

2.1 About business Call centres

Internet research

Search for the keywords *call centre racist abuse* to learn about racism experienced by call centre operators. What can be done to combat this type of abuse?

Discussion

1 With a partner, think of four reasons why someone would or would not want to work in a call centre.

Summarizing

2 Read paragraphs A to E of the article opposite. The words in grey are explained in the *Wordlist* on page 149. Find the correct heading for each paragraph.

- Call of the East Unions strike back More Britons concerned
 Smarter Indians UK jobs leak

3 Now read paragraphs F to H. Write a sentence summarizing each paragraph.


4 Choose the sentence that is the best summary of the whole article.

- Trade unions are worried about poor working conditions and exploitation of workers in India in a growing industry where jobs are highly desirable.
- Trade unions are worried about companies moving to India where working conditions are poor and work is highly stressful.
- Trade unions are worried about job losses, poor working conditions and exploitation of workers worldwide in a growing industry where work is stressful.
- Trade unions are worried about job losses, poor working conditions and exploitation of workers in Britain in a growing industry where workloads are unreasonable.

Discussion

5 Do you share the trade unions' concerns? Discuss your reactions with your partner.

Predicting and listening

6  1:10 You are going to hear a radio discussion between Lavanya Fernandes, a Customer Relationship Management expert, and Tashar Mahendra, a Centre Manager, about working in call centres. With a partner, try to predict what the speakers will say about each of the following five topics. Then listen and check your predictions.

Why India? Changes to call centres Perks of the job
 Employee profile and training Promotion prospects

Listening for detail

7 Listen again and use the key words and phrases in the table to write notes that summarize the discussion.

Why India?	Changes to call centres	Perks of the job	Employee profile and training	Promotion prospects
1 ... one million English-speaking college graduates enter ...	1 New technology: 2 The operator's job has become ...	1 Transport: 2 Good working conditions with ...	1 Good communication skills: 2 Technical skills: 3 Special training:	1 Can become a supervisor after ... 2 Experience in a contact centre is ...
2 Low labour costs for ...	3 Centres are trying hard to ...			

Debate

8 Divide into two groups, *for* and *against* outsourcing call centres from industrialized countries to the developing world.

For: turn to page 110.

Against: turn to page 114.

At the end of the line

Next time you phone a call centre, your customer service adviser could be talking to you from India. Helen Taylor looks at how companies are increasingly farming out their operations abroad, all in the name of cost cutting.

A The chief executive of HSBC bank, Sir Keith Whitson, caused uproar recently when he said he would rather use call centre workers in India than those in Britain. He claimed that workers in Asia are smartly dressed, enthusiastic, more efficient and are often graduates. Of course, he may also have been persuaded by the fact that wages in India are about £4 a day, which is more like the hourly rate over here.

B The bank already has 3,100 call centre staff in Asia answering calls from British customers, and it expects to increase that to 4,500 by the end of the year. With wages so low, the additional cost of redirecting phone calls to India is easily met. And HSBC isn't the only company to be looking East. British Airways, Zurich Insurance, GE and others have all sent their call centre services overseas.

C The public service workers' union, UNISON, is concerned by Thames Water's recent decision to export its call centre services, probably to India, in an attempt to reduce its overall costs. The company plans to cut 150 jobs initially, adding that a possible 1,000 staff could be affected in some way in the future. 'The proposal to transfer these jobs out of the UK is very worrying indeed,' said UNISON regional officer, Ron Harley. 'This is a slap in the face for our members who have worked tirelessly to improve services to customers over many years.'

D Reality, a part of the GUS retail chain, also came into conflict with British staff over plans to move some of its operations to India. More than 80% of USDAW members at the company voted in September for strike action, after saying they'd been betrayed by the company's secret deal with India.

E But in spite of job losses in the industry, with BT alone axing more

than two thousand posts earlier this year, call centres remain a major employer in Britain. One job in 50 in Britain is currently in a call centre, which is expected to rise to one in 30 in the next five or six years. And that is in spite of serious concerns about working conditions in the industry, with complaints about stress, bullying and unreasonable workloads.

F In India, however, call centre work is seen as highly desirable. With school teachers earning just £50 a month, call centre wages of double that are seen as attractive. This means that the industry attracts the young, well-educated, middle classes who are eager to work in a clean and modern environment. A recent BBC Radio 4 programme, *India Calling, How*

'... the finer points of British culture, such as which Spice Girl married David Beckham ...'

May I Help?, described the great lengths that would-be employees in India have to go to in order to work in a British call centre. Many pay a massive £200 for a three-week training course on the finer points of British culture, such as which Spice Girl married David Beckham and the plot of *East Enders*. They are also taught how to 'neutralize' their accents to suit a British audience and some adopt English names.

G Callers from Dundee to Dover need never know that the young woman on the other end of the line is in Delhi not Durham. Nor do they need to know that the goods or services they are buying are beyond the wildest dreams of the cheery telephone



operator. Workers quoted in the Radio 4 programme talked of how it felt to handle customers spending £50 on a T-shirt – the equivalent of two weeks' wages for those taking the calls. Yet they were also well aware that the only reason the jobs had come to India in the first place was because they earned a tenth of the wages their British counterparts could command. It is estimated that 100,000 people work in the call centre industry in India and some think that could grow tenfold over the coming years.

H Workers around the world are becoming more and more likely to spend their working day in a call centre. Their experiences may differ, depending on the conditions in their workplace and the society in which they live, but their lives are no longer worlds apart. The jobs of staff in Britain need to be defended and working conditions improved. But workers in India, too, should be protected from exploitation as a result of the demands of an increasingly globalized market, which is motivated by profit. Wherever it is located, call centre work is potentially stressful and monotonous and call centre staff need adequate remuneration and respect in recognition of this fact.