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Working Lives

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5:58:30 PM

It is late evening. The sun has not yet set but the halogen streetlights are on, casting a warm yellow glow on the street. He is standing amidst the steady stream of well-dressed individuals entering and leaving the office building. The street is bustling with activity as official cabs roll in every couple of minutes bringing the agents to work. Young men and women hang around snack carts to grab that last bite before the shift begins. Workers in about ten multistoried, international call centers in the area are getting ready to go "live".

Joshua[2] is in a hurry. He stubs his half finished cigarette on the road and walks through the main gate. The entry way is partitioned in four sections – visitors, staff, agents and management. Two guard huts with four uniformed security personnel, thick wooden batons dangling around the waist on one side and walky-talkies in hand man the gates. Joshua staggers through the overcrowded agent's lane, signs in at the entry register, takes out the latest Nokia 3315 from the back pocket of his navy blue Levis, puts it on the silent mode, collects his access card and starts walking towards the building marked '1A'.

He breaks into a run putting the access card around his neck. Climbing the short steps to the foyer, he quickly dodges through the half open automatic glass door with attached motion sensors sweeping past the large sunflower with red, fuchsia and yellow petals – the insignia of the BPO[3].

"Hey Josh! You are late man!" blurts the receptionist, Divya, in half mocking seriousness. He looks at his watch. The time is twenty eight seconds past six. Joshua panics.

"I know! I am just there". He replies. His team was supposed to go live at six. Last time he was late by precisely thirty eight seconds from his log-in time.

He starts running without any pretense. Crossing the hall, shoving people aside, "Move people! Move!" He hurries along the long corridor, whizzing by the swanky interiors of waiting rooms and ultra modern classrooms. At the end of corridor, he turns right for the elevator. The elevator door is closed. He heads straight for the stairs. His seat is on the third floor.

He is panting as he crosses the last step. The light on the LIVE sign of the rooms on the right is on. Joshua looks at his watch. It is one minute and thirty-four seconds past six. With a sudden jerk, he surges ahead. His hall Delta is the last one on the right. He zooms past Alpha, Beta and Foxtrot, swipes the access card through the entrance and makes a dash to his seat through the neatly arranged rows upon rows of cubicles.

The air is dry and cool. White fluorescent lights make it difficult to gauge the time of the day. The hall is buzzing with activity. Agents are on air. Sitting on cushioned, straight-backed, molded plastic, swivel chairs. Staring at multiple web pages on their computer

screens. Speaking in British, Australian, South Asian Neutral, American accented English.

Some are smiling as they speak, possibly keeping in mind "the smile in the voice" mentioned in the training manual. Others are talking in grave mechanical tones. Each cubicle is pitching for a different product. Some are waxing eloquent about a debit card, while some are cajoling faulty credit card holders with dire consequences. The walls on the side are adorned with clocks ticking away along the time zones of various countries. Posters, product fliers and pop-up promotional materials are pasted up on the walls. Motivational statements and reminders like "Never Give up" and "Be Brief"[4] are stuck on at each cubicle. Each campaign is aligned across a specific time zone. As one corner of earth twirls to face the sun, the other is already hooked through a complex maze of optic fiber cables, ready to work for another day waking up through all night.

Joshua slides into his seat, gasping for air. Switches on the computer, puts his mobile in the drawer, keys in the password, puts the head-phone on and aligns the mike carefully at an angle from his mouth. He looks impatiently at his watch as the modem of his computer connects to the main server. It is two minutes and fifty-nine seconds past six.

"You are late Mister". Joshua looks up. It is his team leader, Anup. Joshua passes a meek smile. "We have to talk after this," Anup snarls. Giving an intimidating stare, he turns around to barge[5] on a call at a desk besides his. Suddenly Joshua hears the mechanical ringing of the phone in his ears. The screen of his computer shows an incoming call alert. Joshua takes his first call of the shift.

