

Q&A: Contact Centre Homeworking in 2021

Sensee and their client Bupa shared their experiences of homeworking in October 2020 with CCMA members. These were the questions that were raised at the virtual seminar that have been answered by Sensee and Bupa where indicated.

Question	Answer
<p>How do you balance performance with productivity and keeping mental health and family issues balanced?</p>	<p>We promote an open working relationship and ask Team Leaders to take time to build rapport with their team members (even more so than they would in a bricks and mortar setting) making sure that a variety of support is in place including Capability and Performance Improvement Plans as required. By concentrating on advisors' mental well-being and work/life balance, they will naturally be more productive and feel supported and taken care of.</p>
<p>With regards to motivation and engagement, is there anything specific that you have done/use to understand peoples motivation to them engaged to take part in activities</p>	<p>We run competitions and promote social chat amongst advisors within work time. Within our unique LiveDesk 'virtual workplace' we also have an engagement tracker that shows who is and isn't being proactive - which, in turn, can possibly lead to a welfare check. Outside of work we hold Virtual Games Nights via webcam that can boost morale. Advisors get the opportunity to mix with ALL colleagues and bring other family members along too.</p>
<p>With Zoom/Teams/Video calls etc going viral due to kids/pets/other distractions, what tools and 'best practice' advice do you give employees to control their environment, remain professional and give the customer a great and consistent experience?</p>	<p>Our BAU approach is to ask employees to have a secluded office. However, this has been relaxed due to the current pandemic. The most essential requirement is to educate children and other friends/family about why they can't just come in to the home office by explaining what would happen if they did. Some people have also turned to putting a note on the office door to avoid people walking in, asking people to knock before entering. Even with all these measures in place there are still going to be instances when this happens though. If it does, we ask advisors to remain calm, politely put the member/customer on hold if possible, and quickly exit the child/pet/other out of the room and return to the call as swiftly as possible.</p>

Question	Answer
How do you train the Team Managers ? What have you done differently to train the TMs?	<p>We use our LiveDesk virtual offices. These have functions (just like Zoom/Teams) to share presentations, screens, whiteboards and allow all participants to actively engage via webcam. The main difference with training in the virtual world is adapting to the lack of visual queues. One has to be more assertive in recognising when there could be issues and follow up on these as quickly as possible. We utilise webcams as much as we can in 121s to ensure face-to-face contact, and use this as an opportunity to check on the health and safety aspects of advisors' working environments as well as gage interest and body language. With all employees we ask them to follow a 'journey to work', pitching it like a commute. In this way they can get ready for work and be in the right mindset to hit the ground running. As with advisors, personalities are key to being an effective homeworking Team Leader. Individuals must have empathy and understand the impact that working from home can have on their team members, as well as maintain an approachable style so that advisors can reach out to them if needed. They also need to be engaging so they can keep morale high... naturally leading to happier and better performing teams.</p>
Have any of your staff been infected and is there a difference if working at home? I haven't got any in the office since March and have concerns over being able to deliver to customers if we had the whole team impacted- small team of only 24	<p>We have had some cases within the company, and others have been impacted from a childcare point of view even though they've not come down with it themselves. Clearly when you aren't commuting or being around others within the office there is less risk of infection. This will go some way towards explaining why infection rates amongst Sensée employees has remained fairly low. Also, by working at home and having relaxed policies in place to help with childcare arrangements, many people that have had to self isolate have been able to continue working (as long as they have been fit and able to do so).</p>
How do you manage work related stress due to IT issues?	<p>Be as responsive and pro-active as possible. This reassures advisors that you are doing all you can to help. For those that are having system issues (i.e not internet issues) we have a daily touch point huddle where they can attend with others experiencing similar problems and use the time to review calls, do role plays, quizzes and eLearning. This way they remain engaged and product knowledge isn't lost.</p>
With current government restrictions to work from home as much as you can, how is the team members acceptance going to the office when you ask them to because their productivity at home is not as good as it should be?	<p>We try whenever possible to resolve any productivity issues people are having, and look at ways we can help with the daily balance of life and work. For example, by providing more breaks and putting a temporary flexible working request in place. The role of a proactive Team Leader here is critical as they can work with the Team Member to understand why in the first place productivity maybe lower - distractions, knowledge crutches they might have had while working in the physical centre.</p>

