

ASSEMBLY LINE WORKERS OF THE 21st CENTURY: A Glimpse Into the Lives of Customer Service Center Agents

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This article takes a broad view of the phenomenon of customer service centers which have emerged as a distinctive aspect of the globalized economy. The rapid growth in call centers is a result of transnational economic processes that take place in terrains made uneven by differences in economic development across countries. Using data from a number of sources, including focus group discussions and individual interviews, the author looks at the lives of Philippine call center employees with a lens that highlights gender and other oppressions. She also discusses what actions can be taken to protect workers' rights. Lastly, the author problematizes the new conditions for labor organizing among customer service center agents.

Call centers have been called the "factories of the new economy." Being a fast growing industry, the call center area faces a great deal of challenges.— Union Network International (UNI)

INTRODUCTION

In the 1970s-1980s, the manufacturing industry, specifically for basic steel, textiles and footwear, and electronics was seriously affected by the massive transfer of production from high-income to developing

countries in order to take advantage of cheaper labor costs and better control of production processes. In the 1990s relocation was no longer confined to traditional industries but extended to sophisticated manufacturing and services as well. Service operations that were initially thought of as 'inherently domestic' were being transferred from one country to another as a result of technological advancements.

Earlier on, in the area of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), the trend was migration of individual information technology (IT) workers from the developing countries to high income countries. However, the expansion of IT industry in developing countries and the digitalization of some business processes paved the way for globalizing the delivery of some service sector jobs. The reduction of barriers to competition in telecommunications unleashed a surge of new investment worldwide. Foreign-based client companies abroad take the work to local workers instead of importing the workers away from their homelands. The development of software programming centers in Bangalore in the '90s was a product of this change in which around 30 transnational corporations (TNCs) transferred part of their work to India at half the price that it would cost in the US or Western Europe for the same amount of work.

Within this global market, workers of all countries regardless of their degree of industrial development or type of social system, are in direct competition both in production and services (Gallin 1997). The primary motive in subcontracting and offshore outsourcing is to relocate jobs away from higher-cost areas of the world to those areas where there is a lower wage level and where employment conditions and rights may be poorer. For instance, the United States has lost 250,000 call center jobs to India and the Philippines since 2001 (Seattle Post-Intelligencer 2003). But "the resulting job losses in industrialized countries do not imply any great gains in employment in the countries where companies relocate and expand" (Gallin 1994, p. 111). Thus,

trade unions argue that migration of work does not create jobs or income. Rather, it initiates an open-ended competition among developing nations to offer the lowest wages and least amount of regulation in what has been called a "race to the bottom".

The spread of offshore outsourcing in the service sector in the early 1990 was simultaneous with a steady increase in the share of services in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of both developed and developing countries. The volume of international trade in services also increased during this period. This prompted the US to strengthen its position for the adoption of an international agreement that will cover regulation and expansion of international trade in services. In fact, the US threatened to abandon the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trades (GATT) during the Uruguay Round if trade in services will not be placed on the negotiating table (Abu-Akeed cited in Lapid 2005, p 16). The General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS) which was adopted in 1994 "is the natural home for liberalizing commitments on cross-border trade." (Matto and Wunsch cited in Lapid 2005, p. 16). The GATS has provided the environment for business to reap the benefits of lower labor costs through offshore outsourcing. Supporters of liberalization argue that developing countries are to benefit from this arrangement in terms of workers getting higher wages compared to salaries offered by the local industries and therefore are able to improve their quality of life. Critics of GATS, on the other hand, argue that offshore outsourcing is a form of dumping where services are sold internationally at less than fair trade value.

Moreover, while liberalization in trade and services contributes to the over-all increase in demand for women's work, the opportunities opened up for women do not translate into better terms and conditions of employment. Studies show that the ideology of globalization has affirmed women's primary role as housewives to justify their relegation to the lower rungs in the labor market and to exploitative conditions

and wages (Francisco 2005, p. 2). Patriarchal biases about women's labor as embodied in the sexual division of labor, intersecting with the position of our country in global trade, result in jobs for women under non-standard arrangements. Thus, the increase in demand for women's labor (e.g. the call center industry) cannot be viewed separately from the trend of increasing informalization of work and "computer-aided" exploitation. It is with this perspective that we have to analyze whether women are winners or losers in international trade.

The proliferation of call centers in the Philippines is a good example of cross-border trade under Mode 1 of the GATS. Dubbed as the "digital assembly line," call centers are organized in the old industrial culture of mass production. Although there is no moving line that regulates the time spent on each task, networked computers and its attendant workflow software make it possible to time and measure every facet of a call center agent's work to the nearest second. This becomes the basis for expected standard output. The call center worker is one of the first proletariats of the digital age, with the empowered computers and its software imposing the discipline and control that, in the mass production plant, has always been the task of the assembly line and the automatic machine (Head 2003). While issues such as the absence of security of tenure and relentless monitoring of job performance are legitimate workers' issues they are not in a position to demand better terms and conditions of employment since they are not organized into trade/workers unions. Considering the fact that women are the ones most likely to work in these sectors that are difficult to regulate and unionize, offshore outsourcing should also be analyzed in terms of the gender impact on existing instruments laid down for the protection of workers' rights. While there is a rapid pace in the growth of offshore services in our country, stakeholders in this sector have been slow to react (i.e. policy advocacy) in looking closely at this phenomenal growth of cross-border service delivery.

Objectives

This paper aims to (1) provide an overview of the Philippine customer service centers (or call center industry); (2) look at the employment and working conditions and living and social conditions of women customer service agents, and; (3) put forward initial thoughts and initiatives in organizing customer service agents.

Methodology

Data was gathered from four individual interviews of call center agents and team managers and two focus group discussions (FGDs) with a total of eight participants. These are not enough to make conclusive statements. They allow us nonetheless to gather initial insights into the women's working conditions as well as the policies and pronouncements of the government and industry leaders. Likewise, the women call agents' experiences were analyzed in terms of working conditions and possible unionization of workers in the call centers. Lastly, the author tried to highlight the gender gaps in the discourse on interrelations of labor, trade and ICT.

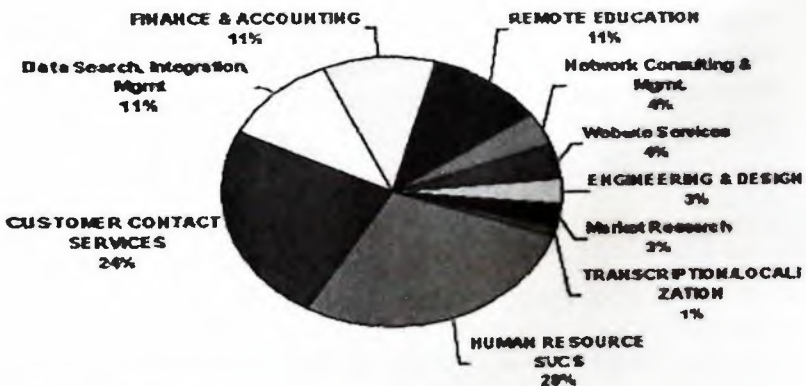
TRENDS AND PROSPECTS IN THE OUTSOURCING OF CUSTOMER SERVICE WORKERS

Outsourcing is defined as the "the process of transferring an existing business function, including the relevant physical and/or human assets, to an external provider in order to strategically use outside resources to perform activities previously handled in-house" (Wikipedia). The trend of outsourcing labor overseas to countries with lower labor cost is often referred to as offshoring or offshore outsourcing. Global multinationals,

including airlines, banks, and IT companies, are major offshore outsourcers of customer service work, both with in-house overseas operations and with subcontractors. (UNI, 2006). Among the major global players in this subcontracting business are Accenture (USA), SNT (Netherlands), Atento (Spain) and Convergys (USA). Asia has become a source of substantial outsource service operations from the United States and Europe.

