



## Case Study:

# Using Remote Operators to Save Space While Still Providing the Highest Quality Patient Care

## Faced with limited space, some hospitals are providing a unique solution – send the operators home!

### Limited Capacity

For many hospitals, having enough space to operate efficiently is an issue. One of the biggest advantages of the 1Call *Infinity* system is that it allows receptionists to work from home, making the space otherwise taken up by an on-site call center available for other uses.

A Midwestern hospital was faced with the issue of wanting to expand, but not wanting to reconstruct their facilities. The hospital call center manager commented, “One of the biggest issues for us is that they built this hospital not knowing it would expand as fast as it did. We have a huge space issue here.”

She continued, “When we were looking at software for our call center, one of the things we

wanted was to be able to have our operators work from home. Our space is just so tight in all of our facilities. We have transcriptionists that work from home, so they actually started this whole process.” The hospital selected the 1Call *Infinity* system for their call center. “Because we had the *Infinity* software, we knew that we were able to do this.”

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### Staff Safety

Before making the final decision on the new location of the operators, the hospital did look into other possibilities. “We had options of moving to other locations, but because

there was only someone there during the day, the staff felt unsafe. We also looked at another one of our facilities, but that location couldn’t handle the call volume,” said the manager.

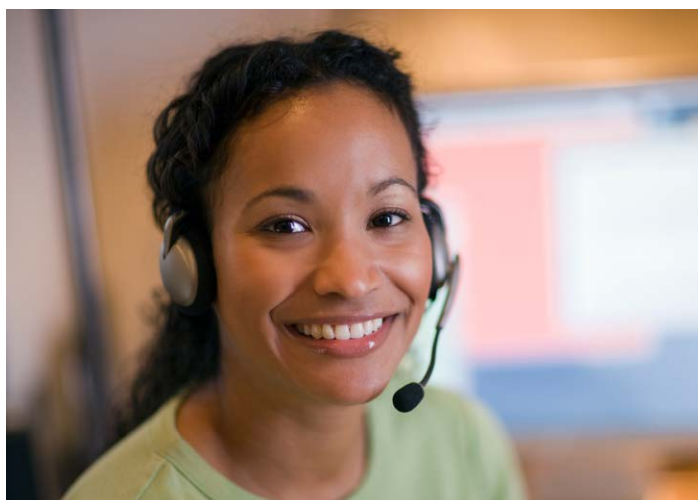
It wasn't an overnight decision, but after careful consideration, it was determined that working from home would be the best, and safest, option for the operators, especially during the night hours.

### Selecting the Right Staff

Not all operators were given the opportunity to work from home. "It takes a certain type of person to do this, and we needed to determine who would be able to do this, and who wouldn't. We were looking for quality staff."

Before deciding who would be offered the remote operator positions, each operator's annual performance reviews for the past three years were analyzed. These evaluations included technical components, which looked at the operator's job competencies, such as how well he or she could handle emergency calls, perform paging and overhead paging functions, his or her ability to handle calls from both physicians and customers, and his or her ability to differentiate between routine calls and emergency calls. The hospital also reviewed behavioral competencies, which included the operator's commitment to service, quality of service, productivity, and teamwork skills. Each operator's call volume, length of time spent on calls, and how often he or she logged in and out were also reviewed.

*"My complaints have dropped drastically since switching to Infinity."*



### Preliminary Testing

Great care was taken in the implementation of staff working remotely. After selecting the operators that would work from home, the manager and another member of her staff tested the remote operator stations for about a month. This helped them know exactly what the operators would be experiencing from home. The manager commented, "We wanted to make sure this would work. Once we knew that it would work, we gave the operators home computers to use and we were able to get them up and running. I gradually added more people, and the last operator went home in April."

### Staff Schedules

When on-site, the operators typically worked eight-hour shifts. After reviewing the various reports when the operators started working from home, including wait times and dropped calls, it was decided that longer shifts would better meet the hospital's call handling needs. "We ended up creating ten-hour shifts, and each operator's performance determined where they were placed. As a result, my strong employees work during the busiest times, from Monday through Thursday. The employees at the next level work Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, and the ones that weren't high performers ended up on the night shift." The lunch shifts of the operators were also adjusted after finding that too many operators weren't handling calls during some of the busier times.

### Home Setup

For this particular Midwestern hospital, 16 operators are working from home. Each was given a computer, a phone and Internet access for handling calls.