Question	Answer
<p>What specific activity have you found effective to keep teams engaged and morale at a level to keep them engaged.</p>	<p>Encourage social chat, just as people would get if they were working in a bricks and mortar centre. Organise fun activities such as competitions and virtual social nights and have group coaching sessions or huddles to ensure they are getting the contact they need.</p>
<p>How are companies managing engagement in a hybrid solution when they have employees onsite and at home?</p>	<p>Ensure there is an understanding from both homeworkers and in-house workers that they have the same job, expectations and duties. There can be an assumption that homeworkers have it easier which is not the case. Try to get them to interact with each other so they get to know the person and not the perception. For example a virtual social night can be joined in by everyone at home - even if they have been in the contact centre during the day.</p>
<p>What communication processes do you put in place to make sure all workers (especially in a hybrid working model) receive the correct information?</p>	<p>The key is variety. Email communication is the most useful but can be repetitive. We use a combination of email, Teams messages and recorded video to keep engagement high.</p>
<p>What are the common Health and safety issues due to home working?</p>	<p>Ensure that peoples' intrinsic functions aren't impacted and that they are working from a room that is safe and secure including heating, ventilation, lighting. By 'intrinsic' functions we are referring to, for example, their manual dexterity, whether they are working a variety of work patterns/shifts, whether they are taking appropriate breaks, and so on. We also perform webcam checks to confirm if standards are being met.</p>
<p>You mentioned bring your own model for IT, broadband and office equipment, is this reflected in pay to your staff members (do they get paid more because of this)</p>	<p>Sensée is dedicated to paying the real living wage, which exceeds many other companies in our field delivering similar services. The fact that '100% homeworkers' have no travel-to-work costs is also a key consideration for many of our people.</p>

Question	Answer
<p>Do you use remote monitoring tools, such as screen recording, click tracing etc?</p>	<p>Remote monitoring is clearly an emotive subject. Our perspective at Sensée is that we need sufficient visibility of HomeAgent activity to know that our people are safe and performing their roles effectively. Our specialist SafeOS software heavily restricts the Agent Desktop in order to prevent advisors from accessing systems not required for their roles. Customer calls are generally recorded in order to comply with client obligations and in line with FCA and other guidelines. We have the ability to do screen recording if required. And we have adherence monitoring built into our resource scheduling platform (TeamTonic) that confirms when advisors are logged in, and also highlights any software issues (such as antivirus not being in place or up-to-date). Trust is an incredibly important aspect of the bond between colleagues in a remote working team: don't damage those bonds by using overly intrusive remote monitoring.</p>
<p>How do you change employees and managers behaviours from a traditional call centre solution to a home working environment?</p>	<p>Focus on the benefits and set their expectations. Homeworkers need to be more self-motivated and get used to managing different distractions (e.g. the laundry that needs doing). Above all, it's key to keep 'work' and 'home life' issues separate and be able to switch off. We've all had the car trip home from work remembering something we've forgotten to do. With the office in the house the temptation to go back to work to tie up loose ends is that much greater.</p>
<p>On engagement and connectivity has Bupa increased planned offline time for colleagues in comparison from being in an office based environment?</p>	<p>Yes. We have increased offline (communications) time - adding between 15-30 minutes for each adviser per week - to recognise that absorbing business changes remotely can take our colleagues more time than it would do in a standard office-based environment.</p>
<p>We are also seeing feedback from in office colleagues that feel left behind. How have you tackled the feedback you have been given from office workers?</p>	<p>Wherever possible, ensure that feedback and communication is consistent and that everyone is seeing the same information. This will help bridge any unease or feelings of being neglected. Encourage in-house and remote teams to integrate, and ensure that they all feel part of one big team.</p>
<p>We have been having difficulty replicating the camaraderie from our bricks and mortar atmosphere in a virtual environment, such as natural conversation between colleagues in the break room or at the water cooler, have you been able to replicate this at all? Do you have any tips?</p>	<p>Consistency is key, keep promoting it and make sure there are positive and communicative individuals in every virtual session to keep the conversation going. Ask Managers to assist with this too. It only takes one person to bring up a subject and the chat will follow - pets and children are always good conversation starters! We also do a whole host of daily non work related engagement emails.... ranging from jokes to stories and random facts that can prompt conversations.</p>