[Call begins]

Joshua: Welcome to The Banking Corporation. This is Joshua Love speaking. How may I help you?
Caller: Yaaa, can you please tell me about the minimum average quarterly balance on a current account in your bank.
Joshua: May I know whose on the line.
Caller: Yes, this is Mark Thompson.
Joshua: Would it be the minimum average quarterly balance of a current account, right Mark?
Mark: That's correct.
Joshua: It is ten thousand dollars for every three months.
Mark: Thanks!
Joshua: Thank you for calling The Banking Corporation. Is there any thing else that I may help you with?
Mark: No thanks.

[Call Ends]

Joshua goes through the same script over three hundred times in next eight hours.

Itinerant Workers

In last three years Joshua, has changed four call centers and has worked with pay scales ranging from Rs. 8000/- to Rs. 40,000/- a month[6]. He owns two credit cards with a credit limit of a couple of lakh Rupees. He is planning to buy a car through a loan. At twenty- three years of age he earns twice the amount his father, a manager at a printing press, does after 30 years of service.

Twenty five year old Neil Anderson's call center had announced a bonus of two dollars on every sale made. He was in the campaign of a major American consumer durables firm. The money was

good, almost Rs. 30,000 or five hundred and seventeen Euros a month, plus bonus. He said he had enjoyed his work in the beginning but in a few months boredom struck. Mouthing the same script and repeating the same lines again and again wore him down, so much so that he would often talk in his sleep, "Thank you for calling BNZ Barclays Corporation. Have a very good day, Sir".

For Gautam, at eighteen, once totally enamored by the call center industry it was a dream gone awry. He landed up with a domestic call center company for a local mobile telephony service provider. His makeshift office was situated in the basement of a busy crowded commercial office complex. The pick-up and drop consisted of an old Suzuki van rented on monthly basis, from a private owner. The office was air-cooled. His salary was Rs. 6,000 or one hundred and seven euros per month approximately. Within two months of joining this place he was thinking of changing the firm.

His job was to call up people and tell them about the latest schemes of the company. After some frustrating months at the job he increasingly disliked, Gautam began using his work hours for advise and consolation. He would often call up unsuspecting people and tell them about his condition and solicit their take on it. On a routine barging of calls by the Quality Control Analyst, he was caught and his contract was terminated immediately.

The shift

For a worker like Sarah, hailing from a small town, the charm of working in an office for a 'multi-national' company is an experience in itself. Cruising in a cab at 3:00 AM after a grueling night

shift[7], listening to old Bollywood melodies from a FM channel with a five-figure paycheck in her bag – was not a future she had not imagined for herself a year ago.

For Joshua too the future has been different and yet the same in many ways. Before joining the call center industry Joshua worked with a multinational Pizzas chain. For two years he acquired a hands on "extensive" experience in making pizza.

Preparing dough.

Just right.

Cutting vegetables.

08 by 24 mm.

Pizza ready.

Three minutes and twenty-eight seconds.

One working day:

Twelve to fourteen hours.

Monthly take home.

Forty-three dollars.

When eventually Joshua quit his job, his resume didn't mention anything about his skill and experience in making Pizza. The industry demanded fresh graduates with no work experience and he responded to that requirement by altering his resume.

He coaxed his former colleagues at the pizza chain to quit and join the call center 'line'. Many did join the industry through a

consultant agency, owned by Joshua's friend. For every agent employed by the call center, Joshua's consultant friend received a fee of Rs 5000/- from the BPO company.

The Skill

The BPO unit marked as an IT industry, initially attracted students and fresh graduates because of its low demands on professional skill. However, high attrition rates led to a slow but determined shift to other potential workers – from retired white-collar professionals to housewives. Today, it is not uncommon for PhD scholars, doctors, engineers and business management graduates to be working in call centers that need their requisite skill. The call center beckons anyone who is "eligible" and "available".

