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The past decade has seen a surge in academic interest in the work practices in the relatively new and burgeoning industry of business process outsourcing (BPO) and call centres (Ramesh, 2004; Taylor & Bain, 2005). *The next available operator: Managing human resources in Indian business process outsourcing industry*, edited by Thite and Russell, adds to the growing literature in this field by focusing on current management and human resource practices in the Indian call centre industry. On basis of empirical research, this book examines the differences between call centre employment in India and other Southeast Asian countries as well as the effects of such forms of employment on the economy and various industry stakeholders.

The book deals with some interesting and timely issues. However, in terms of its analytical depth and rigour and theoretical foundations, the contribution of this book to the field of BPO is minimal at best. For example, the chapters are rather disjointed since they are organised simply on the basis of the geographical location of the study rather than any conceptual similarities or differences. The aim of the book, I believe, was to conduct a comparative analysis of the BPO industry in disparate geographical, cultural, regulatory and economic contexts. Instead, the book ends up being a sketchy and a theoretical report comparing a certain call centre in a certain location with another in another location. There is no attempt at developing a cross-level conceptual framework to compare call centres in different contexts and across different dimensions. Most of the empirical work presented in this book employs qualitative methodology. However, except the chapter by Mirchandani, the qualitative research conducted is nothing more than content analysis since no new concepts, themes, models or hypotheses have been developed. Moreover, the book lacks a comprehensive theoretical approach to understanding and addressing the human resources challenges in Indian business processing industry. These and other issues are addressed in further detail in the following sections.

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With the aim of understanding the nature of work organisation in call centres India and Southeast Asia, the book is organised into three sections. The first section focuses on the perspective of Indian frontline employees, the second on stakeholders' perspectives and the third on international perspectives.

The book starts by acknowledging how information technology-enabled services have emerged as an extreme form of mass production of the most routinised processes in the West. The first section presents a broad overview of the call centre industry including topics such as the rise of the industry, its potential for growth in a global scenario and current work practices in the call centre industry in India. The chapters in this section effectively demonstrate how Indian call centres have emerged as a new and effective expression of the increasing capital intensive industrialisation of service sector work of the West because of extremely low transaction costs (almost eight times lower than in developed countries) and virtually no human resources to manage as a result of outsourcing.

Despite the potential for growth and consolidation of the industry, the authors of many of the chapters (e.g. Wallace—Chapter 2, Thite and Russell—Chapter 3, Budhwar et al.—Chapter 4) raise serious doubts on the future growth prospects of the industry with human resource management challenges appearing to be the single most important issue facing the industry. Although these chapters provide useful information and somewhat diverse perspectives on the issue of human resource challenges in this industry, they are very repetitive and the information could have been condensed and presented more concisely. For example, Chapters 3 and 4 contain almost the same information and could have been edited more effectively to avoid overlap between chapters. Second, several chapters lack clear research questions or hypotheses. For example, the chapter by Budhwar et al. is an exploratory study that does not present any coherent overall aims and goals. Similarly, the chapter by Thite and Russell does not present any research questions that can be discerned despite having a literature review and methodology section. The reader, therefore, is confused as to what the purpose of the chapter is and what the research goals are.

Third, except the insightful chapter by Mirchandani (Chapter 5), the analysis of human resource challenges in this industry is rather limited

because the design of work practices and psychological and physical health impacts of such forms of work on employees are given short shrift. Call centres are established with the explicit aim of creating an environment in which work practices can be standardised into relatively repetitious activities to achieve uniform quality of customer service. Prior research has shown that there are multiple stressors associated with such work practices, particularly relevant to Indian call centre employees (Ramesh, 2004; Zapf, Isic, Bechtoldt & Blau, 2003). Employees are required to undergo many training sessions for product knowledge acquisition and accent neutralisation. They are subjected to a number of examinations that are designed to test their technical and logical skills, which seem illogical given their job characteristics. They are required to adopt a fictitious identity—have foreign names, pretend to be at another location and from another culture and speak in an accent that is not their own. In other words, outbound call centres, require that employees have the requisite ‘soft skills’ such as accent, knowledge regarding geography, lifestyle, government, education, business, culture and politics. Poster (2007) calls this ‘national identity management’—a labour strategy where ethnicity and citizenship are considered malleable and subject to managerial control.

The pressure to display foreignness and having to conform to pre-scripted routines while being polite and pleasant with irate customers results in psychological stress and physical health problems. Having to raise your hand up to go to the toilet, being restricted to a certain number of seconds per call, having to work long shifts without adequate breaks and excessive monitoring and surveillance by supervisors are some examples of worst work practices in the industry. In such a Taylorist managerial paradigm, employees are largely construed as mouthpieces rather than thinking, feeling individuals. Importantly, such work practices would be considered human right violations in developed countries yet are freely practiced in the Indian call centre industry to meet the high call volume requirements posed by the foreign clients.

Thite and Russell bring up this issue, however cursorily, in Chapter 10 (Managing work and employment in Australian and Indian call centres) in the third section of the book. They argue that such practices can enhance levels of emotional labour and result in emotional numbness and loss of touch with one’s true self. However, other important issues

and facets of such practices have been neglected in this chapter and the book in general. For example, managers contribute to the process of 'national identity management' by foreignising the physical and relational environment of the workplace and by setting penalties for employee disobedience. By agreeing to such demands, they not only lose control over their own workplace, but also have little say in the overall labour strategy and in the ability to defend well-being of their employees. Such work practices highlight how call centres are designed to weaken employee autonomy and increase the potential for management control. More broadly, they signify a transformation in the practice of power in the face of globalisation. The book would have benefited greatly had it addressed such global issues in the context of the BPO industry.