McKinsey & Co., an investment consultancy firm, projects a bigger demand for outsourcing services that will reach US\$ 180 billion in 2010. Human resource services (28%) and customer contact services (24%) lead the firm's projected world demand for white collar services (see Figure 1):

Figure 1. Projected World Demand for White Collar Services



Source: DTI, 2006

Philippine's Comparative Advantage

A study by A. T. Kearney (Matto and Wunsch 2004, p. 9) comparing the attractiveness of different countries as outsource locations

confirms that while India remains to be the overall leader in attracting offshore outsourcing, other countries are no longer far behind. In the Philippines there is an increase in the number of companies “specializing” in business process outsourcing, the most popular of them are customer care services or call centers. Majority of businesses use call centers to interact with their customers. The Philippines is considered to be an attractive location for US companies to set-up offshore customer support services and customer interaction compared to India because of our familiarity with American culture and our Americanized English diction and pronunciation. Last year, the country ranked 3rd in the world for top business process outsourcing (BPO) destinations, according to neoIT’s 2005 Mapping Offshore Markets Update (DTI, 2006).

Aside from an affinity to western culture, a strategic location, a hospitable lifestyle and an expanding infrastructure, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) boasts of the “affordable quality of human resources” and strong government support to attract investors to the Philippines. In terms of ‘affordable quality human resource’, DTI (2006) outlines the following as our selling points:

- a. Skilled labor force of 29 million
- b. Literacy rate of 94%
- c. 3rd largest English speaking nation
- d. No. 4 worldwide in availability of knowledge workers
- e. 380,000 graduates/year
- f. Western-patterned educational system
- g. Strong work ethic, consultative/customer-oriented mind set
- h. Quality management staff

- i. Easily trainable
- j. Low attrition rate
- k. Lower costs: approximately one-fifth the cost of the US and Europe

Strong government support in this area is manifested by the formation of the Information Technology and E-Commerce Council (ITECC) to oversee, review or update the national promotion strategy for E-Commerce. This government-private council, chaired by the President of the Philippines, hopes "to lead the Philippines' ICT industry through the next millennium and beyond by putting ICT in the forefront of government priorities and national consciousness like it never has been before" (ITECC, 2006).

Employment Creation

The Bureau of Labor and Employment Statistics (BLES) reported in July 2006 that the nature of work is undergoing major shifts. While the industrial sector has remained stagnant, the agricultural workforce is shrinking in favor of the service sector. Further, the BLES report highlighted the fact that in the next ten years, service sector employment will expand and dominate the nature of work. The growth of the service sector will be led by the expansion in call centers and other business process outsourcing (BPO) followed by growth in wholesale and retail trade, tourism and transport sectors. Interestingly, side by side with this change is the "increasing 'casualization' of the work force as more and more employers resort to labor flexibility arrangements" (BLES 2006) to compete in the market.

The recently held National Employment Summit in March 2006, reports that 4.081 million employment opportunities will be created

between 2006 and 2010 (see Table 1) with the largest contribution from agribusiness (2.004 million or 49.1%) followed by cyberservices (1.384 million or 33.9%).

**Table 1: Projected employment opportunities by sector
2006-2010**

Sector Projected	Employment
Agribusiness	2,004,161
Cyberservices	1,383,890
Hotel and Restaurant	400,280
Medical Tourism	128,150
Health Services	50,003
Mining	39,382
Aviation	27,281
Total	4,081,447

Source: 2006 National Manpower Summit Report cited in LabStat
Updates: 2006

In terms of emerging occupations in cyberservices, customer contacts/agents registered the highest potential employment (see Table 2). This result supports the projection of McKinsey and Company that customer contact services will post bigger demand for outsourcing services in the immediate future.

Table 2: Emerging Occupations in Cyberservices 2006-2010

Occupational Title	Prospect
Entry-level animators	14,048
Transcriptionists (medical)	109,590
Customer contacts/agents	735,000
Software developers/ programmers	122,100
Finance/Accounting analysts	137,585

Source: 2006 National Manpower Summit Report cited in LabStat
Updates: 2006

DISSECTING THE CUSTOMER SERVICE CENTERS: THE NEXT PHILIPPINE GOLD MINE?

Customer Service Centers or Call Centers are physical locations basically providing services involving agents making calls (outbound) to sell products of mostly foreign clients or receiving calls (inbound) to provide customer services, give information, take orders or provide helpdesk functions. It is a young industry fast becoming a prime source of white collar employment nowadays especially for women.

In 2004, industry revenue reached US\$800M. Table 3 shows the expansion of seats and therefore employment (each seat is equal to approximately two to three persons employed) covering the period 2000 to June 2006.

Table 3: Expansion of Industry Seats

Year	Industry Seat
2000	2,500
2001	3,500
2002	7,500
2003	20,000
2004	40,000
2005	77,000
2006, June	112,000

Source: Author's compilation based on data from DTI and the pronouncements of Contact Center Association of the Philippines (CCAP) and Business Processing Association of the Philippines' officials

Currently, the big names in customer service centers operating in our country are:

- PLDT
- Convergys Corporation
- ICT Group
- eTelecare Global Solutions
- Teletech Holdings
- ClientLogic Corporation
- Sykes Enterprises
- IBM Corporation,
- Sutherland Global Services.

Additional seats are being explored by AIG, Siemens AG, Dell and JP Morgan Chase and Company

An Alternative to Migration?

The present Philippine administration has singled out the call center industry as one of the key potential growth areas as Western companies move their office functions in less developed countries.

During her State of the Nation Address of July 2006, Pres. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo said that:

The Cyber Corridor will boost telecommunications, technology and education. The corridor runs the length of all the super regions, from Baguio to Cebu to Davao. The cities of Davao, Tagum and Samal Island Garden all operate

electronic government accounting systems. In this corridor, the English and information and communication technology skills of the youth give them a competitive edge in call centers and other business process outsourcing.

In 2001, in this hall, we hailed ICT as a key growth sector. So we built up telecommunications infrastructure and opened the market for Internet phone calls. Today international calls cost 6 cents a minute, down from 40 cents. From 2,000 BPO workers in 2001, we now have 200,000.

I had coffee with some call center agents last Labor Day. Lyn, a new college graduate, told me, "Now I don't have to leave the country in order for me to help my family. Salamat po." I was so touched, Lyn by your comments. With these structural reforms, we not only found jobs, but kept families intact. Thank God, I thought, or someone might also try to impeach me for violating Article 15 of the Constitution on the solidarity of the family as the foundation of the nation.

