

Whitepaper

The Value of Outsourcing Your One Call Center Operations

How to advance your state or region's damage prevention efforts with expert, full-service one call center solutions

Introduction

One call notification centers have played a major role in underground utility damage prevention for nearly 40 years, and the launch and ongoing promotion of the nationwide 811 Call Before You Dig hotline has thrust them even more into the spotlight as the heart of damage prevention efforts. As the one call industry matures, with evolving accepted best practices, new technologies, and changing demographics, one call centers continue to advance their missions of serving the many stakeholders involved in damage prevention while improving efficiency and maximizing cost savings.

The state or regional boards that oversee these one call centers have a number of choices when it comes to how to operate according to standards and keep stakeholders satisfied. One of the biggest choices is whether to:

- Fully manage the operation in-house, working with a number of different vendors for software, telecommunications, staffing, facilities and other operational necessities
- Partner with a full-service operator that can manage the one call center from end to end
- Design a hybrid model that combines the two approaches

This paper explores the unique challenges and needs of one call centers in a changing industry landscape and the value that outsourcing with the right partner can provide to state and regional one call organizations.

A developing industry hits its stride

In the 1970s and 1980s, many U.S. states began to formally recognize the safety concerns posed by underground utility infrastructure: natural gas, water, steam, street lighting, telephone and power lines that could pose risks to workers and the public if accidentally struck during construction or excavation. One call centers began to emerge in several states, run by and serving individual utilities at first, but quickly expanding to serve statewide regions.

State governments quickly recognized the impact these operations could have on public and workplace safety, so much so that many of them enacted state laws requiring anyone who needed to dig to contact the state one call centers beforehand. They also mandated that any organization that owned or operated an underground facility become a member of the local one call center.

From early efforts to federal mandate

In 1998, sweeping federal legislation reinforced these state mandates. The Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century was a law that, as the name indicated, was primarily focused on highway and transportation safety but included a number of other public safety provisions. One of these provisions charged the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA, formerly known as the Office of Pipeline Safety) with conducting a study of best practices in underground utility damage prevention — an issue which, at the time, held a place on the U.S. Transportation Safety Board's Top 10 priorities for safety improvement.

A steering committee of representatives from major utility safety and damage prevention stakeholders came together at the PHMSA's request to conduct the Common Ground Study. The study's goal was to identify best practices that could provide a standardized approach to damage prevention, in spite of the broad differences in organizational structures, policies and practices of the many different industries and utilities involved with the effort.

After nearly a year of work, the group presented 130 best practices to the U.S. Secretary of Transportation, who, with the support of Congress, decided to keep the best practices document "alive" with a body that would oversee its ongoing evolution. The Common Ground Alliance (CGA) was born.

The difference one call can make

One of the biggest initiatives overseen by the CGA is the implementation of the nationwide 811 call system, which routes excavators' calls to a regional one call center for a locate request. Launched in 2007, the 811 Call Before You Dig system, supported by national advertising, has given underground damage prevention supporters an easy-to-remember tool to promote calls before digging.

The results of promoting one call systems nationwide have been phenomenal. The average number of underground damages dropped 58% between 2004 and 2009, from around 401,500 to about 170,000 a year. The promotion of 811 and digging safety continues to be prominent, with advertising and public relations efforts reaching people around the country.

One call centers: challenges for a changing industry

At the heart of these efforts is the one call center, the central conduit that receives hundreds of calls and Internet tickets each day and handles the issuing of locate requests to utility member companies throughout a state or region. These high-performing one call centers are duty-bound to a number of different stakeholders:

- They serve the facility operators to which they issue hundreds of thousands of tickets each year.
- They serve the state or regional board responsible for the funding of the one call operation. In many cases, this board is made up of representatives from the same utility companies receiving locate requests.
- They serve the caller, who may be a professional excavator or a homeowner/consumer.

With so many different "masters," one call centers face a great number of challenges, especially in light of the fact that standards and practices for the one call industry are continuing to take shape. Challenges and priorities for one call centers include:

Localized control over processes and practices. While voluntarily adhering to the best practices set forth by the CGA, one call centers must also provide unique, customized offerings to meet the particular needs of their region, including state law and local requirements and utility practices and processes.

