

Q&A: Homeworking

Following an open discussion at a CCMA event with Catherine Lindsay, Head of Customer Experience at Hitachi Capital, and Mark Walton, CEO at Sensee, some questions were raised that were not answered at the time. Here are the answers...

	Question	Answer(s)
1	What training was used to manage in a virtual world? Was this internal or external?	Catherine - our L&D team created the majority of our own internal training. We have also had Mind training on Stress and Resilience.
2	Hi Catherine Thank you for sharing your journey. It would be great to hear how you've set up virtual Team Leader support for your agents for more "in the moment" support for example with customer complaints?	Catherine - We do coaching using Teams - both on live contacts and by replaying previous contacts. We have senior advisor helplines available that agents can contact either by phone or Teams chat if they need support in real time.
3	What sort of activity have you done to keep people engaged virtually?	<p>Catherine - a wide range of activity but here's just a few to give you a flavour: increasing coaching and 121 time, setting up a CX social page where we interact on work related or more social topics. We have virtual team talks with our CEO, fortnightly video updates from our MD and my team and I hold regular "coffee with" sessions where anyone can attend and ask questions on any topic they like. We've also increased comms in general and via different mediums, increased how we communicate about change and also focussed heavily on well-being with our team sharing stories and tips with each other. We've also had group activities from a virtual Christmas party and cocktail making, to weekly yoga sessions.</p> <p>Mark: 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>

4	<p>Would you see new trainees being in the office for a period of time initially because my gut is sending trainees remote too early may not be of benefit in the long run?</p>	<p>Catherine - I think we answered this one in the session but we have been fully virtual for all but one of our new starter academies from the start of the pandemic. We found that performance of the cohort and support required for the academy was very similar whether virtual or office based. The feedback from our cohorts both office based and virtual has been really positive as well.</p>
5	<p>Have you seen attrition increase in the last few weeks as recruitment increases post lockdown?</p>	<p>Catherine - we've seen slight increases but not comparable to levels prior to the pandemic.</p>
6	<p>What extra things have you been doing as a business to engage colleagues that are working at home?</p>	<p>Mark: 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.</p>
7	<p>Really interesting presentation thank you! I am starting to think about remote/hybrid working and possibly taking a more regional/national approach to recruiting - I am trying to get my head round how I onboard, engage and manage that model of remote working - you talk about the agents still coming in to the office periodically - does this mean you are still constrained to recruit within a certain radius from the office or are you reaching out wider than you would have done previously?</p>	<p>Catherine - we're definitely thinking about increasing our reach to wider audiences however we do want to keep some element of face to face activity in a month. This may change over time - we will keep monitoring. What we have found is that a number of our current team have actually moved further away over lockdown - for reasons such as family issues, or for partners to find work, and our new hybrid approach means that they can still continue to work with us rather than look for roles nearer to their new home as the need to commute that further distance is limited to a couple of times a month.</p> <p>Mark: Sensee recruits from all over the UK. We call it our '4 corners recruitment model'. Not everyone is right for long term homeworking and we have invested heavily in tools to ensure that we select and recruit people who will thrive working from home. We start by advertising through national and also local channels, including specifically targeting communities that have a rich source of talent but may not be suitable for standard bricks and mortar centres. All candidates start the process going through TalentPitch – this is our in- house built recruitment tool which takes about 2 hours and includes numerous tests (literacy, numeracy, data entry accuracy, etc.), customer service orientation assessments and personality profiling. They also verify their work history, home and PC environment by filling in a digital CV and submitting.</p>

