



CALL CENTRE BLUES

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Thanks to globalization coupled with economic liberalization in India, we are living in a 24 hour work society. We can now access banks, credit cards, insurance companies and other service providers at any time of the day just over a phone call. The phone-in queries reach a call centre where a polite male or female voice answers and gives the required update, information or help. Call centres are spread across the world, the caller may never know to which country the call reached. India is one of the biggest beneficiaries of such outsourcing. The past 5-6 years has seen a boom in call centres in India. The reasons are not inexplicable. Unlike in the West, Indian call centres are 40-50% cheaper, Indian workers are available at a fraction of the cost, and above all they are younger, better educated, and computer literate. In addition, most of them speak fluent English. On the last count India has a distinct advantage over countries like China, Japan and Srilanka where need for knowledge of English is being increasingly felt and certain measures are being taken to meet this global demand in big away.

According to the NASSCOM (National Association of Software and Service Companies) report, the number of call centre employees increased from 10,000 in the year 2000 to more than ten times in 2004 and it is expected to increase manifold in the coming years. The industry's estimated turnover by 2008 is over Rs.200 billion. Call centres have opened flood gates of job opportunities, neutral English accent and willingness to work at night being the only prerequisite. Further, due to constant need for manpower many call centres recruit undergraduates as

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well, while for many other white collared, well paid jobs in our country still require a university degree. This has certainly ushered in hope and prosperity to our job starved youth but it has also brought in its wake a whole range of new-age physical, psychological and social problems.

Physical Consequences

Since most of the Indian call centres serve overseas clientele, the personnel invariably serve in night shifts working across time zones. They lose sleep at night; sleep thereafter in the day is hardly compensated. Through millions of years of evolution, humans have been programmed to be alert in the day and shut at night. This is regulated by an internal biological clock situated in the brain. Disrupting this cycle, results in various physical symptoms. It causes chronic fatigue and drowsiness which may result in lowered performance and accidents. Untimely intake of food and excessive dependence on fast food as is common in these work places give rise to digestive problems, constipation, ulcers, loss of appetite etc. Constant pressures at work that too at untimely hours can give rise to heart problems, diabetes and other stress related physical problems. It has also been found to affect their reproductive health. While in women, it may bring about irregular menstrual cycle and spontaneous abortions, in men it may result in lower sperm count. It has also been found to reduce sexual urge. Call centre employees have been found to suffer from most of these problems. Furthermore, what is intriguing is that research has shown that despite years in night job the body fails to adapt completely.

Call centre employees work in small cubicles which lacks proper ventilation, fresh air and adequate space to even stretch. They commonly suffer from head aches, irritations and eye strains caused by prolonged exposure to computer screen and back aches, and cramps resulting from long hours of sitting in one posture in a narrow space. They suffer from acoustic shocks due to constant use of head sets which might transmit sudden high frequency noise.

Psychological Consequences

Interacting with call centre employees and their team leaders from various call centres around Bangalore this author found that each employee in a call centre needs to attend to at least 250 to 300 calls a shift often dealing with difficult and abusive callers. Constant compulsion to be polite and attentive leads to frustration and internalized anger. Many employees have been seen banging their tables, gritting their teeth or clenching their fists in response which hardly does much as a stress buster. More often than not they continue in this mood even after work hours which have a spill-over effect on their family and friends. Persons with more

phone calls experience quantitative work overload and were found to smoke significantly more cigarettes an important stress indicator and a risk factor for CHD (Cooper & Payne, 1978).

Conversing in British or American accent and assuming a new name camouflage their identity. Thus, Seema becomes Susan and Ravi becomes Richard. Consequent dichotomy in on duty and off duty persona creates an identity crisis, which could have a long term impact on their self worth. Prolonged and intense stress in work places can cause burnout (Rice, 1999) which in turn can negatively affect self esteem (Rosse et al, 1991), performance and job satisfaction (Veinga, Spradley, 1981; Rice, 1992). All these make call centres virtual 'sweat shops'.

The prevailing sense of insecurity and exploitation is high. With high attrition rates, entry point qualification has been reduced. Today, one need not be a graduate to work in a call centre. While this is seen as boon by many it has only added to the woes. Once they join they find it almost impossible to quit and find alternative employment, for many of the other jobs in our country require graduation and the jobs they might find offer a much lower salary. On the other hand many of them get into debt traps. By virtue of their earning a fat salary at such a young age, finance companies vie with each other to loan them huge sums of money either for vehicles, house or other consumer durables. These youngsters find it difficult to resist these offers and land up paying large chunk of their salaries as monthly installments. Most of the call centre employees are in the age range of 20-30 years and single, without much domestic responsibilities. Therefore they succumb easily to expensive life style- designer clothes, branded accessories, eat outs, etc. which once one gets used to, it is difficult to give up. In any other job with similar qualification one may find it impossible to maintain such a lifestyle. This becomes another compelling reason for one to continue with the present job despite all odds.

Social Consequences

This is not all; their social life takes a beating since they sleep while the world is awake. Parties, discos, pubs, and shopping that their bulging wallets allow, might make them momentarily euphoric, but in the long run it leaves them disillusioned and lonely. In cases where both husband and wife are working, and one of the spouse is working in a call centre, the condition becomes much more grim. When one arrives from work the other might be either leaving for work or has already left. Their communication gets limited to calls over their phone lines, chits left at home for instructing the maid, grocer or the laundry.

Call centre jobs which has a recent entry in India is acknowledged as highly stressful by several research studies; however their impact is yet to be fully realized. But one thing is for sure; prolonged high stress will burnout these youngsters and force them to 'retire' much earlier than usual. Thus a few years down the line, we may find a whole lot of unhealthy 35 to 40 year old unemployable unemployed. This could pose serious psycho-social and economic challenges. It may force many into debt traps, disrupt marriages and relationships and incidence of depression and suicide may considerably increase. The organization will also bear the brunt of employee stress in terms of increased absenteeism, and turnover, low morale, lowered performance, lost man hour, cost of health services. The latent cost of stress related disorders have been put at \$ 150 billion annually in the US making stress costlier than accidents. Stress costs more than 105 of Gross National Product (GNP) in USA (Newstrom & Davis 1998).

Labour regulations must ensure healthy workspace, adequate rest pauses, shorter shifts and increased compensatory leave. The organizations need to adopt certain employee welfare measures like organizing periodic health check up, training in relaxation techniques and stress management. Although some of the organizations are undertaking some of these, they are sporadic and far between. What is required is a regular regimen. Experts in behaviour science need to be consulted, and in-house counselors are mandatory. There's no denying, call centres have come to stay. Companies must take such proactive measures in creating and maintaining a healthy work force lest they are accused of slave trading. Organizations too stand to gain in the long run by having a healthy and efficient work force.

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