

SERVICE 800
Telework Model Case Study
www.SERVICE800.com

Overview. SERVICE 800 was founded in 1989 to help service organizations measure the quality of the services they deliver. Generally, SERVICE 800 is engaged by companies that wish to collect data from customers about the services they have been provided by the company's representatives. Data on customer satisfaction are typically obtained shortly after customers are provided services.

SERVICE 800 has offices in London, England and Minneapolis, Minnesota. The large majority of the company's employees are customer service representatives. All such representatives work from their homes as teleworkers. Indeed, when the company was founded, one of the guiding principles was to provide employment for mothers who wished to stay home and work. Currently 200 service representatives work from their homes, 20 to 40 hours per week.¹ SERVICE 800 provides a competitive wage structure and a 401K program for employees.

Business Incentives. Because all representatives work from their homes, SERVICE 800 has achieved significant cost savings from not having a large infrastructure. Another major benefit, according to a senior company official, has been the loyalty and commitment of customer representatives—turnover is low and some representatives have been with the company for 10 years.

Working toward the Greater Good. At the heart of this company's mission is its pride in knowing that its approach allows individuals unable to leave their homes to become employed again. SERVICE 800 is a fairly unique company. The company was designed to provide home-based customer service employees. Management is very satisfied with the results to date. The plan is to expand the number of teleworkers as the company's workload requires additional personnel.

Because of the telework culture at SERVICE 800, the experiences of its representatives are quite atypical of situations nationwide. With management fully supporting home-based employment, there are no supervisors who are lukewarm about telework. Nor are there issues with promotions and career paths being affected negatively by teleworking. For example, teleworkers have been promoted to supervisory positions and some supervisors telework.

Agent Selection and Communication. SERVICE 800 has a formal recruiting and selection process. Candidates must pass a set of initial minimum requirements, and are then selected by a recruiting coordinator. Nearly all new representatives receive training about process and procedures, probing techniques, adherence to scripts, phone etiquette,

¹ Some representatives work as much as 40 hours per week, and some who normally work 20 hours per week actually have longer hours during peak calling periods and when filling in for others who are on vacation. Nonetheless, the general work schedule is 20 hours per week

and so forth. The company considers this training essential for effective performance by the customer representatives.

Communication is addressed by encouraging networking among the representatives, conducting regular telephone and web-based meetings among team members, and generally promoting a “we are family” philosophy. There are four calling teams in North America, each with 40 representatives. A team meeting typically will cover a variety of topics such as reviewing process and procedures, submitting telephone bills for reimbursement, discussing unique problems related to a calling program, introducing new members, and making personal announcements such as an engagement or birth of a child. Minutes for these meetings are distributed among participants.

Besides these team meetings, customer representatives are encouraged to contact their supervisors/team leads as often as necessary via email or phone call. Further, supervisors and team leads are responsible for sending a daily message to their teams. These messages usually contain work available for the day or specific work direction for the team to follow that day and a “thought for the day” with some inspiring phrase or message.

Performance Management. Monitoring and oversight of the representatives, according to the company, is a work in progress. Everyone is required to log into a website to start work and to log off when done. These records must match the hours the customer representative reports.² Data regarding the representatives’ interviews are monitored through a web-based application. The company currently has the ability to see how many attempts are made and interviews completed by a representative for different time periods (per hour, per day, per week). Quotas per se are not established, although there are expectations about how many interviews a representative should conduct for a specific time period.

Challenges. SERVICE 800 has significant challenges in addition to having a workforce that is almost entirely off-site. The two primary challenges have been: 1) communication with the customer representatives, and 2) supervision of the representatives. The latter has been especially challenging. In addition, many of the representatives are required to record every interview conducted but this has proven ineffective due to some incompatibilities in instant messaging programs and screen savers. SERVICE 800 is currently working on a VOIP solution that will allow all calling resources to record every interview they conduct.

The Future. Company management believes that teleworking will become more common in the future. It has noted that increasing numbers of individuals possess the tools and equipment, including a home office, to work remotely. More individuals, particularly stay-at-home mothers and persons with disabilities, are seeking part-time employment as well. Because a larger pool of individuals now has the tools and capabilities of working, and there are improvements in the technology of measuring the performance of remote workers, the company believes teleworking will be expanding.

² SERVICE 800 also has a web-based application which documents actual time worked.

The Teleworker Perspective. Just hear about the opinion of some of their employees with disabilities:

“Our company is a perfect example that anyone, disabled or not, is able to work from home. It’s how the company started.”

“This job has provided an income, made me feel like a productive person, and kept me in touch with the outside world. I am 64 years old. I plan on working until the day I am no longer here on this earth.”

“I am more focused at home. When I worked for (large company) I was talking to other co-workers. I still performed my job duties, but I feel I am 100 percent focused working from home. I don’t have distractions.”