THE NEW *VIRTUAL* PARADIGM OF CRM

The Virtual CyberAgent CSRs™
A Cost-Effective Innovation to
Traditional Customer Service Call Centers

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Our research shows that there is a company, Willow CSN Incorporated, which has successfully implemented customer service outsourcing through virtual customer service representatives who are called CyberAgent CSRs™. Willow has designed a program and system that ensures enhanced caller satisfaction, reduced agent turnover, and increased customer lifetime value for client companies that utilize its network of CyberAgent CSRs™.

Companies that understand the needs of their employees will become the "employers of choice" in the future. Willow, a thought leader in the area of matching the needs and goals of CyberAgent CSRs™ (independent contractors who function as employees of a typical call center), with contact center business objectives, is leading the new paradigm in workplace environments where employee and employer come together to create perfect partnerships.

Willow's unique outsourcing service delivery model includes these characteristics:

1. The ability to provide telephone customer service quality that is as good as or better than that offered by a client's in-house service organization; this includes excellent service levels, higher conversion rates, and lower abandon rates.
2. A value proposition that includes reduced training, recruiting, and staffing costs, plus competitive pricing on a per call basis for the clients using Willow's CyberAgent CSRs™.
3. Clients who trust that their customers' telephone contact needs can be met through a virtual solution because the vendor, Willow, has a proven track record of service delivery that exceeds its expectations.
4. The ability to scale CyberAgent CSRs™ service offerings as the client's demand increases or decreases.
5. Technological innovations that enable CyberAgent CSRs™ to communicate seamlessly with customers and with the client.
6. Software for the CyberAgent CSRs™ that allows seamless accessibility to the customers and to the client. Willow's software package includes workforce management and real-time, customized scheduling software, as well as courseware.
7. Support from Willow in the area of hardware, where the CyberAgent CSR™ receives assistance for technical installation and maintenance, and has access to a support desk.
8. CyberAgent CSR™ standards that ensure high quality service, including mandatory computer and communication skills, clean background checks, and the financial capability to set up a successful home office.
9. A means for measuring the performance levels of CyberAgent CSRs™ and comparing this performance to the client's own in-house CSRs via standard and customized reporting.

10. A process for releasing CyberAgent CSRs™ who do not meet the quality standards.
11. A methodology for client relationship management with a single point of contact at Willow.
12. A desire to create meaningful vocational opportunities for the homebound part of the workforce, including workers who are disabled and handicapped.

CHAPTER 1: VIRTUAL COMPANIES

What is the Virtual Organization?

The virtual organization brings together various initiatives such as telecommuting, outsourcing, and strategic partnerships to be exponentially more responsive to today's marketplace demands. A virtual organization describes a situation where an organization, team, individual, and/or product or service may not be physically present in the same location, even if it may appear to be so in the customer's perception.

Virtual organizations have always existed. Examples of these are small companies that have a unique, clear identity on paper but no office premises to match. For example, the owner might conduct business at home and use a spare bedroom as an office, on a customer's premises, or while on the road. Virtual organization owners may employ a secretary who works from home, or subcontract some of the work when necessary.

Larger organizations have often employed home workers and are, for example, accustomed to employing sales teams who spend most of their time away from the office, on their own, out of the sight of their direct supervisor. Many large consulting firms have offices only for partners, and the consultants work virtually, either at the client site or from home. When the consultants need to be in an office environment, they can use their organization's concierge service to "make a reservation" for office space either at the main office or another location. They are assigned a cubicle where they can hook their computer to the network and have a phone for the day or the week, depending on their needs.

Peripheral businesses such as catering or car-fleet management have been outsourced for many years. Some companies, like Nike and Wal-Mart, have built their success on outsourcing most or all of their manufacturing, concentrating on their core competency of marketing those manufactured products. Strategic partnerships are also growing. Temporary alliances, where companies come together for specific projects, and then disband when the project is completed, are very common in the entertainment, publishing, and fashion industries.

What is new in the field of virtual corporations is the technology that allows business activities to be done more efficiently through a "dispersed" model. It is now possible for people to share information and keep in touch very quickly and conveniently. Barriers of time and distance, which in the past have created unacceptable delays, costs or sheer impossibilities, are no longer constraints.

The characteristics of a virtual organization are:

> ➢ *It allows a new part of the population to contribute to society.*
> Many groups in our society often cannot participate in the "normal" work world. Those groups, who have a lot to offer, include the handicapped, disabled, elderly, and stay-at-home parents or caregivers. Virtual work situations allow these individuals to participate fully not only in supporting themselves, but also in contributing to the gross national product and to society in a meaningful way. The

resulting increase in self-worth, self-esteem, independence, and feeling of importance for this group, when they are offered this opportunity to be virtual workers, is not only heartwarming for these employees, but also for the executives who create these leading-edge work environments. Providing jobs for this sector of the population is not only good business, it is also the right thing to do. Chapter 4 includes testimonials from CyberAgent CSRs™ who love their jobs and who love working with Willow and their clients.

➢ *It has beneficial, cost-effective attributes.*

Employee exit surveys by the Gallup Organization show that the number one reason for quitting a company is, "The employees do not feel like they are making a difference." The virtual organization, if set up with an emphasis on making work meaningful and satisfying to the employee or independent contractor, can lead to increased job satisfaction and reduced turnover. Virtual jobs can allow for the mechanical and repetitive elements of a typical contact center job to be outweighed by perks like a variety in assignments, and choice of working hours, length of a workday, and the type of work. Studies on agent turnover from Purdue University show that attrition is very expensive; reducing attrition makes good business sense. The turnover rate in Willow's CyberAgent CSRs™ network is very low, and job satisfaction ratings are very high.

In addition to providing more satisfying working conditions for employees, virtual organizations can realize significant improvements in productivity, quality, and customer service. Another added benefit is the reduction of overhead costs such as office floor space, heating and electricity, office furniture, and equipment. In addition, there is the opportunity to minimize the effects of natural or man-made disasters or inclement weather, as business is not concentrated in one building, or at one site. And lastly, the local communities surrounding companies that employ virtual workers benefit from fewer commuters on the road, which results in less environmental pollution and traffic, and hopefully, fewer disgruntled commuters. Willow has a solution for providing customer service like no other in the market place, impacting everything from the bottom line to the environment.

➢ *It relies on and utilizes telecommunication technologies.*

William Gibson, in his futuristic novel *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace Books, 1984) coined the term "cyberspace." Cyberspace describes the electronic environment of computer and communications systems in which information is shared. Today, we see computing and telecommunications technologies converging to allow desktop computer systems to exchange information between individuals who are physically remote from one another.

One of the issues in the past that has kept the idea of virtual organization concept has been met with resistance because of concerns that employees would not easily adapt to the technologies required to work virtually, and because of inadequacies in the existing communications network, and computer hardware and software. Companies that want employees to work effectively virtually need to provide

employees with the technology to make the work consistently appear seamless to the customer. This may mean an investment by the company and the employee in home office hardware or software (faxes, computers, cable modems, DSL or T1 lines, copiers, specialty phone systems, and more), as well as office furniture (desks, tables, file cabinets, and the like). Willow has the most technologically innovative platform to enable its CyberAgent CSRs™ to perform as though they were in-house agents.

➢ *It has organizational flexibility.*

Virtual corporations are not constrained by the traditional barriers of place and time. Virtual businesses rely on practices such as cross-functional teams, outsourcing and telecommuting within organizations, strategic partnerships and temporary alliances between organizations. Organizations that want to employ virtual workers need to have systems in place that allow employees to accomplish their objectives and meet the customer's needs as if they were working on-site. Willow excels at providing the infrastructure that enables CyberAgent CSRs™ to meet client company's business objectives.

Remote workers need to be managed differently than in-house CSRs. The manager of virtual workers must employ techniques that emphasize effective and continual communications, a high level of organizational skills, and an understanding of remote work styles. Many companies do not have a good understanding of the potential that technology offers to enhance workforce management. Those who have had bad experiences with information technology projects in the past may be skeptical about the new benefits alluded to by an outsourcing company. However, Willow's proven track record of providing CyberAgent CSRs™ customer service for large, established companies like 1-800-FLOWERS and Gap, Inc., offers potential clients assurance that their customers' needs will be met.

