

CENTRALISED CALL CENTRES

The start of a Ministries of Foreign Affairs' trend?





It is 11pm, a citizen travelling abroad for business has just been robbed of their passport and wallet and is now in a hospital receiving medical assistance. The citizen has difficulty communicating with the hospital due to a language barrier. They place a call to their nation's local embassy/consulate (mission) seeking assistance. Since the call is made outside of the mission's normal working hours the citizen is instructed to call the embassy's emergency phone line. The next thing that happens is all dependent on the manner in which a Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) chooses to deal with consular service requests outside normal working hours.

What we have observed is that an MFA typically has two manners of handling after-hours calls: through a dedicated local emergency phone number connected to a local duty officer or centralised, connected to a call centre.

Local Duty Officers

With a local solution, a post will rotate after-hours call handling responsibilities to staff members often known as "Duty Officers". Most often the duty officer will be given a cell phone that they must carry in the event of a call. A local solution enables many MFAs considerable benefits, such as fitting into a model of decentralized governance and the level of personal hands-on support and continuity of service for citizens especially at smaller missions is unparalleled. The person you deal with during mission office hours could very well be the same person you speak to if you have an emergency service request out-of-hours. This can provide a level of assurance and comfort to a citizen. Additionally the decision to use a duty officer based extended hours solution negates the need for a large centralised telephone system, office locations and rotating trained staff to be implemented at the headquarters level.

Conversely "quality of life" is sometimes seen as a concern for these staffers that are designated with the duty officer responsibilities especially during late hours and over national holidays taking them away from family members. Add to this that one single person can only handle a finite number of calls. Each call, being an emergency or simply information requests or inquiries, could produce the same after hours work effort for a duty officer. For MFAs there is also the matter of the inherent increased cost that comes with extended hours pay for duty officers.

Centralised Call Centre

For MFAs that have chosen to deploy a centralized call centre, whether via regional centres or globally; the decision more than likely materialized due to increased travel volume as well as a growing service level expectation on the part of those travelers. With an increase of global travelers the inherent level of consular service delivery requests increases. Locally-based personnel can sometimes become inundated not only during business hours but also when supporting after-hours calls. A centralised call centre alleviates the after-hours responsibility from local staff and also requires less staff on the whole to handle the same consular service requests, often thus becoming the more cost-effective solution.

Local staff still plays a pivotal role when handling after-hours consular service requests. Where call centres can aid local staff is in the triaging and prioritizing of the call to determine the level of importance and assessment of an emergency. The majority of calls received after hours are information requests that can be handled and resolved over the phone, without the involvement of a duty officer.

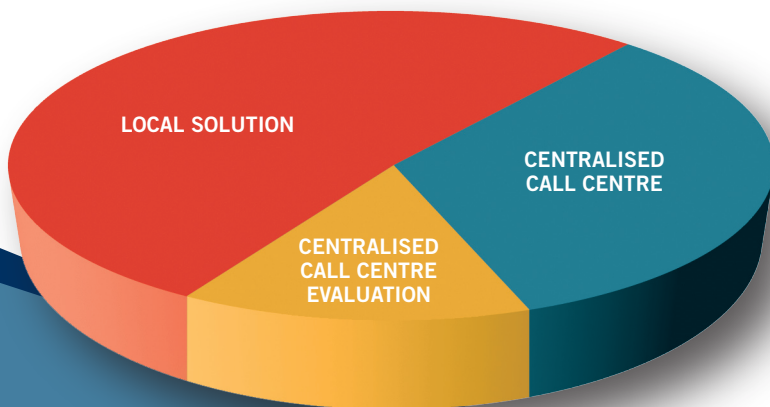
In order to properly realize the benefits that a call centre can deliver, an MFA needs to have some key elements in place. A case management system that can properly record all the case details, which can then be seamlessly shared with the local mission staff in a manner that allows for uniform service delivery across the MFA, is of critical importance. Depending on whether or not the operations call center will act on behalf of the entire MFA for after-hours requests; the MFA may have to develop procedures for a variety of situations that is not typically dealt with in the consular environment.

The Trend

With two proficient and viable options for addressing after hours emergency service requests from citizens, which method are MFAs using today?

We examined several European nations, which included a poll of selected embassies and consulates to determine how they were handling after-hours calls. By no means are we touting these results as a definitive answer to what exists globally amongst MFAs, our research is simply meant to act as a snapshot of what the European MFAs are currently doing through an examination of what is occurring in North America.

