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(A Case of Call Centre Operators in Antananarivo, Madagascar)**

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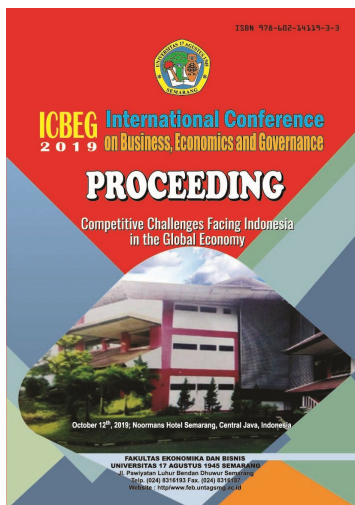
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**A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF MOTIVATING FACTORS OF EMPLOYEES IN
CALL CENTER COMPANIES
(A case of call center operators in Antananarivo, Madagascar)**

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Abstract

This purpose of research was to understand what motivates employees to work for call center companies in Antananarivo, Madagascar. Interviews were used for that purpose. Sixteen call center operators participated in this research. Purposive sampling was employed to invite the participants. From the interviews, two dominant categories surfaced: motivation factors and discouragement factors. Five themes arose within the motivating factors, namely, salaries and benefits, friendly coworkers, skill requirements, working condition and job security. Additionally, the three themes appeared within the discouragement factors were relationships with supervisors, job content and promotion. The managerial implication of the findings as well as suggestions for future research were outlined.

Keywords: Employee, Call center, Motivation, Madagascar.

INTRODUCTION

In a world of increasingly global competition, companies are forced to obtain an advantageous position. Many companies pursue cost reduction in order to meet this purpose. Outsourcing of non-value-added activities has become one option to obtain cost reduction. Such strategy was also widely employed by companies from developed countries. These companies prefer to outsource their business processes to the developing countries due to cheaper labor costs.

As a country where labor costs are cheap Madagascar has become a protagonist of outsourcing. There are multitudes of offshore outsourcing companies in this country but most of them are located in Antananarivo - the economic and political capital of Madagascar. This island represents an important potential in terms of IT development and francophone contact centers. In the last 10 years approximately 30 outsourcing companies have grown in Madagascar, especially in the field of data service and call center.

Call centers refers to a unit within an organization that is responsible for interacting with customers or potential customers using one or multiple communication canals (Kurnialia and Titan, 2015). These responsibilities are assumed by call center operators (CCOs) who are supported by an integrated telephone and visual display unit technologies in doing their jobs (George and Morley, 2006). The work of CCOs has been portrayed as a new form of "Taylorism", because the CCOs have to perform routine task and have a low level of control (Zapf, Isic, Bechtoldt and Blau, 2003).

This atypical nature of the CCOs' work inspired this research to gain a deeper understanding of why people motivate to work as CCOs in call center companies in Antananarivo, Madagascar using a qualitative approach. The findings of this research may provide managers of the call center companies with significant information that help the organizations create strategic plans to motivate their CCOs. .

Research Questions

This research addressed a single research question, namely, what motivate call operators to work? Maslow's theory of needs was used as basis to develop interview protocols.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Call Center

Taylor and Bain (1999, p. 102) define a call center as "a dedicated operation in which computer-utilising employees receive inbound, or make outbound, telephone calls, with those calls processed and controlled either by an automatic call distribution (ACD) or predictive dialling system". The operators of a call center often experience stress and quit their jobs (Castanheira, and Chambel, 2010). There is also a view that the work in call centers is deskilled and monotonous (Ojha and Kasturi, 2005). Grebner, Semmer, Lo Faso, Gut, Kalin and Elfering (2003) state that many operators have low influence over their work, including in planning and organizing their own work. According to Wickham and Collins (2004), supervision in call centers is much closer and much more continuous than most forms of front-line customer work because they are physically monitored. Strandberg and Wahlberg (2007) describe call centers as "electronic sweatshops". This description is similar to that of Taylor and Bain (2002) that the work conditions in call centers is "an assembly line in the head".

