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CUBICLE CULTURE
By JARED SANDBERG

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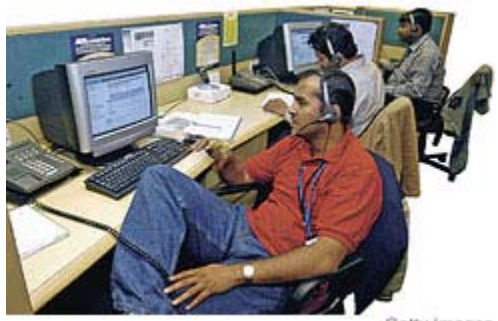
'It Says Press Any Key. Where's the Any Key?'

India's Call-Center Workers Get Pounded, Pampered

February 20, 2007; Page B1

NEW DELHI -- When there is hell to pay, Mitul Pandey is part of the team that pays it. On the graveyard shift here at Wipro, one of India's larger customer-service outsourcing firms, Ms. Pandey, 22 years old, is a specialist on the escalation team. The group deals with the angriest customers of a U.S. computer maker when their problems remain unresolved after many phone calls.



Getty Images

Night-shift employees, like those at this Wipro customer-service center, are in high demand.

On her computer screen, she reviews the log of an exchange with a frequent caller from Mt. Pleasant, Pa., whose memory-card reader is still broken: "I wish to not have anyone from India or any foreign country or anyone with an Indian accent or foreign accent continue handling my case," he told her. Calling him back is tougher than, say, coping with the woman who, instructed by her computer to "press any key to continue," was upset that her keyboard didn't have an "any" key. Because Ms. Pandey doesn't have an American accent, he rebuffs her help. When she and her manager later call him back, they only reach his answering machine and leave a message offering to conference in an American specialist.

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Even though Ms. Pandey sees few daylight hours, and many people beyond the end of their rope, she can still say cheerfully: "I feel like coming to the office every day."

Inside India's booming outsourcing industry, which is helping the economy grow 9% this year, the cubicle farms are hardly distinguishable from their U.S. counterparts. Phalanxes of four-foot-wide cubicles at the call centers are adorned with wedding announcements, Peter Drucker quotes and someone's New Years resolutions ("1. Learn something new. ... 3. Try and stick to resolutions."). People gossip about getting the newest model cellphone, gauge the time remaining on their shift and prattle on about Brangelina. The only visible difference in this New Delhi office park: Instead of an artificial pond overpopulated with Canada geese, languid cows lay amid cement mixers and a stray puppy curls into an empty wheelbarrow.

The biggest difference: It's an employee's market. Here, outsourcing employees have leverage not seen in the U.S. since the dot-com boom. Only in India, the boom isn't built on prayers but on the alluring facts of labor arbitrage -- employees get paid a fraction of their U.S. counterparts, yet it's still a decent wage. Staffers also get heavily subsidized food, tuition assistance, free transportation and often more competing job offers than they can count.

CUBICLE CULTURE FORUM

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They also work in hierarchies arguably flatter than in the U.S. To email a company chairman or to go over the head of your manager isn't perilous here; it's welcomed. Managers can get in trouble just for using a bad tone of voice, they say. Indian companies also have suggestion boxes, which aren't stuffed with coffee stirrers -- and someone knows where to find the key.

"We don't believe in formality," says Aniruddha Ganguly, associate chief operating officer at Wipro BPO. "We don't believe in hierarchy and we don't believe in protocol."

Outsourcing executives here say more than half of their job is making employees happy. That would sound hollow if the attrition rate in the outsourcing industry hadn't once peaked at a brutal 50%. "It's a constant worry," says Suranjan Banerjee, Ms. Pandey's manager. Today, four of his employees told him they had offers from rivals.

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"It's a really bad day for me," he says. (He ended up saving three of the four, not with money but by reminding them of opportunities there.)

There are plenty of legitimate reasons to leave: boredom, long working hours, the physical toll and isolation from their social circles that live on local India time zones. A three-year tenure working phones confers veteran status. Though most who work in the industry love the stability of income and the opportunity for advancement, some will leave because of burnout, to pursue other jobs or to continue their education.

Despite the shortcomings, former outsourcing employees say they like it. "It was a lot of fun," says Kiranjot Sahota, who now lives in California and works for an insurance company. "Out here, nobody wants to interact with each other."

The rise of outsourcing in India has meant the emergence of a powerful consumer class of twentysomethings who often live a fast-and-loose life of partying. Gurgaon, a suburb of New Delhi and an outsourcing hub, has erupted with marble and glass towers as improbable as Las Vegas -- and as busy throughout the night. Roughly a dozen malls have sprouted to capture spending money. Fleets of white jeeps wait outside buildings to shuttle employees home and back, their radios blaring: "New Delhi's hottest hit music is on Fever 104."

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In an atmosphere like this, employees can afford to be picky. "There are people who will leave a company because they don't like the food," says Manu Tandon, a senior marketing manager at outsourcing firm Equinox.

Many view outsourcing work as a well-paying summer job. But in a global economy, many outsourcing employees also see the exposure to overseas business as an important elective in their education. It's a notion Indian executives like to enforce, creating classrooms and training sessions as academic as any on an American campus. So when new hires -- called "freshers" -- join Wipro, they sit in an accent training class, reviewing vowel sounds to standardize their regional accents.

In an American-culture training class at Wipro, students identify Indian stereotypes (superstitious, religious and helpful) and American stereotypes (sports-loving, punctual, not as knowledgeable about computers as they think). The point is to identify shallow images as barriers to good communications so they can be overcome.

