



# Five Realities of Contact Center Customer Service Reps

By Kim Houlné

**T**here's nothing like real-world experience to put on-demand customer service in proper perspective. To gain more insight, Working Solutions recently surveyed several thousand of its remote contact center agents across the United States and Canada. Their responses and experience offer insight into the realities of frontline service today.

## 1. Agent Age

The survey results show that more than half of the respondents (57 percent) were ages thirty-four to fifty-four, with an additional 18 percent reporting in between fifty-five and sixty-four. Fewer than one in five was under thirty-four, with a mere 3 percent under the age of twenty-five.

More than half of the respondents were college graduates with practical work experience.

For instance, Jennifer, an on-demand agent in North Carolina, works on a client program that provides learning-enhancement instruction from pre-K to high school. She has a degree in finance and once worked as a director of a preschool. On one occasion, she received a call from a mother in New York City with a son in preschool who was desperate to help him read. Drawing from her background, Jennifer was able to help the woman find an appropriate educational program.

## 2. Agent Experience

Respondents most often reported sixteen years or more of experience in customer service delivery (37 percent). An additional 26 percent reported six to ten years of experience, with 15 percent having been in the business eleven to fifteen years. (The rest had less than five years of customer service experience.) Clearly, more experienced agents are migrating to the virtual world to work.

Sophisticated customers expect this level of experience. In today's connected world of ready search and online purchasing, consumers can access lots of information and buying options that don't require customer support. On-demand agents most often come into play when situations become too difficult for self-service solutions. At that point buyers need the help of a more mature, well-versed agent to navigate the complexities.

Another example: Kathleen began working from home in the late 1990s after several years as a customer service representative in the offices of Continental Airlines and DuPont. Afflicted with polio as a child, Kathleen now deals with later complications that make remote work a much more practical option. She serves on a client program for a corporate travel booking site. Once Kathleen received a call from a

businesswoman at 11:00 p.m. who was in Paris and needed a flight early in the morning to return home to the United States. As Kathleen searched for a flight, the woman fell asleep. She could hear her snoring and kept holding—for thirty minutes. Eventually, Kathleen texted her the new flight reservation.

### 3. Agent Location

More than half of agents reported they chose to work from home to take advantage of the flexible hours (57 percent). Another 14 percent said they preferred an entrepreneurial lifestyle that allowed them to manage their own resources and career paths. (The rest had other reasons.)

While a number of these workers came from brick-and-mortar call centers, many also moved into virtual customer service from a wide variety of corporate and commercial jobs. This real-world experience makes these agents knowledgeable about the work and lives of the customers they serve.

Case in point: Barb managed her own travel agency for ten-plus years. She knew the business inside out. When her family needed more attention, Barb gave up running the brick-and-mortar business. Today, she's a remote travel agent plying the trade and applying her well-honed skills as an on-demand call center agent. Plus, the entrepreneurial style enables her to balance family needs and work from home.

### 4. Geographic Location

After forsaking offshore call centers in recent years, many businesses now know onshore service providers provide more culturally attuned agents to their customers. The current hot spots for hiring remote workers are Atlanta; Miami; Dallas-Fort Worth; Chicago; Charlotte, North Carolina; and Orlando.

This widespread, home-shore availability of contact center workers is especially important when customers want to speak with someone from their own region. Recently, a client that makes products marketed to a specific Northeast US region requested agents from there, believing they would relate better with its customers. Having an onshore network of on-demand agents made this possible.

### 5. Requisite Skills

When asked to identify the most essential skill for successful customer service, almost half (44 percent) pointed to empathy and understanding as the most critical. Third among responses was problem-solving or conflict resolution (25 percent), topped only by knowledge of company products and services (31 percent). Clearly, among educated and experienced agents, connecting with the customer comes first.

For example, twenty years ago Teresa began her role as

an on-demand customer service agent. She'll tell you that the key to customer service is showing compassion and knowing you can make a difference. Today, Teresa works for a client that provides assisted-living services for seniors and others. One day a young woman called, distraught because her father was ill and unwilling to accept his limitations. Based on experiences with her own dad, Teresa felt empathy for the caller. Teresa shared what she'd learned with the woman, telling her to comfort him, remember the good times, and see this as an ongoing life process. With care and understanding, Teresa helped this caller better care for her father.

### Final Thoughts

The realities of today's customer care call for an experienced agent workforce to serve clients and their customers. Even as artificial intelligence (AI) self-service increases, intelligent agents will be needed to pick up where technology leaves off. Customer service that blends high tech and high touch will be required to serve and satisfy. ☛

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