

# QUALITY OF LIFE OF CALL CENTER EMPLOYEES IN INDIA

## *Changes Via Education*

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Keywords: Call Center, Training, Web.

Abstract: This paper reports on a qualitative study conducted in the summer of 2007 in Delhi, India where nearly 60 call center employees were interviewed in focus group settings to evaluate issues related to the quality of life of the workers. The findings suggest that a this scenario presents an opportunity to develop Web-based training tools for process and culture training of the workers to ensure that they remain with their job and improve the quality of the work experience. Based on the data collected, one of the key opportunities is to develop Web-based training tools that will allow for better acculturation of the employees.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on a specific and unique work environment that has minimal to no training for its employees. Yet the work environment requires training, and the workers are well accustomed to the Internet and the Web. The paper offers developers of Web-based training tools an opportunity to consider how tools could be developed to address the unique circumstances described here.

The advent of inexpensive and reliable Internet- and satellite-based telephone technology allows private enterprise in the US and Western Europe to transfer a significant part of their phone service operations to India and China (Davies, 2004; Kobayashi-Hillary, 2004). Nasscom estimates that by 2008, 1,000,000 will be employed in Indian call-centers (Varma & Sasikumar, 2004), and others estimate 2,830,000 by 2008 (Pathak, 2004). Reliable data on the number of call-center employees and Western entities using them are lacking, but back-office companies in India are currently estimated to export approximately \$3.6 billion worth of services annually. The people working in this industry often come with a basic high school diploma and are at a point where they have had minimal work experience or higher education. This study demonstrates that there is a significant need for education for this population of workers and several computer mediated systems can be used to help train the employees for a better quality of work and quality of life. To begin with, it is useful to consider the way

in which outsourcing has been the key motivator for the needs for training and educating the new class of workers.

## 2 BACKGROUND

Outsourcing has two significant outcomes. First, a new class of employees is developing in India. Some data suggest that typical Indian call-center employees are urban, evenly distributed between men and women, usually in their 20s, with annual salaries ranging from \$4000-\$6000 (Pathak, 2004; Naughton, 2006); 90% are college graduates or postgraduates (Naughton, 2006). They usually do not remain in the business very long; call-centers experience employee turnover at a rate of 75%-100% every year (Mann, Bindra, & Lister, 2004; Scheiber, 2004).

Second, given the need for real-time direct interaction, the workers' conditions must match those of customers, and they must have a cultural orientation similar to the customers'. Like people who have to move from one country to another to find employment, the technological diaspora produces a sense of displacement (Brazziel and Mannur, 2003; Sheffer, 2003) and other kinds of stress.

Western companies generally assume that customers feel more comfortable interacting with support personnel who are acculturated to the West. Strategies for workers, such as adopting a new name

or a different accent, remaining up-to-date with the customers' popular culture, and generally hiding their own nationality, are common (Dudley, 2004), yet evidence suggests that customers are still dissatisfied with foreign workers' service (McPhate, 2005). Systematic research exploring customers' perceptions is lacking, but workers report that customers can become hostile and abusive as soon as they realize that the service provider is foreign. In addition, because call-center work must respond to customer needs, hours are adjusted to suit customers. In India, most call-centers operate from late evening to early morning because of the 5-10 hour difference between India, Western Europe, and the United States (Joseph, 2002). Emerging research and media reports indicate that the odd hours, self-effacing acculturation strategies, subjection to customer abuse, and diasporic lifestyle have had characteristic consequences for call-center employees, but to date, no reliable, systematic data have been gathered or analyzed on this increasing practice. Eventually, these conditions all potentially bear on the quality of life of call-center workers.

Quality of life is a contested construct, and the heterogeneity of Indian society complicates developing a definition. Moreover, the unique conditions of call-center work also challenge the useful application of existing definitions, as demonstrated by a survey on the industry in North America (Batt, et al., 2003). Some researchers have focused on emotional exhaustion as a key factor in call-center workers' quality of life (e.g., Deery, et al., 2002). Media reports about call-center employees in India also address the emotional component, which, in the Indian scenario, is related to family, religion, language, gender, loss of indigenous culture, and the influence of the West on Indian culture. This project will base its definition of quality of life on these constructs and develop the focus-group protocol and the questionnaire on this definition.