Government is confident that a developed ICT sector can offer vast opportunities especially in shared services or back office operations, animation and software development and technical support. As such, government has prioritized the development and enlargement of the sector. In order to sustain and generate investments in ICT, the government will aggressively promote the sector by drawing up more focused incentives packages leading to job creation on high skill industries and services, namely, software and business processing outsourcing.

Quoting from the Medium Term Philippine Development Plan (MTPDP) 2004-2010, it mentions that:

McKinsey and Company recently identified 11 white collar services—with an estimated demand worth of US\$180 billion by 2010—that the mature economies can profitably outsource, and which the Philippines is well positioned to supply. Through the information highway, Filipinos can help reduce the overhead cost of service industry multinationals without their going overseas. (MTPDP Chapter 1 Trade and Investment, p. 20).

To illustrate how government supports BPO employment (in call centers), the Technical Skills Development Authority (TESDA) in Southern Mindanao has begun conducting free examinations to determine a person's competence in working for a call center. The seven-minute verbal test called Prospeak7 is used to evaluate an individual's English proficiency through a telephone call. Those who posted scores of 61 or above are considered "hirable" and will be issued with a certificate of competency by the TESDA and will likewise be endorsed to call centers in the city. Those who scored 55-60 will be considered "near hires" and a training coupon will be issued which will entitle them to a P5,000 worth of PGMA Training for Work Scholarship at any technical-vocation school offering TESDA-registered finishing courses for call centers (Billacura 2006). "The beauty of call centers is its almost 100 per cent local value added, compared to only 25-30 per cent for electronic components," says Romulo Neri, the government's economic planning chief (Landingin: 2006).

Biggest earner, biggest employer?

According to Cesar Tolentino, a senior analyst from the Canadian market research firm XMG, call centers in the Philippines accounted for about half of the total earnings from information technology-enabled services (ITES). According to him, of the estimated US\$1.8 billion ITES earnings in 2005, call centers contributed US\$1 billion, or about 56%. He also adds that call center earnings grew 16.3% in 2005 from US\$860 million in 2004 when the sector contributed 72% of the total US\$1.2 billion ITES revenues. (The Contact 2006)

Rainero Borja, director of the Contact Center Association of the Philippines (CCAP), is confident that the "annual earnings of local

calls centers would grow to \$7.3B in 2010 up top nearly 300% from projected earnings of \$2.6B this year" (Domingo 2006b). As such, the number of people employed by the industry would increase 182% from 179,000 this year to 506,000 in less than four years. This will lead to expansion of the number of work stations/agents' seats from 112,000 this year to 300,000 in 2010. Borja also mentioned that the call centers and "their employees would pay P8.6B in income taxes this year with more money spent on downstream industries such as office rentals and equipment supplies."

To respond to the inefficiency of operations in call center workspaces, non-voice work is explored such as financial services, back office work and medical transcription which could be done during daytime. To ensure an immediate pool of workers for the company, some call centers are forging partnerships with universities through teachers' trainings termed as 'people development' to equip teachers with skills on how to pass the training to their students thus providing an immediate and steady labor pool for the industry.

Helps boost other businesses

The establishment of call centers has given boost to neighboring restaurants, convenience stores, coffee shops and other businesses that decided to operate round the clock. A 30% increase in daily sales of a McDonald branch located in a special economic zone housing several call centers in Quezon City was noted after it opened 24 hours starting April last year. According to its assistant branch manager, call center agents on meal break after midnight contributed to the sales increase posted last year. Chowking, a Chinese fastfood chain, claims that more call center agents are now patronizing their 24-hour outlets in Metro Manila.

Space demand vs. supply

Only 328,100 square meters of office space for outsourcing companies is being built in the country over the next five years which is half the amount the industry requires if it grows the expected 20% rate, according to Richard Raymundo, director of Collier's Philippines. He revealed that office vacancy rates in major business districts, including Ortigas and Makati, will probably fall below 5% in the next 12 months, the lowest since the Asian financial crisis in 1997 and rents which rose 20% in 2005, will probably increase by at least 15% this year as office space supply tightens. As a result, Raymundo added that "non-traditional office space formats are being considered such as warehouses and shopping malls" (Philippine Star 2006). CB Richard Ellis, a property consultant, estimates that vacancy rates in the Philippines' premier commercial district fell to only 8 per cent last year, from 16 per cent the year before, because of the demand for prime office space from call centers and other business process outsourcing (BPO) operators (Landingin 2006)

Work Organization

Workstation

A call center is an air-conditioned workspace which usually consists of work stations each provided with a personal computer (PC) and a "phone"/headset connected to a telecom switch. Computers are often linked to a corporate computer network and, increasingly, the voice and data pathways are now linked through a set of new technologies called computer telephony integration (CTI).

Technology

The key technology used in call centers is the automatic call distributor (ACD). It is a system that can handle voluminous streams of calls, programmed to direct calls instantly to the next available logged-in agent who receives the call through the headset. ACD ensures good level of services, meaning, agents' level of productivity is high and calls are queued and processed as quickly as possible.

With a PC and ACD technology, video display units are used interactively during telephone calls. ACD technology allows agents to retrieve, encode and dispense information from the PC to facilitate the transaction requirements of callers. Other ACD systems have an Integrated Voice Recorder (IVR), a "voice response" mechanism which is used to obtain information from the caller before they get to speak to an agent. This same technology which facilitates an agent's job also serves as a monitoring facility which allows management to "peek" into an agent's activity and evaluate her or his performance in just a "click of a mouse" (Fabros 2005, p. 4). Management can listen in on conversations either openly or covertly, between the agent and the customer. They can also track how long it takes until a customer is connected, how long the call lasts, the time that the agent is not working actively with calls or disconnected because she or he has left the workstation, number of calls on queue and the average call time.

Quality assurance officers are the ones monitoring agents' call handling performance. This can be done by "barging in" (real time, service-observed) or through retrieval of recordings. Since desktop use is recorded, they can also check if the agent used the PC for personal purposes.

Organized support systems

Call centers are often organized into a layer of support systems for more efficient handling of calls. The frontline agents are the ones directly in contact with customers where most concerns are resolved like basic trouble shooting or inquiry. In cases when customer's needs are beyond their scope of responsibility, the customer is transferred to another department or to a second level of assistance like technical support. There are also cases where work organization allows technical support agents to seek assistance from senior support staff (through "chatting") to better assist customers.

Forecasting demand

Demand estimation is a crucial aspect of call center operations. Forecasting methods are important to maintain service quality by minimizing long call queues. Results generated from these methods are crucial in predicting traffic intensity and ensuring that enough staff are available especially during peak hours.

Call center performance

There are scores of standard traffic measurements (performance metrics) that can be carried out on a call center to ascertain its performance levels. However, the most important performance measures are:

- The average delay a caller may experience whilst waiting in a queue
- The mean conversation time, otherwise referred to as Average Talk Time (ATT)
- The amount of time spent while an agent processes customer requests while not speaking to a customer (referred to as Not Ready time/NR, or After Call Work/ACW, or Wrap-Up.)

