The Role of Communication Variables in Influencing Job Retention of Filipino Call Center Agents in Metro Manila and Region 6

NIEL KENNETH JAMANDRE

THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION VARIABLES IN INFLUENCING JOB RETENTION OF FILIPINO CALL CENTER AGENTS IN METRO MANILA AND REGION 6

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The Philippines is the leading Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) destination in Asia, according to the IBM Latest Global Locations Trend Annual Report. Call centers comprise 70 percent of the BPO operations. In the last quarter of 2010, the total number of Filipinos working in call centers was around 350,000 compared to 330,000 in India. BPO operations are mostly in Metro Manila, Makati, Ortigas, Alabang, and Quezon City. As Manila-based call centers experience talent saturation, companies have expanded operations in key cities and provinces in the Philippines. This research analyzes communication factors that influence Filipino call center agents or Customer Service Representatives (CSRs) to stay in a company. It also aims to compare the job retention factors of CSRs who work in Metro Manila with those in Region 6. The study uses the Organizational Assimilation Theory by Fred Jablin as the theoretical framework, and the methods used to gather data were survey and focus group discussion. Interview data were then analyzed qualitatively. Survey data on communication variables were subjected to Factor Analysis, and comparisons

across groups were assessed using t-test and ANOVA. Findings show that there are significant relationships among the CSRs' intention to stay with the company and their communication skills, customer relationship, work environment, relationship with peers, and length of stay. CSRs in Region 6 also appear to have a higher probability of staying in a company compared to those who work in Metro Manila.

Introduction

GLOBAL CONTACT HAS BECOME A MAJOR COMPONENT for businesses in this digital age. Companies expand their market to increase profit by using different modes of technology and engaging in offshore transactions. Telemarketing is a marketing method where an agent contacts a potential customer through a telephone or connection in order to purchase products or services such as insurance, to solicit, and to sell credit card (McDonald 1998).

However, international companies have resorted to outsourcing because of the challenges in global economic competition. Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) is an outsourcing of services for a period of four to six years with an ultimate goal of lowering operation costs (Abu and Matias 2003).

The Philippines is a major BPO destination in Asia—there were 125 BPO firms as of 2007 (Amante 2010). An increasing number of international organizations report that the Philippines is the closest competitor of India. The National Outsourcing Association of United Kingdom ranks Manila as the third top global outsourcing city, and Cebu as the best emerging offshoring city (Valmero 2010). The advantages of BPO operations in the Philippines include higher tax incentives, infrastructure, and the quality of human resources particularly the cultural affinity of the Filipinos to the Americans, their neutral accent, and their ability to speak idiomatic American English (Esguerra and Balana 2010).

The BPO is expanding to regional hubs or next wave cities in the Philippines, offering employment opportunities to urban areas outside Metro Manila, such as Laguna, Baguio, Davao, Iloilo, and Bacolod. The cities of Iloilo and Bacolod are part of Region 6 and are among the Top 10 Next Wave Cities 2009 in the reports of the Business Processing Association of the Philippines (BPAP), Commission on Information and Communications Technology, and the Department of Trade and Industry; Iloilo is considered the most cost-efficient city offering the lowest average wage, rental and power rates and Bacolod is considered the best business environment (Ho 2009).

The BPO industry is divided into call or contact centers, back office services, like finance and accounting, data processing and management, and human resource development. Call centers comprise 70 percent of BPO operations (Esguerra and Balana 2010). Call or contact centers serve as a model for multipurpose interaction such as selling, servicing, and marketing that serves the needs of various constituents of an organization (e.g., customers, prospects, suppliers, distributors, and employees either in-house or outsourced) (Abu and Matias 2003).

The International Labor Organization's (ILO) report entitled "Offshoring and Working Conditions in Remote Work" claims that Filipino BPO employees earn an average basic monthly salary of P16,928 which is 53 percent more than that of their peers in other industries in the Philippines. The profile of the BPO workforce is young, college level or graduates, and composed of mostly female employees. They work for an average of 44.7 hours per week and 42.6 percent of BPO employees (51.7 percent are call center positioare in graveyard shifts coinciding with the daytime hours of overseas customers, mostly from the US, the Canada, Australia, and other English-speaking countries (as cited in Esguerra and Balana 2010).

A call center agent or a customer service representative (CSR) usually undergoes a rigorous recruitment and screening process to ensure that only highly qualified individuals are hired. The common procedures for selection include phone screening, initial interview, examination, final interview, simulation, and assessment. The training program in the call centers initially include importing to the applicants, knowledge of the organization, product, customer, guidelines for procedures, office procedures, customer escalation procedures, hours of operation, quality calls, computer systems, enhancing their communication skills, and monitoring (Jamandre 2008).