While several studies have dealt with the economic impact (e.g., Grossman and Helpman, 2003; Hummel, et al. 1998) of call centers, few have sought to systematically measure and to understand their other impacts discussed earlier which is vital to making effective recommendations for worker well-being. To begin that process, the various components and extent of the problem must be measured by placing them within a conceptual framework that would have sufficient heuristic value to address some of the issues that are being faced by call center employees and could be faced in the future.

The conceptual framework of the study described here is derived by looking at the call-center work experience through the lens of diaspora studies. There are many important and striking similarities between the experiences of the traditionally diasporic and those working in call-centers. Typically, the diasporic condition has been considered to be a political, social and cultural issue and the scholarship has considered the diasporic condition from the perspectives of race, oppression, otherness and similar concerns. In the case of the call-center employees the research has focused on the issue from economic and psychiatric perspectives because a key component of diaspora – movement from one place to another – is absent in the case of the call-center workers. In this study it is argued that people now live in a technological environment where experiences that mimic the diasporic condition can be produced in the absence of physical movement. Assuming that a core component of the diasporic condition is the crisis related to culture where the individual has to be able to adopt a new culture either by completely relinquishing another or by striking a balance between two, it is surely possible that such situations can arise in the new spaces call-center workers dwell in. Eventually this condition leads to having to negotiate a new identity when experiencing electronic diaspora (e-diaspora). In the case of e-diaspora that identity negotiation is only temporary since the e-diasporic experience is not all encompassing. The e-diasporic experience is an incomplete process because the interaction, and all the cultural baggage of the interaction, is interrupted the moment the person is off the phone and has walked out from the Westernized environment of the call-center into the early morning streets of Bangalore. In some ways this results in the e-diasporic having to shape themselves and their environments in different ways so the duality of their existence can be managed. This is a much greater challenge for the e-diasporic because their lived experience remains very foreign from their e-diasporic work place. The very fact that their most busy time of work is at an unusual time poses some interesting challenges. For those who move from one country to another and thus experience the diasporic condition, the quality of life is related to the rhythm of life in the country they are in. For the call-center worker living in e-diaspora the experience is markedly different as noted here: "It is 10.45pm, and in the dark streets outside preparations are being made for Diwali, the Hindu festival of light, but EXL works to English rhythms and even

training sessions are conducted according to London time (Gentleman, 2005).” To these workers it is far important to be aware of events such as the American Super Bowl or the weather in Leeds to be able to do their job. In many ways their e-diasporic condition becomes more challenging because their real surroundings never change but every night they are virtually somewhere else and struggling to fit in. To be sure, this e-diasporic work center can have profound impacts on the call center worker.

A significant component of the e-diaspora experience is learning to become a person of another culture. In the case of the traditional diasporic experience, the learning component is achieved via an immersive process where the new comers become acculturated through engagement in the real life cultural practices of the host system. The learning opportunity through cultural engagement is completely absent in the case of the e-diaspora experience. In this case, the learning is obtained by computer mediated processes where the call center workers need to immerse themselves in a virtual space produced around the Web-based and similar discourses that result in the dissolution of real spaces by allowing the learner to engage with the practices of a new culture by a cybernetic process. In this process, the call center employee remains embedded in one real space while learning about another real space via the digital representation of the other space. This living in e-diaspora is significantly influenced by the amount of time spent by the workers in the cybernetic space defined via web-based interactions. Many of the acculturation processes, like learning about specific client sets, is accomplished by visiting Web sites about the client’s cultural milieu. However, there is little evidence that the web is being used in a significant way to manage the-diasporic identity which is primarily produced by a digital discursive manner. This creates an interesting set of impacts on the people being acculturated.

