

## Customer Contact Management

### A blog on the practical implications of remote working as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic

Few countries and even fewer industries have had to deal with a crisis as crippling as the Coronavirus pandemic. This invisible killer has driven a wedge between us and our loved ones, whilst at the very same time uniting the world in a global cause to find a cure.

This is a human issue first and foremost. In the UK, there will be few people who don't come in to contact with the virus, even if they don't catch it. All industries should prioritise consideration of the impact decisions they make through this crisis will have on their people. Protecting profits ahead of people now could be to turn them off later.

The CCM industry has responded with agility to this crisis. This should be applauded. They have embraced new ways of working with flexibility at the core; and rolled out technological solutions to enable them to continue operating in super-quick time. In any other circumstance, the significant changes to defined and mature operating models could have taken years rather than the days achieved by many. Those with past investments in work-at-home solutions for frontline staff obviously had a head-start versus those that didn't and are likely to fare better in the longer-term. This paper endeavours to support all operators to consider some of the challenges that will be universally faced enabling them to create mechanisms to manage them now and leverage the benefits later.

## Challenges of work-at-home practices

Inevitably, there will be some fall-out from such a fast deployment or scaling up of an operating model that represents a fundamental shift from a previous way of working.

In this paper, we are focusing on four key elements to consider in relation to the challenges that will be faced by many, if not all, and also offer some practical tips on management mechanisms that can be deployed to minimise any adverse impact.



### People

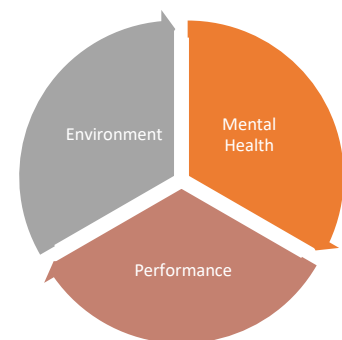
Whatever technologies we have come to depend on, our businesses cannot exist without human intervention. Our people remain the beating heart of our industry and are complemented by technology, not replaced by it.

During the current crisis, dependent on the vertical sector mix, we may need far more people to manage customer volumes, or we may need far less. In either situation, it is imperative that we treat our people with the utmost **respect** and **consideration**. Their **safety**, and the safety of the people they share their homes with, must come first. Enabling them to work-at-home is by far the best way of mitigating the risk of them

being infected by Coronavirus. They can continue to support themselves/their families financially, whilst also complying with government guidelines on social distancing. Perfect. To a point.

Although this resolves one major challenge (getting them to work and keeping them safe when they get there), it then raises a new set of challenges.

**The working environment** – Executives, senior management, and many employees who have support roles in functions such as HR, marketing, sales, project management et al, are likely to already work from home to a degree. In some cases, they do this outside of normal working hours and travel to their normal place(s) of work during working hours. However, they have a space at home that substitutes for an office that enables them to work without distraction. This is unlikely to be the case for front-line workers who may find it very difficult to find a space to work in, let alone one that is free of distractions and background noise. Those that do, may also be ‘fighting’ to use that space with a partner who is also working from home.



It may be forgiven given the circumstances, for a dog to bark or a child to shout, while an employee is interacting with a colleague or a customer. However, it remains unprofessional and will not be tolerated by customers particularly, for long.

The provision of equipment may extend beyond a laptop and may also involve a higher-grade than that required on site. Headsets and keyboards need to be fit-for-purpose and designed for the specific environment. They must also be robust and child-proof. Whilst it should be a requirement for employees to take care of their equipment in the same way that they would be required to do on site, it is inevitable that some equipment could become a toy in a toddlers game with the only benefit being that it wasn't connected to a customer at the time.

Policies should be written/reviewed/updated to accommodate these challenges and provide advice and support to employees in avoiding accidents rather than having to mop up a mess after the event.

It may also be required for companies to provide desks, desk chairs, baffle boards and even refreshments in some circumstances.

Balancing the costs of switching on an employee at home, as opposed to switching them off until normal business resumes, can be easily calculated. The obvious and short-term answer is to keep the costs as low as possible per WAH implementation. However, companies should consider whether speculating in terms of a longer-term benefit means investing slightly more now to enable a more efficient operating model down the line.