Before being allowed to work from home, each operator was required to sign an agreement that included things like eliminating background

noise, requirements to report to the hospital in case of a cable or power outage, attending staff meetings, returning equipment immediately upon leaving, providing an appropriate work area for themselves, and bringing equipment in for upgrades or repairs. Many of the operators designated a room in their home for handling calls to help eliminate background noise and to help them stay focused.

The operators are able to handle all types of calls, including code calls and overhead pages—all as if they were on-site. Even though the operators are 20 or 30 miles away, it's like they are actually sitting in the building.

### Keeping Operators Updated

The operators use the *Infinity* operator chat feature to keep others updated. They could use this to let the other operators know to contact a doctor on his cell phone, and not his pager, for example. The chat feature allows them to communicate with each other as if they are in the same room. Operators also communicate via e-mail and phone calls.

### The Benefits of Working From Home

There are many benefits that working from home offers to operators. “They don't have to pay for gas, they don't have the wear-and-tear on their vehicles, and they don't have the clothing expense. When they start their day, they log into our time card, and they don't have the commut-



ing time. Because of the economy, there were a lot of benefits we weren't able to give them, but I think some of the other benefits compensated,” stated the hospital manager.

### Remote Monitoring

“The minute I walk in the building, I turn my agent screen on, and I chat with the operators to make sure they're okay,” said the manager. “I'm not always here to make sure they're working, so I run reports to make sure they're not taking extra breaks or extra lunches, or that there aren't long gaps between calls.”

Using the *Infinity* Unity Voice Logger recordings, calls can be monitored each day to assess the operator's ability to handle the calls correctly. “My complaints have dropped drastically since switching to *Infinity*.”

### Keeping the Staff Connected

One thing that a lot of the operators miss about not being in the office each day is the social aspect. To address this, and to help keep the staff connected, staff meetings are scheduled every three weeks. “To stay connected, we either meet at the facility, or we try to go outside the facility,” the manager said. The operators also plan additional staff outings outside of work, and meet with each other for lunch on their days off.

### Backup Plan

In the event that Internet or phone service would go out, or operators are unable to use stations remotely for any reason, the operators are required to report to the main hospital facility, where backup stations are available.

There have been a number of interesting circumstances. The manager commented, “I have people located in two different counties. The last time we lost our Internet service, we found out that everyone in one county lost their Internet, but the people in the other were okay. I had the backup, so I was able to call the operators in the

available county and say, 'Hop on, because the people in the other county can't get on.' We learn as we go with this."

### **Fewer Sick Days**

One benefit that was obvious from the beginning was the reduced operator sick days. "Between sick calls and having to travel in the bad weather, we don't get as many as we used to. And if we do get a sick call from somebody, it's easier to find someone to fill in."

### **Simplified Training**

When new operators are hired, they train on site for about a month. "They work with a seasoned operator, listen for a day or two, and then usually by the third day, the new person is taking calls. They'll start with one specific site and then will move on as they progress with their learning. They work with the seasoned operator to make sure it's going like it should," according to the manager. "I had someone that started right before the operators went home, and she caught on right away. That was probably the fastest training I've ever done."

### **Expanded Potential**

Having the operators work from home has also opened up a large potential employee pool, including those who would be unable to travel to the main location.

The manager commented, "For a recent job that was posted, I had 26 applicants. They finally closed it after the second day. I think everyone thought, with the theory of working from home, that it would be easy to do. But even though some think it's a luxury, you have to have the right person. And they do have to be available to come to the site if they lose their Internet access."

### **Handling Remote Discipline**

When there is a problem, handling it remotely can be challenging. "Sometimes, when I send an operator an e-mail, they mistakenly think I'm mad at them. So another piece I'm learning is the best way to communicate. I also think it depends on the individual. Issues with some operators are best handled by a phone call—some by e-mail."

### **Impressions**

As with anything new, having the operators work from home initially met some opposition. The manager said, "At first it was hard for the operators to adjust. For some, this was their way to interact with people. But those that struggled with it the most seemed to end up liking it the most. It was just the whole idea of 'change' that they didn't initially like."

Some physicians were also skeptical. "In the beginning, a lot of physicians were not happy with this. They felt that the operators needed to be on site, since they were the 'go-to' people, but I think they've realized that they can still access the operators for any questions they had or if they needed anything. They've grown to adapt to this."

The administrators also love it, and as this Midwestern hospital continues to grow, they continue to look for ways to have even more staff members work from home.

For callers, the fact that the operators are remote is transparent. "The only ones that know the operators are working from home are the ones that knew we went home. Other than that, they would not know."