➢ *It demands a greater level of trust.*

Because CyberAgent CSRs™ and Willow operate from different locations – Willow headquarters are in Miramar, while the 1600 CyberAgent CSRs™ each work remotely from their own home offices throughout South Florida. a high level of trust between agents, clients, and Willow is necessary. One obstacle to the success of a virtual solution is an agent's inability to adapt to a more flexible work environment with much less structure than a typical contact center. Some agents' work styles are simply not suited to virtual employment; therefore, potential virtual agents should be carefully screened to determine if they can succeed without on-site supervision and the physical presence of their colleagues. Willow has an in-depth screening and interview process for potential CyberAgent CSR™ candidates to select only those individuals who have an entrepreneurial mindset and are self-motivated.

One issue that can hamper the success of outsourcing the CSR function the client company's reluctance to trust that virtual agents will perform to standard without supervision. This is because most organizations still retain a *command and*

control type management style and mindset, where the manager has control in part by being physically present to monitor the CSR's work product. Client companies looking to outsource often fear that flexible work arrangements will result in chaos, with employees not being available when needed or not doing the work correctly. Despite the increase in management theories on the proven benefits of employee empowerment, there remains an ingrained lack of trust in the unseen by many supervisors and members of upper management.

This lack of trust stems from the fact that most managers rely on *face time* to gauge performance. This can lead to employees logging extraordinarily long hours at their desks, without regard to the quality of service or level of effort really required to get the job done. The long hours of *face time* result in burnout and poor attitudes toward management, and can affect customer service, customer satisfaction, and employee attrition. These last two issues, while on the surface seem to be incalculable, are very expensive and directly impact the bottom line. By virtue of their structure, or lack thereof, virtual organizations are forced to measure employees based on their output alone, not on the amount of time they sit at their desks. This allows employees focus on completing the task at hand and eliminates the office politics. The use of output as the sole benchmark for performance oftentimes leads to higher profits and revenues for the company. Willow has performance measurement systems in place that ensure CyberAgent CSRs™ meet or beat client quality and output expectations; therefore, it has already gained the trust of many large, well-known client companies.

The Virtual Reinvention of the Organization

The reasons that workplaces are becoming increasingly virtual are varied and include:

- The increasing sophistication of customers who demand quality, choice, and value for their dollar.

- The convergence of information technologies that allow work to be done by fewer people, more productively, and in more flexible ways.

- The growth in the number of employees who seek greater control over balancing their family, lifestyle, career and professional interests.

- The shift from the "job for life" or "up-the-career-ladder" mentality to individuals who want "more control of their own destiny."

- The increased costs of commuting (in time and money) for many workers.

- The shift from a manufacturing-based economy to an information-based economy, where intellectual content and customer service is more valuable.

- The fast-paced rate of change in markets and technology leaves traditional organizations with traditional business operations behind.

- The need for businesses to respond quickly to change and to increase the speed with which new products and services are brought to market.

CHAPTER 2: CRM SERVICE METHODS

Service Models: Customer Accessibility Strategy

Everyone loves to be waited on, catered to, or made to feel special. The goal of customer service is to connect the customer with the product or service they are seeking, while also making the customer feel valued. In the last five years, the call center has moved from being a back-office cost center to the front line of the corporate customer relationship management (CRM) strategy. As a "lightning rod" for customer interactions, world-class customer contact centers are becoming the single point of contact for customers. According to research conducted at Purdue University, over 90 percent of customer interactions will occur through contact centers by the year 2004.

If a company can provide the kind of service where customers feel special, they have differentiated themselves from their competitors. This is because global competition has reduced products to mere commodities, which are difficult to differentiate by features, functions, or price. Having reached parity, where price and quality are the "table stakes" of doing business, companies now seek to differentiate themselves from their competitors through customer service and satisfaction. However, it can be difficult for front line employees to meet management directives for reaching high sales targets and provide great service. This is where Willow can help. Willow's CyberCenter Network™ has the elements that are required for ensuring great service in a virtual environment. The items that are necessary to build vendor confidence for virtual outsourcing will be identified in the rest of this paper.

With management directives that appear to conflict with customer care initiatives, providing excellent service can seem to be difficult. Those management directives can include things like:

- Cutting costs associated with service over the phone and e-mail,
- Reducing the number of abandoned shopping carts,
- Turning service requests into sales opportunities, and
- Staying competitive—it's what today's customers expect.

To accomplish all these goals, companies need to spend time creating their Customer Accessibility Strategy (CAS). They need to ask themselves, "How do we make our products and services accessible to customers in a way that they feel taken care of?" The cost for not paying close attention to customers can mean losing them forever. When a company truly understands their customers and their preferences, then it is possible to create "One-to-One Customer Relationship Management."

Today's CRM began with a group of people who handled handwritten letters from customers. This was generally done by a customer service department within a company. Customer response time was greatly enhanced by the invention of call centers, where a department of dedicated agents directly answered the phone calls of customers. Today, Customer Accessibility Strategies include a plethora of access channels, such as the Internet. The

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traditional agent-intensive inbound call centers have evolved into highly automated, technology-enabled **customer contact centers** (see Figure 2.1).

The two most popular modes of communication with customers, in addition to the telephone, are e-mail and the corporate Web site. However, since customers thrive on access to company information, they are also use many other technology channels. These include: voice mail, fax-back, kiosk, Web chat, and wireless devices such as cell phones, pagers, PC wireless, and WAP devices, to name a few. With the additional management challenge of these new channels, the call center itself is in a transitory state as it moves to becoming the e-business customer contact center of the future. With the complexity of technology, providing personalized service that makes customer feel "taken care" of is the newest challenge.

Figure 2.1. Diagram of typical customer contact center

A Customer Accessibility Strategy (CAS) should include the following:

- The technology and its ability to allow seamless accessibility to products and services of a company, and

- The ability to measure the effectiveness and efficiency of the technology, process, and the people.

The technology includes both the technology used by the remote agent to serve the customer, as well as customer self-service technology. Both of these technologies must operate in real-time so that when a customer places an order on the Web and then follows up with a call to a virtual agent, the agent has an updated record of the customer's purchase.

Customer Loyalty

There is really only one reason to employ the various service and technology strategies: to service the customer better. If the customer is served better, then the likelihood that the customer will remain loyal increases. Customer loyalty, and therefore, value, is made up of the following items:

- Customer satisfaction
- Customer retention

- Customer lifetime value (CLTV)
- Company profitability

If the customers are satisfied, they stay. The longer customers are retained (increased CLTV), the more valuable they are to the company because their loyalty reduces the amount of marketing dollars need to sell additional products or services. A customer's CLTV can increase in two ways:

1. The customer's spending at a specific point in time, and
2. The time span during which a customer keeps spending at your company.

Customer satisfaction is the key influencer (key driver) for increasing CLTV. We call the financial connection between of satisfaction, retention, and customer lifetime value as the Customer Value Chain (CVC) (see Figure 2.2).

Willow's Cyber Service Strategy

The main concern of traditional call centers is their ability to provide consistently high quality service while being flexible enough to respond to shifts in call volume so as not to incur high overhead costs. Creating a Cyber Service Strategy is the newest innovation in the evolving field of customer care where the ability to service the customer is outsourced to virtual agents. . Cyber service strategies provide a compelling alternative to the traditional bricks and mortar call center approach. One example of a successful cyber service strategy is Willow's CyberCenter Network™, which is made up of a of virtual customer service representative (CSR) contractors they call CyberAgent CSRs™.

Companies with in-house call centers have an exponentially growing need for cyber services. These companies can supplement their in-house call center capability cost-effectively by utilizing a virtual network of CSRs. A true cyber service provider (CSP) like Willow can provide that flexible, seamless, and cost-effective means for addressing the staffing, training, and quality control issues associated with managing incoming call volume at in-house call centers.

Figure 2.2. The Customer Value Chain (CVC) shows how customer contact centers can be successful.

In many cases, a company has can use a CSP in one of three ways:

- Route all their calls to the cyber service.

- Route all their calls through the CSP first and send the overflow to their in-house call center or vice versa.

- Send only the overflow or seasonal calls to the cyber service.

If the CSP can offer a more cost-effective method of providing service than the in-house center without sacrificing quality, then the parent company might elect to outsource all calls. As compelling alternative to the traditional bricks and mortar call center approach, successful cyber service requires a different business model and tools for workforce management beyond what is currently used in most traditional call centers for it to gain broad market acceptance.

Willow's Business Model

Our research shows that Willow has a business model that works very well for outsourcing to virtual agents. In the Willow model, client companies pay only for the number of minutes handled by the company's network, and pay CyberAgent CSRs™ only for the calls that they take. The Willow CyberAgent CSR™ is an entrepreneur who invests in and manages his or her own home-based business, and who is, therefore, highly motivated to produce good results. Each CyberAgent CSR™ must underwrite the costs for the training and the equipment needed before they can begin to take calls.