The second section of the book dealing with industry and stakeholder perspectives is highly fragmented. In general, this section, like section one, highlights a disconnect between employee concerns and employers' efforts to address HR challenges. A broad range of HR grievances are covered: such as favouritism, arbitrary supervisor treatment, pay and work issues, safety and customer racism. However, the three chapters that are a part of this section are largely disconnected from each other, the overall theme of the section as well as the preceding section.

For example, Chapter 6 (A practitioner's perspective on the Indian Info-services industry by Gurjar) presents a number of models using management terminology that are not well defined or articulated and that barely relate to chapters in the previous and the following sections. Most HR models and practices described in this chapter (e.g. 'talent creation', 'diversity initiative', and 'people administration to business partner') are nothing more than management jargons that have little, if any, connection to employee needs and completely ignore the actual grievances of the employees in the call centre industry. One such pressing issue is of call volume and targets in which there is potential for bringing about positive change that could benefit employees. Targets are closely monitored and employee pay is partially based on meeting these targets. The quality of service versus quantity of sales is a serious issue in this industry and invariably the management is perceived as valuing quantity over quality. The pressure to meet targets is so intense that employees are subjected to disciplinary action for taking time off to relax or stretch. 'Cross selling' has been introduced as a strategy to reduce staff boredom and as an

opportunity of engage in 'creative work', but is actually an additional source of stress for employees. Such HR policies demonstrate the management's disregard of employee concerns and how employee work load is increased under the disguise of providing opportunities for 'creative work'.

Yet another major issue not addressed in the conceptual models presented in this chapter is the psychological and health problems employees face to keep up with shifting work schedules. For instance, long work hours and night shifts make socialisation more difficult and lead to alienation and withdrawal. Employees do not oppose such unreasonable management demands as it might exacerbate the already bad work environment. Moreover, they gain employment opportunities, upgraded pay and relatively comfortable 'physical' working conditions by conforming to such demands.

Further, in the section entitled 'Evolution of HR philosophy and practice' Gurjar justifies such oppressive management practices and HR policies. For instance, the lack of industry accountability for such human resources practices is effectively captured in the HR philosophy and practices of one of the most renowned software companies in India, Infosys—'people (employees) leave managers not the company' (p. 122). Such an attitude serves to shift the blame for employee attrition to inter-personal problems, when in fact they are policy-level issues.

Chapter 7 entitled 'Union formation in Indian call centres' by Taylor et al. addresses the issue of the lack union formation in this industry in India. Employee unions are discouraged by the management and NASSCOM and disregarded as being associated with blue-collar jobs by employees. Some companies restrict employees from joining any unions through legally binding employee contracts. While this chapter is an interesting and informative read, once again, it is disconnected from the overall theme of 'industry/stakeholder perspectives' of section two.

Chapter 8 (Outsourcing careers: Western theories in an Indian context) by Cohen and colleagues describes a study of managerial perspectives on career prospects in the call centre industry in India. The study does not elucidate any specific research questions/hypotheses, nor does it draw any coherent conclusion. All that is learned from this chapter is that even though the job characteristics of Indian and foreign call centres are similar, foreign counterparts of the same call centre enjoy greater work flexibility, freedom and sense of security than Indian employees do.

The third and final section of the book 'Comparative perspectives' pertains to international perspectives on the BPO industry. It includes three chapters comparing work systems and managerial practices in India to that in the US, Australia and Canada. Each of these chapters compares a certain call centre in India with a certain call centre in each of these countries, albeit without a clear conceptual framework. Macro-level factors such as differences in government regulatory systems and the economic, socio-political, and historical context are not addressed or taken into consideration while analyzing the differences in micro-level organisational routines and work designs and practices. For example, UK regulators have been proactive in monitoring the work practices of their BPO industry by issuing a bulletin on call centre regulations, health risks and best practices (<http://www.hse.gov.uk/lau/lacs/94-2.pdf>). They provide detailed guidelines on health issues such as stress, noise levels, musculoskeletal disorders (e.g. back problems and voice loss), requirements for workstations, daily work routines, training and organisational working practices to assist industry stakeholders to protect and enhance their employees' health, safety and well-being. Similar policies and regulations are in place in Australia. In contrast, the Indian government has not developed any regulatory or policy framework to safeguard the health of the workers in this industry. These studies would have gained greatly if the influence of such policy level differences among these nations were taken into account while analysing the differences between the work practices and management of human resources in call centres located in these countries. The book does not have a concluding chapter and ends abruptly. The reader is left groping in the dark as to what the purpose of the book was, what its specific goals were, and how they were achieved.

Although the editors claim that their book is evidence-based and relies on systematic empirical investigations compared with prior studies that are based more on managerial polemics and rhetoric, the studies presented lack methodological rigor and a theoretical foundation. Almost all the studies are exploratory, and while that is not necessarily an issue (exploratory work is required in new fields that lack a firm conceptual foundation), it is in this case since no concepts, themes or hypotheses are developed from the work. In fact, the research is presented as if it were based on strong theoretical frameworks, when in fact most of them do

not even have proper research questions. In my opinion, 'The next available operator: Managing human resources in Indian BPO industry' fails to make a substantial contribution to the study of call centres and the BPO industry in general. However, it may well be an interesting read for novices in the field who would like to gain a general overview of HRM practices in Indian call centres.

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Chitvan Trivedi

Ph.D. Candidate

School of Social Ecology

University of California, Irvine

USA