Question	Answer
With a potential for some face to face touchpoints combined with a mix of predominantly homeworking in future, what are the recommendations, from your experience, of the ideal activities to prioritise for available face to face time?	We'd recommend that conversations about welfare or HR-related matters always be conducted face to face.
Thoughts on social events etc particularly for those who live alone and work was their social life.	We hold a wide range of virtual social events via webcam - everything from quizzes to bingo, catchphrase and scavenger hunts. These really help bond our teams together and get the social buzz they may be missing from not being in the office. Family members are invited too!
The security and Health and safety aspects - what measure do you take if someone is not able to provide the virtual environment? I.E shared house so work in and live in the same room, no space for desk etc., or they live at home with parents or no secluded environment?	We would work with them to see if there was a flexible working solution they could work towards - such as 'only work when another person wasn't' if they use the same room. For some of our client accounts, we could also look at the possibility of non-phone work (such as a digital or admin role) so long as privacy regulations are still met.
All have mentioned attrition is low but now starting to reappear, however since lockdown, how has attrition moved for BUPA and Sensée? What have been the main reasons for leaving?	Attrition initially reduced to virtually zero but increased during August and September. It remains less than half pre-Covid levels. The main reasons for leaving are colleagues who have felt that the workload pressure has become too much and/or they have decided on a career change.
How does your performance and development framework differ to those who aren't fully WFH?	[Bupa] It doesn't really differ. We have a big focus on serving our customers well above all else, whether it be through customer feedback directly (e.g. NPS) or Quality Assurance outcomes (through internal sample checking of customer interactions). We have output / productivity expectations - but tried to balance these over a longer period than under BAU i.e. helping x customers over the week - rather than measuring AHT on a day.

Question	Answer
With BYOD/BYOB approach, what support do you provide people to ensure they can work effectively? some areas, especially rural, won't have superfast broadband like in cities. Is there also a financial support provided?	Sensée has minimum requirements that must be adhered to. If new equipment/services are required, we can provide financial assistance with monies paid back in instalments. If internet coverage is an issue, advisors can potentially look into 4G internet to see if this would help get them online, it may come at an additional cost but can deliver a workable solution.
How do you mitigate against the risk of compromising customer data in a remote working environment, particularly in regulated sectors?	Protecting client and customer data is of paramount importance. Sensée has strong InfoSec policies and a robust homeworking infosecurity platform (SafeOS) to ensure that no breaches occur.
You mentioned the staff being able to see their colleagues and supervisors so they know they can get quick support. Do you have a preferred communication tool? Microsoft Teams? Chime? Zoom?	We use Microsoft Teams but team communications is mostly conducted in LiveDesk, Sensée's virtual comms workplace. LiveDesk has all the capabilities of Teams and more, supporting many forms of manager & employee communications from real-time management & technical support to bulletin boards, polling, video conferencing , training and social chat.
How have you overcome challenges around compliance. Areas such as GDPR and PCI.	Homeworking presents unique challenges when it comes to compliance but it doesn't mean that it is any less important, or any less achievable. Sensée is up to date with all the latest security platforms and has tried and tested InfoSec policies. We have a dedicated GDPR office to ensure compliance is maintained and regular audits are performed. Sensée is ISO27001 accredited and has achieved PCI-DSS and GDPR compliance.
Do the panelists have any tips for effective induction training of new employees who are home based?	Induction training is all done via our virtual classrooms. We use a variety of techniques to maximise engagements, video presentations, discussion boards, and place new recruits into smaller groups to action role plays as required. Use of webcam can also allow confirmation of understanding and engagement.
What percentage split do you have WFH versus onsite?	[Bupa] Around 20% are working in the office and 80% working from home.
What's your preferred management approach to addressing underperformance, particularly with those new to working from home and where you don't have all the tools you'd normally have in the office... wallboards/stats etc?	Sensée managers have access to stats and wallboards to ensure maximum understanding of individual of team performance from many perspectives. If performance is found to be down, we'd look to first support the advisor, and then assess how they are adjusting to the new set up. Potentially we'd look to follow a flexible working request, or buddy them up with an experienced homeworker to assist in key areas.

