“Homeshoring”
Moving Jobs to the Den or Rec Room

There has been a great deal of publicity and distress recently about “offshoring”—exporting U.S. jobs to workers in foreign countries. Manufacturing jobs have been sent to China. So many call center functions have been relocated to India that one is no longer surprised to hear a distinctive Indian accent—coming to you instantaneously from halfway across the globe—when calling the toll-free customer service numbers of many U.S. companies.

At Outrigger/OHANA Hotels & Resorts, we do not believe that offshoring our call center work offers the highest level of customer service, so we are using the latest technology to experiment with “homeshoring”—allowing our long-time, highly qualified agents to respond to reservation calls from home. Nearly four months into the program, everything is working well, and we are receiving a great deal of interest and publicity in the process.

Our Denver reservations center connects with customers in a number of ways, including telephone calls, facsimile transmissions, e-mails, and Internet chats. Formerly, each mode required specialized equipment, which was generally located in different rooms or areas. The heart of the system was a 15-year-old call-distribution computer. It was bulky, expensive to maintain, and difficult to use. As call volumes rose and fell from season to season or throughout the day, it was hard to quickly change personnel assignments to respond to the needs of the moment and keep customer service high.

In April 2005, that all changed and, from that moment on, all customer contacts have been received by a computer in Salt Lake City and then distributed via the Internet directly to a selected agent’s computer, based on that agent’s availability and skills. The agent might be working in our Denver offices—but not necessarily. The agent could just as easily be working on a computer in his or her own home.

This latter possibility has been the most exciting thing about the program for Charles Gunsolly, along with two fellow agents, Stacey Rasmussen and Colleen McDonald. Charles, who has worked for our company for 14 years, is slowly losing his eyesight. He can no longer get a driver’s license, so his commute to work on public transportation had turned into a daily 90-minute ordeal, compounded by Denver’s fickle climate, which can deliver “postal weather”—rain, hail, sleet, or snow—on any day of the year.

Since October 2005, Charles’ commute to work from his bedroom costs him nothing and might take 30 seconds to a minute, depending on whether he stops by the kitchen for a second cup of coffee. Weather is no longer a factor. His home-based computer, equipped with a special screen magnifier, quickly connects him with customers, no matter how they choose to contact Outrigger/OHANA—voice, facsimile, e-mail, or chat.

The call center software allows Charles to do more than one thing at a time, so he can answer a voice reservation request while simultaneously providing information on a property’s facilities to another customer via Internet live chat. The same call center software also monitors call volume and, during busy times, can quickly redirect some of the load to other staff members, regardless of whether they,
too, are working from home or are in the call center itself, or to employees in other departments.

Homeshoring is a rapidly growing trend, as innovations in technology make the option ever more physically and economically attractive. Not only does homeshoring relieve people of the time and expense of commuting, it also allows them to take better control of their lives. If they wish or need to, they can work less than the standard eight-hour day and schedule breaks when it is convenient, perhaps at a time when they need to care for a child or an elderly parent living in their home. Shifts can be as short as 15 minutes. Taking time off to pick up a student from school or attend a child’s athletic event is no longer a major issue, provided that other employees are available to maintain needed customer service levels.

Recent articles in Business Week and the Wall Street Journal on homeshoring cite studies that indicate that at-home workers are more likely to be slightly older and have more education and managerial experience than their office-based counterparts. Annual attrition and turnover rates are remarkably lower for home-based workers. It is not surprising that the total number of home-based call center employees is growing rapidly and is expected to increase 24 percent a year from 2006 through 2010, according to research firm IDC, as reported in the Wall Street Journal.

Currently, JetBlue Airways is the Travel & Tourism company with the greatest percentage of home-based call center employees. All of its 1,400 reservationists work from home.

At our Denver Reservations Center, Bill Peters, V.P. Reservations Services, is still experimenting with the details and procedures under which homeshoring works best for all concerned. This work is attracting attention, and Microsoft recently filmed a news clip for its Web site showing how Outrigger/OHANA is using the Microsoft software that makes it all possible. Charles Gunsolly is the star of the show. The clip can be downloaded for viewing by entering http://www.Echopass.com/Outrigger_Echopass_Video.wmv into your PC browser.

In the meantime, things are going very well for Charles, and when the next winter storm blows through Denver, he will not have to bundle up for an hour-and-a-half and commute through the cold to the reservation center. He will probably just pour another cup of coffee, walk to the next room, turn on his computer, and start picking up messages from customers, no matter how they get there—via voice, facsimile, e-mail, or Internet chat. It sure beats trying to cope with rain, hail, sleet, or snow!