

## IMPACT OF WORKING ENVIRONMENT ON THE HEALTH OF WOMEN EMPLOYEES WORKING IN BPO

*Prof. Mankurani Agarwal<sup>1</sup>*

### ABSTRACT

With the enactment of LPG i.e. Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization almost all the multinational companies are now booming, and BPO is one of them. This paper highlights the rapid growth in the call center in developing countries like India. India is known as the BPO destination and it is expected to grow more than 20% a year. It then makes a case for investigation of health of women employees working in BPO sector in India. The analysis is based on working environment which includes pick-up and drop facility, shift timings, food habits, employee and employers relationship. A research approach comprising of in depth interviews and questionnaire survey was adopted to conduct the investigation. The findings highlight various health problems that the women employees are facing in BPO's. The analysis further provides the information both for women employees and the HR manager of the BPO sector. The results show that major health problems are of stress, back-pain, monotony and digestive disorders. The data collected from the interviews, revealed that employees do not feel secure and poor eyesight was also prevalent. Short duration of shifts, proper women counseling, flexi-timings and health awareness programmes, are some of the measures that can be taken to cope with the health problems of women employees.

**Key-terms:** working environment, stress, call center, digestive-disorders etc.

### OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

1. To study the environment in which the women employees are working
2. To find out various problems faced by women employees
3. To find out the causes for various problems
4. To find out measures taken by BPO companies to prevent such health problem

### 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

Primary data was collected from BPO companies from Pune. The sample size of 55 women employees working in BPO was taken for the study. The random sampling method was used for the same. A questionnaire used to collect data. It had both closed-ended and open ended questions. The questions were sub-divided into various headings such as Personal information, working environment information and employee's health care information. The questions were designed in order to find out how various factors like working environment, food habits, quality of food, duty hours, shift stability, break-timings etc. have an impact on the health of women employees. An in-depth interview was also conducted on 9 women employees for certain additional details regarding health related questions. The data collected was tabulated and graphically analyzed in terms of percentage bar diagram.

#### **Secondary data:**

The necessary secondary data has been collected through the Library Research method

- Books and other Publication
- Articles and Research Papers
- Journals, Periodicals, Magazines, Newspapers

- Published Reports of BPO Companies
- Websites

### 3. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY:-

- The present research study focus on the health problem of women customer care executive and not other(managerial level, Human Resources manager, housekeeping etc.)
- ITES company is not being a part of selected sample companies
- The study is restricted to BPO in Pune.
- Only health problems are taken into account for investigation not the other aspects such as satisfaction, pay-scale, incentives, growth etc.
- Sample size being very small

### 4. DEFINITION OF THE TERM USED IN STUDY

- a. **BPO:** The broadest definition in the call center literature is that provided by Norling, who states “a call center is any communications platform from which firms deliver services to customers via remote, real-time contact”.
- b. **Women employees: Only women customer care executive is taken for study**
- c. **Health includes:**
  - Stress
  - Headache
  - Digestive Disorders
  - Sleeplessness
  - Back pain
- d. **BPO for study:** offshore or international BPO
- e. **Working Environment:**
  - Pick-up & Drop (Transport)
  - Working Hours
  - Performance Standard
  - Quality Performance
  - Change in Shifts timings
  - Night Shift
  - Meal quality
  - Duration of break-time

### 5. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The review of literature has done as under:

1. According to the study conducted by **Hema Gulati and Dr. Sunita Bishnoi<sup>1</sup>**, Hr Manager need to put in efforts on the development of their employee, building innovative and motivational schemes (which was money so far) and making environment more livelier.
2. **Smita and Balkrishan in March 2011.**<sup>2</sup>60.2% population complains about headache, followed by digestive disorders 45.9%. Employees were also found complaining about short temper and feeling of irritation, complete sense of exhaustion, cold, restless sleep, lack of concentration, muscular and cardiovascular disorder and lack of appetite.

<sup>1</sup> Hema, sunita in Jan 2011, Challenges for HR Managers in Indian BPO industry with respect to Attrition, International Journal of Management, Volume 2 No 1

<sup>2</sup>Smita and Balkrishan in March 2011, A Critical Study on Work-life Balance of BPO Employees in India,international conference on Technology and Management, Sinhgad institute of Management and School Pune

Almost all problems were found to be in maximum existence in the age-group 20-25 yrs as this being the group of maximum strength.