Calls handled by CSRs are generally either inbound or outbound. Telemarketing, advisories, sales verification, credit and collection, reaction or reinstatement of accounts, loyalty program benefits, and order entry are covered by outbound calls. On the other hand, inbound calls include inquiries, requests for technical advice or assistance, complaints, customer service, support, transcription, sales, marketing anbilling. Because CSRs answer about seventy to eighty calls per shift, they must possess superior listening skills and the ability to deliver information at the customer's knowledge level in an understandable manner. They must also have basic computer and keyboard skills, excellent communication skills including a confident and courteous tone of voice, the capability to empathize with the customer, and effectively handle irate customers (Amante 2010).

Despite the promise of this sunshine industry, there are two pressing issues that need to be carefully studied: (1) the hiring ratio of only eight (8) of 100 applicants and (2) the high attrition rate of 57 percent among call center agents according to the Contact Center Association of the Philippines (CCAP).

Phillips and Connell (2003) define "retention" as the percentage of employees remaining in the organization and "turnover" as the percentage of employees leaving the organization for whatever reason(s). Sharp (2003) states that 85 percent of

CSRs have personal reasons/choices for leaving, while 15 percent are terminated. Among the top reasons why CSRs resign are career change, problem with the manager, negative stereotyping of their competence and nationality, minimal control of their work schedule, and lack of optimism on how their position can foster growth opportunities. To address these, employees need to be attracted, recognized, and rewarded. Sharp (2003) cites the following motivation factors for call center agents: higher wages, ideal working conditions, challenging work, management appreciation, job security, promotion and career path opportunities, involvement in planning, employer loyalty, tactful human resource policies, coaching, and training. According to Gina Hechanova (2009), the intention of leaving the company is usually associated with age, career commitment, burnout, dissatisfaction with pay, the boss, and responsibilities, and unfair firm management and promotions.

This research aims to identify, compare and analyze the communication variables that influence job retention of call center agents in Metro Manila and Region 6. A communication variable is a characteristic to which numbers can be assigned (Reinard 2001). It is operationalized in this study as a communication element which can have two or more values that influence the job retention of call center agents (e.g., "#1 I speak well in the English language" and "#48 I have an effective team leader and supervisor relationship") with values based on a four-point Likert scale of "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," and "strongly disagree." The independent variables are the ninety-two communication items and the respondents' age, sex, socioeconomic status, actual employment status (employed or resigned), and length of stay in the company while the dependent variable is their intention of either to stay with or leave the company. Hence, this study hypothesizes that (1) the communication variables and demographic information of the call center agents have a significant relationship in influencing the CSR's intention to stay in a company, and that (2) call center agents in Region 6 have the intention to stay longer in a company than their counterparts in Manila.

Research Problem

How do communication variables influence job retention of call center agents in Metro Manila and Region 6?

Objectives:

1. To identify the communication variables that influence job retention of call center agents in Metro Manila and Region 6; and
2. To compare and analyze the communication variables that influence job retention of call center agents in Metro Manila and Region 6.

Significance of the Study

The local call center industry continues to generate thousands of jobs with an annual growth rate of 15 percent with an estimated 400,000 people currently hired. By 2016, the Philippine BPO is projected to be a $25 industry with 1.3 million employees (Esguerra and Balana 2010). The local call center industry in particular, aims to provide more employment opportunities to Filipinos. This study contributes to a growing number of studies using a communication framework in addressing the issue on attrition in call centers. The results serve as recruitment criteria to assess the likelihood of an applicant to stay with or leave a company and may also be used in developing job retention programs in training modules (Jamandre 2008). In addition, academic institutions and the private sector could consider the results in developing curricula and promoting the career of graduates.

While there are studies on occupational health risks, employment issues, and how to generally retain BPO employees, only a few are in-depth studies on job retention in the call center industry, let alone a comparison of retention, between Metro Manila and regional sites. Hence, my study aims to contribute to the local studies on the behavior of the Filipino call center agents and its

implications on their work. The study fills in certain gaps in human resource management, occupational psychology, and business and communication research.

Related Literature

The BPO in the Philippines started in the 1990s when industries patterned the business models of foreign corporations which were adapted in the Philippine setting. Dubbed as the "sunshine industry" of BPO operations, call centers continue to expand and aggressively attract clients and employees. Job fairs and job advertisements in all forms of media are by BPO firms (Amante 2010).

