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Reconciling Dichotomous Demands: Telemarketing Agents in Bangalore and Mumbai, India

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Abstract

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Reconciling Dichotomous Demands:
Telemarketing Agents in Bangalore and Mumbai, India

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Though outsourcing has created enormous employment potential in India's information technology enabled services/business process outsourcing (ITES/BPO) sector, the implications for employees remain to be understood. The present paper describes employee experiences in telemarketing outbound call centers in Bangalore and Mumbai, India. Following van Manen's (1998) hermeneutic phenomenological approach, data were collected through unstructured conversational interviews with 18 telemarketing agents identified via snowball sampling and were subject to holistic and sententious thematic analyses. Reconciling dichotomous experiences at work was the label used to capture participants' core experiences and indicated that while participants' simultaneous positive and negative experiences contributed to a sense of concomitant stress and well-being, they employed various strategies to maintain a balance between positive experiences/well-being and negative experiences/stress. Key Words: Stress, Well-Being, Telemarketing, Call Centers, and India

A call centre can be defined as a work environment in which the main business is mediated by computer and telephone based technologies that enable efficient distribution of incoming calls (or allocation of outgoing calls) to available staff, and permit customer employee interaction to occur simultaneously with use of display screen equipment and the instant access to, and inputting of, information (McPhail, 2002). Call centers could be located in departments or as organizations, specifically dedicated to contacting clients and customers. Inbound call centers mainly respond to incoming calls and deal with questions/complaints/requests that customers may have whereas outbound call centers focus on contacts initiated by the organization; they are primarily for attempts to sell a product or a service (Dormann & Zijlstra, 2003).

Much of the literature on the call centre industry has emphasized factory-like division of labor and the existence of intense employee monitoring (Taylor & Bain, 1999; van den Broek, 2004). Jobs in call centers are seen as an expression of advanced Taylorism, being characterized as dead-end, with low complexity, low control, repetition, and routineness (Knights & McCabe, 1998; Taylor & Bain). Call centre agents are mouthpieces rather than brains who enjoy little autonomy (Knights & McCabe), falsifying the popular picture of an empowered worker within the new service sector (Taylor, 1998). Agents have to adhere to clear rules about how to interact with customers, both on the task level (with scripts on how to proceed) as well as on the interaction level (display rules to be positive and friendly) (Zapf, Isic, Bechtoldt, & Blau, 2003). Employers demand that employees deep act; actively work on and change their inner feelings to match the display required by the labor process in order to meet the perceived

expectation of external customers. Indeed, call centers are sites of contradictory tensions and structural paradoxes. The pressure for quantity versus the aspiration for quality imposes conflicting role requirements on agents. The challenge is of trying to get closer to the customer while routinizing, centralizing, reducing costs, prescribing standards, and meeting targets (Houlihan, 2000; Korczynski, 2002).

The notion of control is regarded as a significant factor within the call centre context, which is characterized by the seemingly all pervasive omnipresence of employee observation, using electronic monitoring and surveillance technology (Rose & Wright, 2005). Computer technology plays a critical part in this process; work can automatically be allocated to telephone operators to minimize waiting time, the speed of work and level of downtime can continuously be measured, and the quality of the interaction between the service provider and the customer can be assessed remotely and at management's discretion (Macdonald & Sirianni, 1996). Other forms of control include appraisals/performance reviews, which embrace target setting in terms of measurable (performance) and qualitative (customer interaction) facets of work as well as inculcation of cultural and informal norms (normative control) (Rose & Wright). Normative control facilitates internalized commitment, which ensures that employees accept management's measurement and monitoring procedures as being critical to the achievement of organizational and individual goals (Korczynski, 2002). While Fernie and Metcalf (1998) suggest that these forms of control amount to an exercise of power over virtually every aspect of employee behavior, resembling Foucault's (1975) panopticon, Kinnie, Hutchinson, and Purcell (2000) contend that tight control of and extensive measurement at the workplace need not necessarily produce a "satanic mill" if human resources practices are well-designed and are aligned with employee needs and customer expectations.

While organizations have benefited from call centers in terms of reducing the costs of existing functions, and extending and improving customer service facilities (Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2003), research on employee experiences of work in call centers demonstrates considerable diversity in their findings. On the one hand, there is evidence that some employees find this form of service work greatly rewarding, and enjoy the social interaction and peer support that can exist in many call centers (Frenkel, Korczynski, Shire, & Tam, 1999; Korczynski, 2002), while on the other hand, there are employees who consider the work to be stressful and exhausting due to its routinized and centralized nature (Korczynski, 2002).

The present paper attempts to further our understanding of employee experiences of work in telemarketing call centers in Bangalore, India (see Note 1). Through a hermeneutic phenomenological approach (van Manen, 1998), the study explores employees' subjective meanings of being employed as telemarketing agents. The adoption of such a research strategy allows for an inductive approach as well as for an appreciation of complexity and holism.

The Call Centre Industry in India

In India, call centers form part of the information technology enabled services (ITES)/ business process outsourcing (BPO) sector, which has emerged as the country's new sunshine sector (Babu, 2004). With companies around the world finding that they can cut a sizeable portion of their costs by moving their work to destinations such as

India, due to the availability of skilled, English speaking labor whose wages work out to a fraction of the wages paid in the home country, outsourcing serves as an easy, short-term fix to reduce losses/raise profits. The expansion of high speed telecommunication links across the world, the growth of internet-based communications, and the declining costs of computers and communications has also vastly aided the outsourcing trend (Chithelen, 2004). ITES/BPO firms in India handle a host of activities including responding to credit card enquiries, preparation of invoices, pay rolls, cheques, reconciliation of daily accounts, writing medical transcriptions, processing applications, billing, and collections (Babu, 2004).

In value terms, the share of ITES/BPO is small in India's domestic market (about 1.5% of the domestic information technology/IT market), but it has grown rapidly by about 4000% during 1997-2003. The share of ITES/BPO has risen rapidly in the total software and service export revenues in recent years, from about 14% in 1999-2000 to 24% in 2002-2003 (National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM) data cited by Basant & Rani, 2004). ITES-BPO exports have grown from US$ 6.3 billion in 2005-2006 to US$ 8.4 billion in 2006-2007 (NASSCOM, 2007). The NASSCOM data show that there has been a rapid rise in the employment in IT enabled services as well. It increased from about 42,000 to 160,000 during 1999-2003 (NASSCOM data cited by Basant & Rani). NASSCOM data show that the number of Indians working for this sector jumped to 553,000 in 2007, from 415,000 in 2006 (NASSCOM, 2007). According to NASSCOM estimates, average employment in ITES/BPO firms is 190, although it can range from as low as 4 to as many as 16,000. Future growth of employment in this segment is critically dependent on the infrastructure availability and costs, especially that of telecom infrastructure. Indian ITES/BPO operating costs on average are 20% of the US costs, but the telecom costs in India are 155% of the US costs (NASSCOM data cited by Basant & Rani, 2004).

