

SUBSCRIBE TODAY



Subscriber Services



MyrtleBeachOnline.com



Current
79°

Complete Forecast

Search Recent News Archives Web for

Sign Up

- Jobs**
- Cars**
- Real Estate**
- Apartments**
- Local Shopping**
- All Classifieds**
 - Create an Ad
 - Find an Ad
- Dating**

[Back to Home >](#)

Business XML

Posted on Wed, Apr. 05, 2006 [email this](#) [print this](#) [reprint or license this](#)

EMPLOYMENT TRENDS

Call center workers right at home

'Homeshoring' brings back customer service

By Rebecca Carroll and Jane M. Von Bergen
Knight Ridder

PHILADELPHIA - When Nicole St. Julien-Thomas hears her alarm buzzing each morning, she doesn't have to worry about her work outfit, traffic jams or office politics.

She just picks up the phone, logs on to her computer at home in Gloucester County, Pa., and starts fielding customer service calls.

St. Julien-Thomas is homeshoring, a new and expanding practice that allows customer service agents to work from home instead of in centralized call centers. Some large American companies are even bringing some customer-service operations back from India, the Philippines and other offshore locations to take advantage of homeshoring.

Industry analysts estimate there are 140,000 home agents, who field sales calls, customer complaints and questions for such companies as GSI Commerce Inc., General Electric Co. and Staples Inc.

The number of home agents will more than double to 330,000 nationwide by 2010, predicted Stephen Loynd, a senior analyst at IDC Corp.

"Offshoring's underestimated sibling, homeshoring, is about to hit a growth spurt," Loynd wrote in a January report by the Framingham, Mass., market and business research firm.

For businesses, the goal is to attract agents; improve customer satisfaction, which is often low when calls are routed overseas; and still keep costs down.

Since August, St. Julien-Thomas, 28, of Williamstown, Pa., has been working as an independent "cyber-agent" for WillowCSN, a Miramar, Fla., company that recruits workers for home-based customer service.

"I'm my own boss. I can schedule my own hours," St. Julien-Thomas said. "I'm just happier. There's no more office politics. I didn't realize how much that was bringing me down." She had worked in customer service previously at a call center.

For some workers, there is another advantage, highlighted in a recent survey of 1,000 home-based customer-service agents. It found that more than one-fourth had a major illness or an ill family member, either of which prevented them from working an office job. But they were able to work as home-based agents. The survey was conducted by

MORE NEWS

- [Office Equipment](#)
- [GSI Commerce](#)
- [General Electric](#)
- [Retail](#)
- [Financial Services](#)
- [Staples](#)
- [Aerospace-Defense](#)
- [Computers](#)
- [Sporting Goods](#)
- [Discuss Sporting Goods](#)

- News**
- Sports**
- Entertainment**
- Business**
 - Real Estate
 - Tourism
 - **NEW!** Retail
 - Technology
 - Bankruptcy
- Living**
- Opinion | Letters**

ONLINE EXTRAS

- Newspaper Ads Online**
- Visitors Guide**
- Myrtle Beach Golf**
- Newspapers In Education**
- Weddings & Engagements**
- Discussion Boards**
- Maps & Directions**
- Yellow Pages**
- RSS Headlines**

SITE SERVICES

- Past Articles**
- Contact Us**
- Advertise**

LiveOps Inc., of Palo Alto, Calif., which provides home agents for companies.

Because agents like working from home, annual turnover tends to be lower - about 8 percent to 10 percent, compared with call-center norms of 40 percent to 60 percent a year, said Timothy J. Kane, a senior manager at Deloitte Consulting L.L.P. who also heads the International Telework Association and Council.

Some companies that homeshore create their own customer service departments - with their permanent employees answering phones at home. Others, such as Office Depot Inc., JetBlue Airways Corp., and Verizon Communications Inc., hire outside firms that hire the operators. Some use a combination.

AAA Mid-Atlantic, for example, has its own customer service staff - some working from home, others at company sites. But, for the past two years, it also has used Willow workers to field emergency road service calls in peak periods, such as during snow storms.

Loynd, the IDC analyst, and Kane, who heads Deloitte's Virtual Workplace practice from his Pittsburgh office, say homeshoring will become more prevalent because of advances in telephone and Internet technology.

Also, attracting workers, including young mothers and retirees who want flexibility, will gain importance as the retirement of baby boomers depletes the work force.

But cost is key.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, customer service jobs moved overseas where wages were low and the cost per agent was at most \$15 an hour compared with \$31 an hour in a U.S. call center, IDC estimates.

But an expensive backlash developed, said Mark Frei, a senior vice president at one of Willow's chief competitors, West Corp., an Omaha, Neb., telemarketing company with \$1.5 billion in annual sales.

He said companies "had leaped quick" to offshoring, "and then they looked at the negative P.R. they were getting from their customer base," Frei said.

Some customers did not like the accented English, experts said, and cultural norms were different.

So companies sought a low-cost domestic alternative.

A home agent, according to IDC, costs about \$21 an hour. That includes software, telephone and management costs, but there is no overhead for bricks and mortar.

There are some disadvantages for workers: Some companies, such as West and Willow, bring the agents on as independent contractors rather than as employees, for example, so they generally have no health insurance, pensions or paid time off. Also, they are paid just \$7 to \$12 an hour (sometimes a bit more with incentives), and they must supply their own equipment, including a high-speed Internet connection.

It is important for agents to treat their home office just like "getting up and getting ready for work," said Missy Held, who monitors home agents for AAA Mid-Atlantic from her home in Richmond, Va. "You have to be in the whole mind-set."

That is fine with Albert Ciansarano, 69, who used to be a full-time customer service agent

and now works 20 hours a week for Willow from home in the suburbs of Pittsburgh.

"I get dressed like it's every other business day, and I work my allotted time," said Ciansarano, who likes the extra cash and the mental stimulation. "If it's nice, when I get out of the office, I get on my boat."



[News](#) | [Business](#) | [Sports](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Living](#) | [Shop Local](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Cars](#) | [Homes](#)
[About MyrtleBeachOnline.com](#) | [About the Real Cities Network](#) | [Terms of Use & Privacy Statement](#) | [About Knight Ridder](#)