3. Amrita Gupta <sup>3</sup>The odd timing of work results in the reversal in the biological clock, which results in numerous health problems. Apart from health the social life of the women, employees also suffer as working in the night results in them being cut-off from their social life. The night work, high work pressure and social alienation leads to high levels of stress among the women and therefore in order to continue working in the Call Centres the women need to cope up with the stress and get constant support parental support.
4. **Sanjeev Sharma**<sup>4</sup>:- It is desirable to employ professional HR Professionals with knowledge of Human Psychology in BPO units/call centers. The services offered by professionals may not be felt in the initial stages. The professionals can do wonders in BPO sectors as well. People are the backbone of BPO industry and it is certain that professional HR or Human Psychologist can make inroad in this emerging organization and facilitate the growth of organization in an immense way.
5. **Sarika Kulkarni**,<sup>5</sup> :-Suggested that in most BPO industries there exist health issues due to high stress and other medical problems. This problem generally occurs in offshore call centers.

## I. INTRODUCTION

BPO that is Business Process Outsourcing which can be defined by Gartner Dataguest as “The delegation of one or more IT-intensive business processes to an external provider who, in turn, owns, administrates and manages the selected process, based upon defined and measurable performance metrics”. Out sourcing can be defined as “an organization entering into contract with another organization to operate and manage one or more operations”.

The purpose of the study is to examine whether there are any health issues for women employees working in a BPO. If so, then to what extent the BPO companies may be able to manage these issues. It is important to address these issues as more than 36% of the total employees working in BPO's consist of women employees. A BPO is one where the nature of job is of great importance, as one is directly interacting with the client, customers and with the immediate boss as well. Handling irate customers who are not satisfied with the service or whose problem is not solved or whose services are pending also becomes a difficult task for employees. However, employees have to ensure that customers on line should not be kept waiting for a long time. It should be short and very specific. Again BPO's work for 24/7 and 365 days, all these are divided in various shifts which consist of 8.5 to 9.5 hrs of which 1 hour is assigned for a break and remaining time is purely log-in time. BPO companies also have to maintain quality and quantity standards in terms of time, number of calls handled, soft-skills, log-in time etc. Other than the, 8.5 to 9.5 hrs of shift timings the employees also have to spend time on transportation which on an average comes to 1.5 hrs per day. These are some major factors that give rise to health problems for the employees working in BPO's. The total hours that a woman employee spends in the BPO comes around 54 hours a week wherein it is observed that they can work only for 48 hours (Factories Act 1948, Working Time Regulations ). Out of the total

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<sup>3</sup>Amrita Gupta, Health, Social and Psychological Problems of Women Employees in Business Process Outsourcing: A Study in India\* as a Doctoral work in India.

<sup>4</sup> Sanjeev Sharma, Feb 2010, Human issues in Call Center and BPO Industry a report,

<sup>5</sup>Sarika Kulkarni, 2005, Business process Outsourcing, Jaico Publishing House, First edition.

employees who are customer care executives, 40 % are women who include both married and unmarried. The married woman has more responsibility than the unmarried; hence their health concern becomes a major issue. Besides these BOSS which means Burn out Stress Syndrome is seen very commonly among young people working in BPO's. The symptoms of this syndrome include chronic fatigue, insomnia and complete alteration of 24 hours biological rhythm of the body. Gastrointestinal problems are inevitable for those working at night as the body is put under chronic stress. A potentially fatal increase in heart rhythm can result in severe chronic gynecological problems and sleep disorders in women employees. This study addresses the various health issues that women employees face.

## **II Concept of BPO/ Call Centre**

Types of call are often divided into outbound and inbound. Inbound calls are made by customers to obtain information, report a malfunction, or ask for a help. These calls are substantially different from outbound calls, where agent place calls to customer with intention for selling product or services to an individual.

Call centre staff are often organized into multi-tier support system for a more efficient handling of calls. The first tier in such a model consists of operators, who direct enquires to an appropriate department and provide general directory information. If callers require more assistance, calls are forwarded to the second tier, where most issues can be resolved. In some cases, there may be three or more tiers of support staff. If a caller requires more assistance then the call may get transferred to third or fourth tier of support; typically the third tier of support is formed by a product engineer/developers or highly-skilled technical support staff of the product.