The boom in ITES/BPO activities has prompted policy planners to view this sector as one of the potential avenues to absorb the growing mass of educated unemployed. Despite the growing attention on the employment potential of the booming sector, the conceptualization of its long-term implications and the understanding of its complexities, particularly from the point of view of employees and their experiences of the workplace, are still in a nascent stage. To bridge this gap, a qualitative study examining employee subjective experiences of work in inbound, outbound, and technical call centers, BPO organizations, and medical transcription firms was undertaken in Bangalore and Mumbai, India.

The authors, both social scientists employed in a business school, were the principal investigators of the study, and their involvement included conceptualizing the study, obtaining funding, identifying potential participants, conducting interviews, and analyzing data. Permission for the study was granted by the funding agency and by the authors' employers, after both groups had carefully read the study proposal and approved of the ethical principles to be followed including voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality.

As is discussed in the next section, the study followed van Manen's (1998) hermeneutic phenomenological approach. The analysis process highlighted that the core themes identified via holistic/sententious thematic analyses emerged in relation to particular groups/sub-groups with the larger sample such that each group/sub-group was

automatically differentiated by its own defining core theme. The present paper discusses the core theme of reconciling dichotomous experiences, which defined the telemarketing agents' group (telemarketing forms part of outbound call centers).

Methodology

Design

The present paper draws from a larger study with a focus on understanding subjective meanings and interpretations of work experiences of employees in the ITES/BPO sector in Mumbai and Bangalore, India. The mandate of the study deemed the adoption of phenomenology as its research strategy. Phenomenology derives from the Greek word "phenomenon," which means to show itself, to put into light, or to manifest something that can become visible in itself (Heidegger as cited in Ray, 1994) According to Bishop and Scudder (1991), "phenomenology attempts to disclose the essential meaning of human endeavors" (p. 5).

More specifically, the research question that directed the study was to grasp the essence of participants' work experiences as they were lived. This reflected van Manen's (1998) hermeneutic phenomenology, which studies the world as it is experienced pre-reflectively rather than as it is conceptualized, focusing on the structure of meaning of the experience for the individual, and hence this approach was adopted. Van Manen portrays the methodical structure of phenomenology as a dynamic interplay between six research activities. According to him, the researcher turns to a phenomenon which seriously interests him/her and commits him/her to this abiding concern. The single mindedness of purpose results in full thinking and deep questioning, so that we can understand life wholly. The experience is investigated as it is lived rather than as it is conceptualized. In other words, the attempt is to renew contact with the original experience and to become full of it. The researcher then reflects on the essential themes that characterize the phenomenon. A true reflection on lived experience is a thoughtful, reflective grasping of what it is that renders this experience special. The fourth activity is describing the experience and its essence through the art of writing and rewriting. Language and thought need to be applied to lived experience such that a precise depiction is made. In order to achieve all of this, the researcher needs to maintain a strong orientation to the fundamental question so as to maintain direction and to come out with valid findings. He/she also needs to balance the research context by considering parts and wholes, that is, one needs to constantly measure the overall design of the study against the significance that the parts must play in the total structure.

In keeping with van Manen (1998), the conversational interview was used to explore and gather experiential narrative material that would serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of the experience being studied. Though unstructured, the process was disciplined by focusing on the fundamental question that prompted the research. The interview thus centered around participants' experiences of work including what their work involved, their experiences at work in relation to the task/colleagues/organizational policies/organizational culture, their reactions to work, the reasons behind their choice of occupation, their long-term plans and options, and the reactions of their social networks to their work. The clarity of the research question did

not preclude exploring issues that emerged during the interview, since the researcher was aware that they could generate important insights into the phenomenon under study.

Process of Data Collection and Selection of Participants

As is the case in the phenomenological tradition, participants in the study should be people who have experienced the phenomenon. Accordingly, the researchers had to meet up with people employed by ITES/BPO organizations. The attempt to do so, via the employer organization, met with little success since most organizations expressed fears that their employees may share organization-specific data of a sensitive nature that would compromise the organization's competitive position. Not only did this limit the researchers' opportunity to observe call centre employees at work, but it also forced the researchers to rely on personal contacts and snowball sampling (See Note 2) as a means of including participants. Potential participants who were identified in this manner were contacted via the telephone. Once the researchers introduced themselves and explained to the participants how they had come to know of them and their contact details, the purpose of the phone call and the study were explained. Potential participant questions were answered, these questions essentially related to the purpose of the study and the length of time for the interview. If they agreed to participate, a convenient time and place were set up. Permission to record the interviews was sought, and since it was explained to participants that recording the interview helped to maintain the accuracy of their accounts as compared to compiling field notes where accuracy could be compromised due to faulty recall later, they agreed. All interviews were conducted in English and were later transcribed by the research assistant.

Eighteen telemarketing agents participated in the study. Of these, 12 were from Bangalore and 6 were from Mumbai. There were 12 men and 6 women. Their ages ranged from 19 to 43 years, and their experience in the ITES/BPO sector varied from 1.5 to 46 months. Nine participants were college/university graduates, three were in the process of completing their graduation, two were pursuing post-graduate degrees, one was a post-graduate, and three had completed high school. Participants' monthly salaries were in the range of Rupees (Rs.) 8000/- to Rs. 20000/- Three participants were married; the rest were single.
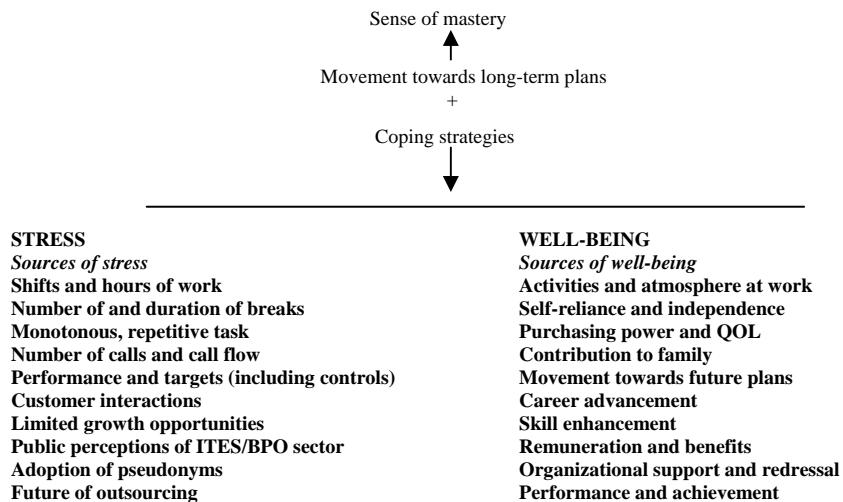
Data Analysis

The treatment and analysis of data followed van Manen (1998). That is, thematic analysis was employed to grasp and make explicit the structure of meaning of the lived experience. Themes were isolated using the sententious (where we attend to the text as a whole and capture its fundamental meaning) and selective (where we repeatedly read/listen to the text and examine the meaning of statements which are particularly revealing) approaches.