Motivation

Kreitner and Kinicki (2012) define motivation as the psychological process that gives behavior purpose and direction. In other words, it refers to reason(s) of why a person behaves in certain ways (Robins and Judge, 2017). Various theories have been developed to explain motivation. Luthans (2011) divide the theories into three main categories, namely, content, process and contemporary theories. Content theories identify factors that lead to motivation, or is concerned with what motivates people (e.g. motivation theories of Maslow, Herzberg, Alderfer, McGregor, and McClelland). Process theories attempt to describe how motivation occurs (e.g. Vroom's expectancy theory). Lastly, Contemporary theories based mainly on social psychology, equity and its derivative procedural/organizational justice (e.g. Adam's equity theory). Furthermore, Luthans states that the content and process theories are more established to understand what motivates people at work.

This research employed Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory as a basis for highlighting the CCOs' motivation. Maslow's theory based on a belief that human beings basically have hierarchical needs. Those needs are classified into five categories. The first named physiological needs that relate to basic issues of survival such as sufficient salaries. The second labelled security needs that concerned with issues such as fair work practices, stable employment and retirement benefit. Then, the third called belongingness which include, for example, acceptance by coworkers and friendly work atmosphere. The fourth layer involves a sense of self-esteem such as status and respect of others. Lastly, self-actualization needs that describe a need of individuals to realize their full potential such as demonstrating to complete

challenging works. By nature, individuals have an inherent desire to grow and develop and finally reach self-actualization. However, in order to experience self-actualization individuals have to satisfy the other four lower needs first. When a need is lacking individuals experience discomfort and attempt to satisfy the need. From managerial perspectives, this situation can be used by a manager to motivate the employees.

METHOD

Sample

Due to the nature of the research question a qualitative study using interviews was employed. The Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs was used as basis to develop interview protocols. Sixteen (16) call center operators from Antananarivo, Madagascar participated in the research through the social media of Facebook and skype. Purposive sampling was used for that purpose. All interviews were transcribed and coded. The environmental triangulation was adopted by involving participants from various companies and different locations. Among the 16 call center operators participate for the interview, ten (10) are men, and the remaining are women. Their age ranges from 21 to 33 years old, four are married, and the rest are single. Their seniority varied from one year up to 10 years. Their educational background is quite different, some have master degrees with different majors. Two participants hold Bachelor degrees in different majors also and the others reported they just have completed some short training.

Data collection procedures

The request to participate was sent to potential research participants via a social network. Of the 20 prospective who were contacted, 16 people agreed to participate in the research. Due to the organizational requirements that prevail for human resource professionals, one person was unable to participate in the study. A friendly request with a message explaining the purpose of the research, the assurance of confidentiality, the voluntary nature of participation and the ways the interviews would be conducted was sent. Once the potential participants agreed to participate in the research an exclusive group on Facebook was formed by the researcher. Detailed information of the research was shared to all members of the group. After interview, all participants was given an opportunity to review their interview transcript to correct any errors or remove any information they wish to retract.

RESULTS

From the interviews, two dominant categories emerged: motivation factors and discouragement factors. Furthermore, five themes arose within the motivating factors, namely, salaries and benefits, friendly coworkers, skill requirements, working condition and job security. Additionally, the three themes appeared within the discouragement factors were relationships with supervisors, job content and promotion.

Motivation Factors

Theme 1: Salary and benefits

Pay and allowances were the most frequently mentioned by participant as their needs that could be satisfied by the call center companies as shown in the following expressions:

"In comparison with another job, the call centers are better paid and have a full allowance". (Participant H)

"I choose to work in this domain to find a financially stability, and only in this company that I can get money enough for my life". (Participant B)

However, unfavorable economy situation in Madagascar at the time the research was conducted apparently negatively affect their abilities to save

“My reward is good, motivating. I can survive with but I cannot save for something else. (Participant O)

“I cannot save money from my salary. If later I will have my own family, this salary will not be enough for me. ” (Participant E)

One participant felt salary was incomparable with their work

“Then also it is not the salary that I expect. The work is very difficult and too much but the salary is just medium”. (Participant O)

In contrast, other participants reported their enjoyment with the benefits provided by their respective companies (e.g. allowances, extra pay, and bonuses) and this made the financial rewards still attractive.