- The mean dealing time, otherwise referred to as Average Handling Time (AHT - equal to ATT plus wrap-up and/or hold time)
- The percentage of calls answered within a determined time frame (referred to as a Service Level or SL%)
- The number of calls / inquiries per hour an agent handles (CPH or IPH)
- The percentage of calls which completely resolve the customer's issue (if the customer does not call back about the same problem for a certain period of time, it is considered a successful resolution or FCR - First Call Resolution)
- The percentage of calls where a customer hangs up or "abandons" the call is often referred to as Total Calls Abandoned or Percentage of calls abandoned. Calls are often abandoned due to long hold times when a call center experiences a high call volume.
- Percentage of time agents spend not ready to take calls, often referred to as Idle Time
- Quality Assurance monitored by a quality assurance (QA) team (Wikipedia)

English-only policy (EOP)

As a rule, a worker who is within the premises of the company should communicate in English. A disciplinary action is given to violators in the form of verbal warning to suspension depending on the degree of the offense (FGDs 1 and 2 2006, 10 and 14 September).

Job segregation

Customer service agents responsible for customer care accounts are usually females while those handling technical support are males (FGDs 1 and 2 2006, 10 and 14 September). Usually, men are the ones interested in technical stuff hence "the view that it is a man's job." There is also a perception that those handling technical accounts must be very firm and

should sound authoritative or expert on that particular field. One female agent who handles technical support laments that there are cases that she should sound very authoritative about the product she is handling to prove customers that she knows what she is talking about. Usually, the ‘product knowledge test’ comes first before customers raise their main concern for calling up customer service support.

Terms and Conditions of Employment

Salaries

For non-technical accounts, an agent receives an average hiring rate of P12,500 - P15,000 monthly basic salary while for technical accounts an agent receives P15,500 - P18,000 on the average (FGDs 1 and 2 2006, 10 and 14 September). The Department of Trade and Industry says that the starting pay of about P12,000-15,000 monthly is just one-fifth of the salary of an agent’s American counterpart. But here in the Philippines, the industry proves to be lucrative for executives. According to the 2006 Corporate Compensation Survey, business process outsourcing companies (BPOs) executives were the highest paid in 2005. The survey report, published by the Employers Confederation of the Philippines (ECOP), showed that the median monthly salary given to its executives (assistant Vice President upwards) is P180,000. It is interesting to note that while male executives in BPO firms have a median salary of P200,000/month their female counterparts receive only about P82,000/month.

Working time

Call centers usually operate at night synchronizing their office hours with that of their clients at the other side of the globe. A working “day” consists of 8 hours on the “floor,” one hour non-compensatory “lunch”

break and two 15-minute breaks. Usually, lunch break is scheduled four hours after an agent has logged-in (between 1:00am and 3:00am) but it can change depending on the volume of calls expected to receive. (FGDs 1 and 2 2006, 10 and 14 September).

In one of the call centers in Quezon City, work shifts are as follows: 6pm-3am/9pm-6am/10pm-7am/3am-12nn/11am-8pm (Jonas, call center agent, 2006, interview, 2 September). Another company has three shifts: for five-day workweek, shifts are either 8pm-5am or 5am-2pm. If the worker opts for a compressed four-day workweek or 4/10, her or his shift schedule is from 11pm-10am (Leila, team leader, 2006, interview, 7 September).

Employment arrangement

Generally, workers are regularized after fulfilling the probationary period of six months but by and large, employment contract is project-based or account based (co-terminus) (FGD 1 2006, 10 September). In some instances, agents are hired first on a contractual basis for six months, and then serve another six months as probationary staff before being regularized (Leila, team leader, 2006, interview, 7 September).

Upon hiring, agents have to undergo a one-month training which consists of communication and culture training (CCT) and product-specific training. If an agent did not pass the training, she or he can go to remedial training but if there was no improvement, she or he will be terminated. The newly-trained agents will first be "sheltered" (work under close supervision of the team leader) before they are allowed to "hit the floor" (Leila, team leader, 2006, interview, 7 September).

An agent's knowledge of the job is also account-based so that if an agent will be assigned to a different account, she or he has to go

through product-specific training again for that particular account (FGDs 1 and 2 2006, 10 and 14 September).

An agent on training, if newly-hired, is given an allowance equivalent to what she or he gets as a probationary worker but if the training is for an agent transferred to another account, the allowance will be based on her or his current salary level (Ibid.).

A pregnant woman is allowed to work on graveyard shift but she can be given a lighter shift schedule upon request (FGD 1 2006, 10 September).

Benefits

Agents generally enjoy the benefits provided for by the Labor Code (e.g. overtime pay, holiday pay, etc). Big companies offer benefits above what the law provides like life insurance and quarterly performance bonus together with other non-taxable allowances like food and transportation allowance or transportation service. (FGD 1 2006, 10 September).

Agents are given sick leaves and vacation leaves, the number of which depends on the account handled by the team. In effect, even if workers are employed in the same company, those working in a particular account may have 15 days VL/SL (vacation leave/sick leave) upon signing of contract while those working in another account will have 1.25 days VL/SL for every month of service (FGD 1 2006, 10 September).

Annual physical examination is conducted but no emphasis is given to occupational health-related examinations (e.g. acoustic shock). They are provided with health and dental insurance as well (FGDs 1 and 2 2006, 10 and 14 September).

Facilities

Separate sleeping quarters (with beds or lounging chairs) for women and men are provided to the workers. There is a clinic with a doctor and/or nurse on duty (FGD 1 2006, 10 September). There is also an arcade where workers can enjoy watching cable TV, play computer games or use the Xbox. In other workplaces, billiard tables, dart boards, and videoke players are installed (FGDs 1 and 2 2006, 10 and 14 September).

Grievance Machinery

Company rules outline the steps in taking up grievances. If the issue is between two agents, then the team leader handles the situation. The decision can be appealed to the next level if one is not satisfied with the result (Tony, team leader, 2006, interview, 3 September).

The Customer Service Agent: Up close as a worker

Call center agents speaking

"I am honored to be given the opportunity to work for an industry that does not only employ people but gives a chance to families to better economic status" -- Leila, team leader

"Instead of being unemployed or forced to migrate, call centers absorb the young and inexperienced workers." -- Dina, agent

"This is an industry where there is no gender preferences, no age limit, no discrimination... As long as you possess good communication skills, you can hit the floor." -- Mayeth, agent

"This is just a temporary job, a stepping stone. If there are injustices at the workplace, workers will opt to move out rather than fight back." -- Liza, agent

"The company I work for gives whatever benefits workers are entitled to according to law." -- Amy, agent

"This is a job that gives good compensation to its staff so I grabbed the opportunity. Anyway, I am still young and I can still manage a stressful job." -- May, agent

"Night work is very hard in the beginning but once you are adjusted to it, it is no longer a problem." -- Carol, agent

Agents' profile

The majority of call center agents are young (18 to 29 years old), women, single, university educated and tech savvy. When the job was introduced for the first time, the industry targeted students from schools catering to the upper middle class but this has been extended to the lower middle class sections of society. Call center agents comprise the booming middle class youth with their own culture and habits. Since their wages are comparatively higher than in most industries, agents can adopt a "comfortable" lifestyle (e.g. having the latest model of mobile phones, etc.).

