer in the on-demand model. Her firm, founded in 1996, was one of the first virtual workforce companies. It provided brands with on-demand, remote-working customer service contractors long before the phrase "gig economy" was coined.

For contact centers, the on-demand marketplace dovetails nicely with companies whose call volumes are cyclical, such as those in the retail, healthcare, travel and utilities sectors, Houlne says—those that don't have a steady state of business throughout the year, and which are continually staffing up or down to manage volume spikes and valleys.

How does an on-demand outsourcing model differ from traditional outsourcing? "We manage the process and the goal, as opposed to trying to micromanage the people," Houlne says. Working Solutions' on-demand approach matches the work to be done with the agent's skills, rather than based on the job function or past work experience. Its virtual talent pool transcends geographical boundaries for a more precise alignment of expertise and capability to the work.

Although the contractors providing customer support may not have a contact center background, per se, they're able to deliver

exceptional customer service because they have the appropriate skills and are enthusiastic about the work. Houlne points to a retired GM engineer who recently came on board as an example. "This gentleman wanted to do something new and perform work that was challenging and fulfilling. The program that he works on has nothing to do with engineering. However, we find that when the agent is there by choice and not because it's their only option, their passion drives higher performance."

Profile of an On-Demand Agent

Not every agent aspires to be an independent contractor or is cut out for a virtual, on-demand type environment. Houlne says that there are a few core characteristics that successful remote-working on-demand agents have in common.

Naturally, empathy and emotional intelligence are essential for working with customers, she says. "Beyond that, we look for candidates who are truly passionate about the work. They also need to be reliable and responsible. We find that agents who have had some professional experience and professional training—those who are in their 40s and 50s—tend to be a little more disciplined and focused on setting their schedules, getting things done and balancing the work with their personal lives. Many younger agents may not have figured out their patterns or how they need to maneuver through their day. It takes some time—some life experience, if you will—to figure out how you want to operate."

From a skills standpoint, the possibilities are wide open. While Working Solutions' proprietary technology provides the foundation that allows Houlne to fine-tune the fit between the agent and the work, the on-demand model allows agents to find assignments where they apply their expertise and gain new skills. "They can choose their own destiny," she says. While not a traditional career path, "we've found that, by expanding their skills, agents are more marketable in whatever they choose to pursue longer term."

Importantly, the on-demand environment provides employees with the opportunity to find work that is meaningful to them—another top employee expectation. Having a sense of purpose at work is highly valued by American workers. So much so that 9 out of 10 employees are willing to trade a percentage of their lifetime earnings for greater meaning at work, according to a study reported in the *Harvard Business Review*.

Developing an Internal Talent Market

As the Mercer report points out, the on-demand environment is not an either/or proposition. Forward-thinking companies are finding ways to blend contract workers with permanent staff to make it easier to access the right skills at the right time. Many are also developing internal gig economies to provide full-time employees with opportunities to work on different projects and teams, to help employees who are on temporary leave maintain their skills, and to retain those who may be nearing retirement age and may want to work part-time on a project-by-project basis.

In organizations where the contact center acts as the hiring portal for the rest of the enterprise, an internal talent marketplace allows contact center leaders to tap former agents who have moved into other roles but who have the knowledge and expertise to help with unexpected workload spikes, such as weather-related emergencies. In addition, offering permanent staff the ability to opt into projects that interest them and which allow them to apply underutilized skills and knowledge enables the organization to optimize its internal talent pool while increasing staff motivation, engagement and retention.

To ensure that employees can expand their skills and pursue the work that interests them, training needs to be targeted and personalized for the individual. "Training content should be hyper-relevant to an agent's role and focused on their learning and knowledge priorities," says **CAROL LEAMAN**, CEO of Axonify.

The microlearning approach is ideal for an on-demand model in which agents are accountable for their own growth and development. "It makes training accessible, memorable and engaging," Leaman points out. "The quick and mobile nature of microlearning makes training incredibly accessible. Agents can complete training on any device and from anywhere. In other words, they can do their training at their desks or on any connected device in just a few minutes a day without impacting productivity.

"With regards to making training memorable, science shows that human brains aren't designed to process and retain large amounts of information at one time. In fact, people forget 90% of what they learn if it isn't reinforced in 30 days," she explains. "To combat this, microlearning delivers training in small chunks and reinforces it repeatedly over time. This helps agents to not only remember what they were taught but also put it into practice."

Combining gamification techniques with microlearning can ensure that the learning experience is more engaging, Leaman adds. "Making the learning experience fun hooks people and keeps them coming back for more, so they're always learning, which helps them to perform at their full potential."

Upskilling Agents in an Era of Automation

A recent McKinsey Global Institute report estimates that, by 2030, roughly 14% of the global workforce may need to switch occupational categories as digitization, automation and advances in artificial intelligence disrupt the world of work. Companies that develop a gig economy culture—one where employees are provided with opportunities to expand skills, expertise and interests through internal "gigs"—seems like a step in the right direction.

In the near-term, as more companies rely on bots and automation to handle basic customer service transactions, frontline agents will need to expand their skill sets to handle increasingly complex calls and to deliver a high-touch customer experience.

"In a world of self-service, talented reps matter more than ever," says Houlne. "Even though people are becoming increasingly savvy about using technology, they still desire human contact. Machines can undoubtedly enhance service delivery, but our human agents pick up where technology leaves off." ◉

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