The impact is related to the fact that the successful operation of call-centers in India depends on the cultural competence and morale of the phone operators, who, in an e-diasporic condition, work outside their country, while living in it (Mitra, 2006a, 2006b, in press). Ongoing, systematic evaluation of the acculturation processes and the workers’ quality of life is urgently needed to formulate training and professional development opportunities to benefit them and to help call-centers operate efficiently. This leads to the following research questions:

1. What are the critical acculturation

2. processes that call-center employees experience?
2. What are the critical effects of acculturation strategies?
3. What methods can be developed to address these effects?

This study tackles some of the questions through a pilot project conducted in Delhi, India.

### 3 METHOD

The study was conducted as a series of focus group meetings in Delhi in the summer of 2007. An independent research organization based in Delhi was utilized to recruit focus group participants drawn from current and past employees of call centers in the Delhi area. The key criterion used in the selection process was that the participant had to have some degree of experience in working in call centers where the employee had direct contact with a Western customer. A total of 43 people participated in the four hour-long focus groups sessions. The participants were offered a small gift at the end of the meeting as well light snacks and transportation to and from the meeting places. The participants included people in the ages ranging from 18 to 41 and about equal number of men and women. The focus groups were moderated with a standard protocol that consisted of the following items:

- Elaboration of the specific training and acculturation methods used by call-centers to prepare phone operators for their work, especially name change, language modification, accent management, and immersion in digital discourses related to the client’s culture, etc.
- Probe the effects of working in call centers in terms of quality of life issues.
- Probe specific ways to resolve some of the tensions produced by acculturation and diasporic conditions.

The information gathered from the focus group meetings are reported here and the information from the focus groups was also used to conduct a questionnaire using a Web-based data collection method.

### 4 RESULTS

The focus group members indicated several different

methods that were utilized by the call center industry to train the employees to mimic the cultural attributes of the customers. These methods include:

- Pronunciation training to ensure that the call center employees would neutralize their heavy Indian accent into a more Standard English accent that would camouflage the ethnicity of the employee. These included details like training to “roll the r’s” so as to make sure the phonemes were correctly enunciated. In some cases the training would be provided by Westerners but in general the training was done by senior members of the call center. The members indicated that the training was not sufficient. The process was facilitated by directing the employees to listen to digital video sites providing language training as well as other Web-based resources that show how the client culture speaks.

- Names of the call center employees would be changed to Western-sounding names so that the customers would not be greeted with a non-familiar name.

- The employees would receive some amount of “cultural training” to familiarize them with the customs and practices of the customers, this would make extensive use of Web-based resources that provide background information of specific places.

- Call center employees would be encouraged to familiarize themselves with the popular media products of the West so that they would be aware of the key popular cultural practices of the customers much of which is available via digital video resources.

The participants also indicated that they spend a significant amount of their time “surfing the Web” when they are at work. This is related to the fact that they have greater access to fire tools required to be connected and utilize that fact.

Most of the participants agreed that there was a lack of sufficient training to acculturate them to the Western practices. At the same time, there was an expectation that the call center employees would be able to operate as “Westerners” when they were on the phone with the customer. One of the participants said, “You have to be a Westerner when working in the office.” The discussions suggested that those who are able to acculturate themselves better than others were often rewarded by the employers. There was also some concern that the call center employees were more concerned with maintaining their accent than ensuring that the customer’s specific questions were resolved.

The findings also suggest that working in call centers lead to a set of issues related to the everyday

life of the workers. There was general agreement that some of the main effects include:

- A sense of separation from the general social milieu because of the “graveyard shift” working hours which led to the need to rest during normal day-time socializing periods. Much of the eventual socialization was manufactured through instant messaging, social networking methods and other digital interaction tools.

- Development of a sense of community among call center employees because of the similarities in life-style with some of the relationships becoming romantic connections and some resulting in marriages. Here too the people used existing digital methods such as Facebook, MySpace and Orkut to create a sense of community.

- Concern over the negative representation of the call center job in the popular media with newspapers and television in India creating a negative image of the workers and the workplace. These impressions often take on a “viral” component with reports about the call center workers circulating in cyberspace.

- Behavioral problems particularly related to increased use of tobacco and alcohol. The job is perceived to be a “high stress” work based on the demands of acculturation as well as the fact that “target reaching” was one of the key metrics to measure performance. The employees feel a need to “release the stress” and often turn to substance abuse as a method of release.