Many call center agents do not see a call center job as a career but rather view it as transitory, a stepping stone for better employment opportunities. They are not bothered if they are just project workers or if they are performing dead-end jobs. Many of them are in call centers because the job offers higher salary level compared to simple day jobs. In the long term, some would like to go back to school or find better jobs abroad (FGDs 1 and 2 2006, 10 and 14 September). But for some "techies" whose passion is drawn to technology, they said that they might stay longer as long as the work feeds on their interests (FGD 2 2006, 14 September). Workers with family responsibilities also look at the job differently. They surmise that they might stay longer out of necessity (Tony, team leader, 2006 interview, 3 September). And while many do not see

themselves working in a call center for a long period of time, one agent is convinced that this is the industry where she can craft her career (FGD 1 2006, 10 September).

Interestingly, an FGD participant who has a bachelor's degree in mass communications and has been working for 1 ½ years in the call center articulated that she cannot see herself still in the industry after five years. Her main motive for applying for a call center job was that she didn't want to be unemployed after graduating from the university. Her goal was to save money for her future plans. In the long run she wants to do media work. Recently, she was called to report to a media company but with a heavy heart, she turned down the opportunity because the salary offered her by the media firm is just ½ of what she is paid in the call center.

Demand of Work: call logging emphasizes quantity, monitoring emphasizes quality

Ability to handle stress

Interestingly, job advertisements of call centers emphasize excellent opportunities waiting for successful hires rather than run through a long list of qualifications they look for in applicants. The following are print media advertisements published in Job Market section of the Philippine Daily Inquirer, a leading daily newspaper, and examples of how call centers project themselves:

- What makes us special? Flexibility that matters. Wide ranging functions, fast growing accounts, boundless career paths. Work for a company unlike any other. Because you are NOT like everybody else. Be an IBMer. -- IBM
- Wake-up call. Take your career to the next level. Go on. Be a Tiger -- Accenture

- High Rise. With the world's largest contact center, there's no way to go but up. Aim Convergys. We are looking for individuals with passion for learning and drive for success. -- Convergys
- Work among champions! Be part of the winning team. Now Hiring! -- Teletech
- Cool Jobs, Fun People, Great Pay! -- Teletech
- We know there is more to living than just making a living. Aside from competitive pay, performance incentives and referral bonuses, Ambergis employees enjoy hotel-like facilities, company-issued mobile phones, daily shuttle service, round-the-clock food service, fun employee events and comprehensive training. -- Ambergis Solutions
- The undying force, that drives the human spirit to greatness. Come...join the ADVENTURE. Be passionate, be a SUTHERLANDer. -- Sutherland Global Services
- As an agent at ePerformax you have to have The X Factor. This means being Xtremely committed and Xtremely quality focused. And as a result you get Xtreme recognition, Xtreme opportunities, Xtreme pay for performance and, most importantly, you can have xtreme fun working in a supportive environment. If you have The X Factor, then we'd love to have you join our family. -- Mike Grape, Agent and Lead Vocalist of Kala

Looking closer at the nature of the job of a customer service agent, it needs more than excellent communication skills in English to become a call center agent. To a certain extent, a person should show efficiency under time pressure, ambitious goals and sometimes direct monitoring of performance. Aside from being able to handle huge amount of information, an agent must also be able to handle different types of customers.

Attending to an average of two to three bad calls (abusive customers) per duty is considered part of the job. One agent resorts to her own psychological conditioning in order to get through the job by

convincing herself that she should not take bad calls personally, “*trabaho lang, walang personalan.*” (*It's just work, do not take it personally.* FGD 1 2006, 10 September). One of the agents in the FGD calls this “emotional flexibility.” When confronted with abusive customers, she consoles herself with the fact that “*hindi naman ako kayang kainin nito, kasi nasa telepono lang naman sya.*” (*The customer can't eat me alive because we are only on the telephone.* FGD 2 2006, 14 September). One agent said that she brings with her a stress ball which she squeezes while talking to an irate customer (Ibid.). One agent remarked that she was able to maintain her “smiling voice” by scratching her legs in exasperation (FGD 1 2006, 10 September). Another agent explained that when she can no longer take abuses from a customer, she presses the mute button to curse back (FGD 2 2006, 14 September).

Excellent call handling skills

Agents reveal that they are expected to fulfill the 5 minute average handling time (AHT) for inbound non-technical calls and a 13.5 minute max AHT for inbound technical calls (FGD2 2006, 14 September). Agents handling outbound sales calls are also given quota which translates to rigid sales or performance targets (Ibid).

Working with scripts

Agents are obliged to follow scripts when talking to customers. Agents share that customers sometimes ask if they are talking to a machine or human being and assert that they want to talk to a human being in case calls will be transferred to another department (FGD 2 2006, 14 September). Working with scripts bind them as to the parameters of what they can offer to the callers. The information they need to assist the customers are indexed in a computer system (eg. usage instruction of their products, key information points). Their hands

are tied when a call requires an agent to work “outside of the script” since non-standard solutions which might prove effective are not allowed (Ibid.).

Loss of identity

Call center protocol includes expectation from agents to interact with customers like “one of the locals.” As such, they assume a different identity so that customers won’t realize that they are talking to an agent on the other side of the globe. In a way, they lose or compromise their real identity at work and take on an alien persona.

At Ambergis, workers are given USA Today and the most recent Texas travel guide to read between calls. They watch the previous day’s TV news from a Texas network during breaks in case conversation with a customer veers to current events (Seattle Post-Intelligencer 2003). It also helps if the agent knows the weather, top stories, who is winning in the NBA games since they cannot afford to sound like they know nothing about their customer’s ‘world.’

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Labor Market Issues

Attrition

Attrition rate is placed at 35% by industry leaders, “well above the 8.3% rate that the industry has set as acceptable” (Villafania 2006). Team leaders note that the usual causes of attrition are (1) agent not “cut” from the job; (2) unable to combine job and school requirements; (3) offers from other call centers; (4) conflict with immediate supervisor (team leader); (5) opportunities to go abroad; (6) health problems and (7) stress – from demands of customers.

Pirating in the industry is common as moving from one call center to another is quite easy given the tight labor market. Hence, call centers ask for bonds (P25,000 -P40,000) from its newly hired workers as an assurance that the latter will stay with the company during the contract period (FGD 1 2006, 10 September).

Labor Demand vs. Supply

The industry observes the dwindling number of skilled workers, especially those proficient in English who can work in call centers. The demand is growing so fast that the industry is facing a labor shortage. In fact, "US-based Cyber City Teleservices Ltd has been unable to fully operate its call center in Davao City due to lack of qualified applicants despite aggressive recruitment drives throughout Mindanao that attracted thousand of applicants" (Reyes 2006). CCAP officials say that "out of the country's 400,000 college graduates every year only 100,000 or 25% are deemed 'immediately employable' in the BPO and IT-enabled services sectors" (Philippine Daily Inquirer 2006). Of the 100,000 only 12,000 could pass requirements to work as contact center agents which is way below the 60,000 minimum needed by the call center industry. Add the fact that "for every 20 job applicants who get accepted, only one shows up for work" (Domingo 2006b).