In following the sententious approach (van Manen, 1998), each transcript was read as a whole to capture the core/essential meaning of participants' experiences. That is, through a careful reading of the transcript, the fundamental meaning of the experience for the participant as emerging from the text as a whole was identified. A common theme could be observed across all participants. In other words, reading each participant's

transcript as a whole demonstrated that across transcripts, participants' essential experience had positive and negative aspects, which brought satisfaction and strain respectively, and that participants were trying to work out a balance between the two. Reconciling dichotomous experiences at work was the label used to capture participants' core experiences and indicated that while participants' simultaneous positive and negative experiences contributed to a sense of concomitant stress and well-being, they employed various strategies to maintain a balance between positive experiences/well-being and negative experiences/stress.

Following Miles and Huberman (1984), the researchers then developed causal networks for each transcript to depict the linkages between components of the core theme. Networks were developed at the ideographic level (i.e., at the level of the individual participant, focusing on particularities) and compared, and through the creation and use of uniform labels across networks, a nomothetic level (i.e., at the level of generalization across individual instances) was achieved across participants. This allowed for the creation of a conceptual map that illustrated the core theme (See Figure 1). Miles and Huberman's checklists were then used to list sources of stress and well-being (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Reconciling dichotomous experiences at work.

Sense of mastery

↑

Movement towards long-term plans

+

Coping strategies

↓

STRESS	WELL-BEING
Sources of stress	*Sources of well-being*
Shifts and hours of work	Activities and atmosphere at work
Number of and duration of breaks	Self-reliance and independence
Monotonous, repetitive task	Purchasing power and QOL
Number of calls and call flow	Contribution to family
Performance and targets (including controls)	Movement towards future plans
Customer interactions	Career advancement
Limited growth opportunities	Skill enhancement
Public perceptions of ITES/BPO sector	Remuneration and benefits
Adoption of pseudonyms	Organizational support and redressal
Future of outsourcing	Performance and achievement

A selective thematic analyses (van Manen, 1998) was undertaken through which categories/patterns/themes that contributed to the core theme were identified. That is, each transcript was read repeatedly and significant statements relating to and illustrating the various dimensions of the essential theme, were identified and demarcated. Labels were assigned to these categories/patterns/themes and later standardized across transcripts. Within each transcript, categories/patterns/themes were examined for their interlinkages. A comparison across transcripts was undertaken to highlight congruence in the patterns/categories/themes and their linkages across participants. Next, across transcripts, those categories/patterns/themes that dovetailed together in meaningful yet

distinct ways were developed into major themes. In this way, six major themes were highlighted. These included emerging opportunities and prospects, keeping up with workplace demands, accepting surveillance, challenges of customer interaction, being valued, and considering the future. Finally, the core theme and its constituent themes were joined into a text that captured participants' lived experience in its completeness. This is presented in the findings section.

For example, excerpts 1 and 2 below were seen as statements relevant to the core theme, containing categories/patterns/themes that related to and illustrated some of its dimensions.

> *Excerpt 1*
> We have to make 6-7 sales per shift. One day, during the initial days, I was not able to make any sale. I was very upset. That time, we can't take calls further. No sale is happening. But now, we are balanced – we go to the rest room, wash our face, have coffee and come back to work.

> *Excerpt 2*
> The shifts affect our health – no sleep, appetite goes, loss of weight, fatigue. But even if you are not well, you cannot go home…you can log off and sit in the cabin. Nowadays, we are working continuously for 6 days a week – only Sunday is off. The shift timings are extended to meet client requirements. The other day, I was so sick but they said I had to come. Anyway, on a shift, you do not even get a loo break. And food breaks…by the time you get the coupons, the break is over because it is so crowded so you have to just gobble your food.

Labels were assigned to these categories/patterns/themes. Excerpt 1 was given the following labels: number of sales per shift, disturbance arising from failure to meet sales target, changes in reactions to failure to meet sales target. Excerpt 2 was given the following labels: health problems, attendance and leave, and breaks.

In undertaking standardization of the labels across transcripts, the labels "number of sales per shift" was renamed "sales targets," "disturbance arising from failure to meet sales target" was renamed "reactions to not achieving sales targets," and "health problems" was renamed "effects on health". The other labels mentioned above were retained and used identically across transcripts.

Further examination of categories/patterns/themes within and across transcripts led to identifying interlinkages and congruence such that some categories/patterns/themes could be subsumed under other categories/patterns/themes that were more encompassing in scope. Thus, "attendance, leave, and breaks" were included under "work conditions," while "changes in reactions to failure to meet sales target" and "reactions to not achieving sales target" formed part of "reaction to performance" and "sales targets" came under "performance measures".

A closer examination of the above categories/patterns/themes, along with other related categories/patterns/themes, highlighted their interrelationship as the singular entity of "workplace demands" and this was developed into the major theme of "keeping up with workplace demands".

Methodological rigor during data analysis was maintained through consensual validation/peer debriefing. While immersion in the data during the process of analysis helped the researchers gain insight into participants' experiences, the researchers shared their analysis procedures and outcomes with academicians working in the area of qualitative research methods, who reviewed the researchers' methods, interpretations, and findings providing critical evaluations, suggestions, and feedback. The incorporation of their inputs strengthened the analysis. During data collection, the researchers gave particular importance to rapport building with the participants. It was opined that making the participants feel comfortable and establishing their trust would play a critical role in helping them to share their stories. During the course of the interview, the researchers used probes and cross-checks to better their understanding of participants' narratives.

Findings

The core theme of reconciling dichotomous experiences underscores the coexistence of positive and negative experiences at the workplace. Positive experiences, stemming from various aspects of work life (see Figure 1), were associated with personal growth, purpose in life, satisfaction and fulfillment, and positive self-concept, all of which are attributes of well-being (see Ryffs & Keyes, 1995). Negative experiences, whose antecedents are listed in Figure 1, were associated with distress and dissatisfaction, indicators of stress that participants sought to minimize. Inherent in these experiences of work was the attempt to balance positive and negative experiences such that the former was never overshadowed by the latter. Various forms of coping were relied upon to ensure that the balance was successfully maintained. The decision to continue with their jobs in this sector, in spite of stress, limited the problem-focused coping strategies that participants could rely upon. At the most, they tried to alter various unpleasant aspects of the work environment to enhance the conduciveness or to search for long-term alternatives in keeping with their long-term goals. Under such circumstances, their coping essentially centered around emotion-focused strategies including compartmentalization, rationalization, delayed gratification, suppression/blunting, social support, and involvement in leisure activities. Engaging in various forms of resistance also facilitated coping, though this was not without risk of being caught and perhaps even terminated. In this manner, participants sought mastery over their lives.

