

Call Center Employees: Is Work Life Stress a Challenge

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Abstract

The Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector is one of the fastest growing sectors in the global scenario. The sector is showing a remarkable growth in the Indian context also. It is performing a number of activities relating to customer interaction and service. Some of them are involved in pure back office work and some others are directly dealing with the customers. Call center is a voice based part of BPO organization. The BPO sector is developing the young generation not only by providing employment opportunities but also by building confidence in them. Indian BPO companies are paying great attention in inducting and training the employees. But most of the employees are youngsters and they are facing a lot of problems. They are working on continuous night shifts, which affect their biological balance. Apart from this, excessive work loads, unreachable targets and pressurizing customers are creating stress among the employees. This ultimately results in physical, psychological and behavioural deviations among them, which not only affects the employees and the organization, but, the country on the whole. This paper aims to identify the problems in the sector and the nature of the stress created by such problems. First hand information regarding the problems, the sources of stress and the experience on stress situations is collected from a project leader who has five years of experience. A questionnaire is circulated to measure the stress level of employees. It also identifies the various stressors prevailing among the employees. The impact of job satisfaction, feed back, working conditions, work family balance and workload in creating stress among the employees are analyzed. Some strategies for coping up with stress are also suggested.

Keywords: Stress, Call center, Stressors, Coping strategies

Introduction

The Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector is one of the fastest growing sectors in the global scenario. When a company concentrates on the core business and out sources its non-core activities like payment services, customer services and administration, then it is referred as Business Process Outsourcing (BPO). A call center can be identified as the voice based part

of BPO organization. The new mantra for job opportunities among young population is "call center". A call center is nothing but a voice-based customer service. Call center is defined as any communications platform from which firms deliver services to customers via remote real-time contact. From the recent past, call centers have started performing a number of activities including e-mail response and customer interaction services. A call center provides all these services to the local as well as the international customers through a wide telecom, web and database network (Ghazi, 2006). Human resources play a vital role in the successful functioning of these organizations. Their prime duty is to provide the customers with the needed information. So organizations recruit them with great care and spend a lot in training them also. But the news in the magazines and newspapers depict that the call center employees are facing a lot of problems like excessive workload, unreachable targets, and pressurizing and abusive customers. Above all, continuous night shifts create biological imbalance in them and finally makes them stressful. So stress is an important problem encountered by the call center employees.

In a study on work related problems across 26 occupations, six occupations were identified as having worse than average scores on three factors namely physical and psychological well being and job satisfaction. The occupations include ambulance workers, teachers, social services, customer services-call centers, prison officers and police. The respondents of these occupations were having low levels of job satisfaction and most stressed regarding physical and psychological well being (Sheena, 2005). These results are confirmed by another study which says that, even the BPO cabbies are under stress. It also states that, after senior level employees and agents, it is the turn of BPO cabbies to take the stress-busting sessions (Harsimran, 2007). The statement clearly shows that the employees of BPO sector are experiencing stress. The problem is very crucial and needs attention because most of the employees in the sector are youngsters. In other words, it is entirely run by youngsters. Ultimately it creates physical, psychological and behavioural deviations among them. It not only affects the individuals and the industry but the country on the whole. The tamil daily Dinamalar (2004) states that Burn Out Stress Syndrome (BOSS) affects young people in the computer field. It occurs due to increased depression which affects the well being of the individual. BOSS generally affects those working in call centers, BPO offices and those working on continuous night shifts. As these employees have to sit continuously for eight hours, they get back pain which is the primary symptom of BOSS. The other symptoms of BOSS are tiredness due to loss of sleep and results in mental depression followed by problems in respiratory system, digestive system and ultimately affects the biological clock. So it becomes necessary to act according to the biological clock to

make the body parts and organs function effectively. BOSS is a popular phenomenon mentioned by Pestonjee. It can be defined as the consequence of high levels of job stress, personal frustration and inadequate coping skills. BOSS can lead to at least four types of stress-related consequences, such as depletion of energy reserves, lowered resistance to illness, increased dissatisfaction and pessimism, increased absenteeism and inefficiency at work (Satish, 2005). This paper aims to identify the problems prevailing in the call centers, the nature of stress created by such problems and the various stressors. Some strategies to cope up with stress are also suggested.

Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to identify the problems of employees in call centers. It also aims to identify the stress level of employees and the resulting behavioural deviations of the employees. An attempt is made to identify various stressors which influence such stress among them. It also aims to identify the impact of job satisfaction, job clarity, job feedback and workload on stress.