Industry leaders attribute the shortage to the current quality of education college graduates receive pertaining to the lack of "proper" English communication skills needed for this type of work. In order to curb this problem, CCAP coordinates not only with the government but with the academic institutions as well to design activities that will produce graduates ready for call center jobs.

With the purpose of attracting skilled workers, call centers not only advertise job openings on newspapers, online job sites, job fairs, television and radio commercial spots, magazines or use of streamers and

billboards but they also resort to non-traditional and creative ways of recruiting people. The company E-Telecare put up a team in the basketball league, the Teletech Titans in the PBL while other companies organize party-like events and one even organized a speech and image modeling contest with \$1,000 at stake. Some give "sign-in bonuses, travel benefits, and free gadgets like mobile phones and MP3 players" (Domingo 2006b). But, David of the Pilipinas Teleserve, Inc. says that the most effective method of recruitment is still through "word of mouth" which works like a referral system in which companies offer incentives to employees who recommend possible recruits. According to him, "eTelecare and People Support, for example, are companies that offer something between P1,500 –P5,000 for every successful hire" (Ibid.).

From the Developed Countries (compiled by the author from UNI's labor news in 2005)	From the Philippines (results of FGDs and interviews done by the author)	
	Working in a multinational company	Working in a 'local/small' company
unrealistic targets	transportation and safety hazards	transportation and safety hazards
poor working conditions (e.g. poor facilities, poor maintenance and cleaning, cramped working conditions)	lack of sleep /rest, decreased body resistance, sleep disorder or insomnia, backaches, weight loss/gain, cough, colds, tonsillitis, sore throat	lack of sleep/rest. Decreased body resistance, sleep disorder or insomnia, backaches, weight loss/gain, cough, colds, tonsillitis, sore throat
repetitive and boring work; limited advancement opportunity	boring work, repetitive	can be promoted but with no corresponding wage increase
inflexible shifts with compulsory overtime and too few breaks	provides no room for personal growth	non-remittance of SSS contribution
constant monitoring and surveillance		wrong computation of compensation
disrespectful supervisors		power tripping supervisors
abusive customers		systems of promotion is whom you know
low pay		no performance evaluation

Work kills social life

An agent's life runs opposite the normal life of the other members of the household/family. One agent feels that she is considered non-existent at home (FGD 2 2006, 14 September). When her family is awake, she is asleep and vice versa. After four months of working in a call center, she can no longer relate to what her family is talking about. Another agent shares that she is considered a boarder at home (Ibid.). Their social life revolves around friends at work. They go out after duty which could mean enjoying a few drinks early in the morning before going home to sleep. Those who have significant others tell of the difficulties of nurturing the relationship. Most of the time, they have to be content with just text messaging (FGD 1 2006, 10 September).

Sexual Harassment

Aside from the dangers of being robbed, (as agents observed that crime such as hold-up increased concurrently with the increase in the number of call centers) women agents also experience sexual harassment in public transportation or while waiting for a ride (FGD 2 2006, 14 September). While some areas provide police visibility, it is only limited to the area where call centers are located like Eastwood in Libis, Quezon City. At work, there was a case of sexual harassment complaint committed by a team manager to his agent in one of the call centers in Quezon City (Leila, team leader, 2006, interview, 7 September). The Human Resource Department (HRD) handled the case and a preventive suspension was meted out to the offender.

Occupational health issues

A study on safety and health conditions among workers in call centers conducted by the Occupational Health and Safety Center (OSHC) shows that the job is highly stressful and causes severe anxiety among

workers. Computer-related health disorders were also identified such as musculoskeletal disorder manifested in pain in the neck, shoulder and back areas resulting from long hours of sitting and use of computers; eye problems and hearing disorders caused by continuous telephone use.

Acoustic shocks

Variably described as “long bangs, short screams, and high pitched tones sustained by call center operators wearing headsets” (Communication Workers Union in UK 2005), acoustics shocks can lead to hearing loss. In addition, “victims of acoustic shocks may suffer from debilitating tinnitus, hyperacusis [sensitivity to certain types of noises], dysacusis [inability to hear conversation above background noise], headache, and nausea. The severity of symptoms can range from a short period of pain followed by a complete recovery to permanent symptoms causing job loss. The majority of the shock sufferers will never return to work using a headset” (Ibid.)

Risk of breast cancer

Noel Colina, Executive Director of the Institute for Occupational Health and Safety Development, noting the increasing number of women working in graveyard shift said that this type of working arrangement could pose health risk for women. He cited a study by the US-based Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center which found that women who work in graveyard shift may face up to 60% higher risk of breast cancer compared to women who never worked at night...exposure to light at night somehow interrupt melatonin production, which in turn stimulates the ovaries to kick out extra estrogen, a known hormonal promoter of breast cancer” (Aning, 2006). Colina also said that painful menstruation (dysmenorrhea), absence of menstruation (amenorrhea) or heavy menstruation (menorrhagia) are conditions related to women taking graveyard shift.

Carpal Tunnel Syndrome (CTS)

“Carpal tunnel syndrome is particularly associated with certain tasks including repetitive hand motions, awkward hand positions, strong gripping, mechanical stress on the palm and vibration. Such injury results in sensations of numbness, tingling, pain, and clumsiness of the hand. This combination of symptoms is called carpal tunnel syndrome. People with carpal tunnel syndrome experience difficulty in performing tasks such as unscrewing bottle tops, fastening buttons, or turning keys.” (Canadian Center for Occupational Health and Safety)

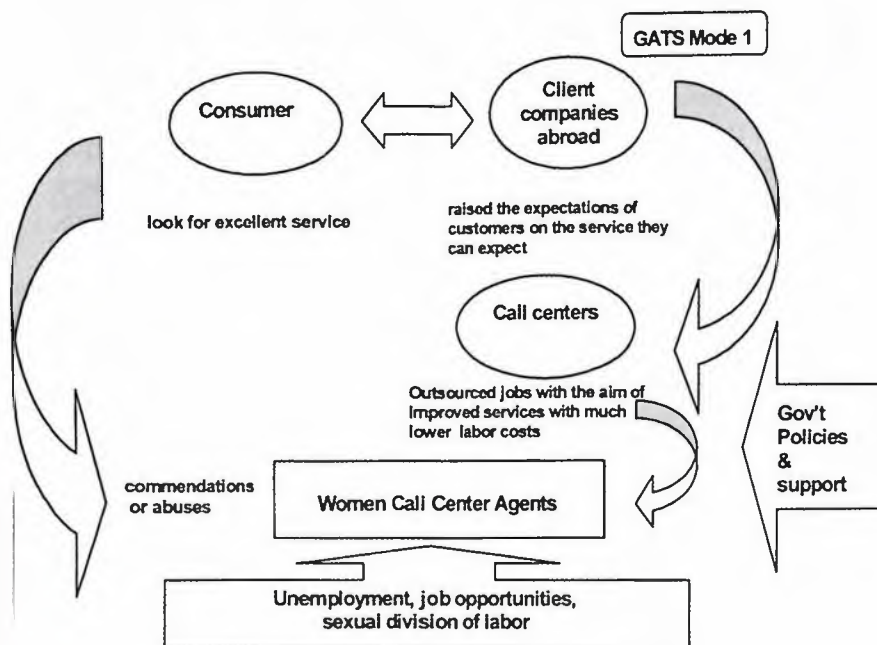
Aside from the occupational hazards mentioned above, it is equally important to look at repetitive strain injury, hazards from exposure to video display unit (VDU), eye discomfort as occupational health issues as well as other practices like giving Kreml-S to newly-hired agents. “Job strain” which occurs when high psychological demands are combined with too little decision latitude (Norman 2005) like agents working on scripts should also be given attention.