The six major themes, namely, emerging opportunities and prospects, keeping up with workplace demands, accepting surveillance, challenges of customer interaction, being valued and considering the future, that make up the core theme are presented below. Vignettes of participants' experiences in their own words are included in the presentation.

Emerging Opportunities and Prospects

Participant narratives made it clear that the contemporary outsourcing boom had altered India's job market significantly. That is, in return for fluent English and good communication skills, employees in this sector, particularly those working for overseas clients, receive attractive pay packages. Apart from the salary, various allowances such as food allowance and night shift allowance (for those working in the night shift) and

facilities such as gymnasium, library, transport, and medical/health services formed part of the package. Given the limited employment opportunities for those with a liberal arts/science degree as well as the poor returns at the entry level in many technical/professional fields, it is not surprising that the ITES/BPO sector is widely regarded as the most viable means currently available to achieving a decent quality of life. Those who had prior work experience in other sectors, which paid meagerly compared the returns received from both the sectors, highlighting in the process the reasons why the ITES/BPO sector was so much sought after in spite of the challenges it presented.

> This boom happening in call centers and BPOs…for a normal graduate, you can't get a job like this. What is this BPO doing? It's actually getting them jobs very easily. So repeating 10 lines a day, I will get paid 10000-12000 rupees - amazing, believe me, it is amazing. Because even a guy who works from morning to evening, say in a garment or textile shop, he wouldn't have been paid even more than 3000 rupees and he can't even live properly. Here you get a good income, plus allowances, transport, good office…So somewhere down the line, independence and self-sufficiency, a good life…

Participants emphasized the sense of independence and self-reliance that their income allowed them, demonstrating high self-esteem. Among them, those who were contributing to the family economy felt that they could do so effectively on account of the kind of package they were receiving. Being able to ease the family situation in this way was a source of pride for them. In addition, the age group of the majority of call center workers created a collegial and fun atmosphere at work, which was quite attractive to participants. Having a good social network within the organization was perceived as adding to the positive experience.

Participants' decision to enter this sector met with a host of reactions from members of their social networks. Parents tended to object to the night shifts on health grounds, and this was sometimes even in cases where the participant had been able to adjust to the timings. But apart from this concern, parents expressed happiness with participants' jobs. This was particularly so in instances where parents believed that their children were mature or were career-minded.

> My parents were not comfortable about the night aspect. I had to convince them that I would manage things. But I also told them my long term career plans – to do MBA (Master of Business Administration), then they said okay. One thing about my parents, they know what I am doing. They have full faith in me.

But while immediate family members responded positively, the larger social network was influenced by popularly held beliefs about work and life in call centers in India which paint an inaccurate, negative picture of fast money, extravagant spending, substance abuse, and sexual promiscuity.

Keeping Up with Workplace Demands

The attractive remuneration, however, did not come easily. Countering popular perceptions that call centers were all about fun and that work here lacked challenge, participants maintained that they had to work hard for what they earned. For telemarketing agents, the hallmark of competence was the ability to convert calls into sales. Being able to make sales was the most important indicator of performance and was closely monitored during the shift. Skill in talking to customers was underscored as critical. Given this, the affective reactions associated with meeting or not meeting targets were not surprising. Being able to convert calls into sales and to meet/surpass targets provided a tremendous sense of achievement and satisfaction. Failure to make sales, on the other hand, created depression and despair. And when participants were able to make sales after an unsuccessful spell, their relief was palpable.

> Once you give your numbers, your job is done. It is not a problem. Getting the sales is the most important thing and they keep track of it throughout the shift – if you don't get a sale, then people will come and stand behind you saying that you didn't get a sale. Every one hour or so they will call and ask how many sales you made. You feel different when you didn't make a sale. When others have made four sales and you made none, you feel odd. You feel very depressed. Because they will come and straight away compare, he is a normal person like you getting sale, then why can't you?

Meeting targets translated into incentives that added on to the salary, besides ensuring continuity with the organization. Apart from sales targets, the number of calls to be made in a shift and the average handling time per call are also fixed in some cases.

> You always have the pressure to make sales and achieve targets. The company makes it quite clear that if you do not perform, you will be marked down. And everyone knows that for one non-performer, there are five guys outside waiting to replace him. So you have to perform. Plus, you have to talk to the customer in a stipulated period of time – someone will be checking how long you are calling, so you cannot keep chatting. Targets are directly connected with performance and perks.

Due to the predictive dialer system (see Note 3), call flow was continuous and did not allow participants any breathers. In addition to the quantitative standards described above, quality parameters in terms of communication content and style on the call, nature of customer interaction, and maintenance of prescribed procedures called for constant attention to detail. Participants mentioned that they could deviate from prescribed scripts to persuade and convince customers to buy their products but even so, they had to guard against the use of slang and abusive language and against misleading the customer. While relying on improvisation, participants could not completely ignore the script during the call since customer agreement to purchase the product had to be recorded in prescribed terms.

Participants described the intensive training that they had undergone to prepare them for their jobs. The training which included voice, accent and communication skills, customer handling/emotional labor skills, process knowledge, orientation to customer culture, and tips on handling difficult situations culminated into mock practice sessions. Detailed feedback whose frequency was high during the initial days of moving on to the production floor aided learning and performance.

Working for overseas clients whose customers (see Note 4) were located in the US, Canada, the UK, or Australia meant that participants had to work in night shifts in order to respond to different time zones. There were participants who were able to adjust to night shifts after an initial period of discomfort. But there were others who found it difficult to manage night shifts, experiencing health problems such as loss of appetite, changes in body weight, chronic fatigue and drowsiness, decreasing vigilance, and irritability on account of disruption in eating, digestion, and sleeping patterns, as a result. Some of these opted for day shift jobs in the ITES/BPO sector, while others continued despite the adverse impacts.

Attendance at work and observing shift and break timings formed important requirements. Participants pointed out that though they were entitled to leave, prior planning well in advance was required to get the leave sanctioned. Being permitted to take leave at short notice, even during emergencies, was very difficult. In participants' views, this constraint was linked to the nature of agreement that the company had with the clients about the quantum of output, which also had implications for the duration of the shift and the length of the work week.

> The client gives our management the number of login hours, sales per target, number of authorized users – for everything, they give a target. What happens is, suppose somebody does not turn up, we have a shortage of people and are unable to meet that target, so we need to stretch our working hours to meet their target. The management may make it 6 days a week. There is pressure from the clients - suppose if we don't perform well, the process is just closed down and the contract is given to someone else who can handle things better. So because of this getting leave at short notice is difficult.

