

BPO Call Centres: Psychosocial Issues and Related Ethical Conundrums

İSDKK Çağrı Merkezleri: Psikososyal Sorunlar ve Bunlarla İlişkili Etik Muammalar

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Abstract: BPO is one of the fastest growing segments of the Information Technology Enabled Services industry in India. NASSCOM reported a faster than ever growth in the BPO industry in the country. Even as the industry grows at a breakneck pace over of 50 per cent per annum in terms of job creation, sucking in thousands of young, barely-educated workers from all over the country, it is spawning socio-psychological and ergonomic problems on an unprecedented scale. One obvious consequence was an excessive onset of consumerism. There are the complex issues of identity construction, as Indians navigate the tensions between their culture and the requirements of service provision for western customers, including practices such as locational masking, adopting pseudonyms and accent neutralization. There is also a nearly all pervading sense of shame and shyness in identifying themselves with Indian tradition and culture. Young folk, all of 18-19 aspire to get a BPO job. Truncating education at the Pre-university level is an option today. Sexual promiscuity is fast becoming a norm. The very nature of work has resulted in employee burnout and other stress-related disorders. Despite all this evidence, BPO administrations are averse to employing counselors on board to provide for support to distressed employees. The aim of this paper therefore is to bring into fore certain dilemmas faced by employees of BPO call centres in India and to identify adverse impacts of the work culture, which tend to result in a psychological disorientation in the short term and distress in the long run. This paper also advocates active and on-site psychosocial support systems to the employees of these concerns.

Key words: BPOs, psychological distress, call centres.

Özet: İş süreçlerinin bir kısmını dışarıdan sağlayarak yürütmeyi sağlayan İş Süreçleri Dış Kaynak Kullanımı (Business Process Outsourcing- BPO) endüstrisi, yarı eğitilmiş gençlere yeni iş alanları yaratmak ve binlerce genci bünyesine almak noktasında yıllık yüzde elli oranında oldukça büyük bir hızla büyümektedir. Ancak bu büyümenin yanı sıra önemli sosyo-psikolojik ve ergonomik sorunlar da doğurmaktadır. Bu sorunlardan en belirginini, aşırı tüketim alışkanlığıdır. Bunun yanında Hindistanlıların batılı müşterilere hizmet sağlamaları için gereken unsurlar ile kendi kültürleri arasındaki gerilimler bağlamında ortaya çıkan kimlik inşası sorunları da bulunmaktadır. Bu sorunlar içerisinde farklı durumlarda farklı kimliklere bürünmek, takma isimler kullanmak ve aksanlarını batılılara benzetmek sayılabilir. Bu çalışanların hemen hepsinde kendilerini Hindistanlı olarak tanımlamaktan kaçınma duygusu görülmekte ve kendi kültürlerinden utanmaktadırlar. Rastgele cinsel ilişki neredeyse bir norm hâline gelmiştir. Bu işin tabiatı tükenmişliğe ve stresle ilişkili diğer sorunlara yol açmaktadır. Bütün bu sorunlara rağmen BPO yöneticileri iş yerinde karşılaşılan sorunların çözümü için psikolojik danışman veya desteğe de sıcak bakmamaktadırlar. Bu çalışmada çağrı merkezlerinde dış kaynak kullanımı çerçevesinde istihdam edilen çalışanların karşı karşıya kaldıkları açmazlar özetlenmiş, bunların çalışma kültürüne etkileri belirlenmeye ve kısa ya da uzun vadede psikolojik uyum problemleri yaratabilecek nedenler tespit edilmeye çalışılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: BPO'lar, dış kaynak kullanımı, psikolojik sıkıntı, çağrı merkezleri, Hindistan.

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Introduction

Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) is the delegation of one or more IT-intensive business processes to an external provider that in turn owns, administers and manages the selected process based on defined and measurable performance criteria. Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) is one of the fastest growing segments of the Information Technology Enabled Services (ITES) industry (Sharma, 2004), further propelled by ongoing worldwide economic downturn, the drive to cut costs, and heralded by technological advances (Sankoorikal & Jonnalagadda, 2010).

NASSCOM reported a faster than ever growth in the BPO industry in India. An industry which was created to a large extent by the early moves of GE under the leadership of Jack Welch now sees globally listed firms like GENPACT, WNS and EXL clocking a few billion dollars in value and leading a pack of small medium and large firms whose employment may well overtake that of the much older IT services industry in the not so distant future (Natarajan, 2007).

While outsourcing has been extensively researched from a cost-efficiency based transactional perspective, it has rarely been considered from an ethical perspective (Chen, 2008; Gilley & Rasheed, 2000).

