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Over the past 10 years, online customer self-service has become increasingly widespread across a number of industries. The banking and travel industries were early adopters of online self-service, and today both individuals and businesses conduct a wide range of transactions online. These online institutions have reduced operational costs by enabling their clients to use less expensive contact methods. Over time, the market has adjusted its expectations of the value of face-to-face contact and determined that they are often happy to conduct their business over the Internet.

Even with the general trend toward online customer self-service, most staffing companies have been reticent to provide this functionality to their client base for fear that it will erode their personal bond with their clients. Of course, no staffing company wants to risk its client relationships, but some firms have found ways to improve their customer service offering by making more functionality available online.

Customer Self-Service in Action

While no single staffing firm provides a full suite of functionality to their clients, a few industry leaders offer key features.

Engaging Prospects

Potential AppleOne customers can conduct keyword searches for candidates directly from AppleOne's homepage. Prospects are presented with summary candidate information and then can click through to see additional

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candidate details. When they find potential candidates, clients are encouraged to self-register and log in to the system. Once logged in, prospective clients are able to schedule an interview, request additional information, save candidates for future review or even request that the candidate be dispatched. Client requests are routed directly to the local branch so that quick action can be taken.

“We want to make it as easy as possible for clients to work with us,” says Will Raleigh, director of Creative Services at AppleOne. “We’re proud of the people that we have, and we want to make them accessible to our prospective clients. Direct Source functionality has been available to clients for a few years already and it is clear that the benefits outweigh the costs. What’s even better is that we are seeing an increase in usage over the past few years.”

Comprehensive Online Customer Service

TempWorks, a leading provider of staffing software, has recently rebuilt and relaunched their Customer WebCenter with a crisp and clean user experience built on Microsoft’s .NET 2.0 framework. The client-facing portal provides staffing company clients with a broad set of functionality that they can extend to their enterprise customers. The portal is branded for both the staffing company and the end client. WebCenter is integrated directly into TempWorks’ front and back office application, and customers using the portal have access to the functionality and data that is relevant to their business unit and role.

While the database of candidates cannot be searched directly by hiring managers, clients can log on to WebCenter to review submitted candidates and schedule interviews. In addition to reviewing proposed candidates, clients can initiate or update job orders, check order status or review the entire order history. Clients may also go online to approve or decline candidate time cards. WebCenter also enables customers to view invoice summaries and drill down to analyze billing and time card detail.

“By far, the number one thing that end customers want to access via WebCenter is the reports section,” states Gregg Dourgarian, TempWorks president and CEO. “Customers want the ability to view reports that have been customized for their needs. They want reports that have consolidated

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What's included in Customer Portals

Candidates

- » Search and view details
- » Select and save for later
- » Request and schedule interview
- » View submittals and take action
- » Review status

Orders

- » Create, update and extend orders
- » View order history
- » View associated candidates

Time cards

- » Review, approve and reject time sheets
- » View time card history

Billing

- » View billing details
- » View billing history
- » Track PO status
- » Process credit card payment
- » Apply for credit

Reports

- » Review standard reports
- » Create ad hoc reports

Online Tools

- » Downloadable forms; e.g., credit applications, time sheets
- » Find my nearest branch
- » ROI calculators
- » Request information
- » Tips, articles and white papers **SI**

numbers and great cost breakdowns. In short, they want reports that will help them save money.”

Dourgarian does not see the portal as a replacement for personal contact. Rather, the portal is utilized for transactional tasks that can be conducted faster online. “Lots of activities can be completed faster online than over the phone or in person. For example, instead of calling a customer to review all new starts on a particular day, the staffing company could post a report listing the candidates that the client could easily download, saving everyone time.”

Online Billing and Payment

Labor Ready's clients are able to log into their customer portals to review and pay bills using their credit cards. “This is great functionality for our smaller customers who like the convenience of paying online,” states Billie Otto, Labor Ready VP and CIO. She adds, “Our larger customers may not pay their bills online, but many log on to the system to review their eInvoice and drill down into the details.”

Client Interest Grows

While there may have been some doubt about the importance of customer portals a few years ago, there is an increasing level of momentum around customer self-service today.

“In 1999 when Labor Ready started to enable self-service, most of our customers weren't asking for it. Now we're seeing more and more online activity, and we expect that our clients will begin to demand more self-service

capabilities from us,” states Otto. “At Labor Ready we understand that our business is relationship-based, but we also know that our smaller customers or customers with centralized functions, such as purchasing, appreciate the ability to conduct transactional business online and on their own schedules. They find self-service to be a convenient and efficient way of doing business with us.”

With an increasing number of off-the-shelf staffing software packages, such as TempWorks, incorporating customer portals into their software (see SI Review article “Front Office Software – Part 2,” Jan/Feb 2006) makes it easier and less costly for staffing companies to offer this functionality to their clients. “TempWorks has seen an incredible amount of interest in our new customer portal. The WebCenter implementation team is busily rolling out customer portals for our clients, and is booked out for months,” states Derek Nicholls, Web Services Integration and Development manager at TempWorks.

The increasing adoption of Vendor Management Systems (VMS) also demonstrates that customers are interested in conducting staffing transactions online. It could be argued that a comprehensive customer portal includes all of the client-facing components of a VMS. Certainly, customers that use VMS take full advantage of the online order management, time card approval processes, billing and reporting. While VMS offers additional key features, such as vendor management, it is clear that customers are willing to

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conduct staffing business online if it provides them with a greater visibility into their staffing levels and practices.

Staffing Benefits

While clients may wish for online self-service, staffing firms have a deep rooted concern that providing customers with an impersonal contact channel will damage the business relationship. However, if staffing companies can effectively manage the messaging to clients and move some of the transactional interactions to the

Internet, operational efficiencies could be gained. It is well understood that staffing industry margins are tight and often squeezed. Companies that can get customers to willingly utilize self-service channels will reduce operating costs and increase margins.

Get with the Program

While staffing company customers may not be boisterously clamoring for self-service, there is compelling evidence that they want online functionality. Staffing companies that act quickly

may find that having a customer portal differentiates them in the marketplace and helps strengthen their brand. When implemented well, a customer portal can improve customer satisfaction and decrease operating costs, without damaging the client/staffing company relationship. Providing Web self-service is quickly becoming an expected component of a full and compelling customer experience. **SI**

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