The Willow business model works because:

- There are no upfront training or equipment costs for the client, because the CyberAgent CSRs™ themselves pay these costs.

- CyberAgent CSRs™ enjoy the freedom and flexibility that comes from managing their own business , so turnover is almost non-existent.

- CyberAgent CSRs™ are paid for performance on a per call basis. Clients can ramp up a call center capacity quickly without adding new facilities.

Research by Purdue University has shown the turnover in call centers costs $6,350 per new agent. With nearly 62% of the average call center's annual budget attributed to recruiting, training, and salaries of CSRs, the overall savings for a Willow's client is significant. In fact, research studies show that compared to traditional call centers, Willow can save a client anywhere from 20 to 35% on a per call basis, depending on the client's industry. Willow makes an impact by helping companies serve their customers more cost-effectively. And the trend to outsource to Willow is increasing exponentially. Willow takes an average 1.4 million calls per month; a 100% increase over last year's average of 700,000 calls per month.

Outsourcing of call handling as an industry has realized tremendous growth in recent years. In an article in the (issue date) of *Call Center*, "Outsourcing: What You Need to Know before You Pass Your Business on to an Outsourcer," reporter (NAME OF REPORTER) makes the following points about outsourcing customer care agents:

- Companies look to outsourcing because they need a way to find staff quickly, at the right price, without the big internal hiring, training, and firing hassles.

- Companies use temporary help and temporary help-to-hire strategies, but are disappointed with the results because:

- o   The recruiting and selection process is left in the hands of the staffing agency, which may not fully understand the corporate culture, performance needs, or technical requirements of the company.

- o   The agents are the staffing agencies employees and are not loyal to the company or their customers.

- o   Turnover is very high because employees seeking temporary work are usually in a transitory stage, making career or life changes, and thus not dedicated to providing customer care.

- • Companies prefer to use the remote agents in Willow's CyberCenter Network™ because:

  - o   This approach allows for more control of the quality and performance of the agents.

  - o   The company has the flexibility to use CyberAgent CSRs™ for shorter periods of time, such as daily or seasonal peaks in call volume.

  - o   CyberAgent CSRs™ get paid by the client company for the number of calls they handle, not for the time they are on the clock.

  - o   The client does not have to pay recruiting or training costs, company benefits, shift premiums, and overtime, further reducing overhead costs.

  - o   Willow has the technology to enable its CyberAgent CSRs™ to be truly seamless to customers.

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of Willow's CyberCenter Network™ is that it is a cost-effective way to provide customer service without sacrificing, and in many cases improving on, the quality of service. In Chapter 4, testimonials from the CyberAgent CSRs™ clearly demonstrate their enthusiasm and motivation to provide superior quality service. It is very unusual to have outsourced service levels higher than internally controlled service levels.

Disaster recovery planning, or business continuity planning, is the process by which companies plan to protect their most critical applications in times of crisis. For the contact center industry, solid business continuity plans should have easily executable strategies for keeping the lines of customer communication open.   However, very little is currently available to allow a call center to respond appropriately to a catastrophic problem. Thus, situations where disaster recovery is necessary can end up being extremely costly to a company. Willow's CyberAgent CSRs™ can make excellent strategic partners for such situations. Clients incur no capital costs, no training costs, and minimal recruiting costs to contract these highly motivated professionals who want to take calls. The company can schedule CyberAgent CSRs™ within minutes of a crisis, not schedule them when call volume is under control, and reschedule them as needed.

Willow's Cyber Service Workforce Management Software

Traditional workforce management solutions cannot easily address the sophisticated staffing requirements of a virtual call center outsourcer offering quality cyber service to multiple client companies. When Willow initially tried to implement its concept of linking highly skilled, home-based CyberAgent CSRs™ with multiple clients, no off-the-shelf technology existed to support

the sophisticated staffing model. Willow then created its own workforce management technology. This exciting advancement in technology is a system that routes call volume through its CyberCenter Network™ to trained, independent-contractor CyberAgent CSRs™. Using StarMatic™, the advanced workforce management system created by Willow, CyberAgent CSRs™ are scheduled to take calls as if they were (sitting) in the client company's call center. The real-time scheduling and communication functions provide the seamless connection to the client company (see Figures 3.1 to 3.4).

With Willow's workforce management technology, StarMatic™, clients are able to leverage their existing infrastructure investment with CyberAgent CSRs™. StarMatic™ is provided by Willow to the client and to the CyberAgent CSRs™ in an Application Service Product (ASP) format.

The Willow CyberAgent CSRs™ use the same client desktop application as the client's in-house agents. Willow also uses a flexible call center management information system (CCMIS) (see Figure 2.3), a Nortel product that spans multiple enterprises with over 300 available call and agent data elements. The program is loaded onto the client desktops for historical and real-time reporting. Clients are able to set routing and call thresholds, monitor the status of the calls and the activity of their CyberAgent CSRs™ as well as handle payroll. Custom reports are also available from this system.

Figure 2.3. This is a view of Willow's CCMIS screen that shows the agents in the system available to schedule for calls.

Through dedicated voice and data connections, Willow's CyberAgent CSRs™ can support multiple clients (typically four), although not simultaneously. StarMatic™ gives the CyberAgent CSRs™ remote access to their clients' scheduling, enabling them to create their work schedules in real time by bidding for work in 30-minute intervals (see Figures 2.4, 2.5, and 2.6). Willow operates a 24/7 technical support desk 365 days a year.

Willow's Client Relationship Management

Willow views its relationships with its client companies as very important and treats them as true business partnerships. On the technical side, this means collaborating to provide the installation, maintenance, and support services necessary to get the system up and running. On the strategic side, it means having a client relationship management infrastructure. Figure 2.7 shows a typical account team, with a relationship manager and other support staff who work to make this kind of virtual network successful. The partnership begins with a single point of contact. To ensure that everything works well, a pre/post program implementation is necessary. The on-site implementation meeting includes review of the technology, the recruiting and training standards, and the training itself.

Other items that are included are the project plan, calendar of events, milestones, and the on-site operations, and lastly, the "go-live" date.
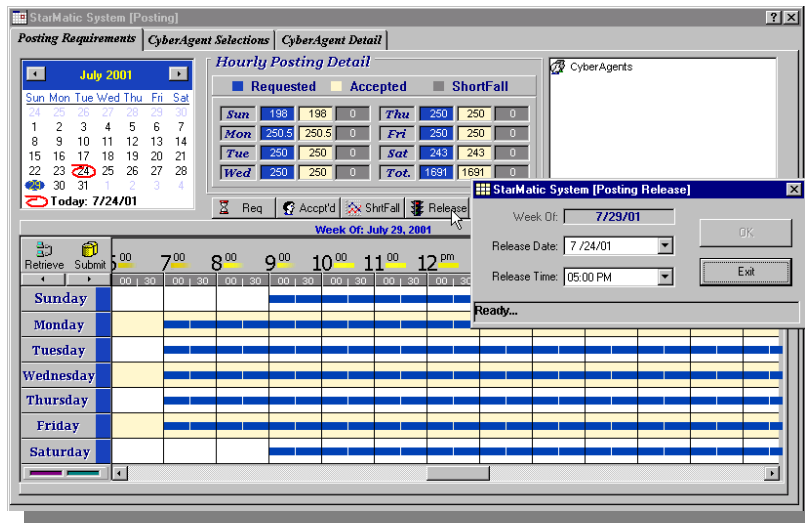