The class reviews cultural differences big and small. As a "high-context" culture where what is communicated is more internalized (say, in a family), Indians can seem to be beating around the bush to Americans, who are part of a low-context culture in which communications need to be more explicit. "If you like to talk and you're dealing with a low-

context person," explains the instructor, Roger George, "you might want to keep it simple and get to the point."

The class also touches on the fact that America has something called daylight savings; some cultural heroes whom students identify, such as Lincoln, Roosevelt and Sylvester Stallone; and some baffling common expressions. "She's going great guns!" one student suggests.

To smooth over communications gaps, many adopt western names. Tushar is Travis. Sameer is Smith. Utkarsh Vardhan, Ms. Pandey's cube neighbor at Wipro, says employees are supposed to use their real names. "But I tried it," explains Mr. Vardhan, and customers called him "Whatever your name is."

Says Mr. Vardhan: "My accent trainer suggested 'Philip.'"

While most calls sent overseas to India are innocuous information exchanges, there's only so much that can prepare someone for the hair-pulling frustration that confronts Wipro's escalation desk, where frustrated callers end up when demanding to talk to a supervisor. Only employees with a proven track record of patience get promoted to the desk.

To prepare for that assignment, they role-play angry callers. Much is scripted, like leaving a follow-up voicemail to see if a technician's visit resolved a problem. But agents aren't trained to respond to rage with anything specific. Listen and solve the problem, they say, and the customer will mellow. Amid entreaties to reboot, one can hear the language of sympathy: "I know how you feel."

But only experience can prepare employees for consumer rage, managers say. Before Wipro's Mr. Banerjee managed the escalation team, he was an agent. One of his first calls involved an American who ran over his briefcase with his car. His pen survived but his laptop didn't. The man said he'd write a letter of commendation to the pen manufacturer but would write to newspapers to complain about the computer maker, where he had friends in high places, Mr. Banerjee recalls. "Nothing trains you for that," he says. No matter how unreasonable or stupid, he adds, "You have to be empathetic."

Another reason outsourcing executives pat employees on the back is because customers usually don't. Given the fragility of computers and their inevitable technical failures, one can understand why. Just 30 notes of appreciation came out of 2,400 calls in a two-month period. Tushar Bhatt, a 26-year-old agent, says with a smile that he has never received a call from any customer out of the blue saying, "My computer is working very well."

Nor does anyone expect to. Most have genuine empathy for their callers. "If the same thing happened to me," says escalation team leader Lalit Chaudhary, "I'd be extremely angry."

Mahi Sudan, who handles mortgage accounts at outsourcing firm EXL Service, knows that by the end of the month

she'll be drained because of payment deadlines. But she also can never predict when a heart-wrenching story will arise. Yesterday, she got a call from an unemployed elderly woman who has cancer and couldn't pay. "She was literally crying," Ms. Sudan recalls. She supplied the woman with a toll-free number of charities that might be able to assist her. "You have to take care of your parents," she says by way of explanation.

It's the kind of situation that makes Ms. Sudan, 22, curse the rules under which she must operate. But it's also an exception. Most of the calls she takes don't leave her emotionally spent or frustrated. "I'm so used to it now," she says. So she and others end up decompressing as anyone else their age would: By going home, eating and, say, watching MTV.

Parents of call-center workers have criticized the overnight, nightclub-crazy culture. But some say their parents don't complain as much as they did at first and they appreciate the steady work and income, not to mention gifts from their children of jewelry and cable television.

"We don't have enough other options," says Sharad Bharti, an agent at Equinox. "Until we get married, this is the time to enjoy." (Chin up; marriage isn't so bad.)

At 35 years old, Deepa Trivedi, who does more high-level outsourcing work at Tata Consultancy Services, has thought about buying a home for the first time, despite inhospitable property values. Her favorite benefit: After she joined Tata, Ms. Trivedi found out that employees had an annual medical budget of more than $11,000. That includes her parents. So her mother had knee-replacement surgery, delayed for years due to the expense, without upfront cash or bureaucratic torment. "I just showed my identity card and the surgery was done," Ms. Trivedi says. "My presence wasn't even required."

At Wipro, it's 5:52 a.m. and Ms. Pandey's cube-neighbor, Mr. Vardhan, a.k.a. Philip, listens to an elderly lady from Chesapeake, Va., explain for the umpteenth time how a technician failed to fix her computer problem.

Even though the machine is beyond its warranty, he offers her a new part. But company rules prevent him from dispatching a technician to install it after the warranty has expired. The caller wants escalation again, so he opens up an instant-message window to enlist the help of an American technician whom he eventually conferences onto the call. Although the Indian employees can dispatch technicians, parts, and even new PCs, they have American counterparts to whom they turn in only the prickliest of cases.

While Phillip's working the case, a small crowd of colleagues are draped over Ms. Pandey's cubicle wall for a small ceremony to congratulate her for a job well done. Company auditors had monitored one of her calls and liked what they heard. "She took ownership on the call and assured the customer she would follow up with him til the issue was resolved," reads a certificate, presented to her with a bar of chocolate.

Mr. Vardhan is still on the conference call with the lady from Virginia and the U.S. customer-service agent. They have conceded to free installation of her free parts and free shipping. Says Mr. Vardhan: "She seems to be calming down now."

Write to Jared Sandberg at jared.sandberg@wsj.com

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