8	Trust works both ways - employer/employee. If an individual is less productive and less responsive do you still extend the same flexible options?	Catherine - we have been working almost 100% virtually during the pandemic and have performance managed virtually, mirroring how we would have done in the office. The only performance issues that would have warranted a return to the office during this time would have been technical issues with things such as Wifi, or anyone who's working environment caused distractions that impacted on performance and the customer experience. Whilst this has been effective, when we move to a hybrid model we are considering having other performance issues that would limit flexible options however I anticipate these will be minimal given our experience in lockdown.
9	The app that you are introducing within your company for booking, is this something that has been procured from an external company or designed within?	Mark: If you are referring to booking shifts (i.e. homeworkers self-scheduling shifts so that @home and hybrid workers can work around their other daily commitments), then this is done through a platform called TeamTonic. TeamTonic is part of the Sensee Cloudworks homeworking ecosystem. To us, the ability to self-schedule for a better work-life-balance (WLB) is one of the most fundamental principles of successful homeworking
10	How do you balance the need for service provision with personal flexibility? Not everyone can have time away at the same time. the school run for example?	Catherine - all requests for flexibility in terms of hours rather than location are weighed up using the individual and business's requirements. Mark: As well as providing homeworkers with a better WLB through self-scheduling, another key benefit of TeamTonic is that it enables resource planners to create highly flexible workplace schedules - indeed, right down to 30 min intervals! Homeworkers 'bid' for shifts around expected intraday contact volumes up to 4 weeks ahead of the actual day. A matching algorithm then matches 'required daily resource levels' to 'requested hours' - and is generally successful in providing @home workers with 85%+ of their requested hours. Scheduling by 30 min intervals is hugely resource efficient - and if extra resource is required due to an unexpected demand peak, homeworkers can even take on extra hours at very short notice.

11	<p>We have struggled particularly with compliance issues throughout the past 12 months and given that we are a regulated business, this could have wider consequences for us. How do you ensure compliance and the correct level of support with a home working model?</p>	<p>Catherine - we're also a regulated business and we have increased independent QA checks since lockdown started, mainly due to the implementation of payment holidays so we wanted to have more oversight to ensure we were driving the right customer outcomes. We've also continued to have compliance internal audit activity as normal. Within our CX team we've also upped the amount of coaching we do with our teams, either 121 or group coaching, and this has helped us improve customer outcomes despite being virtual.</p> <p>Mark: Security and compliance are huge issues in the work-from-home environment. Just because your in-house centre is PCI or FCA compliant is no guarantee that your @home operation is going to be the same. Compliance is possible, it can just take time and a different mindset. Sensée is ISO27001 accredited and has achieved PCI-DSS and GDPR compliance.</p>
12	<p>Have any of you considered a 4 day working week since home working became the norm and if so what was the uptake from employees?</p>	<p>Catherine - we haven't considered it specifically but if anyone had a request for a 4 day week we would consider it in line with our current flexible working policy.</p>
13	<p>What are the main blockers to 100% remote working ?</p>	<p>Catherine -The only real blocker we've had is the strength of certain people's home wifi. And some people have had to change providers to be able to work from home effectively. Other considerations, rather than blockers, would be to making sure work is done to build culture, maintain links with other departments, keep creativity and innovation alive and to think about career progression. I think these are all do-able though in a virtual world. They just need thought.</p> <p>Mark: Nothing, we've been doing it for the past 17 years! But you must plan effectively - which means adopting a virtual mindset across everything that you do: from Recruitment & On Boarding to Management, Training, Technology, Scheduling/ Planning, Security and Communication. You must also recruit the right people. People who want to homework and are suitable for homeworking. There are advantages of working @home and advantages to working from the office. Whether homeworking is right for you often comes down to whether the benefits of homeworking outweigh the benefits of working from an office.</p>