Shift and break timings were strictly maintained. Participants had to log in and log out at specified times. Breaks during a shift were limited to two 15 minute breaks and one 30 minute break, and participants were expected to log in and log out at the exact time allotted to them. Failure to adhere to these timings resulted in poor evaluations and warnings which, if they numbered more than three, led to termination. Participants mentioned how such strict observation of time meant that they could not log out of their systems or leave their seats even to go to the toilet (if it was an emergency, they had to seek permission from the team leader to do so). It also affected their food habits and nutrition intake in that if there were long queues in the cafeteria, they had to either eat fast/junk food (which was not considered to be nutritious or wholesome) or skip their meal/snack in order to log back in time.

Clearly, work conditions were stringent, but participants showed little hesitation in accepting them. In their view, their employers had created this context in accordance with the wishes of the client. Violating these conditions would work to the detriment of the organization (and in turn, their own detriment), since the client was likely to withdraw the project if specifications were not met. Adhering to the conditions ensured the survival of the organization and the continuity of their own positions. In participants' views, then, their own continuity in the job was not a source of anxiety as long as performance was maintained and rules were adhered to.

> Well, we are getting such a good package, such good facilities. Other jobs do not pay so well. The client has laid down these ground rules for targets, quality, monitoring and they have to be followed – if we do not follow them, there are n companies waiting to grab the contract. So finally, it is in our interests only. Our company has explained to us that they have to do what the client wants to keep the contract, so all these conditions have to be followed.

This, however, did not stop a few participants from devising their own methods to reduce the pressure. Extending the call wrap-up time during which relevant information from the phone conversation is keyed into the system, altering their position in the call distribution queue by pressing the release button on their phone and entering wrong customer email addresses into the system if the call did not proceed satisfactorily (so that feedback could not be obtained from the particular customer) were some of the ways in which a few participants got some breathing space. These participants admitted that resorting to such means was risky in that they could be warned, and even terminated, if they were caught.

A few participants also referred to smoking cigarettes as a means of reducing stress, though others were unclear as to whether smoking was resorted to as a stress buster or as compliance with peer pressure. Engagement in leisure activities/hobbies as well as interaction with members of the social support system or social network, whenever time permitted, were cited as means of reducing stress.

Accepting Surveillance

Organizations relied heavily on surveillance, most of which took on electronic forms. Thus, apart from security checks posted at entry and exit points of the production floor, which ensured that participants carried nothing into and took nothing from the production floor, closed circuit television cameras, call recording, call barging, tracking log in and log off timings and call duration, and unobtrusive viewing of the employees' computer screen were resorted to. These systems allowed participants' superiors to check on their technical and social performance standards either concurrently but remotely during a live call (also termed call barging) or in retrospect by pulling out recorded calls at random from the call management system. Participants accepted electronic surveillance not just as part of the job, but considered it to be instrumental in ensuring that the organization maintained its competitive advantage. Participants did not demonstrate any reservations about surveillance since they had been informed at the time

of accepting their appointments that it formed part of client specifications, and hence had to be adhered to for client retention. Thus, apart from an initial sense of self-consciousness, participants did not express inhibitions about their calls being recorded or barged or about having their team leaders sit next to them and shadow their calls live. In fact, some participants looked upon call barging and call recording as important means of getting feedback to improve their performance, which could then be translated into career growth.

Challenges of Customer Interaction

Working for overseas clients and customers raised issues such as the adoption of accents, the use of pseudonyms, and the disclosure of geographic location. Whereas during the initial phases of the outsourcing trend in India, agents compulsorily adopted the accent of the customer, took on a Western name, and claimed to be located in the customer's country; growing awareness about India as an outsourcing destination brought about changes in client requirements on these counts, as many clients no longer saw it necessary to withhold such information from their customers. Consequently, participants' experiences were quite varied here. Organizational policies allowed some participants to use their actual names and to disclose their location should the customer ask. Others took pseudonyms, but disclosed their location if asked. There were some who had to taken pseudonyms and maintained that they were in a foreign location.

Adoption of pseudonyms was accepted as part of the job. That is, participants stated that they had to take pseudonyms as a part of their job requirement and did not attach much importance to it. In their view, taking on a pseudonym helped them in handling the call more efficiently, as customers could relate to their names and call time (so important for their evaluation) was not wasted on spelling out or repeating their actual names to customers who, belonging to different cultures, could not comprehend them.

> When you say, "This is _____ (actual name), calling from ____ (client's name), the customer responds, "Who? Can you repeat your name?" or they may ask, "Are you an Indian?" So the topic moves on to something else – you have to make a sale in a time period. At the end of the day, we are calculating the target issues. So we have to be very quick on calls…so if I say that I am _____ (actual name) then they won't understand it and it will take time.

Participants who were required to claim that they were located overseas had the added responsibility of knowing enough about their location, particularly about the weather conditions, so that they could answer customer queries. While organizations ensured that employees were updated about local weather and local news, some participants did admit to uneasiness. According to them, since they could not anticipate all the questions customers could pose, it was possible that they may be at a loss at some point in time.

Under the circumstances, the adoption of an accent varied. While the group that claimed to be in a foreign geographic location compulsorily used the customers' accent in order to maintain congruence with their stated location, the adoption of the customers'

accent by those in the former groups depended on organizational policy. In instances where customer accents were not adopted, organizations took care to ensure that participants acquired neutral accents which did not betray any regional Indian accent. This was to ensure greater ease for customer comprehension. Participants considered the adoption and maintenance of an accent as a means to facilitating the conversation since the customer would be able to understand the content of the call more easily. "Even if the organization does not expect you to adopt an accent, you have to make yourself understood – so some adjustment (in the accent) takes place, otherwise you will not be able to connect with the customer."

Customer interaction entailed mixed experiences. For all participants, the significant benefits included the experience of taking calls, talking to strangers and convincing them over the phone to buy products, and interacting with people from other cultures, which broadened their skill-set and enhanced their self-esteem.

Irate customers were not uncommon, and participants supplied various reasons for their anger. While customers objected to being disturbed or had received numerous telemarketing calls on that particular day, there were instances when after customers were informed of the location of the participant, they would express ire over the outsourcing trend, holding participants responsible for the unemployment situation in their country. Participants had been trained to humor irate customers by listening to them and by apologizing to them (even if they were rude and abusive). Never once were they permitted to react to these customers, regardless of how they felt. Instead, they were trained to look at the situation "professionally," that is, to consider the customer's reaction to be the result of some extraneous circumstance not attributable to themselves, to look at the experience as a part of their job, and not to the take the conversation as directed personally towards them. Participants admitted to feeling upset during their first few irate calls, but by invoking the training that they had received, these feelings soon dissipated. It was not unusual for them to seek support from colleagues at these times. A few participants found their own ways of dealing with the situation, which they would resort to occasionally if they found it unbearable. That is, they would put the call on mute and curse the customer or they would invite those around them to listen to and jeer at the tirade.

