

Call Centers

Your Bridge to a New Career



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Think fast. What is the fastest growing job category in the world today?

The answer may surprise you. It is call center representative. These are the people who handle sales and customer service calls by telephone. Today, there are an estimated 60,000 call centers operating in the U.S. employing more than 3,000,000 people. Call center employment is estimated to continue growing in the U.S. at 8% per year through 2003.

Thinking of a career change?

If you're thinking about starting or re-directing your career, consider working in a call center. This article will give you an overview of the types of positions available in call centers and will offer guidelines for deciding the type of call center job that will suit you best.

"Call center" is not an industry itself; rather it's a method of doing business that is used by all industries. What this means is—no matter what your interests are—you can find a way to work at a call

center in the field you like. Call center agents work in industries ranging from insurance to emergency response... from automobiles to travel companies... from retailers to publishers... from credit cards to mortgages...from industrial distribution to charity fundraising.

If you understand a bit about the various types of call centers, you will be better able to look for the sort of call center job that suits your ambitions, your personality, your hours of availability, and your job requirements.

Types of call centers

Call center work is classified as either outbound or inbound. Outbound calling means that you initiate the call. Outbound positions are usually either in sales or collections. They also can be lead generation, market research, fundraising, polling, or opinion surveys. Inbound calling means that the customers call you. Inbound calls are frequently subdivided into sales, customer service, or technical support. More and more call center agents are also handling email correspondence and text chat with



customers. When you are able to handle more than one type of these customer contacts, you become what is known as a “universal agent,” and the call center becomes known as a “contact center.”

Another classification

A second way to classify call center work is by whether you will be talking with business customers or with consumers. Business-to-business calls are abbreviated “b-to-b.” And business-to-consumer calls are called “b-to-c.” B-to-b call centers generally are staffed during normal business hours; b-to-c centers are staffed at times when consumers are most likely to be near their phones. This means that b-to-c call centers provide more evening, weekend, and round-the-clock shifts. Inbound b-to-c call centers such as L.L. Bean and Powertel Technologies are open twenty-four hours per day, seven days a week. They are known in industry lingo as 24x7.

One other distinction

A final distinction that you will want to know about before you apply for a call center position is whether it is an “in-house” or “outsourced” call center. Some large corporations such as MBNA operate their own call centers in-house. In fact, MBNA operates call centers across Maine and in New Hampshire. Other corporations choose to outsource their call handling to other companies that specialize in call center operations. For instance, LiveBridge, PowerTel Technologies, Taction, and the ICT Group all operate call centers in Maine. If you work for one of these service agencies, you will, in effect, be working on behalf of those companies that outsource their work to your agency. If variety is what you like, you will

find it at a service agency.

As you can see, all call center work is not alike. How else can you decide which type of call center job is best for you? Here are some tips.

Which is right for you?

If your ambition is to become a sales professional, but cannot find a job in field sales because you have no experience, then a job in telephone sales is a great place to start. Call centers are willing to train you from scratch. You’ll gain experience at a rate ten times faster than you’d learn in face-to-face selling. And, once you’ve proven that you’re good at selling by phone—especially outbound—then doors will open to you for outside sales positions. Sales-oriented call centers also are known for offering commissions, bonuses, contests, and other incentives. So, if you are competitive by nature and want personal control over your own income, then a position in sales is right for you.

If you are more inclined to help people rather than persuade them, then look for a job in customer service. Your income will be more predictable, and the work environment will be a little less zany than it is in most sales centers. Initial training tends to take longer than it does for sales because of the in-depth knowledge you will need of products, policies, prices, and services that you will be dealing with.

Once you’re hired, what can you expect the job to be like? That follows...





What will my work be like?

Your primary tools of the trade will be your ears and your voice. Your working hours will be spent listening to and talking with customers or prospects. In nearly any call center position today, you will wear a headset and work at a computer.

If you have never worn a headset before, don't worry. Before long it will feel as comfortable as your favorite sweater.

If you are not familiar with computers, your new employer will teach you. It will help your chances at getting hired, though, if you can demonstrate that you know how to get around a computer screen using a keyboard and mouse. If you are going to work in inbound sales or customer service, then you also will have an advantage if you are good at touch-typing. Accuracy and speed of data entry are really important in those jobs.

Obviously, you will need to have a strong technical background in the products being supported before you can succeed in a tech support position.

Consider your hours

One final consideration is to match your search for a call center employer with the hours you want to work. Many call centers offer very flexible work hours.

If your goal is to work normal business hours, then a call center that handles business-to-business calls is more likely to offer hours that are convenient to you than a b-to-c center will. If you are looking for late

afternoon or evening work, then an outbound b-to-c call center may be the ideal place for you. If you are looking for all-night work, then look for a center that specializes in consumer customer service or inbound sales. Many of these operate 24x7.

Also, note that some call center work is seasonal. Catalogers, for instance, usually face their busiest time in the months leading up to Christmas. Many call center agents have worked at L.L. Bean for years on a seasonal basis.

If you have never before given thought to working in a call center, I hope that this article has started you thinking about it. A job in a call center can become a stepping-stone to a career in the field of your choice. And it can provide you along the way with uniquely flexible work hours and a wide variety of occupational experience.

About the author

Cliff Hurst is president of Career Impact, Inc. located in Wells, Maine. Career Impact provides training and consulting services to call centers.



Cliff is also author of *A Career for the 21st Century: A Handbook for Call Center Agents*. You can order this book through his web site:

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