Method

Primary data were collected from a Project Leader who has five years of experience in call center. He entered the sector as an executive. After gaining an experience of two years he became the team leader. He continued in the same position for a period of three years and got elevated as Project Leader. At present he is leading a team of fifteen members comprising seven male and eight female executives. Primary data were also collected through a questionnaire which measures the stress level of employees and identifies the various stressors. The questionnaire was circulated and responses were collected from 100 employees. Demographic details like age, gender, marital status and experience were also obtained. Secondary data about the current functioning of call centers, the prospects and problems prevailing in the industry were also collected. In the job stressor questionnaire, some questions were positive and others were negative. The questionnaire has a three point scale (not at all true, somewhat true, and completely true). The positive items were reverse scored. Low score on each item indicated low stress and high score indicated high stress. The average score of all the questions for each respondent was calculated and it indicated the job stress. This score was recoded as low job stress (indicated by the average score of 1.00 to 1.50), medium job stress (1.51 to 2.00), or high job stress (2.01 to 3.00).

Everyday Routine of a Call Center

According to the project leader, the call centers are open for 24 hours on all

the 365 days. They generally engage the employees in shifts. The time duration of each shift is eight hours. The company usually arranges transport facilities for the employees to reach the office and back home. The organizations take great care in recruiting the right persons for the job. They also pay special attention in training the employees for the job especially in English accent, which may be American or Australian, accent. He also confirmed that the change of the name of employees as prevailing in the industry. Thus the call center employees have dual names, one original and the other, the organizational name. The employees are continuously monitored on the job. They are also monitored for the number of calls and the time duration of each call. The feedback is collected from every customer in specific format. The employees are given short breaks in between.

Prospects in Call Centers

The project leader is proud to express that call centers provide plenty of employment opportunities especially for the youth. The minimum educational qualification required is UG degree. Above all, the prime need is fluency in English and the ability to communicate. The starting salary for a fresher in the industry is higher compared to other sectors. Many organizations lay importance for the induction programs and treat employees ahead of the customers. The working environment in international call centers is better than the domestic ones. Most of the companies arrange transportation facilities for their employees. They are also provided separate but small cubicles. The companies also provide good canteen facilities. In spite of all these prospects, the problems are comparatively more.

Pressurizing Problems

The project leader opined that call centers have many unique characteristics. Majority of the employees are young and relatively inexperienced. They are provided with lots of money and freedom. The industry is entirely managed by young workers. Most of them work continuously on night shifts. They work during the night and sleep during the day. This shift from the normal routine affects the biological balance. So the employees are prone to sickness, irritable and depressed moods. This behaviour is aggravated further by the nature of the job. The jobs are monotonous, repetitive and heavily target oriented in nature. They have to deal with a lot of abusive and indifferent customers. The feedback collected from the customers has a great impact on the progress and prospect of the employees. Another pressurizing problem is that appreciating or satisfactory feedbacks are rarely exhibited. On the other hand, feedbacks carrying critical comments are displayed on the notice boards. Also, there is a less scope for moving up in the value chain. The Chairman and Managing Director of a BPO, Raman Roy opined that alcohol

dependence, smoking, sexual promiscuity and burnout are some of the common traits of some technologically brilliant, emotionally unintelligent or not so intelligent people. An important dimension of strategies used to cope with stress in work setting is smoking and independent problem solving. It reflects the situation where the person takes recourse to heavy smoking and avoids support from others (Shailendra and Arvind, 1984). A study by Wipro BPO identified that odd work timings, monotonous job, split personality, performance targets, cultural clash and career growth as the pressure points of call center employees (Pallavi, 2007).

Profile of the Respondents

The distribution of employees based on age, gender, marital status and experience are given in the following Tables (Table 1,2,3 and 4).

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents based on Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Female	23	23.0
Male	77	77.0
Total	100	100.0

Table 2: Distribution of Respondents based on Age

Age	Frequency	Percent
20-25 years	79	79.0
26-30	21	21.0
Total	100	100.0

Table 3: Distribution of Respondents based on Marital Status

Marital Status	Frequency	Percent
Married	39	39.0
Unmarried	61	61.0
Total	100	100.0

Table 4: Distribution of Respondents based on Experience

Experience	Frequency	Percent
Less than 2 years	27	27.0
2-4 years	29	29.0
4-6 years	29	29.0
6 to 8 years	6	6.0
More than 8 years	9	9.0
Total	100	100.0

Results and Discussion

The following Table 5 indicates the percentage of professionals having low, medium and high job stress. The results on overall response indicate that only 8 percent of the respondents have low level of stress. 80 percent of the call center employees have medium stress level and 12 percent have high stress level. Besides work and organizational factors, many societal factors also make call center jobs even more stressful. So, high occupational stress is not myth but a stark reality of the call centers (Ghazi, 2006).

Table 5: Stress Level of Respondents

Stress Level	Frequency
High	12
Low	8
Medium	80
Total	100

The Table 6 shows the score of the respondents about job feedback, working condition, job Clarity, job security, workplace politics, job satisfaction, workload, promotion, interpersonal relations and changes in the workplace. Among these stressors, job feed back, workload and promotion opportunities create high level of stress for majofity of the call center employees. Other factors like working conditions, job security, workplace politics, job satisfaction and changes taking place in the workplace are a source of medium stress for the respondents. As far as the interpersonal relations are concerned, 37 percent of respondents experience medium stress, 27 percent experience high stress and 36 percent experience low stress.