> During training, you are told that you may get irate customers but since you are a professional you should not take it to heart – you are not going to see the person face-to-face, so there is nothing to be scared about…maybe the person is angry about something else and has taken it out on you. You are prepared for it from the beginning…and of course, you cannot react back, you just have to keep quiet and listen. Sometimes when people are a bit fed up, what they do is they put the person (customer) on mute and curse them back.

There were times when foreign customers refused to speak to Indians or to buy anything from them, displaying bias. Here too, the organization's training helped participants cope with any negative feelings they may have from the experience.

Descriptions of appreciative customers, who were excited to speak to Indians and/or who were grateful for the service extended, illustrated that positive interactions brought happiness and satisfaction to participants.

> You do get customers who are thrilled to speak to Indians – they say, "Oh, I love India, I want to visit India – I am so happy to speak to an Indian." Sometimes, they are so surprised that we can speak such good English. So you are left with a good feeling after the call.

The opportunity to speak to flirtatious customers formed part of the experience. These customers would attempt to engage the participant in a conversation unrelated to the purpose of the call. Being able to manage such customers effectively was important, so that the call duration and the ability to convert the call into a sale were not hampered, while the requisite courtesies were not violated.

Interestingly, participants reported mixed experiences about conversing with Indians based abroad. Whereas some members of this group behaved haughtily and made participants feel inferior because they were located in the home country, others were nostalgic about interacting with a fellow countryperson. As earlier, training provided participants with the direction of how such customers should be handled.

Being Valued

Participants detailed various instances to demonstrate that their employers valued them. Management of the organizations, recognizing the pressures that the agents faced, initiated various mechanisms to ease the stress. Maintaining a collegial atmosphere that matched the agents' age group was emphasized, and keeping that in mind, games, contests, special days, cultural festivals, and outings, which were believed would liven up the atmosphere at work, were organized. Formalized support in the form of counselors, nutritionists, and doctors, as well as the establishment of rest spaces, recreational areas, and sports, and reading facilities within the office premises, were appreciatively spoken about by many participants. Additionally, while performance standards were strictly maintained, some organizations displayed sensitivity to employees in that they would transfer an employee to a different process rather than summarily dismissing him/her, if they felt that the employee had potential even though he/she was finding the current process difficult.

Managements were described as being open to feedback, but the success of redressing problems to the management depended on the nature of the issue. Matters relating to targets, breaks, quality, and security were generally not negotiable since the survival of the organization depended on meeting client specifications on these counts. Participants maintained that they had been made aware of these matters at the time of recruitment and had made an informed choice when joining. They also agreed with the management's stand that certain issues could not be altered since they conformed to client specifications, which had to be accepted to retain the project. However, issues such as quality and variety of food, co-ordination of transportation, and other facilities were usually looked into.

Considering the Future

Notwithstanding the challenges, participants pointed out that their gains from their jobs went beyond just the receipt of monetary incomes and other benefits. The training received particularly in the area of communication skills, customer handling, and foreign culture was seen as contributing to personality development and self-confidence, and in turn, to long-term career advancement irrespective of industry or sector. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, performing the telemarketing task itself added on to their skill repertoire and sense of accomplishment. But the gains received could not obliterate the fact that performing the same task everyday caused monotony after a point of time, giving rise to a feeling of stagnation, and a need to look at the future.

Three factors appeared significant in participants' consideration of their long term options, namely, professional/technical qualification, night shifts, and growth possibilities. Those who, notwithstanding the gains, regretted moving from a technical/professional field to the call centre, looked at the possibility of returning back to the particular field, but only if they received returns on the same lines as what they were currently receiving. The opinion here was that this was possible if they improved their qualifications.

> I plan to join technical support (technical call centers) because I have an engineering background – earlier I did not know about this so I got into telemarketing because typical engineering jobs did not pay. But now I am also doing my MBA so I think I can do as well in a technical line as I am doing now.

Though shift timings and duration of the work week made a difference to participants' work-life balance, in that spending time with family and friends and managing personal tasks such as bank work, payment of bills, and so on was affected due to mismatch in timings, reconsidering continuity with the sector on this count was mentioned only by two groups. While women did not see 6 days per week, night shift call center work as a viable long term option on account of anticipated family responsibilities following marriage, those who found it difficult to adjust to night shifts explored the possibility of moving to day shift jobs within the same sector.

> Now I am working continuously for six days (in a week). Only on Sundays, I get an off. I live away from my (natal) family and because I just get one day to rest and to see to my house, I don't go to visit them. If we had to get two days off in the week, we could balance everything…I don't want to work in a call center after marriage because then you won't get time to spend with your family. Even if you want to spend time with them, you won't be able to because you will be exhausted and when you have time, you will want to rest. And how can you do that when you have a lot of commitments then?

Participants gave a high rating to career prospects in the call center industry, pointing out that it was possible to rise up faster in this sector as compared to other sectors. While moving up the organizational hierarchy was an important end in itself, it was also considered to be a means of eliminating the stress associated with having to take calls, since this was not included in the job description at higher levels. At the same time, there was severe competition for promotions since the number of employees at agent level completely outweighed the number of posts available for promotions and it was common for even high performers to remain at the agent level.

Pursuing further studies to ensure career prospects either in the ITES/BPO sector or in other sectors was spoken about by the participants. While some participants preferred to work and save for their studies at the present moment and later quit their jobs and focus exclusively on their education, others worked towards enhancing their qualifications alongside with their jobs. It was appreciated that employers were supportive of participants' attempts to study further. Support took on different forms such as sponsoring MBA (Master of Business Administration) education, having ties with MBA colleges, facilitating study leave for examinations, and examination preparation. But the challenge of work-life balance was felt more severely by those who were pursuing their studies along with their jobs. In their view, undergoing such strain was inescapable for them to improve their future prospects.

> It is difficult to study and work alongside but what really matters is the sleep that one gets. If I can get six hours of sleep in the day, then I can manage. Plus they (the employers) do give us holidays for exams – when we have exams for one week, we can take leave for 10 days. We just have to inform in advance.

Participants were divided in their opinions about the future of outsourcing in India. While some believed that the sector had a strong presence and was here to stay given the tenor of the global economy, others who predicted a downturn displayed no discomfort because they believed that the skills and experiences they had gained through the association with this sector, and through the pursuit of further education, would ensure their employability in other sectors.