The call center industry was largely seen as a stopgap option: there are not too many people planning a career in the BPO industry as calling agents. Nicholas Kahn, twenty two, holds a mechanical engineering degree from a central university in Delhi, opted for a call center job, still considered "low end" by his elk "for the time being" till he found a more suitable one. Yet he was quick to point out the fact that he is not a mere 'caller' selling credit cards. His job was giving technical advice to customers and the company employed only engineers for this 'process'.

Largely being concentrated in the metros and big cities, the call center becomes the first choice in job options for younger migrants from smaller cities and towns. Recruitment drives by BPO companies in these places have yielded good results.

The Practice

The international call center industry, largely comprising of American and British firms demands that the worker be familiar with more knowledge outside the product specifications within a campaign. Sometimes it is the information on baseball scores, weather conditions and the take on latest Hollywood hit that had resulted in a successful sale.

Because of the tenuous relationship with the customer, it is important for an agent to have a vivid portrait of an ideal American sketched in her mind, making the soft skill training seemingly crucial.

A typical section on America goes something like this:

General attitudes: Americans tend to be frank and outspoken. They enjoy a good sense of humour including sarcasm.

Personal appearance: Appearance, in general is important to individual American. Americans emphasize cleanliness but may purposely wear tattered clothing to make a social or personal statement.

Dating and Marriage: Dating is the national past time.

Diet: It is difficult to name a national dish.

Business Practices: Business is done at lightning speed in comparison to many cultures.

Some interesting Facets of American Life:
Unlike India here in America, one has to keep to the right hand side of the road. And the driver's seat is on the left side of the car. The date is written as, MM/DD/YY i.e. Month/ Date/ Year.

Don't offer chewing gum or a breath freshener to others. It gives them a message that they have a bad breath. Your intention may not be that but it is easily mistaken.
Here pink color shirt is normally taken as a sign of 'Gay'.
Never, ever talk in your native language in the presence of Americans during a gathering. They don't like it.

The manual also serves as a pedagogic instruction booklet on methodologies regarding taking calls, dealing with customers, handling irate customers, managing time and problem solving or selling the product.

The Carrot and the Stick

Nicholas, who was recently fired, recounts anecdotes about "irate" customers who would scream, shout, holler and abuse on the phone.

Agents are imparted prior training to handle such situations but Nicholas was equally blunt and candid to his 'frank and outspoken' American callers, he would often abuse back in Hindi because, he says, it provides one with more satisfaction while the caller would not really understand anything.

He was often reprimanded for his misbehavior. On one such occasion at his second work place he had to lose his job because of his aggressive attitude.

On the other hand Sarah is often rewarded for staying calm under adverse situations and making sales while maintaining a lower handling time with the customers. Perks and bonus form a crucial part of a calling agent's "package". But often there is a catch – a

subtle attempt to guide the lifestyles of agents. Gift vouchers, for example are often tenable at select stores only, specializing in transnational durable products like televisions, DVD players, Swiss watches or computers.

The Trade-off

The life of a calling agent reflects the complex narrative of the call center industry in India. It is a life a dichotomous state of being. One of perpetual motion and stagnation. Of being Sarah Jane and Sangeeta Jaiswal.

An agent moves horizontally through the industry, in a random zig-zag manner on the floor, shifting between various campaigns, a loop between the work shifts, global on the job, her voice circulating many cities and continents on every shift. In sharp contrast is the restriction to physical movement within the cubicle, inside the halls through access doors, repeating and controlling her words and thoughts, the well-rehearsed script, the avoidable awkward 'dead air', the ticking clock, the race against time.

Coupled with prevalent notion of 'white collar' work, appellations like 'Customer Care Executives', flat organizational structures, promotion of informal forms of addressing superiors with their first names, make the imagination of a collective bargaining mass like a 'union', difficult.

The excessive surveillance of workers thorough barging of calls, installation of CCTV cameras, along the work floor and leisure spaces like canteens produces internalization of scrutiny, accelerates anxieties about work performance and behavior. It results in devising new sites of escape. Neil for example, would often use the

staircase landing and the toilet to extend his break by a few more minutes. At the same time thinking of strategies to keep his AHT[8] as low as possible.