**Maintaining a healthy mind** – Working in isolation is the stuff of dreams for some people, and akin to a nightmare for others. Despite the work of a frontline contact centre employee generally being centred around communication with others, many will miss doing so in an environment where they are located with their team. Spending unproductive periods and break times in isolation can be very lonely.

This crisis is exacerbating anxiety levels for those who are sufferers already and creating it in others who aren't. Fear for personal and family health, safety, and financial security can easily spill over into an unhealthy level of stress. High stress levels are not conducive to good work performance, and the onus to help employees find and deploy mechanisms to cope with high stress levels still sits with responsible employers.

Managing employees in this environment must be sensitive to these issues, and managers should adapt their styles to ensure they ask appropriate questions to ensure employees are coping with their new environment, and that they take proactive actions where they are not. This will not be a one-size-fits-all approach but a variety of solutions within an overall business framework. The BPO sector in the UK has generally responded well to enabling people with physical disabilities to have access to the same opportunities as those with no physical disabilities. They should deploy the same flexibility to the homeworking environment, ensuring that it is fit-for-purpose for all needs.

**Individual and team performance** – We have heard stories of some sales teams excelling in the home environment, and others that are struggling to meet some relatively basic KPI's. Contact centre managers remain 'in control' of performance by using relevant data points and spending most of their time with members of their team who are in the bottom quartile of league tables. It is easy to coach in a side-by-side environment. It is less easy to do so remotely. Companies who wish to perform now, and potentially leverage the benefits of homeworking later, must crack this challenge and enable their managers to lead effectively in an unfamiliar operating model. They must ensure their management teams are trained in new techniques, and that they are emotionally able to deploy these techniques.

Establishing a new routine, or reiterating the existing routine is important in setting out expectations for employees. The new home-working environment should provide benefits to most employees in relation to saving daily commuting time and enabling them to use their break times doing something constructive for themselves. All other challenges aside, the benefits of homeworking should be spelt out so that everyone leverages them. This will help to continue the arrangement beyond the period of the crisis if that is beneficial to the business and its clients.

One of the greatest challenges for most contact centres is creating efficiency in their resource planning models. Aligning workable patterns for employees with customer demands is a huge challenge, and this is exacerbated further where clients set contractual targets for capacity or service levels at an interval level. Most shift planners welcome split shift and zero hours arrangements. Many employees do not like them for very valid reasons. However, homeworking eradicates the issue of how an employee spends the time in between their split shift and/or the cost of a double commute during a working day. Homeworking can give companies an opportunity to work closely with employees on creating shifts that work for them, are significantly more efficient, and better aligned with client targets.

It is likely that KPI's will be relaxed throughout the period of the crisis, to enable suppliers to focus on managing the volume of contacts. A plan to reintroduce normal KPI's should be produced with careful and sensitive implementation. Hitting numerous complex KPI's is challenging and once momentum has been lost in terms of keeping all the KPI plates spinning, it will take time and support to return to previous performance levels. The plan should be akin to supporting a new employee, and companies should look to incorporate glide paths for the most challenging targets and provide coaching and/or formal training as required to enable employees to reach their previous highs.

## Compliance

The world has just been through one of the most intensive changes in regulatory management with implementation of General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Data security and data privacy challenges were already at the fore of contact centre operating models. The risk of a breach is high and the penalties for serious breaches include public vilification through negative PR and financial loss through regulatory and contractual fines that can be crimpling.

The risk of a breach is substantially higher in an environment that isn't closely controlled by management and trained compliance officers.

Short term 'wins' in switching over to a home-working model could be quickly undone if data breaches increase and dent client faith in the arrangement. The positive PR messages widely circulated across social media sites regarding the speed of deployment could come back to haunt those who do not instil the appropriate protocols to protect their clients' customer data.

New procedures should be drawn up to cater for the specific tasks being carried out and new protocols put in place to educate employees in what is and isn't acceptable when operating from home. Electronic signatures demonstrating completion of relevant courses and understanding of relevant policies is imperative but not just once. These should be repeated regularly enough to demonstrate due care and attention to this most important issue.

Companies who do not have the relevant expertise to create these policies and courses, should seek to engage with third parties who do. This should be prioritised. The only thing worse than a breach, is a breach without any evidence to demonstrate every care was taken to avoid it in the first place.