Discussion

Telemarketing agents' experience of work is a complicated mix of stress, well-being, coping, and sense of mastery/control. The finding that a job is simultaneously demanding and rewarding is supported by the job demands-resources (JDR) model. Job demands refer to those physical, social, and organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological effort on the part of the employee, and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs. Job resources refer to those physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that either/or reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs, are functional in achieving work goals, and stimulate personal growth, learning, and development (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). Bakker et al. (2003) used the JDR model to examine how job demands and job resources are related to

absenteeism and turnover intentions among call center employees. Their study revealed two different processes at play. The first process involves energy depletion starting with high job demands such as work overload, changes in tasks, emotional demands, which lead to health problems, and consequently, to longer periods of absence. The second process is motivational in nature whereby call center employees who can draw upon job resources such as social support from colleagues, supervisory coaching, and performance feedback, feel more dedicated to their work and more committed to their organization, and consequently, are less inclined to leave the organization. Clearly, a dual process is operational, as the present study findings highlight. More importantly, the study findings underscore that instead of telemarketing work being an either-or phenomenon (that is, either stressful or satisfying), it combines both positive and negative elements. Through its inductive, phenomenological focus, the study has thus allowed for the recognition of the complexity of human experience rather than adopting a reductionist stand.

Undoubtedly, participation in the labor market is inextricably linked with instrumentality, but expectations of job seekers go beyond mere survival to the achievement of upward social and economic mobility. Jobs in India's ITES/BPO sector, particularly those catering to international clients, facilitate the realization of the latter objective through the remuneration, benefits, and facilities they offer without usually calling for highly specialized prior training. Not surprisingly, these jobs are much sought after as compared to other existing opportunities in the Indian job market whose returns are modest in spite of high investments in training and skill acquisition.

Equally, the receipt of such attractive packages breaks employee resistance, rendering them more amenable to organizational control. Participants' acceptance of workplace demands, customer interaction protocols, and surveillance, as being client specifications that organizations have to honor in exchange for competitive advantage, reflect the power of organizational, socialization, and corporatizing processes which translate into well-executed defence mechanisms such as rationalization, intellectualization, suppression, and compartmentalization. As Karreman and Alvesson (2004) state, it may seem hard to accept that people are so easily influenced that they quickly and seemingly whole-heartedly accept a specific belief system and tie their identities so strongly with corporate membership and career steps. But in Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail's (1994) view, when organizational members perceive the image of the company as positive and prestigious, they are more inclined to identification.

Karreman and Alvesson (2004) caution that while distinction between psychological and sociological dimensions of identification are important, social forces which reinforce the encouragement and monitoring of a particular identity orientation and positioning, are continuously in operation. In addition, because third party service providers are dependent on clients, there is immense pressure to comply with client specifications and ensuring that employees fall in line becomes an important priority (Mason, Button, Lankshear, & Coates, 2002).

As Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) point out, organizations take pains to establish a service culture through which they can control employee behavior, developing normative or clan control. Intensive efforts during the induction and training phases, ongoing socialization, and performance monitoring reinforce appropriate role performance. Through training, feedback, discussion, rituals, stories, myths, observation of models, the employee learns what is expected of him/her. Thus, technocratic and

socio-ideological control arrangements, and group orientations and expectations, provide strong pressures for people to adopt a social identity in a particular context, furthering Collinson's (2003) observation that organizations not only produce products and services but also people. Given this, it is understandable why participant narratives did not echo Collinson's observation that expecting call centre workers in India to convey the impression that they are English/American through the adoption of pseudonyms and accents amounts to denying sense of self and taking on a new identity. Instead, participants considered these strategies as means of facilitating effective and efficient performance. From a methodological standpoint, then, outsider views, no matter how objective and accurate, need not reflect the subjectivities of insiders.

The stringent controls, however, did not stop a few participants from devising ways of occasionally beating the system. Thus, contrary to Fernie and Metcalf's (1998) claim that control systems in the call centre exercise power over every aspect of employee behavior and have perfected supervision, the study findings are in consonance with Knights and McCabe's (1998) position that technology has merely changed the nature of control, rather than rendering it perfect. While management is achieving increased control in one way, they are losing it in another. Sturdy and Fineman (2001) have suggested that as of now, resistance among service workers is most likely to be covert, individual, and temporary. Although strike action is rare and unionism still somewhat embryonic in the outsourcing sector, employees do contest and challenge management decision-making, and resist unfair treatment and unacceptable customer behavior. Mulholland (2002), for example, has reported that call centre agents often challenge management's discourse about care, quality, and teamwork by subjecting it to derision. She argues that "making fun of a management style is a form of resistance" (p. 299). Call centre workers may also disregard the organization's scripted conversational rules. They may search for weaknesses in the organization's control systems and construct free spaces for themselves," which provide an amnesty from normal emotional labors" (Sturdy & Fineman, 2001, p. 146). In addition, they may deliberately redirect calls to other service operators, enter misleading activity codes into the system, or simply hang up on offensive customers (Knights & McCabe, 1998).

The authors found evidence in this study to support Rose and Wright's (2005) contention that call centre work is not entirely unskilled. The skills required, though fairly generic in nature, comprise computer skills, social skills including emotional labor, cognitive and communicative flexibility, sales skills, product knowledge, and endurance (Frenkel et al., 1999; Thompson & Callaghan, 2002; Tyler & Taylor, 2001). The performance of emotional labor forms an important component of participants' jobs. As Belt, Richardson, and Webster (1999) observe, call centre employees present the "personality of the firm to the customer over the telephone" (p. 18), and hence play a critical role in the management of customer relationships. The manner in which employees express their feelings towards customers can have an important effect on the perceived quality of that service transaction (Peccei & Rosenthal, 1997). It is clear, therefore, that call centre workers are not simply expected to execute their physical tasks competently and efficiently and to display knowledge of their organization's products, procedures, or practices. They are held accountable for their emotions. Employees are expected to display emotions that help create a desired "state of mind" in the customer (Deery & Kinnie, 2004). Explicit norms are conveyed during the training and induction

phases, and once on the job, workers' moods, facial expressions, words, and non-verbal vocal cues are subject to supervision (Leidner, 1996). The use of scripts has been described by Taylor and Bain (1999) as an attempt to structure the "speech of workers into a series of predictable, regulated and routinized queries and responses" (p. 109). In their interaction with customers, employees are often forced to express emotions they do not feel (such as being friendly or happy) or suppress emotions that they genuinely do feel (such as anger or frustration). Hochschild (1983) believes that in the long run, this can lead to feelings of inauthenticity and emotional dissonance and result in anxiety and burnout.

The manner in which participants were trained to handle irate customers is in keeping with Korczynski's (2003) observation that management knew how employees felt, but they expected them to put up with the abuse to keep business going. Thus, reacting negatively to irate customers would result in punishments for the employees. Management trained participants to rely on cognitive restructuring to cope. Employees were told that they could maintain their hold over their situation by the way in which they looked at the situation; they should remove themselves from the situation and not take the customer personally. Seeking support from each other created what Korczynski (2003) terms as communities of coping. But as Noon and Blyton (1997) caution, communities of coping serve as a curious mixture of consent and resistance to work. By helping staff to survive the tensions of their work, these communities preserve the social order of the workplace and reduce staff turnover, facilitating management requirements. But they can develop into strong informal subcultures that provide resistance and make workplace relations difficult for management to control.