Quality. Like call centers in other industries, one call centers must constantly balance efficiency (higher throughput and shorter resolution time) with quality. In the case of the one call industry, quality equates to both caller satisfaction and utility satisfaction — and for the latter, accuracy is the name of the game. Over-notification of locate requests to utilities is a common and costly problem for those utilities, which pay a small fee per ticket and also must fund the locate service for each request.

Cost-effectiveness. Running a one call center cost-efficiently is the No. 1 goal of most state boards. Many one call center administrators are constantly looking for ways to minimize labor costs, optimize infrastructure, keep facility and utility costs under control, and generally operate more efficiently. However, one call centers need to manage costs in a way that does not compromise quality, creating a constant tug-of-war for many operations.

Industry change. One call center best practices and regulations are continuously changing as the CGA continues to evolve industry guidelines and as state laws change. At the same time, two major trends are shaping a new future for the one call industry: the adoption of new technologies and a demographic change across all the industry stakeholders. From excavators, to the representatives at utilities and on state boards, many of the people who have been involved in the first decades of underground damage prevention are stepping aside to admit a younger generation. This new generation of stakeholders depends on technologies such as mobile devices and GPS, and they expect these technologies to support their damage prevention efforts.

The operational decision every one call center faces

Every state or regional one call center has to make the major decision about how to manage their call operations most effectively in order to overcome the challenges of control, cost, quality and adaptiveness to change. At some point in the life of many one call centers, the “big question” has arisen: do we become a non-profit organization and manage our one call center operations in-house, or do we partner with a vendor who can run the end-to-end operation for us?

The in-house versus outsource decision is not an easy one to make, and for many state boards and one call administrators, the decision comes down to control. In an industry where

processes are so rigorous and cost savings so important, the idea of paying a vendor and risk giving up control of quality and accuracy may seem formidable to some.

Yet there are many reasons why outsourcing a one call center operation may be advantageous to your state or regional one call center operation, especially with an experienced vendor that understands the need for a unique approach in each state or region.

Maintain a focus on quality and accuracy.

Do it fast and get it right — these are the demands on every one call center, and yet they sometimes seem to be at odds with one another. When they're managed in-house, one call centers have access to software vendors and industry best practices that promise to help them reconcile these dueling priorities, but once these assets are in place it can be difficult to make them continue to perform year after year.

An experienced one call full-service vendor can work closely with your operation to strike the right balance between speed and quality, introducing time-tested processes and technology that improve quality across an entire network of nationwide one call centers. A full-service vendor will:

- Constantly evaluate call quality, speed and performance and develop innovations and changes for ongoing improvement
- Employ processes such as call routing and load balancing as well as Internet ticket entry to increase call throughput and reduce answer time
- Implement and constantly upgrade and improve upon sophisticated software that provides real-time polygon-on-polygon mapping
- Hire and train call center representatives who are experienced in the one call industry and can expedite calls accurately
- Benchmark your one call center's performance against the performance of a national network of one call centers

Drive operational efficiency for overall cost savings.

Outsourcing may seem at first glance like the more expensive option, but the overall efficiency and cost savings that outsourced one call centers realize can save operations hundreds of thousands of dollars a year compared to the cost of self-managing a one call center. An

experienced full-service vendor can provide a number of advantages for reducing overall cost of ownership, including:

- Decentralized and distributed technology (e.g., the use of the Internet)
- Reduced reliance on proprietary software products
- Single point of contact for all service needs, with one singular goal of making all systems work together for maximum efficiency
- Expert handling of all day-to-day operational details — dealing with members, addressing and communicating issues, hiring and managing staff, managing facilities, troubleshooting technology, etc.
- Leveraging of economies of scale and fixed costs from the vendor's large network of one call centers

Share the strength and collective knowledge of a network of one call centers.