The call center workforce is comprised of young professionals whose average age is 23 years old and about 80 percent of new hires are fresh college graduates (Villafania 2010). High pay and peer influence arethe most common reasons cited for working in BPOs. Male employees whose technical positions are related to Computer Science and Engineering, plan to work longer and earn bigger than their female counterparts because of their capability to manage burnout (Jamandre 2008). They are entitled to a number of benefits including night differential pay, commissions, study incentives, allowances, bonuses, and office privileges, like food, coffee, sleeping quarters, recreational facilities and other nonmonetary incentives. As a young workforce, the employees intend to work an average of thirty-three months before they transfer to another company or change professions. They cite the following reasons for leaving: better compensation in other companies, offer of higher position, high intensity of stress of the current job based on metric evaluations, unpleasant customer behavior, strict monitoring, holiday work schedule, occupational safety, emotional and health issues, monotony of the work, and lack of professional growth and employee involvement in management decisions (Amante 2010; as cited in Esguerra and Balana 2010). Barrios and Patawaran (2004) explain that CSRs are "present-oriented," an attribute of a person who values present outcomes rather than the effects of future events.

Since high attrition rate results in additional expenses for recruiting, hiring and training, industry leaders are optimistic that this trend will decrease and stabilize in the next few years as companies continue to research on turnover factors and effective intervention programs. Such studies will affect recruitment strategies as well. There is even a proposal among BPO companies to adopt a Code of Ethics to address the competition among talents and employee transfers (Amante 2010).

According to Wieters (2007), there is a need to develop a Predictive Index to measure the person-job fit among call center agents wherein the compatibility of the behavioral characteristics of an employee and the "characteristics" of the call center job is measured. In addition, the studies of Gray (2009), Nicholson (2009), Chu (2008), and Ramesh (2007) on organizational commitment and job satisfaction of call center employees show that they are motivated to continue working by (1) positive supervisory relationship, (2) knowledge and contribution of individual role to customer service, (3) teamwork, and (4) organization and family embeddedness (i.e., family proximity and the relationship of the individual to the organization and community in the context of organizational fit, link, and community in the context of organizational fit, link, and sacrifice).

The studies mentioned show the dynamic operations of the BPO particularly in call centers. Because CSRs as frontlines, are an important component in the growth of the industry, this study aims to contribute and strengthen the bases of those aforementioned factors that lead to the job retention of CSRs.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses the Organizational Assimilation Theory (OAT) by Fred Jablin as framework. Jablin (1987, 755) defines assimilation as "those ongoing behavioral and cognitive processes by which individuals join, become integrated into, and exit organizations."

It becomes a dual process based on socialization and individualization. The former refers to the formal and informal situations when the organization encourages the individual to be accustomed, while the latter refers to the attempts of the individual to alter several facets of the organization to suit his or her needs (as cited in Miller 2006). The theory explains the role of the communication process in intervening with the relationship between the individual and the organization, specifically during the stages of organizational entry, assimilation (i.e., consisting of anticipatory socialization stage, encounter stage, and metamorphosis stage), and the exit processing of employees.

> Organizational assimilation is made up of a chain of events, activities, message exchanges, interpretations and related processes—essentially 'links'—in which individuals use what they have learned in the past to understand new organizational situations and contexts, and as appropriate realign, reshape, reorder, overlap, or fabricate new links so they can better adapt to their own and their organizations' requirements in the present and future. (Jablin 2001, 759)

The process of assimilation starts during the organizational entry. The three parts of anticipatory socialization are "learning about work in general, learning about a particular occupation, and learning about a particular organization" (Jablin 1987, 684). The first refers to an employee's early experience in life such as during childhood (ibid.). Jablin (2001) cites the following factors which influence vocational anticipatory socialization of an individual: (1) the family; (2) educational institutions where students learn about standards and competencies, organizing activities, and reducing anxieties; (3) part-time employment which allows the individual to learn relational communication skills; (4) peers and friends, who can be a source of opinions of the occupation; (5) and media which influence perceptions about occupations. Jablin (ibid.) explains that the organizational anticipatory socialization process of an individual is an attempt to apply for a position for which he or she has been trained. In this stage, the job seeker gathers information which could

influence expectations from the organization. The main sources of these information are the organizational literature and interpersonal communication with co-applicants, interviewers, teachers, current employees, and persons in his or her social network. This is the stage where the job seeker undergoes the recruitment process, sets organizational expectations, experiences realistic job previews, selection interview, and enters the preentry period.

Encounter is the second stage of assimilation, where the new employee "learns the normal work patterns and thought patterns of the organization" (Jablin 1987, 693). Jablin (1982) explains that the role of the immediate work group and direct initial superior is to provide key information about the organization: thus, the new employee initially realizes and soon enjoys career benefits on a long term basis. Furthermore, this isthe phase where the newcomer first experiences and makes sense of the new organizational culture, and learns to change old ways and principles (as cited in Miller 2006).

