



Eight Cost-Effective Ways

to Improve Remote Agent Decision-Making

Bob Wendover

Common Sense Enterprises, Inc.

www.commonsenseenterprises.net

It seemed so easy to keep an eye on your agents when they were all within reach. If they got stuck, you were right there. If they had a product question, you answered it off the top of your head. If they were hesitant to make a decision, you guided them with a word or two.

My how things have changed! You manage your team from a work-station at home. They work from a bedroom, at the kitchen table, sitting on the couch or maybe on the balcony of their apartment. Among the people you supervise, there have always been the top performers, the people who need constant support and everyone in the middle. You knew how to anticipate all this as you walked around the center. But that office hum has turned into crickets. As much as they complain about feeling isolated, you miss the energy as well.

The difference is that they're looking to you for guidance, even if it is through a screen. After all, you've got the experience and resilience to weather this, right? The issues, around customer retention, call resolution times, and escalations haven't gone away. They've just become more difficult to address because of this remote environment.

Decision-making is part of this equation. Every time an agent picks up the phone, sends an email or engages in live chat, they face the uncertainty of both the issue and the customer. The issue may be easy and customer difficult. Or the customer may be easy and the issue difficult. Usually, it is somewhere in between. But they've always had you, and the team, at their back. Now that intimacy has gone away. They have to make decisions in the

isolation of their bedroom or kitchen table. It is only natural for them to hesitate more when working by themselves. For more than a few, it is overwhelming.

Does all this sound familiar? You're part of a big club. Even as the economy begins to strengthen and the dangers of Covid-19 subside, the workplace will never be the same. Firms are looking to reduce leased space. Some agents are discovering that working virtually is an attractive option. Some have made it clear that sitting on the couch at home with earbuds, a laptop and a smart phone is their preferred way of "making a living." In one short sentence – Remote work is here to stay.

So, how do you, as a customer care leader, maintain the quality of decision making among those on your team while adapting to these evolving challenges? Here are eight low-cost ways to ensure that remote agent decision-making meets and exceeds your customers' expectations:

Establish remote rapport – You know what your agents are like in the office. But what are they like at home? Where some of them never spoke much about personal interests before, they may be more open to a warmer relationship while working at home. For those who have always been an open book, this isolating environment can be excruciating. They're not necessarily looking for a friend. But it easy to assume that the extroverts crave some conversation as they do business. You might consider this small talk too time consuming.

But spending a few minutes chatting them up might make all the difference in their

demeanor. Share a few personal details if you like. You don't have to be buddies. But a warmer, less transactional relationship builds trust. Trust is something we're all desperately seeking right now. Take a few seconds to get a read on each person. Address their concerns. Commiserate a bit. Reassure them when necessary.

Address the little concerns – It's not the big obstacles that drive us crazy. It's the shoelace that snaps with no time left. The same thing is true for those who are unexpectedly working from home. These little concerns sap energy and impair focus. It might be family or financial challenges. Maybe they live in a crowded space where it's difficult to concentrate. Some agents actually "escape" to work to find some peace or a couple of friends. When they are immersed in personal issues, it is more difficult to compartmentalize these concerns as they deal with customers during a shift. As a result, their attention and response time is affected. They find their attention draining away when they're three quarters of the way through the day. They commit errors they wouldn't normally make. Cumulatively, this impairs productivity and customer retention.

As with building rapport, empathy is the best solution in these situations. Take a couple of minutes to listen and help them to cope with these issues. It can go a long way toward helping them settle into a more focused mindset. A focused mindset produces confident decisions. This does not mean you have to play the role of personal counselor. But a sympathetic ear demonstrates your belief in them. As a result, they will rise to meet your expectations.

Keep everyone in the loop – In the office, there was a bulletin board next to the restroom, chats over cubicle walls, and snacks in the break room. At home, there are the same four walls, the same view out the window and the same dirty dishes in the sink. If you want to chat with co-

workers, it has to be planned. You can't drop by their workspace for a few seconds. People work when they're on the job, they also socialize, keep up with the gossip, and want to be kept in the loop about business developments. In other words, they want to feel a sense of belonging.

You can't play the role of social butterfly, nor should you. Chances are, they have formed those networks all by themselves. But you can increase the frequency of business news. In these uncertain times, communication is a key to keeping them engaged. Ask them to submit questions. Then answer these concerns to the best of your ability (without making promises the company may not be able to keep). Make announcements about staff changes, include a cartoon or fun gif to provide a bit of entertainment. Send out a "smile of the day" via email. Increase the frequency of communication and encourage them to do the same with you.

Provide encouraging messages – Agents hesitate to make independent decisions because they're fearful of making a mistake. They know what they should do. But that little voice in their head says "Be careful" or "Don't screw up. Remember what happened when Ruth did that." In truth, we all remember life's bad outcomes a lot more than the good ones. If your agents are going to make the best decisions in this uncertain and remote environment, confidence becomes just as important as skills and knowledge. It is up to you to foster this.