- An increased “Westernization” of the people because of the need to be acculturated with the customers. One of the upshots of the Westernization was the increased material consumption among call center employees partly because of the increased economic affluence at a relatively young age.

- The call center employees felt that the job was offering them an opportunity to improve their communication skills which could be a valuable asset for future employment in other industries.

Overall, even though there were concerns about the job, the participants felt that the call center employment was providing a positive experience for them. This was related to the primary motivation for taking the job – earning a relatively large amount of money at a very young age. The average pay of the call center employee is considerably higher than what a person of similar age and qualifications would earn in other industries in India. At the same time, the increased access to money has also led to altered consumption patterns that are similar to what would be seen amongst the Western culture. The respondents indicated that the money they earned from their job was rarely used for saving for the

future or to support a family. Instead the money was spent in obtaining material goods ranging from electronic gadgets to motorcycles and cars, to designer clothes and accessories. The money was also used for entertainment and leisure activities such as going on trips, throwing expensive parties, and frequently eating at restaurants and drinking at pubs.

The participants in the focus group meetings also indicated that their work conditions could be improved by making some changes to the way in which the industry operated. These suggestions included:

- Allowing the workers to use their real names as opposed to the Westernized names. The name change was considered burdensome by many of the participants.

- Allowing the workers to speak in their own accent as long as the customer was able to understand them. Most participants felt that the ability to “speak naturally” would allow them to concentrate on the process issues related to their job without being preoccupied with maintaining an accent.

- Better regulation of the industry with greater assurances of security of employment, better benefits, and the availability of health insurance. These changes would attract more people to the industry and reduce the negative popular image of the industry.

## 5 DISCUSSION

The finding from this study indicate that a sub-culture of people is developing within India who feel disconnected from their actual place of dwelling because of the requirements of their place of work. On the other hand, these workers feel that they need education and training to become better workers to serve their clients better. The industry is increasingly relying on the use of digital tools, from the cell-phone based communication methods to digital representation of the client’s culture, to acculturate, educate and train the employees. These methods need better management and delivery so that the issues faced by the employees can be tackled more effectively to reduce the reported stress and quality of life issues faced by the workers. This is where the Web offers some significant opportunities.

As suggested earlier the call center employees are usually well connected to the Web. They spend a good amount of time on the Web and are technologically adept. They are also often employed

by corporations that have a high degree of technological competence. As the data from this study suggests, a primary need for call center employees is better training and education with specific foci as discovered in this study. Further exploration could be used to develop Web-based training tools that allow the employees to be better acculturated and be able to interact with other similar workers thus developing a Web-based learning community which not only assists the workers but also allows for the development of a social network for the e-diasporic.

Many of the issues pointed out by the participants are reminiscent of what migrant workers would experience as they went through the diasporic condition of living and working in a place that was not their own. There are numerous studies that show that the immigrant communities rely of Web-based tools to create a sense of community as well as use the Web to become acculturated to the new place. In the case of the call center employee the matter is complicated by the fact that there is no movement of the people and there is no immersion in the culture in which they work. The acculturation has to happen in a surrogate manner with the use of trainers and digital tools. Among those tools, The Web offers one of the best options because it can be used for immersive training where the worker can periodically obtain trains about the cultural they have to work in since such tracing is particularly critical for these employees. Simultaneously, the call center workers have to negotiate a dual identity where their everyday practices need to be balanced between the expectations of the culture of where they live and the culture where they work. Loss of this balance could result in harmful behavior which is evident in the increased incidence of substance abuse.

These issues need a more broad-based examination. As such, a questionnaire was developed to do Web-based data collection from a large cross-section of call center employees. That data obtained from the questionnaires would throw more light on the way in which there could be variations in perception and behavior based on demographic attributes of the call center employees. It is important to continue to collect that data to have a better sense of the quality of life of the employees and to develop specific training – both in real life and in virtual space - to ensure that the employees are better able to cope with their e-diasporic experience.

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