Figure 2.4. An example of Willow's proprietary workforce management software, StarMatic™, which is used to schedule agents. Clients such as HSN post a schedule and CyberAgent CSRs™ can select the days and time slots in which they want to answer calls.
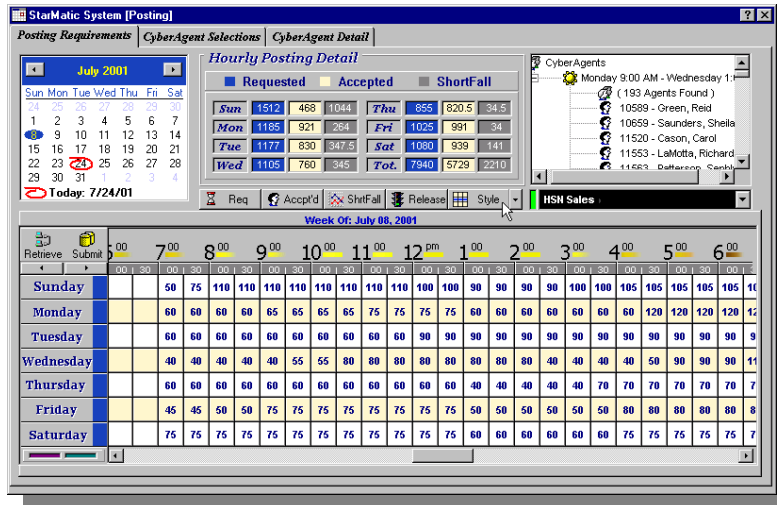
Figure 2.5. An example of the Willow Workforce Management Software, StarMatic™ screen that shows time slots for the week that are filled.
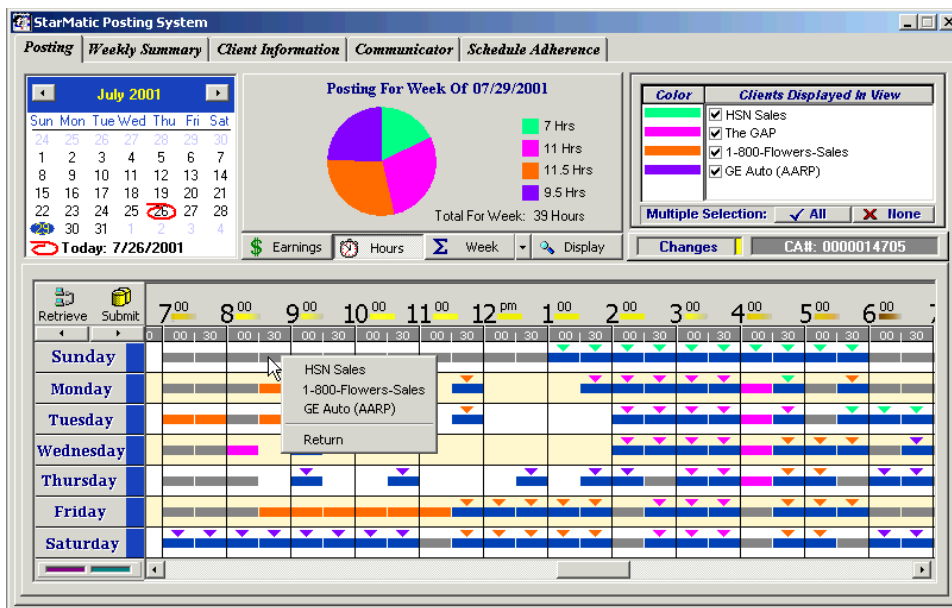

Figure 2.6. An example of the StarMatic™ scheduling screen, with real-time view of client postings and CyberAgent CSR™ to-client communication features.
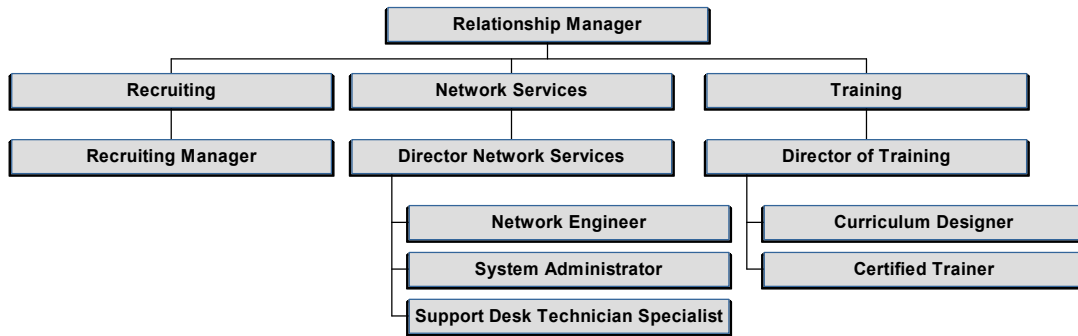
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Figure 2.7. The organizational tree of a Willow customer relationship account team.

Recognition for Willow's Unique New Business Model

Our nation's government has noted the career opportunities offered by Willow. In 2000, the White House recognized Willow as being unique in offering flexible, work-at-home alternatives, increasing innovative e-business models, and keeping cars off the road. Willow's CEO, Asim Saber, was invited to explain his unique business model to a team of White House staff assigned to research innovative telecommuting and work-at-home initiatives. The Willow business model also received recognition from former Vice President Al Gore and the Presidential Task Force on Employment of Adults with Disabilities (see Figure 2.8). Willow also received the CTI Best of Show Award in 1998 for the Best Display of Innovative Technology (see Figure 2.9). And further acknowledgement for Willow came in the form of a Technological Achievement Award for Innovative Technology (see Figure 2.10) from the Smithsonian Institute.

Figure 2.8 The Presidential Task Force on Disabilities Award given to Willow

"Willow CyberAgent CSRs™... now there's an occupation that didn't exist a few years ago and now you're going to be hearing a lot more about it."

- Former Vice President Al Gore.

Figure 2.9. The CTI Best of Show Award given to Willow in 1998 for the Best Display of Innovative Technology.

Figure 2.10. The Smithsonian Award for the Technological Achievement Award for Innovative Technology recognizing Willow's contribution to technology.

Figure 2.11. Dr. Jon (in the middle) with Keith Bender, vice president of Customer Communications, ANC Rental Corporation (on the left), and Asim Saber, president and CEO of Willow CSN Incorporated. (On the right)

Who Uses Willow Teleservices?

Typical clients of Willow include: household names such as Alamo Rent A Car, AAA-motor clubs, 1-800-Flowers.com, The Gap, GE Financial, HSN (formerly the Home Shopping

Network), Staples, Office Depot and SkyMall. Willow handles 25 to 30% of HSN's calls (approximately 75 million incoming calls per year). Clients such as AAA Minnesota/Iowa, and AAA Hoosier, have opted to send 100% of their calls through the Willow system and then send the overflow to their in-house call centers. Willow handled 42 million minutes of calls for clients from January to March in 2001, compared to 22 million minutes in the same period last year.

CHAPTER 3: STAFFING CALL CENTERS

The Definition of a CyberAgent CSRs™

Call center agents are a company's ambassadors; they connect the customer with a product or service, and Willow's CyberAgent CSRs™ are the newest of these ambassadors. The definition of CyberAgent CSRs™ is:

"An independent contractor who has invested his or her time and financial resources to set up a home-based business to handle inbound calls from customers of Willow's client companies."

Willow's philosophy on the workplace and CyberAgent CSRs™ is:

"An invested workforce is a motivated workforce."

When an individual qualifies to become a Willow CyberAgent CSR™, he or she is setting up his or her own home-based call center business. Like the owner of any start-up company, a CyberAgent CSR™ needs to invest capital to get the business going. That investment helps the sole proprietor to truly "own the work." Willow combines the best of all worlds by creating a career opportunity where people can set up their own business and make their own schedule, thereby having more control over their income and work/life balance..

All of these factors are reasons why Willow's requirements for recruiting CyberAgent CSRs™ are different than those for typical in-house agents. Willow's rigorous application process ensures that those selected to enroll in the CyberAgent CSR™ program are motivated to work independently without supervision, set their own schedule, and keep their own business records.

Who Are Potential Willow CyberAgent CSRs™?

The CyberAgent CSR™ concept, training highly-skilled independent contractors to run their own home-based call center business, enables Willow to tap into the skills of many underutilized talent pools. In many cases, circumstances preclude these skilled individuals from working in anything but a virtual corporate structure, thereby limiting their career opportunities. The virtual employee lifestyle appeals to a wide range of people, including displaced spouses, single parents, and primary caregivers who need flexibility to work at home; it also appeals to retirees and the physically disabled who find home employment more convenient and more comfortable than being in a regular corporate environment.

People are attracted to Willow because of the flexibility, freedom, and income producing potential of the CyberAgent CSRs™ business proposition. Many new applicants hear about the opportunity through friends, family, and informational sessions held at local community colleges. Seventy-five percent of CyberAgent CSRs™ are between the ages of 25 and 45. Eighty-two percent have some college education or technical school training; at least half have had managerial experience. Many are caregivers who want to work in a professional capacity, yet want the flexibility and the freedom to do so from their home offices around their own schedules.

