

Hanging on the line?

The outsourced reception

Outsourcing has long been an accepted part of running an efficient business. Traditionally, specialist skills like legal services, marketing and IT have been outsourced because it is more cost efficient than setting up an in house team, particularly for the smaller firm. More recently, a new wave of services are being offered for outsourcing, some of which challenge preconceived notions about the set-up of the conventional British office.

One such example of this is the idea of the 'Outsourced Receptionist'; a service that allows businesses to outsource all or part of the receptionist function. At first it may seem an odd concept; the idea of permitting valuable business calls to be answered by someone not in the office, but providers claim that the benefits are numerous and that it is essentially no different from outsourcing other services. It is widely accepted that the way in which incoming calls are handled has a huge influence on customers' perception of the company and business experts say that companies ignore the importance of the receptionist function at their peril.

One such provider of the Outsourced Receptionist service is Moneypenny; founded by brother and sister team Ed Reeves and Rachel Clacher, the firm has recently been listed on the Deloitte Fast 50. Explaining the concept behind Outsourced Receptionist Rachel said, "Moneypenny was set up because we had used existing telephone answering services ourselves and found something lacking. We wanted to develop a service where the person taking the calls has a real understanding of the client's business and is as knowledgeable about the organisation and as accountable as they would be if directly employed by the client. It shouldn't matter where the person answering incoming calls is physically located; it is more important that they are professional, skilled and understand the client's business inside out."



*Moneypenny founders
Ed Reeves and Rachel Clacher*

In many ways outsourcing the receptionist function can result in calls being answered more efficiently since the technology allows the outsourced receptionist to

recognise the numbers of important clients so she will not bother them for telephone numbers or to check the spelling of their name. Certain outsourced receptionist providers offer a service whereby calls can be handled on an individual employee rather than company basis depending on what each person requires.

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When a call is diverted, the receptionist can see the diary of the person being called and any additional notes about the individual's preferred call handling method (call to be put through to mobile or landline, message to be taken and faxed, emailed or sent as text message).

For companies with home workers or employees who are on the road a lot, an outsourced receptionist can be a useful asset since, unlike a traditional receptionist, she can transfer calls immediately to any other line (including mobiles and abroad) so callers need never know that a person is working away from the office. An office-based receptionist would usually have to take a message and then contact the person concerned and get them to return the call – less efficient and less professional.

Although for small companies it is often more cost effective to outsource the entire receptionist function, for larger companies using such a service often supports the work of the existing receptionist by transferring calls when she is on the phone, away from her desk, on lunch or off sick. It means that when the

receptionist is away, companies avoid having to employ a temp who has no understanding of the company or having to ask a less experienced member of staff to deal with calls.

Manufacturing company Cytec Engineered Materials Ltd has partially outsourced its receptionist function for two years. Petra Klement, PA to the managing director, explains why it works, "We simply don't have to worry about calls not being answered or being answered by somebody who doesn't really know the company or isn't experienced in answering a busy phone. Calls to reception are the first point of call for many potential clients and so it's imperative that they receive a good impression. If the receptionist is busy or if she's away, the calls simply divert through to our outsourced receptionist, but as far as the caller is concerned the person on the other end of the phone is in our office."

As always with outsourcing there are suggestions that it poses a job threat but companies often employ the receptionist in a different area of the business or use her time away from the phones in a more productive way. The idea of using this type of service to help in-house staff development is a viewpoint supported by John Mortimer, managing director of leading support staff recruitment agency Angela Mortimer plc. Mortimer believes that the majority of UK companies are mentally stuck in an era in which managers managed, workers implemented and support staff did as they were asked. "In the past ten years, education, outsourcing and computerisation of pure functional tasks and the proliferation of the PC have combined to create opportunities for assistants to participate more actively in the business process and we believe that companies should capitalise on the potential of growing talent from within." The argument goes that time freed for the in-house receptionist by outsourcing can be used to help her develop additional skills and experience, for the ultimate benefit of the company.

The main obstacle to the success of the outsourced receptionist function is likely to be conservatism; the misperception that allowing calls to be answered by someone not in the office will result in a less personal service for callers. In fact the opposite is true; outsourced receptionists are specialists in answering business calls professionally; they are no different from a specialist lawyer or IT contractor. Those owners and managers who can keep an open mind and see past convention are likely to reap major benefits for their business.

For further information, see www.moneypenny.biz