The employee experiences the following communication-assimilation processes: (1) written and oral orientation programs, which include introduction to the employee's handbook and topics about organizational history, mission and policies, work rules and related practices and procedures, and employee benefits and services; (2) socialization strategies among members of the unit and the employee or newcomer; (3) training programs; (4) formal mentoring; (5) informal mentoring, which happens based on mutual agreement and occurs naturally between the mentor and the protégé without the formal assignment and with a goal for positive outcomes; (6) information seeking; (7) information giving; (8) development of relationships among peer and supervisors; (9) and role negotiation, where the goal of the seasoned employee is to change the perspective of the newcomer on how a role should be acted out and assessed (Jablin 2001).

During the metamorphosis stage, the employee tries to adapt to the organizational norms by developing new attitudes or by changing existing ones. The employee likewise looks for possibilities

on how the organization can accommodate his or her distinct needs and his or her aspiration to influence the organization (as cited in Cragan and Shields 1998).

Organizational exit and disengagement are also significant in understanding assimilation for demographic, economic, and social reasons; the postmodern business trends of mergers, and acquisitions; and the behavior of people who move regularly and change jobs and companies (as cited in Miller 2006). Jablin (2001) adds the following observations about organizational disengagement: (1) it is a process where employees have already predicted when they would be leaving the organization (i.e., this is contrary to the notion that the event was unexpected or unplanned; (2) it is a process involving and affecting both the stayers and leavers; (3) it has effects on the families of the leavers; (4) and communication plays an important role during disengagement because it may serve as a sensemaking resource for an unexpected exit, better role adjustment of the leaver outside the organization and a means to discuss topics openly (Jablin 2001).

Motivation theories explain how an individual is attracted to attain goals. In the context of organizations, these theories try to explain the outcome of the attainment of goals based on the employee's behavior. It is observed that there are internal and external factors that influence an employee to behave in acertain manner. For instance, Abraham Maslow's need hierarchy model defines human needs and assumes that the lowest level needs of the pyramid have to be satisfied first before those of the upper level needs (i.e., from the basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter, to social and emotional needs, to intellectual needs, and finally to self-esteem and self-actualization needs). On the other hand, Frederick Herzberg proposed the two-factor theory of motivation, which posits that intrinsic factors or motivators lead to job satisfaction. Consequently, the "absence extrinsic factors" described as poor hygiene conditions or job context may lead to dissatisfaction. Commenting on Herzberg's assumptions, critics have noted that to equate the process and dynamics of changing

hygiene factors with job satisfaction is an oversimplification. Still, Herzberg's theory provides a detailed set of job factors that foster a motivational atmosphere in the workplace (as cited in Gibson et al. 2009). Rensis Likert advances the Four Systems of Management human resources theory to explain a series of four management systems based on the changing profile of employer and employee relations—System I or Exploitative Authoritative, System II or Benevolent Authoritative, System III or Consultative, and System IV or Participative. For Likert, the most beneficial system for the highest level of productivity is Participative because there is "genuine participation in decision making and goal setting, free-flowing communication, full use of every worker's skills and creative energy, and a high level of responsibility and accountability for the goals of the organization" (as cited in Modaff et al. 2008).

While the motivation and humanistic theories offer a perspective on the different factors which influence behavioral change of an employee, Jablin's concepts on assimilation provide a comprehensive framework of the stages focusing on communication elements which an employee experiences that may lead to job retention. However, Bullis (1999) and Turner (1999) contend that the concept of "assimilation" negatively connotes how an employee is absorbed or integrated in the organization rather than how s/he experiences socialization and individualization (as cited in Modaff et al. 2008). Kramer and Miller (1999) defend the concept of assimilation where there is an active exchange and a mutual influence between the employee and organization in all the stages of assimilation.

Research Design and Procedure

The study uses quantitative and qualitative methods. The survey is designed to measure the possiblerelationship of the communication variables to the job retention of call center agents, while the focus group discussion validates the survey results.

Respondents' Profile

The total respondents is 442: Metro Manila (n = 183, 41.4%) and Region 6 (n = 259, 58.6%). Of the 259 ofRegion 6, 117 are from Bacolod and 142 are from Iloilo.

Place	Frequency	Percentage
Metro Manila	183	41.4
Bacolod	117	26.4
Iloilo	142	32.2
Total	442	100

Table 1. Place of Origin of Respondents

There are 166 male respondents and 258 female respondents.

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	166	37.5
Female	258	58.3
No answer	18	4.2
Total	442	100

Table 2. Sex of Respondents

The socioeconomic status of the respondents are as follows: 18 (Class A), 14 (Class B), 137 (Class C), 202 (Class D), 24 (Class E). This is based on the average monthly household income used by the Social Weather Station

Socioeconomic status	Frequency	Percentage
A	18	4.1
B	14	3.2
C	137	30.9
D	202	45.7
E	24	5.4
No answer	47	10.6
Total	442	100

Table 3. Socioeconomic Status of Respondents

The average age of the CSRs is 26.30 years old with a minimum age of 19, and maximum age of 51. The average length of stay in a company is 19 months.