## **III Growth and Development of BPO industry**

1. The industry has been growing rapidly. It grew at a rate of 38% over 2005. For the FY06 financial year the projections is of US\$7.2 billion worth of services provided by this industry. The base in terms of headcount being roughly 400,000 people directly employed in this industry.
2. The global BPO Industry is estimated to be worth 120-150 billion dollars, of this the offshore BPO is estimated to be some US\$11.4 billion. India thus has some 5-6% share of the total industry, but a commanding 63% share of the offshore component. The U.S \$7.2 billion also represents some 20% of the IT and BPO industry which is in total expected to have revenues worth US\$36 billion for 2006. The
3. Headcount at 400,000 is some 40% of the approximate one million workers estimated to be directly employed in the IT and BPO Sector.
4. The related industry dependent on this are Catering, BPO training and recruitment, transport vendors, (home pick up and drops for night shifts being the norm in the industry). Security agencies, Facilities management companies.

## **IV. Relevance of the Study:-**

1. 33.33% approximately strength consist of women employees in BPO. The study becomes important as the role of women, in development of economy is equally important
2. The working environment consist of various factors some of which may not be good for the health of women employees hence this leads to study.

3. BPO industry is expected to grow more than 20% a year, growth of BPO for the development of economy is very vital as it provides employment to millions of people.
4. Development of BPO Industry leads to the development of other related services such as infrastructure, per capita income, technology, lifestyle, and income, employment to unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled workers.
5. India is known as the BPO Destination, to maintain the same status and position in worldwide development of BPO industry is important.

#### **V. CAUSES FOR HEALTH PROBLEM AMONG WOMEN EMPLOYEE:**

High standard performance

Long working hours which is generally around 12-13 Hrs (including pickup & drop)

Frequent changes in shifts timing, within a month, or quarter

Other responsibilities (personal), commitments

Insecurity in transportation

Nature of Job (continuous answering on call)

Body position during work (no movements)

Long gap between break timings

#### **VI. HUMAN ISSUES IN BPO INDUSTRY**

The human issues are similar to Taylorist principles which frequently results in employee burnout.

Brown, intensely, exemplifies the work as “repetitive brain strain”. These metaphors are hardly amazing, in a way, given that call centers are well-known by organizations to “create an environment in which work can be standardized to create relatively uniform and repetitious activities so as to achieve economies of scale and consistent quality of customer service”. This means, in other words, that offices are planned in ways that decline employee autonomy and improve the potential for management control, and “a loss of control is generally understood to be an important indicator of work-related stress” Call center work is stressful is a universal truth. The earlier research also suggest that the although there is element of satisfaction ,overall the work is stressful.

#### **VII. Key stress Generators**

##### **1. ‘Can we get off the phone for a while?’**

The primary source of stress reported is inherent to the nature of the job: spending all day on the phone dealing with people one after another, day after day, is difficult. Doing it under constant pressure to keep call volumes up, with no time between calls to “recover from an awkward call or from ‘customer rejection’” is even more difficult. And doing it with very “little authority or autonomy to rectify problems” that arise is perhaps the most difficult of all.

##### **2. Quality/Quantity conflict:**

Call center are rooted in contradictory tension and structural paradoxes, and confront a number of trade-offs on that basis. These set a context for attitudes towards the organization and can impose conflicting role requirements on agents. A core example is that of the pressure for quantity versus the aspiration for quality, the guiding logic of which is the conundrum of trying to get closer to the customer while routinising, centralizing, reducing costs and prescribing standards.

The practice of ongoing work practice modification and target revision as management swings from one side to another of the quality/quantity debate is a major source of stress for call center agents.

### 3. Intensity:

As Bain (2001) argues, “far from being either in terminal decline or on the wane, Taylorism-in conjunction with a range of other control mechanisms-is not only alive, well and deeply embedded in the call center labor process, but its malevolent influences appears to be spreading to previously uncharted territory”. There is a widespread consensus that “call centers are a new, and particularly effective, manifestation of the increasingly capital intensive ‘industrialization’ of service sector work, and work performed in them is highly intensive and routine”.

### 4. Targets:

There is a fourth feature of some call center work that may endanger stress: performance targets. There are various types of target, which may vary between inbound and outbound centers; inbound centers typically have targets for call duration, ‘wrap up time’, and daily call volume. Outbound centers often also have sales or completion targets, which are closely monitored and upon which pay may be primarily based. In addition, in some sectors, inbound call centers are attempting to introduce the practice of cross selling, where agents attempt to sell additional products to the customers who call in for another purpose. In these centers, sales targets similar to those in outbound centers are often in place.

## VIII. OTHER HEALTH ISSUES.....

As most of the call center work is at night shift, the work becomes more stressful. High rates of absenteeism and sick leaves reported yet very little investigation is done with regards to the core reasons particularly when compared to turnover.