Even as the industry grows at a breakneck pace over of 50 per cent per annum in terms of job creation, sucking in thousands of young, barely-educated workers from all over the country, it is spawning social and ergonomic problems on an unprecedented scale. Stories abound of young BPO workers losing control over their lives and straying into drugs, crime, unfettered promiscuity, and eventual depression and severe suicidal tendencies. Sure, there have been workplace-related problems as long as there have been workplaces. What makes the BPO's case so alarming and pervasive is the unique nature of the industry. Never before have young workers run an entire industry almost on their own; never before has an entire generation of young, white-collar workers worked only in the night, often away from their small-town families; and never before has any industry pulled so many youngsters into a world of make-believe, glamour and relative affluence like BPO has.

More often, fresh graduates were recruited with salaries, comparatively higher than in any other industry for a non-professional degree. As attrition began and started to rise, under-graduates too were recruited. This resulted in a sudden transition from being a student to being employed with relatively higher purchasing power. Though the high packages and sophisticated work environment in BPO's succeeded to attract a large number of youngsters, they failed to sustain the pool. And the reasons behind it range

from physiological fatigue, psychological dissatisfaction to fear of an illusive future (Pillai, 2006).

The aim of this paper therefore is to bring into fore certain dilemmas faced by employees of BPO call centres in India and to identify adverse impacts of the work culture, which tend to result in a psychological disorientation in the short term and distress in the long run.

Excessive Consumerism

One obvious consequence was an excessive onset of consumerism. Moreover, credit cards were issued to the employees, which resulted in buying sprees beyond one's capacity to repay. Spending was mostly in terms of acquisition of electronic goods, mobile phones, clothes and accessories, fast food, and entertainment, especially forced and artificial acculturation to the "pub" culture. BPO towns are islands of early prosperity that stand out like sore thumbs in the Indian landscape.

Identity Crisis

In a bid to sound like the customers they serve, the call centre agents often assume a fake persona and put on a fake accent. As it turns out, switching between their real person and the fake persona isn't that simple. When a Natraj becomes a Natt, the association is not just with a temporary new identity, but somewhere it begins to seem that the real persona is less worthy. The put-on accents seem to tell you that this new persona is far more 'cool' and respectable. It is another form of mental slavery we're witnessing, but it is insidious and, therefore, far more sinister.

That's made worse by the nature of the job, which is monotonous, repetitive and heavily target-oriented. Often, the workers get only short breaks and must deal with indifferent or abusive customers. More importantly, there is little career progression. Not everyone who joins a call centre ends up becoming a team leader or moving into top management roles.

The nature of workplace engagement is unique, too. Most of the BPO workers ride to and from work together, work just a few feet away from each other, and sometimes also share apartments if they are staying away from their families. Because of all that, "their personal and professional lives tend to fuse since they spend so much time together and, of course, this leads to problems at the workplace.

Adoption of an Alien Culture and Negative Attitudes Towards One's Culture & Language

There are the complex issues of identity construction, as Indians navigate the tensions between their culture and the requirements of service provision for western customers, including practices such as locational masking, adopting pseudonyms and accent neutralization, which may result in racist abuse (d'Cruz & Noronha, 2006; Mirchandani, 2004a, 2004b; McMilan, 2006; Poster, 2007).

It will be naive to think that we are getting BPO jobs without 'importing culture' associated with it. Today their screen names are Joe, Tim and Jimmy which may be their real names tomorrow. A Krishna Murthy is Kim and Somnath is Sam. BPO space is completely western space.

There is also a nearly all pervading sense of shame and shyness in identifying themselves with Indian tradition and culture. Enter any BPO outfit. The English is accented. The dress is getting more and more accented as well. The BPO outfit in the country might as well be territorial outposts of the foreign land being serviced. BPO today is a sub-culture by itself and the young employees are increasingly coming to believe that their birth in India is an untimely quirk of fate.

BPO employees are expected to make appropriate changes to their accent, name and their personality so they are able to converse with a person sitting in Idaho, Texas or Boston. Some of the impact of this corporate sponsored multiple personality may now be manifesting itself at the work place.

Truncated Education

In India of yester years, the son and daughter of an educated man aspired to study. Education has always occupied prime status in the Indian home for boy and girl alike in urban areas, and certainly for the boy child in semi-urban clusters. Saraswathi, the patron goddess of education is a point of worship.

Today, things are a wee bit different. Young folk, all of 18-19 aspire to get a BPO job. Youngsters are keen to get going with the business of making their own money. Truncating education at the Pre-university level is an option today. The BPO provides an option to earn good money at a young age, even without the degrees in hand.