Question	Answer
Mark hit the nail on the head, 99% of our staff did not apply for homeworking jobs but this has been forced so many now feeling fatigued and low morale	[Bupa] When asked, we found that if given ultimate freedom of choice, around 10% of our staff would want to be back working in the office on a 5-day a week basis, around 10% would want to work at home exclusively, and 80% would want to work a mix of in/out of office. Once restrictions lift, we hope to allow our staff to fully exercise this choice - which I think will help those staff who are really finding it hard to be at home all of the time.
What reward and recognition tools/activities have worked for you?	We have our own Rewards Plan where individuals nominate each other with our judging panel recognising the best entries and giving prizes. In addition, we hold competitions to collect examples of best practice sent in by advisors. A budget is set aside per account each month to reward good performance in addition to social events.
How do you proceed with development and progression in a working from home environment?	Much in the same way you would internally. We spend extra time with those looking to progress and teach them the extra skills needed. We have a development programme for advisors and an academy for Team Leaders. They are given a wider view of the company and attend sessions where they work together on management skills and do exercises to embed knowledge.
How do you allow colleagues to develop and progress within a virtual business?	As above
For anyone that has office and home based workers do they have the same rewards have seen some companies recruiting home workers at a lower pay rate what are the thoughts on this?	As a company, we are dedicated to paying the real living wage. We do not believe there should be differences within companies for home and office based workers. There are some additional costs associated with work-from-home (such as higher utility bills) but these are invariably outweighed by the benefits (such as no commute or canteen costs).
Do you have any tips for onboarding and training new starters remotely when traditional methods of live coaching with a colleague is not available?	Use a variety of techniques to maximise engagement: video presentations, discussion boards, role plays etc. The use of webcam can also allow confirmation of understanding and engagement. Homeworker coaching can be carried out 100% in the office, 100% virtually, or a mix of both. In Sensée's case, it is 100% virtual. We have the software to Live Listen in to calls and sessions, and assist where required.
What elements make up a virtual mindset?	To effectively manage a homeworking operation, we frequently talk about the need to have a virtual mindset across everything that you do: from Recruitment & On Boarding to Management, Training, Technology, Scheduling/ Planning, Security and Communication.

Question	Answer
How are you able to provide the right levels of support (coaching, observations, feedback) on individuals who are not meeting objectives set. Knowing that people have different learning styles.	We have various coaching tools available from extra LiveListening, to additional peer to peer sessions, role plays, and reviewing calls. With the right software there is very little you can't do that isn't done in the office.
Question for all, With increased AHT/WRAP & shrinkage, have you moved towards increased staffing to meet SLA, or have you moved the goal post and set new SLA's around the new normal that we are now in.	We'd suggest keeping the same SLAs while making allowances for small changes in Talktime, Wrap, Hold etc. as people get accustomed to homeworking. If SLAs aren't being met, emergency staffing increases or overtime may be offered but we would only look to action this in the short term and the long term goal would be to reduce shrinkage by working with the agents to find more flexible working patterns and to commit to what they can do.
How do you make working from home fun and interactive?	Utilising the tools we have to make sure that not just the work communication is there but also the social side. Outside of work we hold these regularly having different activities from quizzes, bingo, catchphrase and scavenger hunts, all done virtually via webcam and all the family is invited too. This really helps bond the team together and get the social buzz they may be missing. Within work we have competitions, daily emails with a range of jokes, stories and random facts to keep things light and fun and this filters into the virtual offices.
How do you keep the team motivated & engaged whilst working from home?	Continued feedback and support, even just a quick message to check in and ask how they're doing goes a long way. Use a variety of techniques to maximise engagement including video presentations, discussion boards, role plays etc.
Initial thoughts re profile of the suitable candidate?	Getting the right personality to match home working as it is very different to office based work. Make sure candidates are open & honest, resilient, self motivated and adaptable. Familiarity with IT, and a little IT knowledge, will also take them a long way.
How do you make sure that within a business where you still have office workers and home workers that you ensure that the home workers have the same opportunities for example development, incentives and are not left out - do you have any examples	We would ensure that all opportunities for development are the same, allowing all communications (and potentially sessions) to be available for all regardless of where they are based. We follow the same processes but just have to adapt them to meet the virtual environment.

