Leveraging the Gig Economy to Complement Your Contact Center Workforce

The freelance economy, on-demand economy, gig economy, or whatever you want to call it, continues to grow. According to research by McKinsey, the Freelancers Union, and others, freelancers already account for 25% to 36% of the workforce in the US, and the growth rate of this group is three times that of the overall workforce. McKinsey estimates that the gig workforce has the potential to grow from 76M to 129M in the US, and from 89M to 138M in Western Europe, based on their preference for freelance work on a primary or supplemental basis.

The freelance trend is led by millennials—about 47% of them already freelance full-time or part-time, per Freelancers Union. This data point is especially relevant to the contact center workforce, as freelance agents are a useful supplement providing contact centers the ability to easily scale up or down to handle seasonality, event-driven demand, and churn. Millennials and Gen Z already form a large portion of the contact center workforce. Over time, freelancers may indeed become a majority, considering the trends.

Not unlike other CSRs, freelance agents also represent your brand. How can you leverage them without sacrificing service quality and brand equity? We take a look at some best practices for success.

**Framework**

First, you need to assess your fit for the use of freelance agents. The following framework, based on the complexity and criticality of customer queries, can be a good starting point.

- Low criticality, low complexity: High fit
- Low criticality, high complexity: Medium fit, possible high fit
- High criticality, low complexity: Medium fit, possible high fit
- High criticality, high complexity: Misfit
Criticality is an indicator of how high the stakes are. For example, healthcare advice to patients or financial advice to consumers or businesses, are high in criticality. Complexity could be a combination of how difficult the queries are to resolve and how important compliance with regulations is, especially given that penalties for non-compliance could be very high in some industries.

While scenario #1 is a high fit, the need for freelance or in-house agents can be reduced through knowledge and AI-guided automation. While scenario #4 is a misfit for obvious reasons, 2 and 3 require more careful assessment. In the case of 2, technologies such as knowledge management (KM) and AI can help self-service systems get smarter and augment freelance agents so they can handle more complex queries, making it a possible high-fit. In the case of 3, the low level of complexity, combined with hiring more experienced freelancers to account for the high criticality, could make it a high fit. Done right, KM and AI systems can help here, too. Yet another dimension is seasonality—if your business has high seasonality (e.g., retail/e-tail) but relatively low complexity and low criticality, freelance agents can be a good fit in that case as well.

**Challenges**

While the freelance approach provides flexibility for contact centers, it also comes with challenges. Here are some of the more common ones:

-Unlike in-house agents, freelance reps have to go from zero to service in a matter of hours or days rather than weeks, especially when they are seasonal.

-They may not have deep knowledge of the policies, procedures, and in many industries, products, and often find themselves having to drink from the proverbial fire hose.

-Despite being citizens of a digital-first omnichannel world, they may, just like their next-gen in-house colleagues, find themselves working with phone-centric legacy desktops without easy access to knowledge or process guidance. In many cases, they are also saddled with channel-specific point products that don’t provide 360-degree view of the context. This means they have to “ask for the mother’s maiden name” multiple times, which is one of the biggest irritants for consumers.

-Many industries operate on razor-thin margins and depend on the customer experience they deliver to be the differentiator. Having freelance reps at the frontline poses some risk to customer service quality and brand reputation.

-As routine questions get answered by self-service, agents get more complex questions from customers. Oftentimes, customers are also looking for value-added advice. An issue for in-house agents, this poses a bigger challenge to freelance reps.
**Tips for Success**

Here are some proven best practices to elevate freelance reps to the next level of performance and make them your brand ambassadors:

**TAKE A KNOWLEDGE-FIRST APPROACH.** “No brain, no gain” is the 21st Century version of the idiom “no pain, no gain.” In fact, lack and consistency of agent knowledge is the biggest pain point in customer service, according to a recent eGain-Forrester survey of 5,000 consumers in the US. So focus first on knowledge, or the biggest customer pain point could get amplified by the freelance approach!

**JUMPSTART YOUR KNOWLEDGE BASE.** Capture answers to the most commonly asked questions, starting with simple ones first. Make them easily findable through advanced search options like natural language and faceted search, not just keyword search which typically returns hundreds of irrelevant hits. The 80/20 rule is a good way to prioritize what questions to address first in the knowledge base.

**ADD CONVERSATIONAL KNOWHOW.** Traditional search methods, even the more advanced ones, can only go so far; they are not a substitute for the knowledge of domain experts who can guide customers to answers or advice through an interactive dialog. Here’s the good news: AI is proven to help capture this interactive knowhow and disseminate it to agents at the point of engagement with customers, thus driving the interaction forward. Freelance agents, serving a business that is perhaps unfamiliar to them, can help customers get to their “destinations” with AI guidance just like how GPS helps drivers navigate to their destinations in unfamiliar locations!

**GET “RICH” OUT OF THE BOX.** Phone-centric agent desktops have limited capabilities at best, when it comes to supporting digital channels such as messaging, video chat, and others. The limitations drive today’s digital-first—often digital-only—consumers to the phone or, in most cases, to the competition. Make sure your customer service solution is digital-first and digital-centric, just like your customers and agents.

**UNIFY OMNICHANNEL.** A customer engagement hub is an old best practice but is still very relevant. According to CEB (now part of Gartner), switching channels increases customer effort by 30% and making them repeat information during the switch increases their effort by another 60%, a sure recipe for customer defection! Make sure your customer engagement applications are based on a unified omnichannel platform so your agents can operate with 360-degree context. This way, customers aren’t asked to repeat information, they get the single right answer to questions regardless of touchpoint, and you elevate both the customer and the agent experience (CX and AX), while reducing Total Cost of Ownership (TCO).

**CUSTOMER VIEW SHOULD BE CONTEXTUAL.** It is important to provide a 360-degree view of the context of the current service request than an entire 360-degree view of the customer.
latter overwhelms the agent with customer information that may or may not be contextually relevant. The agent winds up staring at the clutter rather than solving the customer problem.

**HIRE RIGHT.** A good fit with your brand personality and values is as important as hard skills.

**BE INCLUSIVE.** Make freelance agents feel part of the team. Make sure to onboard them just like in-house agents, and include them in group events, physically and virtually.

With these best practices, all your service reps—freelance or otherwise—can quickly become as good as your best reps.

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