

# Book Review

*Hechanova-Alampay, M. R. (2010). 1-800-philippines: Understanding and managing the Filipino call center worker. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press. 138 pages.*

In the past decade, the call center industry in our country has become more controversial than overseas work, boosting economic revenue but at the same time creating a host of concerns that encompass so many aspects of Filipino life and culture. The book by Hechanova-Alampay provides a comprehensive look at this sector from an organizational psychologist's perspective combined with practical recommendations for those managing it.

The first chapter characterizes the call center industry in the Philippines and describes the research framework and methodology that were utilized to examine four particular work practices that the industry is often criticized for. These include an oversimplified job design, emotional labor, night work, and masking practices. It was noted that the framework, adapted from Erez and Early's Cultural Self-Representation Theory (1993), employs a cultural lens, something that was argued to be largely absent in previous research. The methodology is organized and thorough, involving a mixed-method approach with three phases of data collection that included observations as well as actual interactions with call center workers. Much of the study appears to be based on survey data from a large sample of 991 employees from 10 call centers.

The succeeding four chapters present the findings of the study in relation to each of the work practices, with a focus on their impact on call center agents, referred to as "customer service representatives" or CSRs. The effects of work practices on CSRs were investigated mainly using quantitative statistical analyses, in terms of how they influenced employee well-being and identity, motivation, and behavior. In general, each of these chapters presented both beneficial and adverse impacts of the work practices on CSRs, and then provided some recommendations to either decrease or prevent the negative effects.

The next two chapters link the work practices in call centers with the problems of recruitment, selection, and turnover that have plagued the industry, again also including some suggestions as to how to deal with these, largely from

a human resource management perspective. These range from the design of packages of compensation and benefits, to training, wellbeing, and career development programs, organization development interventions, and workforce planning.

The last chapter highlights the major concerns raised by the study, and integrates the many and specific recommendations proposed in earlier chapters to provide leaders and managers of the industry some directions towards more effective management.

On the whole, the book offers sound empirical basis for many of the issues surrounding the work of CSRs, thus allowing for a more systematic understanding of their situation. While grounded on relatively rigorous data analyses, the discussion of findings is fairly straightforward.

There are a few weaknesses, however, that relate to specific chapters. More particularly, the second chapter on the "Nature of Call Center Work" presents the perceived benefits of this type of work culled from the study's own local data, but from thereon, the issues regarding job design include only citations from foreign studies. The omission of local data on the perceived problems regarding call center job design characteristics is unexpected, because the application of a "cultural lens" would be most appropriate in examining perceptions of these attributes, whether these are pleasant or unpleasant. Data from the present study's large sample would have been a significant contribution to existing local literature by documenting exactly what specific job design issues (e.g., the use of dialog scripts) are perceived negatively by Filipino call center agents, and to what extent these are perceived to be so.

Similarly, the section on redesigning call center work seems short on support from local data, with the proposal to employ psychological empowerment as a strategy in the local setting relying mostly on data from foreign studies, with a few anecdotal quotes from Filipino CSRs implying how socialization programs can increase job meaningfulness, and Jocano's (1999) argument that colonization renders high acceptance of western management practices among Filipinos.

The chapter on "Emotional Labor" presents findings of the study confirming the experience of moderate levels of emotional labor among CSRs. Emotional labor, defined as the need to regulate emotions, has been a salient issue in call centers since it has been linked to high stress levels among CSRs because their interactions with clients often involve complaints that arouse intense emotions.

The ensuing discussion on differences in how the two subfactors, surface acting vs. deep acting, impact on employee burnout and its outcomes (e.g., commitment and turnover intent), is somewhat confusing. There appears to be an error in stating that “the association of emotional labor with surface acting is stronger ... than that with deep acting...” (p. 32) because the correlations cited from Table 4 actually refer to associations of burnout, not emotional labor, to the subfactors. Further, the succeeding statement does not specify to what the two subfactors have opposite relationships with, and the reader has to scrutinize the table to discover it refers to several variables, including job satisfaction, organization support, and organization commitment. It should be noted that, overall, the results of correlational analysis indicate only few and weak associations with burnout and other outcome variables, whether the aggregate emotional labor measure is utilized, or its subscales. Indeed, what the data seem to indicate as more important is that the reliability estimates obtained for the emotional labor measure and its subscales should be re-examined to answer the question posed by the author in relation to whether surface acting and deep acting are “really components of the same construct”.

However, the author makes a very good point in the end of the chapter by suggesting a shift in emphasis from surface acting to deep acting in the training of Filipino CSRs. That is, rather than focusing on the use of scripts in dealing with clients, it would be more effective to teach CSRs how to manage their emotions by the skills of attention deployment, cognitive reframing, and empathy. Her explanation of how deep acting is related to our capacity as Filipinos for empathy and *pakikipagkapwa* clearly illustrates the usefulness of a “cultural lens” in understanding, and applying, foreign constructs such as emotional labor in the local context.

The chapter on the effects of night work and rotating shifts covers a wide range of harmful effects these work schedules have on Filipino call center agents. While the discussion highlighted the socio-psychological impacts of night work in relation to family and other social relations, there was no mention of two other important issues raised elsewhere – the effects on academic performance of working students which make up a large percentage of Filipino CSRs, and the effects on reproductive health.

In my work as college secretary in one of the largest colleges in the university, I handled cases of students appealing for readmission after being disqualified from their programs. I observed that in many of these cases, the students were

call center agents working night shifts and who were subsequently unable to keep up with their class requirements, including attendance, recitation, and exams. It is ironic that these students often take these jobs because the pay would have allowed them to finance their studies when no other resources were available to them. These observations have also been reported in some graduate theses (e.g. Ocampo, 2007), but only in passing. The issue needs to be attended to and addressed by the call center industry because it is linked to turnover issues as well, since eventually some students decide to leave their call center jobs and return to their studies. On the other hand, other students decide to drop out of school permanently and are left without the necessary skills that would enable them to pursue productive careers in or out of the call center sector.

Another concern related to call center work that surprisingly was not documented in the book involves the impact of call center work to the reproductive health of its employees. A recent study by the UP Population Institute that was presented in a research dissemination workshop (2010) showed a rather high frequency of call center agents engaging in either casual, multiple, or extramarital sexual relations with co-workers. These statistics also included high incidences of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, which may be linked with night work. While the book may not be expected to cover all the possible issues and concerns of CSRs, this is one issue that is hard to overlook given that it can have very adverse consequences even outside of the call center industry. However, it may be that such a topic is too sensitive for the methodology employed in the present study.

The rest of the chapters of the book are quite engaging, especially the chapter on culture masquerading which not only explains the twangy accent of CSRs, but also its impact on one's cultural identity. There is a thorough review of literature and many anecdotal examples that complements the study's own findings. The author also makes a strong argument that the practice of nationality masking may in fact lead to decreased commitment to the company and higher intentions to leave it. There are many other important insights that are given in this book that truly will enrich our understanding of Filipino call center workers.

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