	Intention	Actual status
Stay	373	302
Leave	42	30

Table 4. Intention and Employment status of CSRs

Three hundred seventy-three answered that they will stay with the company while forty-two answered that they plan to leave. The employment status of the 442 respondents were checked after three months—302 remained employed, while fourteen resigned, and sixteen were terminated. There were respondents whose statuses were not verified because some survey forms either had incomplete names or no names at all. Finding out who among the respondents resigned or were terminated is significant in order to determine the relationship of the dependent variable of job retention to the respondents' intention to stay with or leave the company.

It has been noted that there were survey forms with incomplete information such as age, sex, socioeconomic status, length of stay in the company, and intention to stay with or leave the company. There was no pattern as to why some respondents left some survey items blank. However, it can be inferred that this may have been due to the length of the survey and the limited time given to answer it which was conducted during work hours. Perhaps some chose to conceal their identity and other personal information while others were uncertain of their monthly household income. Others, may even have forgotten the date when they started working in the company.

Company profile

After sending invitations, letters and making follow-up calls to ten companies for two months, only one agreed to participate. Hence, the results of this case study only apply to this particular company.

An agreement of confidentiality was made between the researcher and the company in conducting the survey and the focus group discussion within the company.

The company is a foreign corporation which operates in North and Latin America, Australia, United Kingdom, and the Philippines. Its business line includes sales, marketing, and customer relations management. It began its outsourcing component in the United States in the 1980s and expanded its global operations to eighty-five countries in the 2000s. It is one of the industry leaders in the Philippines employing more than 20,000 Filipinos.

Research Instruments

A. Questionnaire

A survey questionnaire composed of communication variables was developed from the related literature and the principles of the Organizational Assimilation Theory (i.e., based on the concepts of pre-entry perceptions, personal background, family and peer influence, job expectations, prior knowledge about the company, screening, orientation, training program, actual work, immediate work group, socialization strategies, adjustments, mentoring, information-seeking behavior, role negotiation, work environment, and development of new attitudes) (Jamandre 2008). The ninety-two items are speaker-related, message-related, channel-related, receiver-related variables and the principles of Anticipatory Socialization, Encounter Stage and Metamorphosis Stage of the OAT.

The demographic information of age, sex, socioeconomic status, length of stay, actual employment status, the intention to stay with or leave the company and the 92 communication items, were all treated as variables subject to statistical treatment. Factor analysis was used in deriving the common factors present among the 92 communication variables. The communication variables were then measured using a 4-point Likert scale.

The survey questionnaire was endorsed to and distributed by the Human Capital staff of the company. The survey forms from Region 6 were accomplished in December 2010 while those in Manila, in January 2011. The company has sites in Luzon including Pasay City, Quezon City, Taguig, Rizal, Cavite, Pampanga, Batangas and Laguna. Of its regional sites in Cebu, Dumaguete, Iloilo, and Bacolod, only those in Iloilo and Bacolod agreed to participate.

B. Focus Group Discussion

An exploratory guide based on the survey results, OAT and related literature on selecting, hiring, training, and work experiences of call center agents, was developed to address the qualitative part of this study. It aims to provide explanations on the specific processes of assimilation experienced by a call center agent, including orientation, training, workload, socialization, and particularities of the work environment.

Two batches composed of six CSRs from Metro Manila and Region 6 participated in two separate Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) on June 2011.

Analysis of Data

A. Statistical Treatment of Data

The 92 survey items were treated as 92 communication variables which were subjected to factor analysis to determine the common factors that influence job retention of call center agents. Factor analysis is a statistical procedure used to reduce the dimensionality of the data. The large set composed of 92 variables was subjected to factor analysis to create a new set of small number of factors, which are functions of communication variables. This provided new sets of dimensions that may be used for subsequent analyses of the data. In this study, the 92 variables were reduced to twelve factors based on their interrelationship andvalues. The complete list is in the Findings and Discussion. For example, these ten survey items communication

variables were associated to a factor, called Communication Skills, based on their interrelationship with one another:

Factor 2 – Communication skills
    #1 I speak well in the English language
    #4 I am capable of handling all types of call problems
    #8 I am fully knowledgeable of the products, sales, and
        services
    #2 I have a good speaking voice
    #14 I know how to achieve customer service satisfaction
    #15 I understand all forms of call protocols
    #9 I fully understand my job description
    #5 I am a persuasive and accommodating call center agent
    #22 I am competitive and confident of my skills to be
        promoted
    #40 I project a positive image to foreigner clients

After doing the factor analysis, a t-test was used to compare the average factor scores for two groups of CSRs, while the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was done to compare the average factor scores when there were more than two groups being observed or compared. The factor scores were used in assessing whether there are significant differences in the 12 Communication Factors with respect to the respondent's (1) intention to stay with or leave the company, (2) sex, (3) socioeconomic status, and (4) actual employment status. These factor scores were also used to determine the significant correlation of the 12 Communication Factors with (5) age of respondent and (6) length of stay in the company.