Most of the agents have a vast range of experience prior to making the investment to join Willow's CyberCenter Network™ as a CyberAgent CSR™. Figure 3.1 shows the varied backgrounds of the CyberAgent CSRs™, which ranges from accounting to financial to sales to travel, with 50 percent having previous customer service experience. More than half of the CyberAgent CSRs™ are bilingual.
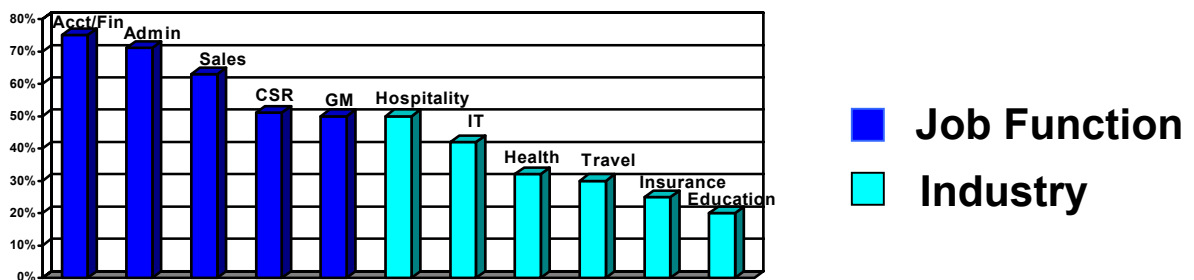

Figure 3.1 The broad range of background and experience of virtual agents

Willow's Recruiting and Staffing Cost-Saving Process

What is unique the process by which Willow recruits, staffs and trains CyberAgent CSRs™ for its clients is that the client company does not have to do very much to obtain a fully motivated

work force.. That is good news for any employer. Dollars once spent on the recruiting and training process are greatly reduced, if not all together eliminated.

After an initial recruitment and application process, Willow provides clients with a list of potential CyberAgent CSRs™ based on their candidate requirements. Willow then works with the client company to train the selected individuals. As indicated earlier, the CyberAgent CSRs™ must pay for their own application and training, , so recruiting costs are essentially negligible. It is essentially up to the client company to decide to what extent it will be involved in this process. In some cases, client companies adopt a hands-off approach to recruiting and training, further decreasing the amount of time and resources it needs to allocate to these functions. .

When a Willow client needs to schedule CyberAgent CSRs™, it set the pay scale and posts the hours on an automated posting program on StarMatic™. The CyberAgent CSRs™ who are certified by the client log onto the posting program and select the hours they want to work.

Ease of Recruiting and Staffing CyberAgent CSRs™ Positions

People are willing to invest in becoming CyberAgent CSRs™ because they know that this business opportunity offers excellent income potential while allowing them to maintain control over their career and their life. This combination is unheard of in a traditional call center and is why becoming a CyberAgent CSR™ is so appealing to potential candidates who would not be interested in working as a CSR in a traditional call center. For instance, CyberAgent CSRs™ work for three or four Willow clients on average, and typically schedule themselves to take calls in two-hour blocks. In addition, CyberAgent CSRs™ select which client companies he or she will take calls for. Empowered by the ability to choose which clients to work with and manage their own schedules, CyberAgent CSRs™ easily meet or beat performance expectations. They know this is not a job for a typical CSR, and if they do not perform, there is a waiting list of over 5500 people who want the opportunity to do so.

CyberAgent CSRs™ value the flexibility that the Willow program offers them, allowing them to "plan their work around their life" instead of vice versa. For example, the desire of a parent to stay at home with their children and have a good income is met by Willow in an unprecedented work model that is making all industries take note.

The demand for this kind of income opportunity is demonstrated by the fact that the Willow Cyber Network™ has over 1,600 active agents with a database of 5,500 applicants who have applied to be considered for the CyberAgent CSR™ qualification program. Rare is it that any company has a backlog of call center agents who are not only trying to get in the door, but who are also self-motivated to perform. Willow is changing the way people think about earning money, the way companies provide service, and the manner in which customers are served. They are true "thought leaders" in the areas of innovative customer service and improving job satisfaction.

CyberAgent CSR™ Training

CyberAgent CSRs™ are highly motivated entrepreneurs who have gone through a rigorous application and training process, at their own expense, before entering the Willow CyberCenter Network ™ as CyberAgent CSRs™. This investment typically ranges from $1,200 to $3,500 and

includes an application fee, training courses, and the necessary home office equipment which the agents need to set up their business. Typically, only 35% of all applicants make it through the screening process.

The CyberAgent CSR™ training program includes telephone skills training, plus client-specific product training programs. Willow uses its own training facility, and 18 other conveniently located facilities throughout southern Florida. Willow puts candidates through a battery of tests to make sure each candidate is computer literate and has the attitude profile suitable for at-home work. Candidates who pass these tests then go through 40 hours of training on everything from the soft skills of handling phone calls to how to file quarterly estimated tax returns. After completing this basic training, qualified candidates are then trained on individual client needs. The CyberAgent CSR™ pays all or most of the training costs.

Retaining Agents: Willow's National CyberAgent Association

The average turnover of CyberAgent CSRs™ is less than 10%, significantly lower than the call center industry average of 65%. Among the reasons for such low turnover are: the flexibility and income earning potential; the screening process, the technical support, and Willow's advanced training process. When employees are properly trained and equipped with the resources to do their job and do it well, they can focus on being great at customer service. If they can focus on doing a great job, they are more likely to enjoy the work they do and feel like they are making a difference. In addition, to the support mentioned above, Willow understands the psychological need of virtual workers to feel connected and to be part of a community. In many studies on virtual workforces, employees are at first excited about not having to drive to the office or go to meetings. However, after a time, many employees feel a strong sense of disconnect from the organization when they are not in regular contact with their colleagues, missing the interpersonal relationships that can develop over lunch or coffee breaks. These feelings of isolation can de-motivate a virtual worker.

Willow, understanding the individual's need for community, especially among this group of virtual workers, established The National CyberAgent CSR Association. The association provides a place for agents to network, create friendships, exchange ideas, and share stories. In addition, the association provides socialization events and a virtual infrastructure for agent growth and development. This community helps those who have not previously been to take care of the area of benefits. Most in-house agents have a benefit package provided for by the company; however as independent contractors, CyberAgent CSRs™ are not employees of Willow and therefore do not qualify for benefits with Willow. With its 1,600 member network, the National CyberAgent Association can offer its members the option to purchase group rate benefits if they so desire.

CHAPTER 4: CASE STUDIES AND CYBERAGENT CSRS™ TESTIMONIALS

How Willow Got Started

Willow started as a call center for the home delivery of groceries. In 1989, the company created its own off-premise switch and began marketing it. Eventually Willow stopped making switches and took on a new direction. Willow teamed with the State of Florida to structure a program to reach the untapped labor market of persons with disabilities. This resulted in Willow becoming a full-blown CSP.

The Client's Perspective on Using Willow's CyberAgent CSRs™

Traditional staffing of a call center means that the CSRs are employees of either a company's internal call center or of an outsourced call center. Willow CyberAgent CSRs™ know that that they only get paid when they answer the phone. Willow CyberAgent CSRs™ are not paid during breaks, lunch, or downtime. Because of this, CyberAgent CSRs™ are more motivated to be logged on and taking a call, which tends to be the opposite of the behavior of the typical call center agent. This is why client companies are adopting CSRs as part of their contact center solution. Figure 4.1 shows the different kinds of companies that utilize CyberAgent CSRs™. In Table 4.1, the performance between the use of in-house agents and CyberAgent CSRs™ is compared. Various market segments are compared including:

- Consumer order processing (closure rate),
- Business to business order processing (conversion rates), and
- Business and consumer retention and conversion rates.

Across the board the performance of CyberAgent CSRs™ is as good as or better than that of in-house agents.

Figure 4.1. Examples of large corporations that use virtual agents

MARKET SEGMENT	IN-HOUSE	CyberAgent CSRs™
Consumer/Order Processing --Closure Rate	85.3%	89.27% (April 2001) 90.67% (May 2001)
Business to Business Order Processing --Conversion Average Order Size --Extended Protection Plan	9.9%	14.22% (2.5%-3% Higher than In-House)
Business/Consumer Membership Retention	5.34% Feb 7.03% March 7.88% April 6.12% May 6.35% June	8.90% February 9.26% March 10.22% April 9.71% May 8.43% June
Business/Consumer/Sales/Service --Conversion	⎯	10-12% Higher than In-House

Table 4.1. The table compares the performance of in-house agents with CyberAgent CSRs™.

Specific Client Perspectives

HSN

HSN operates two call centers- one in St. Petersburg, Florida, and one in Roanoke, Virginia – to handle the 75 million calls it receives from home shoppers every year. HSN debuted nationally in 1986 as Home Shopping Network. Since then, innovative practices and advanced technologies have been its hallmark. How else could it handle the huge demand generated by broadcasting a 24/7 television-shopping channel and operating a full-service e-commerce site?

To serve shoppers, HSN operates a very large call center operation. Popular sales items can generate hundreds of customer calls a second. An average day means handling 200,000 customer calls - close to 1.5 million calls per week. This is an everyday life for HSN, a company that excels in this challenging call center environment.