14	How do you get your agents to be accountable for their performance?	Catherine - Through regular 121s and coaching sessions just as we would have done in the office. We have upped the number of coaching sessions since lockdown. Mainly to make sure we were giving our team maximum support with the kinds of contacts we saw in the pandemic and payment holidays however we've continued with this as we've seen positive improvements to overall customer outcomes.
15	What happens if you have disruption in your business, weather etc which you are unable to forecast for?	Catherine - I think we'll be better placed to manage disruption in the hybrid model as the model itself gives greater flexibility.
16	With such flexibility in self scheduling, how does this translate in terms of providing effective Team Leader support/coaching/etc?	Mark: I believe that the majority of centres underinvest in their Team Leaders (TLs). But in many respects it's the most important contact centre role of all because they are often the people who 'glue' whole communities together - and especially remote worker communities. So make sure you do all the things you should be doing anyway, like setting up great TL development programmes and academies to ensure you have the right calibre of people coming through, and that they are well primed to do the job, and ensuring you continually invest in your team leader pool. But also recognise the particular demands of being a Remote Team Leader. Firstly, make sure they are suitable - are they Open & Honest, Resilient, Self Motivated, Adaptable? Are they happy Working-From-Home? And do they have the right skills to be a Remote TL? A weekly one-to-one maybe the only time a remote Agent comes in front of their Manager..... so it's crucial that time is managed effectively and situations are handled professionally.
17	We have seen an increase in AHT but this is down to the customers needing more pastoral care than previously in the uncertain world we're in. Detailed QM has identified that it's not directly related to remote working.	Catherine - we definitely saw this as one of the drivers of higher than normal handling times during the pandemic
18	What do you all do in the event of system outages - individual WIFI issues, are there set expectations as to when they are asked to come to office, or if not how is this handled?	Catherine - we've managed these on a case by case basis but normally if the outage is expected to last more than a few hours we have asked people to come into the office, or if possible move to a different location with working wifi where government restrictions have allowed this. We would continue with this approach in the hybrid model

19	Would there be any clauses in working from home contracts if there are productivity issues?	Catherine - We haven't planned to have this in our contracts.
20	Have you got any practical tips on how we manage personal development and progression when working remotely? There is a concern as we move to a hybrid world colleagues are worried that as we return to offices those who are 'seen' in the office will have more opportunities.	<p>Catherine - we're asking ourselves these questions at the moment. We already have a tried and tested development route into leadership roles via our Aspire programme. We created Aspire with L&D and trialled it within the CX team in 2019. It came into its own during the pandemic when several of the first trial cohort moved into leadership roles as we increased in size. After this successful trial the programme is now fully virtual, and cohorts have aspiring leaders from across all areas of the business to develop our people leaders of the future. To support our people who want to progress into an area outside of the CX team we're putting more structure around our career pathways. We're looking at ways to better showcase the opportunities we have and help people build networks in a hybrid model.</p> <p>In addition our focus on developing our team managers throughout the pandemic means that we're also having better conversations about people's aspirations for the future which helps us understand what development goals our people have regardless of location. In terms of developing people within their own roles our move to virtual coaching and the increase in coaching and observation time has given us some really good insight to help our people to deliver better customer experiences and outcomes.</p> <p>Mark: 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. 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.</p>

21	Advisor flexibility and customer demand will not always be aligned, for the Sensee model and BG (to be) model how will you ensure that the customer demand is achieved whilst supporting flexibility and how do you agree which advisors have the first 'choice' of shifts?	See answer to Qs 9 and 10 above
22	Do you think you still get the same engagement when training from home vs office. We have seen a greater attrition since changing to this model.	<p>Catherine - See question 5 - We haven't observed this and feedback from our virtual academies has been really positive.</p> <p>Mark: Sensee 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. If conducted effectively, there is no reason why virtual training should be any less effective than classroom training. In fact we have plenty of examples where the opposite is true.</p>
23	Has anyone found that it costs more for working form home compared to in office or is it offset through improved KPIs (thinking about the kit being made available whilst still being acountable tof property costs)?	<p>Catherine - We used to do things like rent car parking spaces for people and provide tea and coffee in the offices so our overall costs have decreased with everyone working from home. It will be intersting to see how this works in a hybrid model though as more IT kit may be required and more tea and coffee being drunk at work again!</p> <p>Mark: Studies indicate that our @home contact centre service drives an average 18% rise in CSAT and NPS scores and a 24% reduction in operational costs. One client reports that it is 30% cheaper to handle customer contacts using our outsourced service than handling those same contacts in house - with the majority of that saving coming through much more efficient resource scheduling.</p>
24	Will you expect those returning to site to bring their wfh kit with them or are you also providing perm office based kit?	Catherine - we're reviewing how this will work currently. It is likely to be laptops and docking stations but awaiting confirmation over what we'll do with screens.
25	What is the max number for classroom virtual training?	Catherine - I guess this depends on the complexity of your roles and the technology set up. We found that we reduced numbers a little for virtual training vs office training to maintain the same training timelines.