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Call center business still a viable one for rural America

By Joan Engebretson

Caleris founder: "Rogue divisions" are bringing help desk jobs back from offshore suppliers. But success depends on the right combination of a skilled labor force and technology

In the last 10 years or so, many of us have become accustomed to talking with help desks and customer service representatives in foreign lands. But Sheldon Ohringer, co-founder of business process outsourcer Caleris tells me he's beginning to see what he calls "rogue divisions" of some corporations moving those operations back to the U.S. And, he says, he's got a perfect place for them to go. It's rural Iowa.

Caleris keeps its customer list confidential, but Ohringer says the company already has picked up business from some large high-tech companies whose names many people would recognize. And although the cost of doing business with Caleris may be higher than what it would be in Bangalore, it's a lot lower than what it would be in Des Moines—and in comparison with costs in major metros like Chicago or New York, even Des Moines looks like a bargain.

Ohringer and fellow Caleris founder Rick Grewell started the company in 2003 when they purchased a 30-person call center in western rural Iowa. Today they have 300 people in three call centers located in three Iowa towns--Manning, Jefferson and Newton.

"Newton was the former home of Maytag," comments Grewell. "Whirlpool bought them and 5,000 people were let go, including 2,000 factory workers and 3,000 office workers."

That's exactly the sort of place Caleris likes to locate. A town with a lot of unemployed office workers, he says, provides a large skilled labor force to draw upon. "We have a variety of jobs other than just various levels of customer service and help desk," explains Ohringer. "We need managers, supervisors, IT people and trainers."

Caleris likes to set up shop in towns with at least 5,000 people and a community college. The company does its own soft skills training. Technical training, such as training on products manufactured by high-tech clients, is provided by the client—either through an on-site visit or via teleconference.

The role of modern infrastructure

Another key client category for Caleris includes small telcos, which use Caleris for technical

support. Employees handling these accounts use remote diagnostic tools to troubleshoot customer problems.

□ In the old days of outsourcing, the outsourcer had CRM and client software, □ Ohringer explains. Today, he says, □ we get seats on their environment and can use all of their tools □ it □ s like we □ re on the premises or one of their own employees. □

Underlying the three Caleris call centers is high-speed connectivity that local carriers lease from Iowa Network Services, a statewide fiber network with numerous small telco members. □ New technology makes us more efficient, □ comments Ohringer. □ It makes our services more reliable and cost-effective. □

He adds, though, that modern telecommunications infrastructure is only one ingredient to making a company like his successful. The real strength of Caleris, he says, is in its people skills. . □ We understand how to pick the right people, □ says Ohringer.

Caleris sometimes gets asked to set up call centers in other states □ and Ohringer and Grewell have not ruled out that possibility. Ohringer comments unabashedly, though, that □ We both really like Iowa. □ And as long as the co-founders are able to find more Iowa towns with the right ingredients, they □ re most likely to stay within the state.

As the broadband stimulus brings Iowa Network Services-style networks to other rural communities, however, it seems like there should be new opportunities for entrepreneurs in other states to use a similar model to ease unemployment and keep people in rural America who want to stay there. The success that Caleris has seen could be viewed as a template of how to achieve that.

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