Historically, HSN has sought out innovations in technology to make it easier and more convenient for callers to order products. For instance, with HSN's personalized interactive voice response system (IVR), HSN was at the forefront of IVR technology when it installed "Tootie" in 1987, one of the first retail IVR implementations. Tootie broke new ground, humanizing an automated system so that callers would be less intimidated and facilitating sales without the assistance of an agent. Now named "Express," HSN has continued to enhance and upgrade its IVR order entry and customer service system to add speech recognition, intelligent routing, and intelligent customer identification.

In another effort to maximize service while minimizing costs, HSN has partnered with a CSP, Willow CSN Incorporated. For more than two-and-a-half years, HSN has contracted Willow's CyberAgent CSRs™, who now handle 25% of HSN's incoming sales traffic. HSN uses CyberAgent CSRs™ to fill in during planned peaks, and during unplanned spikes in call volume. The short time slots assigned to the CyberAgent CSRs™ make it easier to plug them into projected busy periods. HSN also has the capability to request additional CyberAgent CSR™ support on a just-in-time basis to handle the unplanned sales spikes for which HSN is famous. These two approaches help HSN build and reduce capacity quickly, providing a great advantage that is hard to duplicate with in-house agents.

CyberAgent CSRs™ are compensated by HSN on a per call basis and are scheduled at least 48 hours in advance and, on average, five days in advance. HSN routes a certain percentage of its calls to that switch, which routes the calls to the CyberAgent CSRs™. Connectivity is facilitated through the Internet using a VPN (Virtual Private Network) solution that connects the CyberAgent CSRs™ directly to HSN's mainframe. CyberAgent CSRs™ operate on HSN's legacy mainframe platform. Instead of paying a premium for this flexible real-time staffing resource, HSN is actually saving money. HSN does not have to provide desks, workstations or headsets, so its cost per call is about 25% less.

AAA Road Service

AAA Minnesota/Iowa is one of American Automobile Association's affiliates that provides emergency road service and travel information to more than 700,000 members in Minnesota and Iowa. Services and assistance are administered 24/7 through two call centers. Annually, AAA Minnesota/Iowa handles more than 900,000 member calls and makes another 500,000 outbound calls.

CyberAgent CSRs™ have helped AAA Minnesota/Iowa to deliver top-notch service, reduce costs, and improve employee retention. In-house employee turnover at AAA Minnesota/Iowa has been reduced from 35% to below 15%. In addition, AAA Minnesota/Iowa has been able to handle its growing call volume without expanding its facilities. In fact, AAA Minnesota/Iowa has essentially handed off its road service calls (those are 35 to 40% of the incoming call volume) to a pool of CyberAgent CSRs™ equivalent to 20 full-time agents. The motor club uses the CyberAgent CSRs™ during drive time – the morning and evening rush hours - as well as to cover lunchtime or when there are more emergencies due to factors like bad weather.

For AAA Minnesota/Iowa, CyberAgent CSRs™ are a strategic business partner because of their flexibility, which allows AAA Minnesota/Iowa to manage its own business better. The CyberAgent CSRs™ are well trained so they hit the ground running. AAA Minnesota/Iowa designed a training module for the CyberAgent CSRs™, and Willow then ensured that each CyberAgent CSRs™ was well trained in all procedures and systems. To supplement the training, AAA Minnesota/Iowa has a support infrastructure for its CyberAgent CSRs™ and operates a help desk that is available 24/7. The main communication channels for assisting CyberAgent CSRs™ with questions or problems are the chat line, a special 800 number, and e-mail. CyberAgent CSRs™ are monitored the same as the in-house agents through an existing system and with no problems (see Figure 4.2).

AAA Minnesota/Iowa also conducts it routine customer satisfaction surveys on customers served by the CyberAgent CSRs™. The scores are just as good, if not better, in most skill categories than in-house agents. Employees will perform at an expected level but they are always conscious of being overloaded. CyberAgent CSRs™ really want more calls and more work; the more calls they take, the more money they make. With respect to the in-house agent's attitude towards the CyberAgent CSRs™, the trend is that in-house agents are grateful because they used to be asked to work overtime and they don't have to do that anymore. The use of CyberAgent CSRs™ actually reduces the stress in the in-house center. AAA Minnesota/Iowa is looking to shift another 25% of their calls to CyberAgent CSRs™, even though they are 2,000 miles away.

Question	CyberAgent CSRs™s 6 Months' Service	AAA Agents Average\ 8 Years' Service
1. Was the operator interested in serving you?	95.4%	93.9%
2. Was the operator able to do what was necessary to help?	94.9%	93.0%
3. Was the operator courteous/sympathetic/ understanding?	91.4%	89.9%
4. Was the operator able to provide helpful information?	87.4%	84.9%
5. Was the operator knowledgeable about AAA policies & procedures?	86.8%	87.4%
6. Was the operator understanding of your needs?	90.3%	89.8%

Figure 4.2. Examples of questions used to determine the customer satisfaction to compare virtual agents (with 6 months of service) and in-house agents at AAA (with 8 years of service), showing that the virtual agents score equal to or better than experienced in-house agents The CyberAgent CSR's™ Perspective

We found the testimonials of individual agents so powerful in and of themselves; we wanted to share them with you directly. The following testimonial case studies are from five CyberAgent CSRs™ who explain why this career works for them. Motivated agents taking calls often translates into higher customer retention rates and longer customer relationships.

The reasons agents liked this type of opportunity is because:

- They were able to work at home.
- They did not have to drive in traffic.
- They could spend more time with their families.
- They made excellent money.
- They enjoyed the work they did.

Figure 4.3. Dr. Jon visiting at the home office of Michele Kesian, a Willow CyberAgent CSRs™ with Jeremiah Knight, an executive from ATT Outsourcing.

Figure 4.4. Dr. Jon with Michele Kesian, a virtual CyberAgent CSRs™ who is eager to take calls.

Figure 4.5. This picture shows Michele starting her day in her home office.

Figure 4.6. Dr. Jon with two CyberAgent CSRs™ who are ready to get to work, from left to right, Carleen Thompson and Kathy Donohoe.

Theresa Jones

Theresa Jones was at a company picnic with her mother when she first heard about Willow CSN. "There must have been 14 or 15 people there who were talking about Willow. Half of them were running their own business working with Willow, and others were friends or family members that wanted to do the same. They were all talking about how much they loved it," says Jones.

When she first heard of Willow, Jones was working full-time in an office job for an import/export company in South Florida. She was also raising an 8-year-old daughter. "With the job I had, it was difficult to really stay involved with my daughter's school life. I couldn't always get time off to go to parent/teacher meetings and other functions that I wanted to attend," she says. "Willow offered the flexibility to run my own business with a good income and still be there when my daughter needed me."

Before she became a CyberAgent CSR™, Jones looked into other types of stay-at-home work, but found that they either paid too little or required extensive, costly training. "With Willow, once you completed the training of course you knew you would have the opportunity to succeed," states Jones, citing the company's blue chip client list as a source of confidence that she would have plenty of work.

Jones originally planned to start her business with Willow on a part-time basis, but as luck would have it, she was laid off from her current job on the same day she was to start taking calls as a CyberAgent CSR™. She decided to commit to Willow full-time.

Her client's include HSN (Home Shopping Network), SkyMall, AAA Chicago, and Alamo Rent A Car.

"Because we're independent entrepreneurs, we can pick our own clients and develop a schedule that suits our needs," says Jones. Her typical day starts by answering calls at 7 A.M. and working for half an hour before making breakfast and taking her to school. From 8 A.M. until 4:30 P.M., she's back on the phones, with a half-hour break for lunch. She's free to re-arrange her schedule to attend conferences during the day, and is at home to help with homework when her

daughter comes back from school. Jones often returns to work once her daughter has gone to bed, answering calls from 8 P.M. until late in the evening.

"With Willow, I can organize my work around my life rather than the other way around," is how Jones puts it. She's taking advantage of that flexibility not only to support her daughter, but also to return to school. She expects to graduate in a few years with a degree in business management.

"Willow represents the wave of the future for people like me," she says.

Luz Magaly ("Maggie") Valdes

"One day, it hit me that I knew absolutely nothing about computers, but my nine-year old son could spend hours playing around with ours. Suddenly, I felt like I was wasting time," says Maggie Valdes. "That's when I decided to change my life."

The stay-at-home housewife went to technical school to learn about computers and their various applications. When she finished her classes, the job offers were plentiful, but Maggie was not satisfied. She wanted to work from home so that she could still be with her young son.