B. Qualitative Analysis of Data

The findings of the FGD were encoded and patterns of the communication variables from the survey that influence job retention were analyzed. From the results of the factor analysis, t-test, and ANOVA, the FGD participants were asked to share their ideas and experiences about the communication variables or 12 factors which had significant relationships with their intention

of whether they will stay with or leave the company. They were also asked to comment and add insights on the other reasons why they were influenced to stay with the company. Aside from citing their experiences, they also spoke of those who have left the company

Findings and Discussion

The 92 communication variables in the survey were subjected to factor analysis, and 12 factors were identified:

Factor 1 - Ability to adapt and socialization skills

Factor 2 - Communication skills

Factor 3 - Acculturation to customers

Factor 4 - Value for work

Factor 5 - Company pride and work environment

Factor 6 - Knowledge about company and nature of work

Factor 7 - Work attitude and problems

Factor 8 - Customer handling skills

Factor 9 - Peer relationship and company goals

Factor 10 - Customer interaction

Factor 11 - Peer relationship

Factor 12 - Company innovation

The following results in Tables 5 and 6 were obtained using t-test and ANOVA. The average factor scoresbetween the groups are declared to be statistically different if the p-value of the test is less than the level of significance of 0.1.

Table 5 shows which among the twelve factors exhibit significant differences in the means of factor scores across intention to stay with the company. It can be seen that the average scores for the factors Company Pride and Work Environment, and Customer Handling Skills significantly differ between those who intend to stay with the company and those who intend to leave. In particular, those who intend to stay exhibit higher scores in the factors than those who intend to leave.

Factors	Mean		Remarks
	Stay	Leave	
1. Ability to adapt and socialization skills	0.162	-0.099	Not significant
2. Communication skills	0.001	0.082	Not significant
3. Acculturation to customers	0.009	-0.254	Not significant
4. Value for work	0.039	-0.235	Not significant
5. Company pride and work environment	0.120	-0.889	Significant
6. Knowledge about company and nature of work	0.031	-0.259	Not significant
7. Work attitude and problems	0.018	-0.145	Not significant
8. Customer handling skills	0.098	-0.711	Significant
9. Peer relationship and company goals	0.024	-0.257	Not significant
10. Customer interaction	-0.046	0.147	Not significant
11. Peer relationship	-0.016	0.076	Not significant
12. Company innovation	0.007	0.068	Not significant

Table 5. Comparison of Average Scores for the Communication Factors across Intention

Table 6 shows the results of the ANOVA in comparing the mean factor scores across three different locations - Metro Manila, Iloilo, and Bacolod. It can be seen that significant differences are observed for the factors named Communication Skills, Company Pride and Work Environment, and Peer Relationship. For Factor 2, Bacolod has a higher mean than Metro Manila and all other pairs do not have significantly different mean scores. For Factors 5 and 11, Iloilo and Bacolod have a higher mean than Metro Manila and all other pairs do not have significantly different mean scores.

Factors	Mean Square		p-value	Remarks
	Between Groups	Within Groups		
1. Ability to adapt and socialization skills	0.920	1.001	0.432	Not Significant
2. Communication skills	4.178	0.964	0.005	Significant
3. Acculturation to customers	1.574	0.994	0.194	Not Significant
4. Value for work	1.731	0.992	0.158	Not Significant
5. Company pride and work environment	7.259	0.930	0.000	Significant
6. Knowledge about company and nature of work	2.051	0.988	0.104	Not Significant
7. Work attitude and problems	0.958	1.000	0.413	Not Significant
8. Customer handling skills	0.516	1.005	0.674	Not Significant
9. Peer relationship and company goals	1.400	0.996	0.241	Not Significant
10. Customer interaction	0.670	1.004	0.573	Not Significant
11. Peer relationship	2.607	0.982	0.049	Significant
12. Company innovation	1.717	0.992	0.161	Not Significant

Table 6. Relationship of Intention and Work Location

Comparisons of mean factor scores across sex, socioeconomic status, and actual employment status were also done. However, there are no significant differences of the mean factor scores found across these variables.

Using correlation analysis, it was discovered that the length of stay of an employee in the company has significant correlation with scores in Factor 2 – Communication skills (0.412), Factor 5 – Company pride and work environment (-0.319), and Factor 8 – Customer handling skills (-0.133). This means that call center agents who have longer tenure with the company tend to have higher scores in Factor 2 and lower scores in Factors 5 and 8.

There is also a significant relationship between the age of employee and the score in Factor 2 (0.122). This is interpreted as: older employees tend to have higher scores in Factor 2.