The results show us that the majority of these European nations are still relying upon a duty officer carrying an emergency cell phone after hours. Our research analysis also shows a possible emerging trend with regards to the adoption of centralized call centres.



Of the 24 European nations we spoke to the results breakdown as follows:

- Local Solution: Belgium, Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Switzerland
- Centralised Call Centre: Estonia, Finland, Luxembourg, UK, Netherlands, Denmark, Moldova
- Have indicated a level of interest in pursuing/examining the centralised call centre concept further: Poland, Spain, Norway, Sweden

What initially fueled the research interest in after-hours handling was a feature article in *Consularis* that WorldReach conducted with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, discussing Denmark's decision to adopt a centralised call centre.

With over 100 embassies or consulates generals and 450 honorary consulates worldwide and an increase in the number of Danish Citizens travelling resulting in an increase in strain on overseas embassy personnel, the Danish MFA decided a few years ago that a change was needed in the way they delivered consular services.

The Danish MFA came to the realization that a centralised call center with a minimal amount of staffing could provide the same and in some cases better services compared to the old model. An early visit to the well established Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) operations call center proved to be a great input to their initial planning.

The worldwide roll-out of their consular operations call center was introduced on a region-by-region basis at weekly intervals. It took approximately a year for the Danish center to be fully operational and for them to perfect their rotating work schedules.

Over two years into operating the 24/7 consular operations call center the Danish MFA is finding that the greatest supporters of the operations call center internally are the very same overseas personnel that were previously tasked with after-hours support who have now been tremendously relieved by this organizational setup.

On average the Danish MFA receives 100 calls per day; about 20% of those calls are after-hours calls routed directly to our call center at no cost to the caller. Experience shows that 97% of all after-hours calls can be resolved directly over the phone. In the majority of cases, comforting words and a listening consular officer enables the call center to handle the calls immediately or postpone the involvement of embassy staff until regular embassy office hours. In less than 3% of the cases, is the Danish MFA dealing with real emergencies that require immediate involvements by embassy staff.

Moldova Case

Source: United Nations Development Programme

Just this past December 2009, the Republic of Moldova launched their first call center on consular affairs. The call centre offers Moldovian citizens in-country or abroad with a new manner to have their consular service requests addressed. The call center launched within the Consular Affairs Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration extends the normal work-

ing hours of a Moldovan embassy or consulate abroad; offering 18 hours of support Monday to Thursday and 9 hours of support on Fridays from 08.00 - 17.00. The calls are toll free for those in-country and normal rates apply for those abroad. Outside these hours the MFA guides citizens to address their concerns via email.

The MFA cites the large diaspora of the Moldovan population as an impetus for change, “The massive citizens’ exodus imposed the Ministry to create a new service that would meet the citizens’ needs in obtaining timely and accurate information on consular affairs. During the discussions that I and the Prime Minister had with our diaspora in Belgium, Greece, Italy, a deficiency of communication between the state representatives and our citizens living abroad was identified. By launching the Center, we aim to come closer to the concerns and needs of our citizens”, declared Mr. Iurie Leanca, Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration at the inauguration of the Call Center.

The Call Center was created under the project “Building Institutional Capacity of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration” project, implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Moldova, with the financial support of the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA).

The future of extended hours call handling

We have observed through our research analysis that a change may be occurring as some Ministries of Foreign Affairs adopt or express interest in shifting some of the call handling responsibilities back to headquarters.

The recent Icelandic volcanic ash air traffic delays that have been experienced by much of Europe inadvertently created a greater focus on out-of-hours consular service requests. Stranded citizens looked to their Ministries of Foreign Affairs through their network of embassies and consulates to mitigate their concerns and personal plight caused by the delays. In an effort to assist stranded citizens some MFAs took the step of extending the operating hours of embassies and consulates. While the measure did allow local personnel to address more citizen concerns, it also begs the question, if a centralised call centre were in place, would that measure and increased onus on local staff be needed?

As the budget of MFAs continue to come under greater scrutiny as evidenced by the impact of the global economic downturn, MFAs will increasingly opt for more cost-effective solutions. A solution that saves an MFA money without jeopardizing quality of consular service delivery such as a centralised global call centre will no doubt be receiving increased interest, especially as the adoption rate amongst MFAs continues its growth.





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