“I still can survive with my salary every month because I get lunch and transport also every day. It is very important for me because it can reduce my daily spending.” (Participant F)

“I am so happy because I always get a bonus every month. The bonus increases the amount of my salary. And it can cover some spending of my family”. (Participant G)

Most of call center companies in Madagascar provide full allowances. Social security and OSTIE (health insurance) are compulsory under the labor law of Madagascar. Apart this, the companies also provided lunch, transport, as well overtime pay and bonuses for employees.

Theme 2: Friendly coworkers

The majority of the participants described their positive feeling about their coworkers. Team building was another aspect that was considered as a good media for knowing each other.

“When we work, we feel like in the classroom. The supervisor is the teacher and all the operators are the students. Sometimes, we bring some food and we eat together during the break. During the holiday or the occasional day such the Halloween, we try to dress up to make fun in the work”. (Participant L)

“It consolidated the friendship with my entire friend. And I always get a new friend also during the team buildings”. (Participant P).

Theme 3: Skills requirements

Skill requirements for working in the companies was also regarded as an attractive factor. No diploma was required. These loose requirements were attractive to young people, especially to high school graduates who have to work before continuing their studies at universities.

“After my high school, only the call center can hire me because my diploma is not enough to do another job”. (Participant C)

“The recruitment in the call center is easy. They don ‘t need any diploma or experience”. (Participant O).

Theme 4: Working condition

The participants underlined that their workplace have safety and welfare regulations. They also felt that their companies took care of the workplace

“I never see a company like this before, in here, we have everything, I feel comfortable. The company take care of the place where we can take rest, the toilet

is clean, the cafeteria also. For example, the place where we take rest is very big, and we can hang out with the friend there". (Participant D)

Only one participant described that her workplace was less comfortable.

"Sometimes after work, I feel like I am deaf. I cannot hear anything because during the work I use the earphone permanently. I am afraid that after some years I will be deaf". (Participant R)

The absence of proper facilities to prevent employees from possible health problems was also mentioned.

Theme 5: Job security

A chance to stay in company for a long duration was guaranteed for employee in the company. During the interview, all participants stated they were motivated to work because it was impossible for them to be unemployed with this job. The chance to be unemployed more depended on employees than on companies

"There is no reason to be afraid in this kind of company if you work well". (Participant H)

"Most of the times they company do the layoff when the employee is in the essay period". (Participant E)

As they explained, it was difficult for the companies to lay off them because the companies were not sure about the replacements.

"I missed my job during three days because of some personal reasons. I was afraid that when I came back to the work, I will be layoff. But when I discuss with the responsible, they said to me, it is very difficult to find another one so they just give a punishment". (Participant K)

Discouragement factors

With regard to the second category (discouragement factors) the majority of the participants mentioned three kinds of needs that they could not satisfy by working in the companies. The three needs include good relationships with supervisors, promotion opportunities and job content.

Theme 6: Relationships with superiors

Poor communication was the most highlighted by participants during the interview and this resulted in conflict between employees and supervisor or between employees with higher level managers. Given all higher managers in the call centers were foreigners, these cultural differences became a barrier to communication between the employees and the managers

"Our manager always "nerd" is the workplace. They never want to talk with us. If they have to talk with us, they ask the supervisors to transfer the message". (Participant E)

"We are in the same company, but the managers never talk or discuss with us. Sometimes we feel like machine in the work because there is any affinity between us". (Participant C)

Jealousy was another factor that maybe contributed to this poor relationship. The operators were aware that the appointment of supervisor was based on seniority instead of competencies or relevant diplomas. Therefore, from the operators' views, the supervisors were lacked of

managerial skills. Participants underlined that most of employees who left their jobs because of those conflicts.