SUMMARY, REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Understanding the life of customer service agents

Figure 2 summarizes the socio-political context of call centers.

Figure 2. Context of Call Center Agents' Job



Customer's satisfaction and agent's excellent performance = company's profit

In a customer service transaction between a consumer and a company, it is understandable that a consumer would be looking for excellent quality service, foremost of which are being attended to and assisted as quickly as possible. In order to attract customer's loyalty, competing companies raise the level of expectations on their

service which consumers can expect to receive. One way companies do it is by defining "excellence" a notch higher than the prevailing standard, ensuring, for example, the promise of reduced queuing time and assurance of agents' excellent product knowledge. Frost & Sullivan research analyst Shivanu Shukla notes, "Contact centres are fast assuming increased importance in the business process as customer service becomes the key differentiator for product or service preference," (The Contact 2006). By looking at workers just as one of the factors of production, this can lead to unrealistic targets which take a heavy toll on customer agents' lives. To exemplify, an in-depth study of contact centers in catalog, retail and e-commerce done by Rama Ramaswami states that currently the median speed of answered calls is 15 seconds, median talk time is 3.5 minutes, median time in queue dropped from 20 to 18 seconds and call abandonment rate reduced from 7-10% to 3.3%. Technological inventions like ACD are designed to facilitate better operation of a call center by putting pressure on agents to "improve" their performance but not necessarily to enjoy "the fruits of the increased productivity that they themselves helped create" (Head cited in Brand 2005).

Call centers may not necessarily be a sweatshop but it is a factory nonetheless

Customer services produced in a physical environment in which shifting is the norm (since many companies operate round the clock) and chilly temperature conditions (primarily for the protection of equipment and machines), is reminiscent of workplaces in electronics industry. The relentless barrage of calls made possible by ACD, the pressure to quickly finish up an on-going call in order to take on the next call is similar to assembly line work in garments factories. In garment factories as in call centers, workers are pressured to finish a job to avoid stacking up and causing delay in the jobs of co-workers

thereby affecting company performance as a whole. The only difference in call centers is that what is stacked up and delayed is information inside the "agent's head" but the pressure to deliver is similarly high since the performance of the call center depends on the agents' productivity. Like their sisters in the garments factory, it is not easy for agents to leave the workstation and so the usual health problem is urinary tract infection. Equally important is the fact that 100 calls per shift and working on scripts prove to be monotonous work with few opportunities for career progression. "Nakakabobo," (*It Makes one Dumb*) as one agent describes her work.

Government's job creation program: How cheap can we get

The hefty salaries call center agents receive are cheap compared to the long term cost of deskilling our young workers. The lower BPO jobs that government is proud to create, entails social costs. In the short term, employment opportunities raises the economic status of a particular section of the labor force specifically the young people who are vulnerable as new entrants on the labor market since they lack work experience. Once the boom is over, our country will be left with highly educated workers who cannot get professional work because their growth has been stunted by working as glorified telephone operators.

Instead of finding ways of solving the problem of mismatch between education and job creation, market-driven education encourages the mushrooming of tutorial schools for English fluency or schools offering "courses" on call center and medical transcription. Two years ago, when the demand for caregivers abroad was high, caregiver schools suddenly flourished to respond to market demands. Clearly, this is our participation in the race to the bottom.

With the plan to push for an amendment in the Labor Code to recognize flexible work arrangements (e.g. subcontracting, flexi-work, flexi-wage) especially in business process outsourcing and cooperatives, the workers will most likely be at the losing end since based on the experiences of our workers in various industries, work is generally not decent with labor flexibility practices.

A revitalized trade union movement as a movement for social change is needed

Today, trade and domestic growth statistics are meaningless indicators of the well-being of a country or of its people. In spite of our country's continuous GDP growth, employment prospects have been deteriorating particularly for women and young people. And the surge in unemployment and underemployment leads to increased violations of workers' rights and poor working conditions.

The challenge that the social movement is facing is how to protect labor standards and trade union rights and put an end to the open-ended competition of the race to the bottom.

Still, organizing is the most important work that trade unions have to take seriously. Approaches must include international organizing of workers at both ends of the work migration. It is also imperative that the movement looks at this new global economy in relation to "the changing composition of the working people, growth of the informal economy and gender issue" (Gallin 2004). These issues when taken seriously will lead to expansion of definition of who can be organized, new strategies in organizing workers, changes in structures and programs of the unions, gender-responsive and more inclusive labor movement.

Gender lens in crafting policies and responses Why these jobs? Why women?

The impact of inequalities in access to and control of economic and social services is mediated by different roles within the society. As Cynthia Enloe asserts,

It has become commonplace to speak of 'cheap women's labor.' The phrase is used in public policy discussions as if cheapness were somehow inherent in women's work. In reality, women's work is only as rewarded or as low-paid as it is made to be.

The international political economy works in the way it does and has done for the last two centuries in part because of the decision which have cheapened the value of women's work. These decisions have first feminized certain home and workplace tasks—turning them into "women's work"—and then rationalized the valuation of that work. Without laws, cultural presumptions about sexuality, marriage and feminine respectability, these transformations wouldn't have been possible. (Enloe 1990, p. 160).

Indeed, technological changes affect the quantity and quality of women's work. In the ICT industry, labor is highly sex-segregated. Men usually occupy high skilled and therefore highly paid jobs while women are often relegated to less skilled, lower paid and least secured jobs. Though employment for women in ICT-related services has grown so fast over the past few years, women are concentrated in those services requiring routine, limited technical training and low skills. As a result of technological revolution, young women workers with low levels of education were recruited to computer-aided electronics industry in the 1980s with their 20/20 eye vision as their 'capital.' In the new millennium, young, highly educated women workers are being recruited to work in computer-aided service industry. Despite the grim reality that

they are vulnerable to sexual harassment at work and while in transit on the way to/from their graveyard shift; and to health-related illnesses due to the nature of their job, the long term impact of working as call center agents has not been given much attention and therefore lacks concrete policy responses.

On top of this, opportunity to work outside the home does not change the division of labor in the family. Married women or single mothers opt to work on nightshift or graveyard shift so they can still perform their household responsibilities during daytime.

Also, the competitive reduction of tax bases in order to attract investors and company relocations reduces the resources available for public services. And when public spending is reduced, it is women who suffer most.

In sum, while call centers might increase the spending power of women workers, the industry profits more from their labor, skills, health and relationships.