Self-managed one call centers look to a range of vendors for call management software, real estate, HR and other needs — but once those vendors finish their job, the one call center is on its own. When you partner with a full-service provider, however, you are never alone. You continuously benefit from the ongoing learning and innovations that the other one call centers in the network achieve. Access to the network allows your one call center to benefit from:

- Higher reliability and quality by leveraging resources across the network (such as with call load balancing, redundancy and call routing during outages and emergencies, etc.)
- Ability to network with other administrators and visit each other's one call centers to learn from their developments and processes
- Constant insight into industry trends and developing best practices

Ensure reliability of infrastructure, systems and processes.

A big storm or an unexpected power outage can be enough to bring your one call center to its knees. One call centers that manage their operations in-house face the very large challenge and cost of building out emergency backup systems — but even that might not be enough when the center goes dark, the phones go dead, and callers have no one to intercept their locate request.

A full-service vendor will partner with your one call center to develop true full redundancy and backup call routing that kicks in immediately as soon as there is an interruption in service. With a nationwide network of one call centers, the vendor can automate call routing to other state centers that have access to the same database of member polygons, creating a seamless experience for callers and preventing states from missing any dig request calls. Your vendor will also help you build out on-site disaster-proof systems — generators, backup servers with firewalls, and other infrastructure to protect your operations in the event of an emergency.

Benefit from experience and expertise.

If your team has been working in the one call industry for a long time, you are experts in the way things need to be done in your state or region. However, you may be limited in your view because of your geographic focus.

When outsourcing with an experienced full-service vendor, you benefit from boundless institutional knowledge and thinking that continues to evolve based on the vendor's work with dozens of centers and interactions with tens of thousands of facility operators and excavators every year. You can use this experience and knowledge to your advantage to develop strategies for better ways to serve your stakeholders.

Influence the development of technology that prepares you for the future.

Technology is overhauling the way the one call industry works, as well as the way it needs to interact with stakeholders to advance damage prevention efforts. Trying to manage this tidal wave of technology change alone can be overwhelming, especially for state board members and administrators who do not personally have a background in technology or an up-to-date understanding of its implications.

A full-service provider that knows the industry will have its finger on the pulse of technological change, working ahead of the curve to implement the software and provide the services that allow one call centers to best serve their members and callers. Over the past 10 years advances such as real-time mapping and communications software, Internet-based ticket entry, and ticket management software have been essential tools to helping one call centers perform at their maximum levels. Over the next 10 years, increased use of the web and mobile technologies will transform the one call industry's practices. One call centers partnering with

vendors who are already working on solutions to address these trends can position themselves to move into the future.

Maintain full control over your operations.

For many people, outsourcing may seem synonymous with giving up control — and especially in an industry where quality and cost-efficiency are so critical, the thought of surrendering control can seem foreboding.

However, one call centers that partner with the right full-service provider say that their vendor relationship is more of a collaboration than a true “outsourcing” model. A solid one call vendor will make a commitment to taking a customized approach to each state’s needs, listening carefully to what the one call center needs and providing support to attain the organization’s goals. A successful outsourcing relationship is one where the one call center’s administrators continue to be in control, while being able to trust a partner to handle the many details in order to help the center run more efficiently.

One Call Concepts: the right partner for full-service one call center operations

The key to feeling comfortable in outsourcing your one call center is the partnership you have with your call center service provider — and the confidence you have in their ability to support your operation in meeting its goals while addressing the needs of all stakeholders.

One Call Concepts is an outsourced provider with a solid track record of innovation, efficiency and cost-competitiveness. One Call Concepts has been a leader in innovation and best practices for one call centers for 30 years. Serving more than one-quarter of state and regional one call centers across the United States, One Call Concepts manages everything from end to end, tailoring solutions to state’s specific needs. We employ pioneering software, time-tested practices, a deeply experienced team, and a commitment to partnership and collaboration with the one call centers we serve. One Call Concepts saves one call centers and their members millions of dollars each year and advances rigorous quality standards to help one call centers satisfy all their stakeholders.

Learn more about how One Call Concepts can help you address the challenges you face as a one call center in an evolving industry. Visit us at www.occinc.com or call 410.712.0082.