

Chapter XXXIII

The Limits of Anytime, Anywhere Customer Support

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews research in distributed work, relating it to the way organizations manage collaboration between home-based customer support agents. The analysis focuses on the importance of shared identity to development of trust and social capital. The distributed work literature recognizes trust enables knowledge sharing through social exchange and gift giving activity. The discussion outlines two social norms—the norm of beneficence that encourages gift giving and the norm of reciprocity that encourages social exchange. These two norms provide a framework for understanding how knowledge sharing starts and continues in organizational relationships. The chapter next discusses the organizational strategies companies use to implement home-based customer support. The discussion concludes that the available research findings of applied studies of distributed work suggest that the most effective organizational strategy for home-based customer support enables knowledge sharing by blending face-to-face meetings, with other employees and management, and distributed work online.

INTRODUCTION

The “virtual contact center” is gaining a great deal of interest as a way of delivering customer service. Virtual contact center is a term describing self-service resources, such as Interactive Voice Response (IVR) systems, the Web, and

home-based customer support agents. Self-service applications are included in the concept of the virtual contact center offered here since IVR systems (Landry, Mahesh, & Hartman, 2005), and e-commerce Web sites, typically provide human backup for failed service requests by customers using a self-service channel (Kotelly, 2003). The

growing sophistication of self-service over recent years resulted in more companies considering implementation of a distributed work organization for customer support agents since self-service channels require 24/7 support and are often characterized by spikes in traffic.

Individuals and businesses have access to increasingly inexpensive and sophisticated broadband networks with the Web and other Internet Protocol (IP) technologies such as voice over IP (VoIP). Indeed, VoIP makes a distributed workforce solution increasingly practical (Rosenberg, 2005), allowing the same message to traverse voice or data channels. Companies are quickly gaining the technical ability to move customer support requests via telephone calls, e-mail, or chat across distances to support agents at distributed locations, aiming to match the customer's request with the skills of available agents, while providing centralized monitoring and intervention capabilities.

Companies are technically able to organize virtual contact centers across continents, corporate departments outside the contact center (i.e., sales, marketing, and product development), multiple contact centers, branch offices, or out of agent homes. The latter are referred to as home-based agents. Managers are able, from distant company offices, to listen to customer calls, even rewind and replay them, monitor keystroke information, and watch screen navigation of home-based customer support agents, just as if the agents are working in a centralized call center. Implementing a home-based virtual contact center is easily the largest challenge facing organizations wanting to take full advantage of distributed work in delivering customer support. This chapter draws from the distributed work literature on knowledge sharing to analyze a range of collaboration challenges facing organizations that implement a virtual contact center using home-based agents.

Traditionally, customer support relied on numerous disconnected systems crossing telephony, information technology, networking, and human

resources. Under those conditions, managing distributed customer support was difficult. By necessity, employees in large call centers did most customer support. However, Internet Protocol (IP) technologies give companies a practical choice in taking advantage of the convergence of telephony (voice), data networking, and the Web. As a result, corporate enterprises now have a range of opportunities to incorporate added flexibility to customer support efforts, including virtual contact centers.

We note that, as the availability of broadband networking using Internet technologies increases, the promise of "anytime, anywhere" customer support increasingly appears attainable. However, companies implementing virtual contact centers face a basic fact about distributed work, specifically that the human and organizational challenges faced in employees collaborating, working together, at a distance are equally, or more, daunting than the technical challenges. The analysis in this chapter provides an overview of several companies in the United States that implement virtual contact centers using home-based agents, examining the extent to which the organizational strategies take central findings about distributed work into account.

Customer support agents are able to collaborate now, using technologies such as chat, e-mail, discussion lists, screen sharing, and so on, to share knowledge about problems faced in their work. Nevertheless, the existing research on distributed work discussed below indicates that the likelihood of knowledge sharing between employees collaborating with one another or with management increases under some organizational conditions relative to others. Specifically, it takes longer to develop knowledge sharing practices in organizations where agents do not experience a shared identity because the absence of a shared identity impedes the development of social capital (Hinds & Weisband, 2003).

This chapter provides an overview of the organizational strategies used by companies in

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