Getting a sincere "pat on the back" when the day is not going as planned lifts spirits. There's nothing like saying, "You can do this," or "I have faith in you," when they're sitting at home with no one else to reassure them. Do this individually. Sending the team a "good job" email is never as powerful as chatting with each person. Besides, it gives you a chance to check in discreetly and build some rapport, as mentioned before. Does this take more

time? Sure. But if you invest this energy in them, they will reciprocate.

Use think-alouds to compel independent decisions – There are agents who have concluded it is simply easier to ask the boss for an answer. None of that has changed because we've gone remote. It has just gotten clumsier and more time-consuming. Unfortunately, the boss sometimes fosters this expectation by answering every question rather than compelling independent thinking. Over time, however, supervisors who do this end up answering a "parade" of questions that never seems to end. In today's remote environment, this process has simply migrated online.

Think-alouds are the solution to this problem in both environments. When someone approaches you for a decision they should be making themselves, say, "Let's think this through together. How would you begin?" Agents may be resistant to this approach at first. But if you persist, they will begin to think for themselves in front of you. You'll get to see how they think. When you provide encouragement, they will grow in their confidence. Over time, they will come to accept this new way of doing things. As a result, their decision making will become more resourceful and you'll find more time to get your own work done.

Provide agents with the context you just used to give in person – When everyone was in the same location, you could simply explain the bigger picture about a product or process. It took a minute or two and they said, "Oh, I see," or something like that. Then they filed it away as part of their personal knowledge base. This kind of instant turn-around is no longer an option. With customers becoming impatient for immediate answers, saying, "Let me put you on hold while I check with my manager," has become trite and frustrating. It is also costing you customers.

Three simple solutions to this dilemma are a searchable database, short videos and infographics. All can be produced inexpensively and quickly. A searchable database consists of answers to the frequently asked questions agents deal with. These can be loaded onto a platform like Zapier® or Guru®. Your company or relevant vendors can provide additional spec sheets, instructions, or troubleshooting ideas and add them to this platform.

Like a searchable database, short videos can be created for frequent questions and issues. Each should be no more than a minute or two long and answer or explain one specific concern. They can be recorded and edited on a smart phone and made for very specific issues. Upload them to the cloud and distribute the links to these videos in a Word doc that can be kept on the agent's desktop.

Infographics are another entertaining way to distribute information. They too are inexpensive to design and produce. Search on the term "customer service infographics" and you'll find lots of ideas. Provide a steady stream of these resources as they become available. Announce their presence to all agents via emails or weekly updates. Not only does this keep people informed, it reminds them to use this content.

Leverage the network judgement within the culture – Encourage your agents to rely on each other for insights. While this "network judgment" has been a part of customer care training for a long time, the new demands of working remotely is forcing every organization to look for technological ways to deliver these strategies. Modern collaboration tools like Slack® and instant messaging offer means for agents to connect in near-real time to obtain advice and perspective from co-workers.

In addition, develop a central source of strategies. One firm uses what they call a "shared team in-box" to offer comments

and insights that might be helpful to co-workers. Once again, there are a number of applications which can facilitate this process including Zapier® and Guru®. The key to this is getting agents to embrace its use. Ask them to refer to it before answering their individual questions. Mention it during pre-shift meetings and in mini coaching sessions. You might even offer an initial incentive for use, such as rewarding the first 100 people who contribute insights to the platform.

Recognize good thinking – In other words, catch them doing something right. Most of the time, these are the little saves such as a quick customer resolution, coming up with a creative solution, thinking of a great process idea, being a source of encouragement to others, or being the font of wisdom for recent hires. In some cases, you will be praising top performers who already know they're doing a good job. It never hurts, though, to

receive one more compliment. In a lot of cases, however, you'll be lifting the spirits of those who work consistently and occasionally make a laudable contribution. This is where recognizing good thinking can have even more of an impact. It is sometimes tough to accomplish this in a remote environment. But these compliments are also more meaningful to the receiver. Some leads and managers even set a personal goal to recognize good work a certain number of times per week, just to make sure they do it. A well-established rhythm of this will reward you, the team and the organization with measurably better customer outcomes. Every single one of these practices costs little or nothing to implement other than a few minutes of effort. As we continue to work through this extraordinary time, the implementation of these eight tactics will improve your remote agent decision-making. I guarantee it.

Bob Wendover has been helping employers improve workplace decision-making for more than thirty years. He is the award-winning author of ten books. His latest two, *Work Wise* and *Overcoming Overwhelm* will be published at the end of 2020. Contact him at bobw@commonsenseenterprises.net or 1-800-227-5510.