“Our supervisors show off that they are the best because they get the promotion. They always find sometimes wrong with our work. In my opinion, it is just to decrease our qualification to the manager. I don’t like that situation so much but I don’t have choice”. (Participant K)

Excessive rules and unnecessary control was another issue that participants raised during the interviews and these led to the employees felt that their workplace was like a prison. As they explain, the punishments were too much and always had impact on their salaries:

“During work, we never take break unless we are seriously ill, for example, hemorrhaging for pregnant women or fainting during the work. It is too exaggerated and sometimes unbearable”. (Participant H)

“Even just to go to the toilet, we cannot go more than twice a day, and if it is more than five minutes, the supervisor will be angry immediately”. (Participant A)

Theme 7: Promotion

The seventh theme was identified by the participant concerned promotion. They revealed that it was almost impossible for them to get promotion in their jobs and that contributed to the discouragement.

“All my years in this job, I never get promotion. One time I ask them a promotion but they always reject it”. (Participant A)

“I do not expect any promotion because they clearly said to me that it's difficult to find another who can do my work” (Participant P)

“I do not think that they'll give to me a promotion because it rarely or almost never shows up here” (Participant R)

Theme 8: Job content

The last theme of discouragement factors was related to job content. Participants claimed that the characteristics and all components of their work made it different from others jobs (atypical). The challenge was one of the elements that made the work difficult.

“As a moderator, our job is just to filter the information which is significant or not, it is too boring because it becomes a routine and we do not even use our brains. There is no innovation from us and it is always the same”. (Participant R)

“In this job, you do not have to think too much, everything is the same. You do not have to do a lot of things because the task is only one”. (Participant F)

“We are tired because there is a lot of pressure, we have to adapt with the managers wants, and we have no choice.”

However, participants also admitted that such jobs have given additional knowledge to them. This was particularly felt by those who carried out the jobs for the first time. This additional knowledge they gained from the training that was held before and after they started working

“Every day, I learn a new thing from my job” (Participant A).

Interpretation of the Results

The main objective of this research was to understand what factors that motivated call center operators (CCOs) in Antananarivo, Madagascar. Previous scholars have described the nature of call centers operators’ work as little more than a return to Taylorism and “an

assembly line in the head” (Taylor and Bain , 2002). Call center operators are also portrayed as employees who work in the environment where they have low levels of control over their jobs; carry out monotonous work; experience intense surveillance and monitoring and have very little interaction with other employees. There is a view that the work in call centers is deskilled (Ojha and Kasturi, 2005). Therefore, the scope of job knowledge is very limited which results in the employee to tolerate stress (Bargnara and Marti, 2001).

Not surprisingly, when asked to illustrate their work, these participants expressed it in overwhelmingly negative terms such as: stressful, hectic, chaotic, and poor relationships between the employees and the supervisors/managers. However, some other positive terms were also reported by the participants regarding their work such as good salaries, secured jobs and friendly coworkers

Two main categories arose during the interviews, namely, motivational and discouragement factors. The first refers to compensation and benefits, working condition, friendly coworkers, skill requirements and job security. The later concerns relationships with supervisors, job content and promotion

As the findings of the interviews suggest, the majority of the call operators felt skill requirements for their jobs was achievable and they were satisfied with the system of how the company reward them. From the perspectives of Maslow motivation theory, it could be said the call operator jobs was able to meet their physiological needs. Similar to this finding, the call operators reported the high level of their secure feeling about the future of their employment in that the feeling of the risks of their unemployment were minimal. This also means that the safety needs was secured in call operator jobs. With regard to belongingness needs, it was apparent that the jobs of call operators was still unable to fully meet such needs. Despite the enjoyment with working condition and with friendly coworkers, poor relationship with supervisor also surfaced during interviews

To put it briefly, among the three lower-order (i.e. physiological, safety, and love) needs the need of belongingness was the one that was not sufficiently met. Social needs are important for employees to help them not feeling alone, isolated and depressed at work. Special attention need to be paid to resolve these issues.