"I received a call from my job counselor at school. She told me about the opportunity to start my own business contracting to name-brand companies as a home-based customer service agent through Willow CSN and encouraged me to go for it,"

Valdes says that becoming a CyberAgent CSRs™ changed her life. "That was 3½ years ago. Today, I couldn't be happier. I love working with Willow, and I love working from my home."

Valdes worked with her first client, HSN, for about two years and picked up other clients along the way. Today, she works between 20 to 40 hours a week for AAA Minnesota/Iowa, AAA Chicago, and 1-800FLOWERS.com.

"I really like helping people," enthuses Valdes. "I would have to say that I enjoy the AAA calls the most because I get to help people with directions and other questions."

One AAA Chicago call sticks out in Valdes's mind. "I received a panicked call from an elderly woman who was lost and scared. She told me where she was, but this road was not on my maps. So I kept the woman on the line and contacted the AAA Chicago dispatcher on my home line. With the dispatcher on one line and the lady on the other, I was able to figure out her exact location and point her in the right direction. This call took 45 minutes, recalls Valdes.

Valdes appreciates the flexibility she has to schedule her work around her personal life.

"I work around my son's baseball practices and games, and while he's at school," she says. "This means I work from 10 A.M. to 4 P.M. and then from 6 to 8 P.M."

Valdes also enjoys the support she receives from Willow. She says that the company is very good about training agents to conduct their business effectively and calls the 24/7 technical support "wonderful." She has referred more than 40 people to Willow's CyberAgent CSRs™ program.

Valdes relishes the camaraderie between herself and her fellow CyberAgent CSRs™s, explaining that feelings of isolation and disconnect, which are often associated with working at home, are non-existent. "In fact, it is just the opposite," she explains. "You make friends at your

training classes and stay in touch with them constantly through e-mail, instant messaging, and chat rooms. Willow also brings everybody together for its semi-annual meetings."

Michele Kesian

At the beginning of 2001, Michele Kesian found herself on the wrong side of the Internet-boom economy. One of the countless victims of a whirlwind of layoffs that accompanied the beginning of the year, Kesian was left unemployed with a husband who had recently fallen ill. Having worked for a hematology medical company as a business and sales representative for over 15 years, Kesian planned to find a similar job, but found that the economic climate was more daunting than expected for someone who needed to earn a good salary while maintaining flexible hours.

It was by chance that Kesian heard about Willow from a friend of a friend. "I immediately thought the Willow program was perfect for my situation. It lets me run my own successful business while having the flexibility to address my husband's health."

Although Kesian was excited about the prospect of balancing her personal and professional lives, she did feel some trepidation about working at home after being in a more traditional office environment for 15 years. "I was concerned about not interacting with people, but I found out that even though there's no one to chat with at the water cooler, all of the CyberAgent CSRs™s stay in touch with each other over the phone or on the Internet. Best of all, when I have a bad hair day no one knows it but me," Kesian laughs.

Kesian goes on to say, "Since I schedule my own hours, I can be involved in the community in a way that I was never able to in the past. Now I love working from home. It's really been nothing but a positive experience for me. So much so that I always recommend it to friends who could be successful with a home-based business."

Kesian is particularly happy with the clients she works with—Special Data Processing, AAA Chicago, and GEFA. "Willow makes sure that we have as much support from the clients as we do from Willow itself. That's one thing I really have noticed about Willow, the top executives are very involved, and really care about the personal and professional development of the CyberAgent CSRs™.

Stephanie Daniels

In 1998, Stephanie Daniels was working full-time as a police officer for the Miami-Dade Police Department when she decided that she needed to earn extra money to begin saving for her three young children's college educations. She did not want to work overtime in her uniform; she wanted to work from home, and she needed flexible hours.

"My husband's friend told me about an opportunity with a company called Willow CSN," recalls Daniels. "I was intrigued by the concept – I could run a successful business with good income while working at home as a virtual customer service representative on a schedule that I could set for myself. I decided to sign up for the basic training class through an adult education program at the local high school."

Three years later, Daniels is still on the force and devotes some of her evenings and weekends as a CyberAgent CSRs™ for AAA Chicago and AAA Minneapolis/Iowa.

"I really enjoy working for the AAA Motor Clubs. They provide excellent support to the agents and do a great job of maintaining a familial work environment," says Daniels

Daniels says that Willow does a good job of ensuring that the channels of communication remain open among the agents and clients and the Willow management team, noting that there is always someone available to talk with. And on top of everything else, she values most the amount of control she has over her schedule and her income.

"I like that everything starts and stops with me," states Daniels.

Lisa Hernandez

"In 1998 my cousin told me about Willow, and I thought, 'this seems like the perfect business opportunity' because at the time, I wanted to be home with my kids as much as possible," recalls Willow CyberAgent CSRs™, Lisa Hernandez. Hernandez was attracted to Willow because of the flexible schedule and supplemental income.

Hernandez says that owning her own business has brought a personal fulfillment to her life that she wasn't expecting. "I was perfectly happy to be raising my kids, and I loved doing so, but Willow offered a professional experience that balanced out my family life. I love raising my kids, but this is something that I was doing for myself. Running my own business is something I've always wanted, but I never had the courage or time to pursue it before."

Working an average of 40 hours a week, Hernandez now has the flexibility to raise her kids while also raising her household's net income. She typically books her time around the need to care for her kids. "I usually work during the school day and after the kids go to sleep or before they wake up," she says.

Along with the personal fulfillment Hernandez receives from balancing her personal and professional lives, she also takes pride in helping the people that call from her five regional AAA clients. "I don't feel like I'm working—I feel like I'm providing a community service," is how Hernandez puts it.

From the money she's earned through her business providing assistance to AAA customers with car troubles, Hernandez has been able to purchase a car of her own and pay off all her debts. Hernandez summed up her feelings for Willow, saying, "I don't know if I could ever go back to working in the 'real world' again. Willow has been a great business opportunity and has worked perfectly for me."

Haikal Taibi

Haikal Taibi has been in the United States since 1995. After climbing the corporate ladder in his old retail job, Taibi decided in 1999 that he needed another opportunity to supplement his income. At the urging of a co-worker, he applied to be a part-time independent contractor for Willow and was accepted into the training program.

When one of Taibi's then three children developed a medical condition that required frequent trips to the doctor's office, the flexibility offered by the business opportunity with Willow was particularly helpful. Says Taibi about that challenging time, "Our daughter is doing much better now, but Willow definitely offered us the business opportunity to earn a good income and at the same time provide the flexibility needed to schedule our family needs to get through that period."

Because Willow allowed Taibi to arrange his schedule in whatever way he needed to, he decided to become a full-time agent. He now works with four clients, 1-800Flowers.com, SkyMall, GEFA, and TracFone.com, which he describes as one of his favorite parts of his business. "Because I provide service to such a diverse group of clients, there is always a new challenge. Using the many skills I've developed during the course of the day really refreshes my spirit so that things never get monotonous."

Although he was initially worried about losing the interaction with co-workers that comes from being associated with a more traditional office job, Taibi finds the benefits far outweigh any issues in that regard. He enjoys his lifestyle because he sets his own schedule, and is able to help raise his kids and help care for his in-laws while making good money. "Since I'm my own boss, I get to figure out what hours work best for me. The more I work, the more money I make, but if there's something I have to do or if I want to take a day off, I don't have to schedule any hours at all. It's all up to me."

While Taibi's scheduling may be up to him, he's happy that he is not entirely on his own. "Willow offers its CyberAgent CSRs™ a lot of support. Whether it's technical support or making sure we're getting enough calls from our clients, we know Willow is behind us."

Joy Zinram

"Willow is the best thing that's ever happened to me in my life," says an effusive CyberAgent CSRs™, Joy Zinram. After working most of her life with doctors and hospitals, Zinram reached a stage in her life in which she was looking to segue into something that gave her a little more control over her schedule. Having also been injured in an automobile accident, Zinram was looking for a job that required less physical mobility.

"Willow was perfect for me," states Zinram. "After all those years working in the hospital, I can honestly say that I'm doing something better for myself now." Since starting with Willow in March of 2000, Zinram has had good reason to extol her career choice. "When I was training to become an independent business owner with Willow, in the spring of 2000, they asked us to fill out a five-year plan. My major goals included getting out of debt, remodeling the house and purchasing a boat." With more than three years to spare, Zinram has completed and exceeded all of those goals.

After starting her home office with a desk that she literally found on the side of the road, Zinram has achieved complete self-sufficiency. She's done so by taking full advantage of Willow's make-your-own schedule policy. "I average a full work week, and the more I work, the more I make. It's really perfect for me—no traffic, no work clothes, no gas money, and with all the crazy things going on in the world right now, home isn't a bad place to work."