Qualitative Discussion

As mentioned earlier, this study seeks to answer how communication variables can possibly influence job retention of CSRs in Metro Manila and Region 6. The first aim is to determine which communication and demographic variables have significant relationships with the intention of the call center agent to either stay with or leave the company. Based on the statistical results, the CSRs' intention to stay with the company is influenced by their perceived high level of communication skills (Factor 2). CSRs believe that they are effective when they are able to provide customer service satisfaction which also motivates them to continue working and to perform better.

Applicants undergo an assessment which evaluate their communication skills. According to the FGD participants, hiring in their company is fair regardless of the applicants' educational background and previous work experiences. They also acknowledge that the orientation and training were effective, particularly in resolving

issues to avoid call backs. According to the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) (2005), among the top psychological and work stressors in call centers are (1) unrealistic performance quotas, (2) constant electronic performance monitoring, (3) random taping of phone conversations, and (4) highly fragmented, repetitive, and fast paced workload. However, the CSRs' assessment of their performances based on Quality Assurance scores and statistics were deemed as fair, reasonable, and accurate. CSRs maintain and develop their quality communication skills based on constant monitoring and continuous training. The Human Capital Director explained that there are feedback mechanisms and enhancement surveys to improve the communication skills of the agents. With these programs, CSRs perceive that their level of communication skills are improved as they are being monitored and assessed by their immediate supervisors who use quality assurance standards. The FGD participants explained that they are more knowledgeable, capable, and confident of their English-speaking skills and customer interactions. For the respondent showever, the "best training happens on the floor."

CSRs are also convinced to continue working for the company because they have developed a sense of company pride (Factor 5). In effect, they promote the company to others based on their experiences; they speak of their entitlements and healthy work environment. Based on the FGD, the respondents said that they are proud to be working as call center agents because people perceive them to be capable and intelligent English communicators. When people ask them about their work, they confidently and willingly share details of their experiences and dispel the misconceptions regarding their lives as agents.

CSRs value working in their company because of the favorable rules and regulations. A male FGD participant claimed that many CSRs highly value the medical and health benefits, flexible policies, allowances, office amenities, referral programs, rewards and recognition programs, work-life balance, and

professional growth. A Human Capital staff explained that employees are entitled to top technological support, dynamicemployee communications, and academic advancement. She added that the company offers leadership training to those interested and qualified to "career path mobility" as team leaders, quality analysts, senior or operations manager, among others. As one CSR said, "getting in and staying with the company is a privilege." These imply that the CSRs are knowledgeable of and satisfied with the company policies and the workplace. In addition, these imply that their motivation to stay with the company is based on their positive experiences of how the company accommodates their needs in developing their skills and being listened to by management. Thus, they promote the company to family and friends.

Another factor that influences CSRs to stay is their improved customer handling skills (Factor 8). Angry and rude clients (Amante 2010; DOLE 2005) are among the top organization stressors in call centers. Although this is difficult and stressful to new hires, the tenured employees have become more patient and confident in dealing with different kinds of customers, especially the irate ones, as they get accustomed to the common concerns and behaviors of callers. The FGD participants added that alongside the challenging phase of graveyard shift at the start, they eventually master the skills of customer interaction in efficiently resolving customer concerns. They become experts in providing quality customer service given the experiences. It appears that the stress in handling difficult customers become manageable over time, thereby motivating the CSRs to perform even better. As a result, they value positive customer feedback when they receive commendations from satisfied clients. Amante (2010) stresses that CSRs must possess strong mental and emotional skills in dealing with diverse and difficult customers who may curse, insult, ramble, or engage in an unintelligible transaction. Working in a call center then becomes easier and manageable for the CSRs. A female FGD participant said that challenging experiences taught her to become a more polite, honest,

Given that there is a significant relationship between Factors 2, 5, and 8 and the length of stay of employees, it is expected that the seasoned CSRs are top performers or experts in their communication and customer handling skills. Hence, they consider their work an "easy job" which makes them stay longer. For one female CSR, "self-esteem is just a bonus" in knowing that she performs well and contributes to the success of her work, her team, and the company. The results subscribe to the ideas of Philips and Connell (2003) that employees are motivated if they do challenging work, have autonomy, flexibility, recognition, rewards, growth, compensation, and a supportive and balanced (i.e., positive organizational culture, equitable in decision making and employee welfare) working environment. The CSRs believe that they have stayed and will stay longer in the company as long as they are trained well, have opportunities for promotion, consistently attain customer satisfaction, experience belongingness, and receive competitive compensation.

