

available at [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/iimb](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/iimb)

IIMB Management Review

## BOOK REVIEW

**Employee identity in Indian call centres: The notion of professionalism, Ernesto Noronha, Premilla D'Cruz, 2009. Response Books (Sage), New Delhi, 184 pages, Price: Rs 395.**

The book under review presents the results of a study of Indian call centre employees working for captive call centres as well as 'international facing' third-party centres of multi national centres (MNC) in Bangalore and Mumbai. The research aimed to understand phenomenologically the subjective experiences of these workers using qualitative methods, within the larger context of systems of managerial control and the customer service environment. Drawing particularly on van Manen's methodological approach, the authors' objective was to represent the 'lived experiences' of their subjects through in-depth unstructured interviews rather than the usual questionnaire survey techniques. Accordingly, the 'sample' size is small, with 59 interviews forming the database for the analysis.

The well-known difficulties of conducting research in the business process outsourcing (BPO)/call centre industry in India (which does not readily welcome researchers or publicity) are illustrated by this study. The authors did not get access to the 'shop floor' for observations or interviews and so had to contact informants using other networks and conduct interviews outside the workplace. Moreover, most informants were not willing to sit for follow-up interviews, which are necessary for this kind of qualitative research. As a result, the study relies on responses elicited during one-off interviews, albeit long ones – a shortcoming that essentially undermines the researchers' objective. Despite this drawback, the authors have produced relevant new knowledge about the ITES workforce. They analyse several significant themes culled from the interview transcripts and draw on additional data collected through interviews with managers, union leaders, and other key informants, and secondary sources.

Noronha and d'Cruz identify the idea of 'professionalism' as the core theme that runs through informants' narratives and that frames their self-understanding and orientation to their work. They also demonstrate that inculcating professionalism forms a key component of management ideology

and practice in this industry, aimed at creating 'consent' within the workforce. Herein lies the central problematic of the study – when organisations attempt to inculcate a professional identity in employees and to make them self-managing and self-motivated, tactics that are aimed not only at control but also at staving off incipient union activity, and when employees display evidence of internalising this identity, what does this tell us about employee subjectivity and agency? Does it imply that management strategies are successful and call centre agents are simply dupes who are amenable to 'subjective' management techniques, that their very selves are subordinated to systems of organisational control? Or does it mean that call centre agents are autonomous individualised professionals who are nonetheless engaged in 'self-exploitation'?

While the book does not address in depth such questions (on which there is a burgeoning literature within critical management studies and labour sociology; see [Upadhya, 2009](#)), it does point to the complexities of call centre work in India. First, the authors point out that call centres combine extreme techniques of neo-Taylorist digitised control and monitoring with indirect management practices linked to the ideology of professionalism. Thus, workers are told that they are not 'workers', that they must behave as 'professionals' by devoting extra hours and effort to satisfying customer demands. But in practice they are treated like factory floor workers or worse, for they are not even granted the level of control over the work process or autonomy in decision-making that is routine in contemporary factory settings. This contradiction has been highlighted by several other studies ([Remesh, 2008](#); [Vasavi, 2008](#)), but the unique contribution of the work under review is to examine it in greater depth and draw out its implications for the question of worker identity and collectivisation.

An important finding is that Indian call centres seem to allow much less scope for individual initiative, flexibility in work systems or participation in management than do those in the West. Call centres in general are known for their highly routinised workflows and tight systems of control, but organisations in India appear to be even more extreme in this regard – perhaps a major factor behind the high rates of employee turnover. As this study also found, many employees feel frustrated because they believe their skills and talents are under-utilised in BPO jobs. An important practical recommendation is that attrition might be reduced if employers devolve more responsibility and decision-making authority onto the agents and lower-level managerial staff, rather than depending entirely on standardised, computer-controlled call handling systems.

0970-3896 © 2010 Indian Institute of Management Bangalore. All rights reserved. Peer-review under responsibility of Indian Institute of Management Bangalore.

doi:10.1016/j.iimb.2010.07.001



Production and hosting by Elsevier

Another distinctive feature of the Indian call centre industry is the near gender parity in the workforce – in fact, slightly more males than females according to some statistics (about 60%), a ratio that reflected in this study's sample. While this fact suggests that gender issues are very different in the Indian context, this dimension is not explored in this book. The authors only mention that women working in call centres tend to acquire a 'bad reputation', and the fact that most women drop out of the workforce after marriage or having children. But we need to ask why BPO/call centre work is widely regarded as a suspect occupation for women, and what are the effects of this social attitude on women's ability to participate in the workforce. Clearly, wider social norms regarding women's sexuality and social roles come into play, and neither employees nor employers are in a position to challenge them. Within the workplace as well, women workers are often subjected to sexual harassment and abuse by customers over the phone as well as by their male superiors. This hostile work environment may explain the larger proportion of males in the workforce, in contrast to the West, despite the preference for female employees.