Young India thereby is going to get less and less educated. When the opportunity to earn without the requisite degrees in hand was not there, by default, education happened. Today, it will not. The BPO enterprise is a speci-

alist skill of low value. India is building an army of inadequately educated telephone operators. Till the business flows in, this is fine. If and when it stops, there will be an employment nightmare. There will be two million, single-skilled, highly accented and inadequately educated telephone operators used to an aberrantly high levels of income in this country.

Promiscuity

The majority of BPO workers are young, relatively inexperienced and immature, and when they suddenly find money and a lot of freedom-not to mention peer pressure-they often don't know how to handle this potent cocktail. Added to it is the situation of night-time work, the ennui of a boring job and the proximity of the two sexes in a 'happening' environment. In this context, sexual promiscuity is fast becoming a norm. The lines between love and lust are fast blurring. Cap it with the ever growing preference for pre-marital relationships, swinging, lesbianism and sexual promiscuity in the name of sexual liberation, and we have a recipe for cultural disaster brewing. The problem tends to be worse in the case of young workers who've come from smaller towns. They live in an unreal world that often borders on the undesirable.

Work Related Stress and Other Psychological Concerns

It has been widely reported that the very nature of work at BPOs has resulted in employee burnout and other stress-related disorders. The problem was compounded in countries such as India, where employees had to work in night shifts as these BPOs catered to overseas clients. Working continuously in such shifts, handling stressful transactions with clients, led to mental and physical exhaustion. In addition to workplace stress, the personal habits and undisciplined lifestyle of some employees further compounded their problems.

Since the outsourcing industry caters primarily to customers outside India, there's the issue of time zones. Most BPO workers work at night, and sleep during the day. Such a routine tends to upset the natural bio-rhythm. They get sick, irritable, and depressed. Because these people are living away from their homes and work night shifts, when chances of being 'found out' are low, they experience a disinhibition effect, which means the normal inhibi-

tions that prevent people from doing something that is not socially acceptable no longer operate.

A combination of factors including monotonous but stressful work, and good starting salary at an early age pushed some employees toward high risk behavior such as alcoholism, substance abuse and promiscuity. There were also reports of BPO employees getting involved in crimes.

The problem was exacerbated as a high percentage of BPO employees hailed from small towns and stayed away from their families. Some of them wanted to take full advantage of the newfound independence, while others succumbed to peer pressure as drinking, doing drugs and indulging in other high risk behaviors were considered 'cool' and glamorous.

There have also been several emerging reports that highlight a number of health, social and psychological problems which can seriously affect the predicted high growth rate for this sector in India (Budhwar, 2009). Things are further complicated by the concept of graveyard shifts to match working hours in the Western countries. These erratic long working hours make normal socialization difficult, leading to alienation, withdrawal and increased irritability. Psychologists note that many young individuals employed in BPOs are susceptible to burn-out stress syndrome (BOSS), symptoms of which include chronic fatigue, insomnia and alteration of the body's 24 – hour biological rhythm. In addition to this, disturbed sleep and prolonged working hours may lead to gastric ulcers, high blood pressure, diabetes or clinical depression. Other ailments ranging from hypertension and asthma to spondylitis are also reported as an outcome of working in BPOs. Another stressor for employees working in the BPO sector is the problem of racial abuse from irate customers. Indeed, one can say that the BPO workers face an array of problems on unsolicited sales calls from rudeness, sexual harassment and fury to open racism.

The scenario described above indicates therefore that despite apparent well-being, employees working in this context are disturbed by various psycho-social and work related stressors, reflecting in problems of psychological ill health. This clearly shows that the process of developing mental disorders and of maintaining mental health is profoundly shaped not only by biological and psychological factors but also by the work environment. Performance and work related strains are resulting in pressures being placed upon individuals that require them to cope with circumstances over which they have no direct control. As a consequence, it is probable that several of the psychological and emotional problems manifest themselves in a category of problems called common mental disorders.

Though the industry is contributing a great deal to the GDP of the nation, there are under researched people related issues which need to be urgently looked into as is evident from the issues discussed. Studies have shown that there is little concern the industry management shows towards healthy HR practices which enable quality work life (Rajeswara Rao & Bakkappa, (2009). BPO administrations are averse to employing counselors on board to provide for support to distressed employees. Human Resource Managers were observed to get defensive when mentioned the prospect of full-time counseling provision to their employees. Some BPO units even object to the conducting of surveys on HR practices, quality of work life and well-being of their employees. It seems as though an invisible but a non-permeable barrier exists between the BPO 'elite' and the outside world. There is thus strong and emerging evidence of the need for going beyond traditional HR practices. Ethical practices such as provision of Employee Assistance Programmes in these entities would translate into better employee retention, engagement and well-being. Companies need to develop guidelines in this area and need to increasingly look at how outsourcing affects the communities they are working in (Pratt, 2008).

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