The outcome of forceful, demanding work may be a consequence on worker’s health. For example, Richardson, Belt and Marshall write that “Health concerns have been expressed, including tension, sleeplessness, headaches, eye-strain, repetitive strain injury (RSI), voice loss, hearing problems and burn-out”, More detailed description of the causes and effects of these ailments can be found in industry and trade union reports.

Few health issues including stress, noise levels, musculoskeletal disorders (such as back pain) and voice loss, and also at display screen issues, working environments, requirements for work stations, daily work routines, training, organizational working practices and shifts can be seen .

- Sleeping Disorders
- Digestive System Related Disorders
- Depression
- Severe Stomach Related Problems
- Eyesight Problems
- Ear Problems

### Remedial Measures for Stress Management in Call Centers

Stress is an inevitable part of a call center job and HR- heads have to properly undertake remedial measures towards stress management in BPO industry. This helps yield maximum efficiency out of the work force.

The consequences to stress can be physically as well as mentally daunting. This also significantly reduces the chances of meeting the goal efficiently. Stress could be due to the pressure of meeting targets, monotony of the work, quantity/quality conflict etc.

Recognizing and becoming aware of the symptoms of stress is the first step towards dealing with stress and undergoing healing process. These symptoms might be physical signs or emotional signs.

### 1. Managing stress in call centers

Defusing the tensed atmosphere with occasional jokes and light-hearted humor can be good way to keep away a stressful environment. This trend could be implemented with the management's support. There are several organizations which implement stress management programs as part of training.

There is a three-tiered approach to dealing with stress efficiently. These remedial measures include practical or behavioral techniques, relaxation techniques as well as thinking or cognitive techniques.

### 2. Behavioral or practical approaches

Behavioural or practical techniques are effective methods since the utilization of these methods is under the person's control.

- It includes exercise and eating healthy.
- It involves abstaining from alcohol, sugar, caffeine etc. These agents cause fatigue and increased mood swings.
- It also involves giving the body sufficient rest so that it can make itself immune against further stress.
- One of the techniques is to schedule time for leisure. This helps a person lead a balanced life.
- Other helpful strategies include preparing in advance for any recurrent stressors through efficient time management, delegating responsibility, not procrastinating, setting limits and priorities etc.

### 3. Relaxation approaches

Relaxation techniques include a lot of methods that are devised to rid the mind and body of tension. Some of the approaches are listed below.

- Progressive muscle relaxation: This is a major relaxation technique which allows the person to relax each of the major muscle groups individually. This gets rid of muscle tension and relaxes the body.
- Listening to music, using saunas, hot tubs etc., reading and so on.
- Meditation focuses the mental energy onto more positive thoughts thus dispelling distracting and stressful thoughts from the mind.
- Visual imagery helps the person visualize himself as dealing with a stressor that plagues him efficiently. This goes a long way in helping the person deal with that particular stressor.

### 4. Thinking or cognitive approach

The thinking or cognitive approach is now being widely implemented in stress management programs due to its effectiveness. This approach enables a person to view a threatening event appraisal as one that is a manageable challenge and thus controls stress effectively.

There are three steps in this approach.

- The first step of this approach is to identify stress-producing thoughts.
- The second step is to ponder the consequences of these stress-producing thoughts. The realization of these consequences will inculcate motivation to change these thoughts.

- The third step of the approach involves challenging these thoughts and replacing them with more positive and productive thoughts. This helps the person become emotionally healthy and helps him behave in rational and productive manner.