Zinram was originally reluctant to work at home because she thought her family and friends wouldn't consider it to be a serious or respectable business opportunity. "It was one of the proudest days of my life, though," recalls Zinram, "when my successful brother-in-law commended me in front of my entire family for achieving so much with my own business."

Another reason Zinram receives so much credit from her family is because she's able to devote so much time to them, including her elderly parents. "Willow gives me the freedom and independence I need to succeed as a daughter and as a business owner. I feel very connected to Willow because they treat people like people should be treated."

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Co-Author

Dr. Jon Anton (also known as "Dr. Jon") is the director of benchmark research at Purdue University's Center for Customer-Driven Quality. He specializes in enhancing customer service strategy through inbound call centers, and e-business centers, using the latest in telecommunications (voice), and computer (digital) technology. He also focuses on using the Internet for external customer access, as well as Intranets and middleware.

For the past six years, Dr. Jon has been the principal investigator of the annual Purdue University Call Center Benchmark Research. This data is now collected at the BenchmarkPortal.com website, where it is placed into a data warehouse that currently contains over ten million data points on call center and e-business center performance. Based on the analysis of this data, Dr. Jon authors the following monthly publications: "The Purdue Page" in *Call Center Magazine*, "Dr. Jon's Benchmarks" in *Call Center News*, "Dr. Jon's Industry Statistics" in *Customer Interface Magazine*, and "Dr. Jon's Business Intelligence" in the *Call Center Manager's Report.*

Dr. Jon has assisted over 400 companies in improving their customer service strategy/delivery by the design and implementation of inbound and outbound call centers, as well as in the decision-making process of using teleservice providers for maximizing service levels while minimizing costs per call. In August of 1996, *Call Center Magazine* honored Dr. Jon by selecting him as an Original Pioneer of the emerging call center industry. In October of 2000, Dr. Jon was named to the Call Center Hall of Fame. In January of 2001, Dr. Jon was selected for the industry's "Leaders and Legends" Award by Help Desk 2000. Dr. Jon is also a member of the National Committee for Quality Assurance.

Dr. Jon has guided corporate executives in strategically re-positioning their call centers as robust customer access centers through a combination of benchmarking, re-engineering, consolidation, outsourcing, and web-enablement. The resulting single point of contact for the customer allows business to be conducted anywhere, anytime, and in any form. By better understanding the customer lifetime value, Dr. Jon has developed techniques for calculating the ROI for customer service initiatives.

Dr. Jon has published 75 papers on customer service and call center methods in industry journals. In 1997, one of his papers on self-service was awarded the best article of the year by *Customer Relationship Management Magazine*.

Dr. Jon has published thirteen professional books:

1. e-Business Customer Service, The Anton Press, 2001
2. Minimizing Agent Turnover, The Anton Press, 2001

3. Customer Relationship Management, The Bottom Line to Optimizing Your ROI, Prentice Hall, 2nd Edition, 2001

4. Integrating People with Processes and Technology, The Anton Press, 2001

5. Selecting a Teleservices Partner, The Anton Press, 2001

6. 20:20 CRM A Visionary Insight into Unique Customer Contact, The Anton Press, 2001

7. Call Center Performance Enhancement Using Simulation and Modeling, Purdue University Press, 2000

8. Contact Center Benchmarking, Purdue University Press, 1999

9. Listening to the Voice of the Customer, Alexander Communications, 1997

10. Contact center Management by the Numbers, Purdue University Press, 1997

11. Customer Relationship Management, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1996

12. Inbound Customer Contact Center Design, Dame Publishers, Inc., 1994

13. Computer-Assisted Learning, Hafner Publishing, Inc., 1985

Dr. Jon is the editor for a series of professional books entitled *Customer Access Management*, published by the Purdue University Press.

Dr. Jon's formal education was in technology, including a Doctorate of Science and a Master of Science from Harvard University, a Master of Science from the University of Connecticut, and a Bachelor of Science from the University of Notre Dame. He also completed a three-summer intensive Executive Education program in Business at the Graduate School of Business at Stanford University.

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Co-Author

Dr. Natalie Petouhoff (alias "Dr. Nat" and pronounced pet-a-hoff) is a Director of Content for Benchmark Portal, Inc.   As a principal investigator working with Dr. Jon Anton, she creates articles, white papers and writes books that provide companies mission-critical information to enhance their customer service strategy through inbound call and e-business centers using the latest in telecommunications (voice) and computer (digital) technology.

Dr. Nat specializes in change management, re-engineering and business process mapping. Dr. Nat co-created the SP^3M process, which enables companies to measure, market and manage the people, process and the technology in the ever-changing world of customer contact centers. Her unique blend of the Successful People Process (SPP™), SP3M™ and solid background in technology allow her to reduce the adoption resistance so often experienced when companies change how they deliver service via enhanced technology solutions. Reducing the adoption resistance results in technology implementations that are within budget, on time and within scope, leading to a larger return on the technology investment, increased customer lifetime value, and larger company profits and revenues.

Dr. Nat's background ranges from technology to human resources. She has first hand experience at companies like General Electric, General Motors, Hughes Electronics, Universal Studios as well as Internet start-up companies. She believes that customer call centers are the ambassadors of a company, as they are generally one of the first customer encounters. Her signature speech, *NO PEOPLE, NO BUSINESS™*, demonstrates her commitment to helping companies understand the value of the human asset when benchmarking.

As a former Change Management consultant for PriceWaterhouse Coopers, Dr. Nat installed call centers and ERP systems and designed customer access interfaces. Through this front-line experience at companies like Warner Lambert and Sony Pictures Entertainment, she was able see the challenges companies face when implementing new technology solutions and changing workflow processes.

Dr. Nat is currently working on a Human Potential ROI Calculator. This will help companies see the value of training and developing employees, as well as a way to quantify human capital as a corporate asset. Dr. Nat has come up with a credible way to calculate how the degree to which people accept change can allow for the full return on investment for expensive technology. Dr. Nat also specializes in helping companies reduce the employee resistance that always accompanies change.

For her outstanding work in technology at Hughes Electronics, Dr. Nat received three awards, namely: 1) the *Leadership Achievement Award* for leadership in the face of resistance, 2) the *Superior Management Award* for quick technology solution implementation with a tiger team, and 3) the *Peer-Selected Award* for demonstrating exemplary behavior towards peers.

Dr. Nat has published the following books:

- *Recruiting, Training and Evaluating Call Center Employees: Increasing Retention*, Editor, American Society of Training and Development (ASTD) 2001.
- *Customer Relationship Management: The Bottom Line to Optimizing Your ROI***,** Prentice Hall, 2001.

And the following are up coming books Dr. Nat is working on with various authors:

- Integrating Your People with Process and Technology: Managing Employee Acceptance of Improvement Initiatives, Anton Press, 2001.
- Analytical Customer Relationship Management: Measuring Customer Satisfaction and Customer LifeTime Value**,** Prentice Hall, 2002.
- Forward Intelligence™: The Company With The Most Information Wins, Anton Press, 2002.
- Customer LifeTime Value Management: Maximizing The ROI for CRM Initiatives, Anton Press, 2002.
- Operational Customer Relationship Management: The Technology that Empowers Customer Satisfaction, Prentice Hall, 2002.
- Motivating Your Call Center: The Methods to Increase Agent Retention and Productivity**,** Anton Press, 2002.

In addition she has published ten technical papers in industry journals and the following white papers:

- *The Use of Symbols to Capture Caller Data Efficiently and Accurately,* www.BenchmarkPortal.com, 2001.
- *Managing Call Center Service Quality,* www.BenchmarkPortal.com, 2001.
- *Customer Lifetime Value: The Secret of Obtaining The Maximum ROI of CRM Technology,* www.BenchmarkPortal.com, 2001.
- *The Psychological Impact of Change and Re-engineering in A Call Center and Training Employees to Handle "The Valley of Tears",* www.BenchmarkPortal.com, *2001.*

She is a popular speaker as evidence by being asked again to speak at the Women and Technology Conference in Santa Clara to an audience of over 6,000 technical women who heard about her latest ideas in technology as applied to customer service and career development.

Dr. Nat's formal education is in technology. She was awarded the General Motors Fellowship to complete her Doctorate of Engineering from UCLA where she did her thesis research at Oak Ridge National Laboratory and Hughes Research Laboratories in Metallurgy and High Energy Particle Physics. She also has a Master's and a Bachelor of Metallurgical Engineering degree from the University of Michigan, financed by five scholarships.

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