Question	Answer
<p>How do you ensure that you have the required levels of staffing when the inbound demand requires it if reliant on advisors choosing when and how much they want to work? How do you get the right balance?</p>	<p>We release available work hours in advance for advisors to self-select their work schedules. This is via a combination of compulsory and optional/voluntary hours. This empowers advisors to have a say in what hours they work, while meeting our client obligations.</p>
<p>How do you assess suitability for homeworking during the application process?</p>	<p>Look for the key traits: Open & Honest, Resilient, Self Motivated and Adaptable. We have a diverse application process that assesses suitability via questionnaires and later webcam interviews.</p>
<p>Thanks Mark, with the 32% staff in disaffected rural areas how do you make sure they have sufficient internet strength to perform their role successfully? I know you can do internet speed tests but how do you factor that into your recruitment process?</p>	<p>We have minimum specs for broadband and equipment that everyone must pass prior to being employed. If an advisor lives in a rural location and can't offer the required BB speeds then, if their set-up allows, they could look into 4G internet as an alternative.</p>
<p>Hi, how do you manage shrinkage, and onboarding in that environment? Thanks</p>	<p>At Sensée, we generally have very low shrinkage. Absence too is generally well below industry averages. This is partly down to a strict adherence to the margin guidelines we set, HR processes, and focus on employee welfare. When it comes to onboarding we have a diverse application process that assesses suitability via online questionnaires and later webcam interviews where we look for key traits: open & honest, resilient, self motivated and adaptable.</p>
<p>What tips can you share for looking after the well-being and engagement of remote teams? Especially as many are moving from surviving WFH and now looking to flourish.</p>	<p>Continued feedback and support, even just a quick message to check in and ask how people are doing goes a long way. Use a variety of techniques to maximise engagement: video presentations, discussion boards, role plays etc.</p>
<p>Mark, could you talk about the most effective ways you have improved or managed performance of your remote sales teams? And have the metrics that matter most changed?</p>	<p>[Bupa] The key focus has been on 'empowering people' (even more than before) but doing so based on giving a clearer, narrower set of metrics to focus on - whether they be sales or service related. This has meant that some 'input measures' have been relaxed (e.g. giving people broader objectives such as you need to help x customers over the month). How you get to that, we'll now leave to you. This has also facilitated more best practice-sharing. Key metrics overall have been maintained - rather than getting better - but I would argue that underlying, we have had to have get better as to stand still against such a headwind wouldn't have been possible otherwise.</p>

Question	Answer
In terms of engagement plans and activities how do you feel this is best balanced when you have a split of employees working in office and from home?	Collaboration is key. Ensuring that you adapt activities so that everybody can be included. Tools such as Zoom and Teams are great platforms for social nights - which are often easier to run virtually.
How to you accommodate equipment if they are moving between home and office working?	Sensée operates a Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) policy. If equipment needs replacing or upgrading, we can provide financial assistance to homeworkers, repayable in instalments.
Really interested to hear how we can mitigate more against distractions in the home - iPhones, TVs, playstations etc!!	Education is key, and not just for our advisors but also for their friends and family. We always position it that people still work in a contact centre/office and before doing something should always ask themselves 'would this be acceptable if I were in the office?' If the answer is no then it generally shouldn't be done in their home offices either.
You touched on it, but with a home working business model, how have you ensured things like PCI compliance?	Sensée has kept up to date with all the latest security platforms and has tried and tested InfoSec policies. We also have a dedicated GDPR office to ensure compliance is maintained and regular audits performed. Adherence monitoring is built in to our scheduling platform to confirm when advisors are logged in, with the platform highlighting any issues (such as antivirus not being in place). Sensée is ISO27001 accredited and has achieved PCI-DSS and GDPR compliance.
What WFM system do you use? Do you need different functionality from WFM solutions for homeworking?	Sensée has built its own WFM solution and refined the platform over many years. Key to WFM in a homeworking environment is the ability to schedule flexibly in order to deliver the work-life-balance hours that homeworkers desire - while giving resource planners the ability to micro-schedule personnel around corporate requirements. These capabilities are inherent within the Sensée TeamTonic solution which manages advisor schedules and acts as a portal to online client apps, as well as ensuring security obligations are met and client/customer data protected.
Any good tips for how we can add more gamification to our WFH advisor and managers?	Get creative! Working in the virtual world is much easier when setting up games nights and social activities. We regularly hold events ranging from quizzes, catchphrase, bingo, scavenger hunts, and more.
Do you complete training for your new recruits via homeworking facilities too?	Yes, and this is all done via our virtual classrooms. We are able to show presentations, videos, gauge understanding and place people into smaller groups to action role plays.