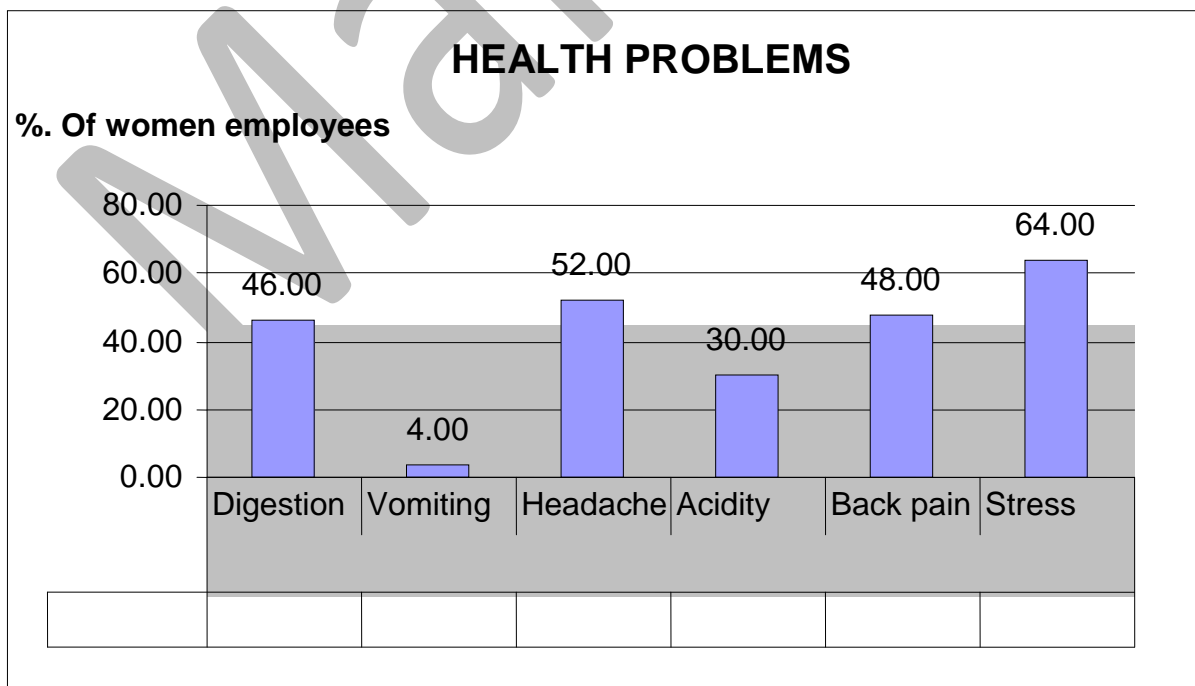
These methods, if followed, can yield an effective process of stress management in BPO industry. It is recommended that HR professionals having knowledge in Human Psychology is hired in call centers.

### IX. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A majority of the respondent women employees belonged to the age of 22-25 years, out of which most of them were graduates. Majority of women employees faced health problems like stress, back-pain and digestion problems. In terms of working hours, 76% of women employees worked for more than 10 hours while others worked for 9-10 hours. When the quality of food was evaluated, 34% of women employees replied that the food quality was very poor, while 64% responded that food quality was good and remaining 2% responded that the quality was excellent. Other major health issues are also shown in the figure given below. In terms of tenure of job 67% of women employees had been working for only 1 year, 23% for 1-2 years and 10% for more than 2 years. The findings from the interview also revealed that women employees do face other illness problems like low hemoglobin levels, poor eye-sight, back pain and weakness as well. The employees suggested that they do not find themselves secure working in the BPO, as they could not rely on the driver of the cab was used to pick up and drop them at their residence.

Age group, physical fitness of employee, working hours etc. also affects the health of the women employees working in a BPO. It was also found that married women were more prone to the health issues than unmarried women in terms of stress and back pain problems. The findings also suggested that women working for more than 1.5 years were facing more health issues than women who were working less than 1.5 years in BPO's.

**FIG.1.1**





## CONCLUSION

The study revealed that almost all women employees working in BPOs faced major health problems. This was more true for married women rather than the unmarried women as married women had to balance their work life with home life and had greater responsibility towards their homes/children. In case of unmarried women who had worked for more than 2 years, the health problems faced were more than those of unmarried women employees who had worked for shorter periods of time. Stress, back pain, weakness, improper digestion, poor eyesight and sleeping disorders were the major health problems that were faced by the women employees working in BPOs. Though the meal was provided by the BPO in a subsidized rate, the quality of meal was not as per the standard. This needs immediate attention. Health magazine and other journals related to health was also not provided in most of the BPO's, this, while in some BPO's women employees do not have time to read such journals as they have to rush to their home. This also can be avoided by providing them on their system, so that when they log-in it will automatically reflect and women employees can better go through .Managing employee health issues in a contact center environment is challenging because turnover in this industry is always likely to be higher than in others. For any industry, one of the most effective tools is empowerment. Regular health check-ups which should include stress test, hemoglobin level test, blood pressure test, calcium test etc. can be incorporated which gives an idea of the health of the women as well as other employees. Regular counseling, rewards and recognition, other welfare programmes, annual functions, get togethers; Job Enrichment, trips etc. are the other step that can be taken in order to maintain a friendly and cheerful environment in the organization.

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