The fourth factor in convincing CSRs to stay with the company is their positive peer relationship (Factor 11). The CSRs believe that there is an open communication system among superior-subordinate and peer-coworker interactions. The FGD participants described their immediate supervisors or team leaders as accommodating and encouraging. They believe that the role of the team leader is crucial in motivating his orher members to perform well, individually and as group members to meet the target goals. Having an effective leader is crucial to job satisfaction (Chu 2008). Amante (2010) claims that the young BPO workforce expects more guidance from their managers. The FGD participants in both Metro Manila and Region 6 unanimously agreed that there is teamwork and a sense of family with their peers in their accounts. As Filipinos are part of a "collectivistic culture" similar to that of India, the concept of "family embeddedness" influences job retention of call center agents (Ramesh 2007). CSRs believe

that socialization in a group in the workplace makes them feel "bonded." In order to succeed as a team, CSRs value their overall group performance for the welfare and benefit of everybody in the team. They believe that they stay in the company because they treat their officemates as family who need the support of each other. Hence, their wavemates or peers engage in team building activities, and socialize even beyond the confines of the office in order to build relationships.

On the other hand, the FGD participants clarified that the pay is not the main motivator for staying because compared to other call centers, they actually receive a mid-range salary. However, aside from not feeling "overused," they the company.

For the second aim of this study, which is to compare the job retention factors between Metro Manila and Region 6, it appears that it is the cheaper cost of living in Region 6 which has resulted in its higher mean score compared to that of the Metro Manila. A female FGD participant compared her experience of working in Metro Manila and Cebu. She said that if given the chance, she prefers to work in Cebu because her fis there and it is more costly to work in Metro Manila than in Cebu. These are the same sentiments of the Region 6 respondents. In addition, the FGD participants also compared their compensation in the call cenwith that in banks and hospitals and other office-related jobs in Region 6; they still find the call center work more financially rewarding. The FGD participants in Metro Manila echoed the same sentiment: living in Metro Manila is expensive compared to living in the province. On the other hand, a male FGD participant shared that in a training held for a new site, Region 6 employees were more "bonded" and were more predisposed to helping each other compared to their Metro Manila counterparts.

The FGD participants also gave insights on attrition in call centers. They said that their colleagues resigned or were terminated because of their poor relationship with supervisors.

Some had better offers in another company or even transferred to a non-call center industry. Others wanted a change in lifestyle considering the health problems related to their work, frequent customer escalations or call avoidance. There were likewise instances of job mismatch, no long term plans on the part of the agents, and lack of commitment which often resulted in poor performance. There were a number of agents who pursued higher studies. To address these, Hechanova (2009) suggests the following: (1) effective reward system, development of a "fun" atmosphere and well being programs, (3) right fit for the person and the job, (4) job designs (i.e., the process of creating the content and systems of jobs to satisfy the needs of the organization and the employee), (5) continuous growth for the agents, and (6) quality leadership. These suggestions by Hechanova and the results of the study complement each other in giving insights on job retention of CSRs. By looking into the CSRs' communication skills development, the dynamics of customer interaction, and by instilling a sense of company pride and fostering a positive employee-supervisor relationship, more CSRs may be convinced to stay with the company.

Conclusion

The results show that the communication factors that appear to influence job retention of CSRs are their length of stay and the perceived development in their individual and interpersonal relationships with their customers and co-workers. How the organization encourages these developments is likewise important in convincing the CSRs to stay. The CSRs are convinced that staying with the company for a long period means that they have fully adjusted and adapted to the nature of their work and internal and external workplace dynamics.

This study contributes to the knowledge on job retention and organizational communication which BPOs should look into

when creating their training and retraining programs which focus on enhancing the call center agents' interpersonal communication skills to help address the issue of attrition in call centers. Based on the results, it is during the assimilation stage when a CSR is convinced to stay. Factors such as communication skills, company pride, customer handling skills, and peer relationship refer to interpersonal skills developed during the encounter stage of organizational assimilation. While a job seeker sets positive perception and expectation during the recruitment stage, selection interview, and pre-entry period, it is during the assimilation stage where a CSR fully realizes and values his potential and opportunities to continue working in the company. Respondents who have decided to stay and intend to stay longer in the company are further motivated based on their perceived communication competence, effective training programs, formal and informal mentoring, satisfying customer relations, acceptance and exchange of information seeking behaviors, and the positive development of their relationships as colleagues.

Therefore, the socialization and individualization efforts of the CSR during the encounter stage of assimilation influence job retention. BPO companies, particularly call centers, may then consider these findings for their job retention programs. The employed and potential CSRs could also be given a better understanding of their careers.

Recommendations

Given the potential of communication research together with other disciplines such as Business, Psychology, and Labor Management in the emerging Philippine BPO industry, scholars are encouraged to look into other organizational dynamics of different kinds of local and international call centers and into other BPO industries such as back office services and finance. Future studies may improve on the number of sample respondents

and include more regional sites. It is also interesting to compare communication variables with additional demographic information and job retention data across all company rank and positions.

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