In terms of higher order needs, self-esteem and self-actualization were those of participants desired but they felt these needs were unavailable yet. Lack of promotion opportunities were most dominant issues of self-esteems frequently mentioned by participants. Promotion is a sign of belief that an organization values its employees and will raise the status of the employees. As human beings employees also need to gain respect and admiration from others. With regard to self-actualization needs, the desire to use their own ways in doing a job was foremost. It was very likely that this desire was associated with the monotonous nature of the call operators’ jobs that led to the operators to realize their creative potential

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusions

Various needs of call operators have been revealed during the interviews. However, like other human beings, not all call operators motivated by similar needs. It is the responsibility of the managers of the call center companies to identify the individual needs of the call operators. Once the needs identified the managers provide opportunities for the call operators to satisfy their needs in order to boost their motivation.

Managerial Implications

It is the managers' responsibilities to be aware of employees' needs to induce their motivation. Motivated employees are influential in accelerating organizational performance and attaining organizational objectives. The followings are managerial actions that the call companies may take to help their employees keep motivated to work.

First, the companies should constantly monitor whether the salaries they provide are sufficient for call operators to purchase the essentials of life even though satisfaction with salaries surfaced during interviews. In addition, allowances on transportation and lunch should be maintained because these practices make call operators perceive that their organizations care about them. Special attention needs to be paid for necessary break to use the bathroom as this was a dominant issue that the call operators concern. Combined with comfortable working conditions and reasonable work hours this provision will help the call operators meet their physiological needs and keep them motivated.

Second, although call operators reported their secured feeling of employment (i.e. low-risk of becoming unemployed) other safety-related issues should be considered such as providing health and safe work environment as well as protection from accidents. Offering competitive salaries and retirement benefits, when possible, are another alternatives. These things will facilitate the call operators to fulfill their safety needs.

Third, the existing team-based projects should be preserved to help employees know one another and avoid personal problems such as loneliness. It is also important for the companies to encourage their supervisors to be kind and accessible. More importantly, they were made aware of how to apply appropriate rules and control. Therefore, it will eliminate employees' to have negative perceptions concerning the current ways of the supervisors interacting with them. It is also important for the organization to appoint supervisors based on the basis of performance instead of seniority, or the combination of the two. This will help the call operators to respect their supervisors and prevent them from forming an opinion that their supervisor are incompetent. Holding social events within the companies and offering adequate amount of time are some other ways to make call operators to fulfill their social needs. Altogether, they can help the operators to meet these belongingness needs.

Fourth, promotion is the most visible sign for companies to value talented employees. Like other human beings call operators need gain respect and admiration from others. Through a promotion the status of an employee raises. To make call operators feel valued it is suggested to the call companies to offer promotion on the basis of achievement instead of seniority or any other non-performance based factors. However, a promotion indeed cannot be given to every employee. Therefore, the call companies should consider other ways to appreciate call operators' achievements. The appreciation is not necessarily to financial matters. Offering praise and recognition when the call operators perform their jobs well reflect the belief of the companies that they value the call operators. By doing these things the call operators' needs of self-esteem might be satisfied.

Fifth, the terms of monotonousness and boredom surfaced when called operators asked to describe their jobs indicating they did not gain or experience self-actualization at work. The needs of self-actualization describe the needs of people to become capable of doing something or to reach their full potential. These sorts of needs are individualized. Due to highly structured nature of call operators' jobs, giving flexibility and autonomy to them perhaps is unwise. Instead, the call center companies can offer assignments that involve challenges or

creativity. Inviting them to participate in decision making can be another option to help the operators to realize their full potential.

Limitation of Study and Future Research Direction

The use of call-operators only to gain the understanding of their motivation to work perhaps was the main limitation of this research. For future similar research, involving supervisors or other higher managers may help the researchers have a deeper understanding of the motivation. It may enhance the trustworthiness and the rigor of the research too. The adoption of other theories of motivation such as Herzberg's two-factor theory can give a holistic understanding of the call-operators' motivation. Finally, the use of quantitative approach is suggested to complement the data discovered in this research therefore the credibility of this research perhaps is more assured.

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