SOME POSSIBLE RESPONSES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Legislature: The right to night work, the need to be flexible

"70% of call center employees are women...Women should be allowed to benefit from the growing call center industry and be given equal treatment as men" -*Senator Mar Roxas*

In 2005, the Committee on Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR) of the International Labor Organization (ILO) reported that:

The [Philippine] government states that even though the Convention [89 on night work] is seen as no longer in tune with the times and increasing the duration of the night period to 11 hours, as prescribed by Article 2 of the ILO Convention, would be a backward move, it would not be fully ready to dismantle protective legislation for women in the name of equality. On the other hand, while recognizing that the ratification of the Protocol may appear to be a convenient option, as it would bring about a relaxation on the night work prohibition against women, the Government fears that it would give rise to massive requests for exemptions from several sectors or industry (ILO 2005).

To date, six legislators have filed bills related to night work for women. Senator Roxas authored SB #2071 aimed at amending three provisions in the Labor Code. The bill argues that workers who work in the graveyard shift (10pm-6am) should be given free medical check-up to ensure fitness for night work and be provided with free rides from their work sites to areas where public transportation is readily available. It further explains that workers should be allowed to work under compressed or flexible time arrangement. Roxas also reasons that night work prohibition should be repealed in consonance with Convention 171 (1990) on Night Work. Senators Estrada and Defensor-Santiago also filed bills related to nightwork. In the House of Representatives, Congresswoman Imee Marcos calls for the abolition of night work prohibition as it is very discriminatory and not gender fair while the other two bills look at expanding exemptions from night work.

To realize its efforts in job creation, the Executive plans to “issue administrative guidelines and propose legislative amendments to the Labor Code to recognize flexible work arrangements (e.g. subcontracting, flexi-work, flexi-wage) especially in business process outsourcing and cooperatives. However, this shall take into consideration the promotion of decent work and respect for core labor standards.” (Chapter 9 Labor, MTPDP 2004-2010, p. 112).

Unions: Facing Up to the Challenge of the Global Mobility Revolution

KMU had referred to call centers as "air-conditioned hubs for exploiting workers"...Interestingly, unionization can help stem attrition and job-hopping since workers will be given bargaining power and will be provided a forum to resolve work-related issues. Ironically, the apparent transient nature of the job is hampering efforts to organize unions.— Raffy David, CCAP director

For the Union Network International (UNI), the global union federation (GUF) for skills and service workers, call centers are "a far cry from the sweatshops of old, yet the work can be highly stressful, opportunities for career progression limited by a flat grading structure and staff turnover can be high" (UNI 2006, p 2).

While organizing challenges seems insurmountable, UNI believes that unions should take these difficulties into opportunities in crafting effective strategies leading to unionization of call center workers. This is anchored on the aim that good employment conditions and workers' representation must be ensured in the global operations of the employer company, regardless of the country where operations are located. Quoting Christopher Ng, regional secretary of UNI Asia Pacific Regional Office, he remarked: "We should not make the mistake of confusing the difficulties facing unions in organizing the unorganized and the real need for such organization" (Ng 2001, p. 108).

Internationally, there are a number of agreed codes of practices and guidelines which unions see as possible labor tools in ensuring that labor standards are respected. These are:

- ILO Declaration of fundamental principles and rights at work

The Declaration was adopted in 1998 and commits Member States to respect and promote principles and rights in four categories, whether or not they have ratified the relevant Conventions. These categories are: freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining, the elimination of forced or compulsory labor, the abolition of child labor and the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.

- OECD Guidelines for MNEs

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is the organization of industrialized countries engaged primarily in economic research and political dialogue. Its member states are home to practically all multinational corporations (MNCs) (Folke 2004). OECD is an international governmental organization but trade unions (through the Trade Union Advisory Committee [TUAC]) and the business sector (through Business and Investment Advisory Committee [BIAC]) of the member countries have consultative voice in the organization. The Guidelines are a set of rules and principles for good business conduct of MNCs which are recommended to OECD governments.

- UN Global Compact

This is a joint initiative of leading representatives of business, labor and civil society to foster action and partnership in the pursuit of good corporate citizenship. It is one of the many initiatives advocating for what is referred to as “corporate social responsibility.”

- International framework agreements

These are code agreements on labor standards negotiated between a TNC and a Global Union Federation (GUF) concerning the international activities of the company. Though IFA may be limited in cases where jobs are outsourced, "recent framework agreements have at least tried to extend the basic agreed principles to situations where companies are using sub-contractors" (Bibby 2004).

UNI reports that in other developing countries, like India, other forms of organizations are being explored. For example, instead of calling an organization of workers a union, they call it "forums". It is a deliberate decision in order to encourage potential members who have no tradition of trade unionism to join the organization. While in Europe, initiatives are underway in order to protect union members' jobs.

In Spain, Telefonica unions and the company cooperate in a training program that provides at least 35 hours of off the job training a year and allows employees- who contribute to the training fund – to build up qualifications. The union believes that the more qualifications a worker possess the greater the possibility of promotion. In France, unions are monitoring a government Social Label Scheme awarded to call center companies that accept corporate social responsibility and help improve the poor image of the industry there. The scheme has financial incentives – companies with the label can apply for government contracts. (UNI 2006)

Here at home, Jose Umali, Secretary-General of the Union Network International-Philippine Liaison Council (UNI-PLC) proposes a new framework in organizing call center workers. Figure 3 summarizes this proposal.

Figure 3. Comparative Organizing/Organizational Framework

	Proposed Organizing/ Organizational Framework for Call Center Workers	Traditional Union Organizing/Organizational Framework
Organization Form	Industry-based/ Profession-based association or organization	Enterprise based-trade union
Central issues around which organizing is done	Health and safety, quality of working environment, employment security	Wages and benefits, working conditions, job security
Initial services that will be offered by organization	Skills enhancement and development, job counseling	Collective bargaining negotiations, grievance handling, legal services
Method of determining wages, benefits and working conditions	Industry/profession standards-setting eventually leading to firm- level collective bargaining	Firm-level collective bargaining agreement

Source: Jose Umali, *Strategies and Techniques For Organizing and Recruiting Workers in Customer Service Centers in the Philippines: 2005*

Solidarity at work

More than ever, it is crucial to take a broader look at what ‘workers solidarity’ means. The struggle for democratic rights and for trade union rights is one of the clearest expressions of a common international labor movement: the converging interest of those, on one end of the scale, who struggle to rise from conditions of near slavery and those, at the other end, who are defending rights and standards acquired after difficult and bitter struggles which are eroding under the impact of globalization (Gallin 1997). Practical solidarity work is now being encouraged between unions in developed and developing countries. An important component of this is the recognition that organizations of workers different from the traditional union structure are being set-up in new industries. Another important aspect of solidarity work is forging strategic partnership with other civil society organizations and NGOs which are also concerned with the implication of globalization and challenging its existing form.

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Interviews

Olive [agent], August 24 (5:00 – 7:00 pm)
Jonas [agent], September 2 (10:00 am – 12:00 nn)
Leila [team leader], September 7 (10:00 am – 12:00 nn)
Tony [team leader], September 3 (10:00 – 12:00 nn)

Focus Group Discussions

FGD 1 with 4 participants, September 10 (10:00 am – 1:00 pm)
FGD 2 with 4 participants, September 14 (10:00 am – 12:00 nn)

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