While participants perceive organizational support and facilities as evidence that they are valued, it is possible that organizations have other reasons for providing the same. In Batt's (1999) view, since there is an association between the ways employees are managed and the performance of the organization,, organizations, through their training, evaluation, facilities, and environment, attempt to ensure employees' appropriate performance of emotional labor. Ashkanasy and Daus (2002) have noted that people "catch" or are "infected" (p. 79) by the feelings or emotions of others, a result that has become known as emotional contagion. Positive expressions of emotion by employees can create favorable impressions in customer's minds, while negative attitudes expressed by employees can similarly create unfavorable impressions. The way in which employees are managed will ultimately affect the service recipient. What employees experience at work will thus be passed onto the customer (Schneider & Bowen, 1993). By implication, therefore, call centre managers are shaping the experiences of their customers by the way in which they are managing the experiences of their employees.

The racist reactions of some customers to Indian call centre workers uncover a new dimension in the outsourcing space. Outsourcing has been celebrated by corporate bodies as a means of cutting costs and enhancing efficiency, while being welcomed by developing economies as sources of employment and revenue (Chithelen, 2004). But at a time when global integration and citizenship and lack of boundaries are promoted as watchwords for contemporary human existence, and issues such as diversity and human rights are widely discussed and perpetuated as hallmarks of civilization evolution, the maintenance of ethnic demarcations calls into question the success of the ongoing

discourse. The extent to which these reactions are linked to bias per se vis-à-vis to unemployment and job loss for customers in their home countries needs to be assessed.

Participants' accounts of having to juggle complex patterns of working hours with personal and family needs and obligations and with leisure activities find documentation in the literature. Hyman, Baldry, Scholarios, and Bunzel (2003) maintain that for call centre agents, work intrudes into their private space through exhaustion, sleeplessness, and its conscious omnipresence. Interestingly, even though call centre organizations recognized that improvements in work-life balance would improve staff retention, minimize absenteeism, and reduce stress (Call Centers, 2002), in practice, culture management has been used effectively to manipulate and blur the traditional boundaries that have typically divided work life and private life as a method of extending organizational control. There is a purposeful attempt to manipulate and control the boundaries between the inside and outside spaces of employment in a way which brings the outside space of consumption, leisure, and spiritual development onto the site of production, and pushing the inside sphere of corporate culture out into other aspects of employees' lives (Spicer & Fleming, 2004). This is often managed through emphasis on team structures that encourage and intensify self-control as attendance and active participation in team meetings and recreational events determined pay increase and promotions (van den Broek, 2004).

Participants' varied response to shifts lends credence to Costa's (2003) stand that tolerance to shift work is a complex phenomenon, related to several aspects dealing with both "external" conditions and "internal" factors. In Costa's research, 20% to 30% of workers do not like shift work and suffer from serious troubles, mainly due to circadian disruption and severe sleep problems that force them to quit. On the other hand, around 10% do not complain at all during their working life, as they are able to combine satisfactorily their personal attitudes and behaviors to the peculiar demands. However, the majority withstand it, showing different levels of (in)tolerance that can be more or less manifested at different times and with different severity. Various intervening variables, concerning both individual factors as well as working situations and social and familial conditions have been shown to influence adaptability to shift work. Such factors can have both negative and positive effects on an individual's tolerance, according to the different circumstances and ways of interaction. Individual chronobiological structure is of particular significance since desynchronization of circadian rhythms is considered one of the major causes of perturbation of human homeostasis, not only in short-term adjustment to inverted sleep-wake cycle, but also in long-term tolerance to irregular working hours.

Notwithstanding the submission to organizational controls, participants' coping with their experiences at work and their focus on their long-term plans gave them a sense of mastery over their lives. Similar to Rotter's (1966) concept of internal locus of control whereby people believe that they have substantial influence over their lives and that their actions influence particular outcomes, a sense of mastery is associated with greater well-being since the individual believes that he or she can direct situations/events that impact his or her life (Ruiz-Bueno, 2000). Surely, amidst the widespread criticism about call centers as manifestations of advanced Taylorism, for participants to experience a sense of mastery while dealing with job-related complexities and contradictions is an encouraging sign.

Looking ahead, it is apparent that though India's ITES/BPO sector is a relatively recent development, it is already characterized by great diversity, housing inbound/outbound/technical call centers, back office operations, and medical transcription agencies, operating via domestic and international firms. These organizations, which were initially located in the metropolises of Mumbai, Bangalore, Delhi, and Chennai, are now moving to other larger Indian cities such as Pune and Hyderabad as well as smaller cities such as Cochin and Nagpur. The employment opportunities presented by this sector are tremendous. Indeed, Indian policy makers and planners are capitalizing on this sector as a critical avenue to absorb the growing mass of educated unemployed. While acknowledging the contribution of this sector to the Indian economy in general and to employment in particular, attention to employee work experiences in a nascent industry as well as to the microlevel and macrolevel implications of these experiences is imperative to protect and promote employee interests, thereby indirectly facilitating the overall and holistic socioeconomic development of the country. While the present paper is a step in this direction, advancing our understanding of the work experiences of one group, namely, the telemarketing agents who work in outbound call centers, much more research is needed to understand the work experiences of other groups within this sector. Undoubtedly, the inclusion of managerial perspectives, along with agents' viewpoints, would complete the picture. Longitudinal studies and research comparing domestic and international firms as well as metropolitan, large and small, cities would uncover further nuances and complexities.

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Notes

1. Telemarketing call centers are outbound call centers where a product or service is to be sold through virtual mode. Such a job involves emotional labour and marketing skills, rendered complex by the absence of face to face interaction. In addition, performance in telemarketing jobs is measured essentially by the number of sales made in a specified time period, besides other parameters such as quality of interaction, length of time per call, and so on.

2. Snowball sampling is a method for forming a research sample by asking existing study participants to recruit future participants from among their social network (Neuman, 2000).

3. Predictive dialing technology is used in outbound call centers to telephone large pre-programmed lists of customers. It involves programming a database of customers into a computer which then 'telephones' them, via multiple dialing, in a predetermined order. If a number is engaged or rings a certain number of times without answer, the computer moves on to the next number. If a call is answered by the customer, the call is transferred automatically to a waiting agent. Producers of predictive dialing technologies claim productivity gains of up to 200% over conventional dialing, which would clearly contribute to work intensification for the agents using such technologies (Richardson & Marshall, 1999).

4. Clients are organization(s) with whom the ITES/BPO organization enters into a contract, for the purpose of providing service(s). Customers are clients' service recipients whom the contractee ITES/BPO organization's employees interact with to provide service(s).

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