For many who have migrated to bigger urban centers from smaller cities and towns, there is an increased dependency on colleagues to solve work pressure related problems. Very often, the call center is the only space where an agent feels at home. Colleagues, the only people one would know in the city. Neil who lived as a PG[9] would often hang around the call center long after his shift was over because there was nothing to go home to and 3am in the night was not an ideal time to wake up his landlord.

Practice, such as, of giving cash 'gifts' to agents who marry within the company hint at official approval to extend the work unit to being the only unit in an agent's life.

Odd work timings with long hours of commuting (most agents regularly commute three to four hours every night, in addition to eight to ten hours of work) usually results in reversals of circadian cycles leading to health ailments. An agent would be constantly contesting his fluctuating notion of self between assumed foreign identity – the alias over his native Indian identity. Insistence of team performance over individual results pushes for further dilution of self.

Subtle control is further exercised on eating or clothing preferences, choices with respect to mobile phones, bank accounts, automobiles or travel destinations. Malls and multiplexes would often be the intended space for leisure through "free" cinema tickets, luncheon or dinner vouchers, or coupons. The invention of rituals and cultural markers like rose day, jean day, ethnic wear day, hair style day in an industry that primarily functions at night

coupled with excessive attention paid to acquire the latest tag from the apparel world in a business that deals with auditory sensors only, can be thought of as an interesting phenomena. This understated normative directionality help manufacture intricate imageries of the notion of a call center agent and consequently produce contradictory practices to subvert this imagery.

The work contract varies from call center to call center. There is no standard basic wage across the industry. The agents gets anywhere between one tenth to four tenths of their salary as basic wage the rest is ballooned through an array of bonuses, gifts vouchers and benefits. Call centers also differ on providing provident funds, gratuity, medical, health, accidental insurance and loans. That depends primarily on its turnover, availability of the campaigns, agent strength and accessible surplus cash.

The call center industry in India is far from stable. As call centers adjust to structural uncertainties, flight of job, campaign termination and rescinded contracts, agents like Neil, Joshua, Sarah, Nicholas and Gautam are trying to steer their way through this precarity. Constantly plotting and re charting their routes. Continuously negotiating obstacles and subverting dead ends even as they journey on to an unknown uncertain future.

The above article emerges out of the research on Call Centers in Delhi that Iram Ghufran & Taha Mehmood did under the Independendant Fellowship programme of Sarai.

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[1]North Okhla Industrial Development Area, a ring town of Delhi

[2]The names of Agents and Business Process Outsourcing companies have been changed in order to protect their privacy. There are 160000 calling agents or executives, as they are called, employed by the Business Process Outsourcing industry in India. At the current rate of growth, the employment figures are estimated to grow to a million "agents" with a turnover of more the $17 billion by 2008.

[3] Business Process Outsourcing.

[4] 'Never Give up' usually seen in outbound call centers for agents making a sales pitch for credit cards, services etc. and 'Be Brief' refers to the Average Call Handling Time.

[5] In call center lingo barging refers to monitoring of calls by Team Leaders, Quality Control Analysts etc.

[6] Forty thousand Indian rupees correspond to approximately six hundred and eighty nine Euros a month. Joshua's income profile comes under high-income group individuals, who are often targeted by insurance companies, banks, financial houses like automobile or home loan providers etc. Lifestyle of a high-income individual may include owning a car, a multi-bedroom apartment, foreign tours/ vacations, a couple of mobile phones, computers, etc.

[7] A Supreme Court of India judgment allows women to work night shifts under the Factories act as reported in 'The Hindu' dated 28th March, 2005.

[8] Average Handling Time of a call. This could be anywhere between less than 30 seconds up to 17 minutes and more, depending on the 'process' and 'campaign'.

[9] Paying Guest