## Culture

A clear operating model or methodology, along with a strong brand, helps BPO companies create their own identity in an environment where otherwise they must take on the persona of another. Not all BPO companies have a defined operating model and this will make it even more difficult to ensure the culture of their organisation exists beyond the four walls of their offices.

Culture cannot be dictated; it is created when all employees in a business work together in a unique way that is common to them in pursuit of a shared goal. High attrition levels amongst mid and senior management can have serious adverse cultural impact because it breaks the chain of shared behaviours and introduces new people who take time to become familiar with those norms. Switching from an environment where everyone is travelling in the same direction and experiencing the same messages in the same way and at the same time as everyone else, to one where the very concept of consistent messaging comes to a grinding halt will have a major impact on culture.

Effort is required to ensure that those familiar cultural norms are protected to the extent that they can be, and not lost entirely if they can't be protected in the short term. It is also important to extend those cultural norms with new cultural aspects that relate to the new environment. People, generally, enjoy belonging to communities whose shared values and behaviours align with their own. Losing this

will result in employees selling their services to the highest bidder as work rates become the differentiating factor.

Maintaining and extending cultural norms into a home-working environment isn't easy but it is possible. For example, if it is normal for employees to grab a beer from the fridge in the café after 4 pm on Friday; then put this as an appointment in the calendars of each team so that they can continue to share in this experience together. If a business has free vending on sweets throughout their offices, then sending sweets through the post to their employees instead is a very small gesture that tells people they are not forgotten. If weekly team meetings always take place on Mondays at 2 pm, it is important to continue with that routine.

Using video conferencing also helps to protect the team-working ethos but beware the growing trend of filling work calendars with Zoom/Teams meetings that aren't required and last too long. People still need space and time to do their jobs. Enable proper critique of the effectiveness of meetings, and if the outputs are not of value, then cancel the series. 'Being seen' will not be the new success criteria; success will continue to be achievement against relevant targets.

## **Customer Impact**

As above, most employees' homes are not geared up to enable them to operate in the same way as they would at the office. Not least, eradicating background noise from inside and outside of the home is a challenge for many but failing to do so would be deemed as a considerable breach of professionalism by customers.

Bearing in mind the immediate challenges, the BPO companies can be forgiven for focusing on the essential rather than non-essential customer services. Some were criticised early on for using the 'key worker' definition to validate their decision to continue operating; time will tell whether this was a mistake or not. However, generally, few can argue that contact centre workers perform an exceptionally important role across many sectors in the UK. Without them, the operating rhythm of a business can be fatally interrupted and as less customers are served to the standard they expect, the negative PR spreads across social media and leaves a significant stain on an otherwise competent enterprise. We know the damage this does to customer loyalty all too well.

Today's priority customers though are those in need of information, advice, and/or support due to a change in the circumstances of their health or their finances. The public sector has been voracious in their demand for contact centre resources, and quite right too. There is an opportunity to provide employment through this period of time to support a different cause, but all of the care and attention provided to resourcing and training within an office environment should continue to be applied to these new circumstances.

Ultimately, if customer service lines remain open, customers should not feel a difference in the quality of the experience as a result of this crisis. BPO's must make sure they continue to focus on the quality of each experience as the primary measure of their value at a customer level. Quantity over quality will be as damaging today as it was yesterday.

## In Summary

This episode will be remembered for decades to come and is an opportunity for the industry not just to learn but also to correct some of the bad practices of the past. The smart ones will use it as an opportunity to adapt and evolve their operating models to demonstrate their people-first principles whilst also optimising quality and efficiency. They will be able to hold their heads high having reacted quickly to a global challenge without damaging the quality of service they provide to their clients and customers whilst putting the needs of their people ahead of the needs of their balance sheet. It will be difficult, but it can be done.

#Inthistogether #Coronavirus #Covid-19 #BPO #Contactcentremanagement #4T4

*4t4 Consult Ltd are a small, niche, consultancy. We work with a team of associates that are experts in customer experience and sales generation. We are passionate about driving tangible business results in relation to sustainable business growth. If you require any support with your business planning or plan execution through this crisis, or to get through the aftermath, please get in contact through our website contact page [www.4t4consult.co.uk](http://www.4t4consult.co.uk).*