The study also points to another way in which the larger cultural environment impinges on the working environment – the fact that 'professional identity is greatly valued as a symbol of social status and upward mobility in the Indian context facilitated the process (of cultivating the notion of professionalism in employees)' (p. 73). The authors argue that imbibing professional identity makes Indian agents more acquiescent, willing to sacrifice their personal needs to the interests of the organisation and its customers. Still, it is not clear, given the high attrition rates, whether this strategy actually works. The contradiction here is that adopting a 'professional' persona does not in fact lead to upward social mobility – rather, call centre work is socially devalued. Moreover, there is little scope for career development in the industry. This is yet another contradiction that adheres to the BPO industry. Other contradictions include that between the high level of education of employees and the routine and low-skilled nature of work, and between the advertised image of call centre jobs as professional 'careers' and the fact that they are actually short-term, dead-end jobs in most cases. The dissonance that many employees eventually experience between their expectations from the job and the reality of work is however not fully explored in this book, perhaps because the authors were not able to follow informants' working lives over a long period of time.

An important contribution of the book is the discussion of unionisation in the 'knowledge industries'. Interviews with union leaders indicate that a process of rethinking strategy is underway, in line with employees' self-identity as professionals and the processes of individualisation that has been engendered by these new industries. Employee associations are being forced to work with managements rather than adopt an adversarial stance. There is an interesting theoretical question here – why are IT and ITES employees so resistant to forming associations or unions in India, with its long tradition of white collar unionisation (e.g., bank employees, airline pilots)? Is this a function of the globalised nature of the industries, or have managements succeeded in inculcating employees with the dominant management ideology? The authors suggest precisely this – that call centres employees view attempts at collective action as inconsistent with professionalism.

Informants' narratives paint a vivid picture of the call centre work experience, highlighting the stress and conflicts that arise from the need to use 'emotional labour' and adopt a false persona in order to service foreign customers. Agents respond to racial and sexual abuse by evolving creative coping mechanisms. But in the end they accept their over-regimented and often harsh working conditions as 'part of the job'. 'Unions are for people in factories', they say, and BPO professionals are 'intellectuals' who have no need to engage in such activity (p. 107). There are hints of subversion in individual acts, but the authors do not interpret actions such as delaying incoming calls as 'resistance' – instead they read them as temporary outlets for frustration. In the end, the argument seems to be that the notion of professionalism is indeed internalised by agents, 'altering their self-concept and enhancing their self-esteem' (p. 72), driving them to accept the rigorous work routines and other stressful demands of the job.

Apart from the findings of the study itself, the book contains a very useful review of the current management and sociological literature on call centres in the West, focusing on questions of organisational control, consent, 'knowledge work', 'emotional labour', and employee well-being in the neo-Taylorist settings of the service economy. It also provides an overview of the current status of research on the BPO-ITES industries in India, highlighting the specificities of the call centre industry here.

In summary, the authors' main argument – that call centre employees' subjective experience of work is captured in the notion of professionalism – can be challenged, for their own interview data point to ambivalences and dissonances. A more nuanced theoretical discussion of the contradictions inherent in call centre work within the wider context of the Indian social milieu would have greatly strengthened the study. For instance, if 'identity regulation' is the most important means of organisational control, we need to explore in much greater depth, using techniques that go beyond interviews, the question of employees' identity formation and subjectivity. Nonetheless, it is a significant contribution to the growing literature on labour issues in the IT/ITES sector and would be an instructive read for employees and managers in the industry as well as academics.

## References

- Remesh, B. P. (2008). Work organization, control and 'empowerment': managing the contradictions of call centre work. In C. Upadhyya, & A. R. Vasavi (Eds.), *In an outpost of the global economy: Work and workers in India's information technology industry* (pp. 235–261). New Delhi: Routledge.
- Upadhyya, C. (2009). Controlling offshore knowledge workers: power and agency in India's software industry. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 24(1), 2–18.
- Vasavi, A. R. (2008). 'Serviced from India': the making of India's global youth workforce. In C. Upadhyya, & A. R. Vasavi (Eds.), *In an outpost of the global economy: Work and workers in India's information technology industry* (pp. 211–234). New Delhi: Routledge.

Carol Upadhyya  
School of Social Sciences,  
National Institute of Advanced Studies,  
Indian Institute of Science Campus,  
Bangalore 560012, India

E-mail address: [carol@nias.iisc.ernet.in](mailto:carol@nias.iisc.ernet.in)