Table 6: Job Stressors of Respondents

Stressors	Frequencies			
	Low	Medium	High	Total
Job Feedback	15	20	65	100
Working Conditions	36	53	11	100
Job Clarity	74	23	3	100
Job Security	16	50	34	100
Job Satisfaction	39	50	11	100
Politics at Workplace	16	50	34	100
Work Load	5	13	82	100
Promotion	5	32	63	100
Inter Personal Relations	36	37	27	100
Changes in Workplace	23	55	22	100

Feedback about job performance, workload and job security are creating more stress on the respondents. Critical comments on poor performance and not a single word of praise on excellence are the features of job feedback in call center, according to the project leader. Most of the call center employees agree that abusive and argumentative clients create mental stress (Indradevi and Kamala, 2006).

The project leader also opined that the working conditions are not up to the expectation. The systems are kept close to one another and the employees also sit nearby with very little moving space. The facilities in the domestic call centers are demanding because there are no pick and drop, poor cafeteria and shoddy working conditions (Ghazi, 2006).

Job clarity is an important dimension in which 74 percent of the employees are having less stress. Majority of the companies give importance to induction and orientation programmes. The new recruits are trained not only for skill sets, but also for workplace etiquettes and behavioural aspects (Pallavi, 2007). So the employees are well trained about the various aspects of the job.

It can be inferred from the table 6 that majority of the respondents are experiencing stress due to lack of job security. Also, there is a feeling of dissatisfaction among the employees about the job. The reasons for such dissatisfaction are abusive customers, poor superior-subordinate relationship and the negligence of care of management for employee welfare. High level of occupational stress is associated with high dissatisfaction (Ghazi, 2006). Most of the call center work is highly repetitive and offers little diversity. This further leads to little job satisfaction (Pallavi, 2007).

Workplace politics is also a stressor for the employees. 34 percent of the employees experience high stress and 50 percent of the employees experience medium stress due to workplace politics. Dissatisfaction which leads to stress is conceived in terms of dissatisfaction with company policies, working conditions and politics (Ghazi, 2006).

It can be inferred from the table 6 that 82 percent of the employees experience high level stress due to workload. The task of the call center executive is not only monotonous and repetitive but at the same time, they have to work for ten to fourteen hours without using one's skills (Ghazi, 2006). The performance targets are important pressure points for them because there are daily targets to be met in terms of calls made or handled (Pallavi, 2007).

Majority of the respondents opine that lack of promotion opportunities is an important stressor. There is a less chance of growth and development in the sector. Also, when some of them tried to switch over to some other job, the experience in call center was not considered. These are similar to the findings

that there is little career progression in call centers. Another important fact is that every one who joins the call center does not end up becoming a team leader or moving into the top management roles (Pallavi, 2007).

Majority of the respondents are experiencing stress due to interpersonal relations at work place. Most of the employees ride to and from work together. They work just few feet away from each other and sometimes share apartments, if they are away from family. This sometimes leads to problems in the work place (Pallavi, 2007).

Apart from this, the employees are monitored continuously. They also experience a very close supervision. Poor work environment is a major issue in the call center (Indradevi and Kamala, 2006).

Conclusion

The call center provides lot of job opportunities. But the employees are not clear about their personal growth and development. The organizations should identify the sources of stress for their employees. Job feedback, workload and promotion opportunities are the major stressors for the call center executives. Working conditions, job security, workplace politics, job satisfaction, changes taking place in the work place and interpersonal relations create medium stress among them.

In giving job feedback, good performance and achievements are to be appreciated. They must be brought to the notice of others. Feedbacks of poor performance and inadequacies are to be dealt personally and the executives must be helped to overcome them. President of India technology operations states that (Mr. Shekar Nair, Personal communication) during performance reviews, achievements are rewarded and inadequacies are evaluated so that the employees are assisted to overcome them (Vinutha, 2005).

The stress due to workload and poor working conditions can be reduced by improving the working conditions. Providing good canteen facility or cafeteria where employees can go for a break and refresh and giving them enough leisure time and holidays can really help. Taking the employees for a holiday outing can improve the interpersonal relations and reduce their stress level.

The responsibility of the call centers is to provide a clear career path to its employees so that the stress due to job security and promotion opportunity can be eliminated. Open door policy and speedy solution to employee issues can improve job satisfaction and reduce workplace politics.

The organizations should also show care and concern for the employee. The employees should be properly trained on stress management and

behavioral aspects. Above all teaching them about our culture, tradition and imparting value education at the school and college level will help in incorporating high values among the individuals and help them in the long run. Proper counseling by experienced counselors, social outings and stress management programmes including yoga and meditation can help to maintain a stress free work environment in call centers.

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