

Foreword

More people than ever before work in call centers. Worldwide, the call center industry providing inbound and outbound telecommunication services for companies and institutions is one of the fastest growing industries not alone in industrialized countries but also in developing countries which benefit from offshoring of call center operations to low-cost labor regions.

The public opinion about call centers is ambiguous. On the one hand call centers improve business-to-customer relations and provide jobs and career opportunities. On the other hand popular media and scientific literature have blamed call centers for their bad working conditions causing stress and stress-related diseases, exploitation, and high attrition rates. In the special case of India, which is one of the preferred destinations for offshoring call center operations, call center work has not only been criticized for the supposedly bad working conditions but also for morally corrupting India's culture and youth. Representatives of the Indian mainstream opinion criticize call center employees for their work in mixed gender environments even during night that stimulates immoral practices and fosters a Western orientation.

Yet, the validity of these critical assertions has rarely been investigated empirically. In addition, only a few studies have tried to analyze what the people working in call centers themselves think about these critical arguments. Using an elaborate mixed method design including participatory observations, conversations, and a quasi-experimental cross-sectional comparison of call center workers and employees working in other service sectors the author tested whether the societal criticisms in India really apply to call centers and their employees. This was accomplished by analyzing what the qualitative and psychometric data shows about call center workers' perceptions regarding working conditions and the criticisms. He also compares the stress levels, job characteristics, coping strategies, job expectations, and lifestyle characteristics of call center employees with other young Indians working in the service sector and sharing similar urban and educational backgrounds.

The major contribution of this research is that it systematically falsifies the popular assumption in India that the call center industry consists of stress-inducing sweatshops, which are full of immoral practices. Contrary to the societal criticisms, call center workers did not have significantly higher role stress levels than the other service sector employees. There were no significant differences on any of the job characteristics between the two sectors. It was also observed that people in the call center sector are more stressed by the interference from the family sphere into the work sphere than the other service sector employees. This result shows that it is not the work environment or lifestyle but rather the societal criticism and pressure to conform to Indian norms which call center employees are stressed about.

Because of their more Western oriented lifestyle and their openness to working in mixed gender environments, call center employees report being marginalized by the mainstream Indian community. Owing to the shift-based work cycle and constant pressure from the Indian society, a sense of reactance against cultural norms has developed among them, which has led male call center employees to form closely knit communities to enjoy themselves and relieve stress. Thus, call center employees can be considered virtual migrants who go through the whole process of migrating to a virtual foreign environment and returning to the home culture every day.

Using the example of work in call centers this book addresses the transfer of Western work methods to a specific non-Western cultural context. It encourages scholars as well as practitioners to critically assess the upside and downside of a cross-national standardization of work practices.

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Torsten M. Kühlmann

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