Sustaining Talent of the Service Industry in the Philippines: The Ergonomic Approach

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ABSTRACT

The Philippines is considered as the BPO capital of Asia due to Filipinos ability to speak English as a second language. Because of this, BPO has become an industry that contributed to the economic growth for decades.

Since the industry that employs workers at various times of the day, particularly at nighttime, various talent management programs have been in place to attract a skilled workforce. However, in the light of attractive compensation and generous benefits – companies overlooked the important aspect of ergonomics issues in call center management such as workstation design, shiftwork and its effects and computer-related disorders. It was observed that call center work in the Philippines lacked focus on considering these factors, making talent management more diagnostic than preventive in avoiding employee burnout, thus making skilled talent move from one call center to another, or worse to another industry and making a career change for good.

This paper will provide a conceptual framework of linking ergonomics and sustaining talent in the Business Process Industry, a look at the Philippine setting. By addressing so, it will also measure the employees’ productivity which resulted in the competitiveness, growth and profitability of these call centers. This paper aims to investigate the transformative nature these BPO has employed ensure they get to keep the best talent not because of the attractive compensation and benefits they offer but the level of seriousness management has placed to alleviate workplace conditions to address these ergonomic issues of shiftwork, workstation design and computer-related disorders.

Keywords: Call Center, Business Process Outsourcing, Computer Related Disorders, Shiftwork, Ergonomics, Talent Management

1. Introduction

Since 1992 when the first Business Process Outsourcing company started in the Philippines, it has brought about employment to 1 Million Filipinos not only in the National Capital Region but all the way to the key cities of the country. It contributed to $25B revenue to the economy (Business Mirror, 2015) and is expected to employ 225,000 employees more in the next years (Rappler, 2016).

Given its massive contribution to the Philippine economy, it is inevitable that the industry is here to stay for long. But just like most companies across the globe, sustaining talent will always be the major challenge of the industry, since as a Service Industry it is very much dependent on the workforce to deliver the various goods across the six-sectors (Tullao, et al. 2012).

HRM Practitioners, in the course of the ever-changing landscape of the world of business then evolved from being the “administrative assistants” to Strategic Partners (Bondarouk and Olivas-Lujan, 2014). As part of the corporate strategy HR then becomes a key player because building competitive advantage is ensuring to have the best and the brightest people in the organization, which gave birth to the concept of Talent Management

1.1 Talent Management

The concept Talent Management rose when the McKinsey and Company coined the term War for Talent in 1997 (Michael, et. al, 2001) and concluded that there is indeed a propensity for the war of talent. Lewis and Hackman (2006: 140) further defined Talent Management as “ensuring the right person is in the right job at the right time” and therefore surmised that Talent Management or TM is a collection of HR activities

Talent Management despite its two-decade existence still is a major concern of companies due to the “insufficient pipeline of high potential employees to fill strategic management roles” (Ready and Conger, 2007). The Service Industry, particularly the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) in the Philippines is no exemption to this phenomenon.

Attrition to the BPO has been the major concern of every company particularly the Call Centers. Though there are positive outlook that from 70% turnover rate, it dropped to 50%. (www.sourcefit.com, www.bigoutsource.com). However, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority (2016), the country on the average is experiencing a 7.79% separation rate. On a nationwide scale, attrition is posing a single digit figures whereas BPO is at 50%.

Servicing the other side of the globe during its business hours, employees have changed the landscape as various 24-hour food chains rose, transport systems increased and economic zones were created. Thus, their shiftwork practices are not only confined within the industry of Business Process Outsourcing but also touched the facet of food, transport and information technology.

1.2 Shiftwork

Shiftwork, as defined by Helander (2006) is “any work done beyond 7pm and before 6am”. He further argued that “the problems of shift work leads to fatigue, health disorders, disruption of social life, decreased productivity and safety”. Kromer, Kromer and Kromer-Elbert (2001) added that shift-work is disrupting the normal body rhythms and presented that that certain mental tasks, focus of attention and being alert are jeopardized in the long run. Understanding the concept of shiftwork and effects on performance and productivity is under the discipline of ergonomics. Osborne
(1996) further concurred that this is also the discipline using its “person-centered approach” lead to the work and performance of the individual in the workplace. He further argued its importance because the “human operator manages to cope with the environment” and is therefore must resolve its discrepancies.

Apart from shiftwork, Call Center Employees are also exposed to the prolonged sitting leading to body pain and MSDs (Abad, Galarido, Tiu, 2014). Despite the big shift and economic rewards this industry has contributed to the nation, understanding the rudiments of their work has been the least of the agenda of the government – albeit the very curative measures it placed to ensure protection of the welfare and being of these “night owls.”

2. Method
Understanding the importance of ergonomics to alleviate the working conditions of our Call Center employees vis-à-vis the importance of sustaining talent in the BPO are the two conceptual frameworks that will be discussed. Through review of related literature present covering the years of 2000 up to present will be presented and thoroughly discussed in this study to come up with conceptual framework and conclusion.

We will first discuss common ailments in the call center, followed by the various concepts in talent management particularly in sustaining talent before coming up with a marriage of these two concepts to draw out its conclusion.

3. Literature Review
3.1 Common ailments in the Call Center
3.1.2 Computer-Related Disorders
A call center is defined as a place where contacts are made and received. It is a work environment in which the main business is conducted through a telephone/headphone and computers. The call center work is characterized by fewer opportunities for variation in work task and longer work shifts in front of computers lead to long continuous work with little variation and it has been shown to be associated with musculoskeletal disorders (MSD) (Gujrathi & Sharma, 2014).

Several studies reported that a wide range of physical ailments of call center agents which are backache, shoulder pain, headache due to eye strain, and dryness of eyes. The factors that contribute to the pain and discomfort felt by call center agents include keyboard position, mouse, and ergonomic chair. The body parts that experience the most pain are shoulder, lower back, upper back, neck, and wrists/hands. (Abad, Galarido, Tiu, 2014)

3.2.2 Musculoskeletal Disorders
According to Comcare (2015), one of the typical injuries that can be experienced due to the workplace includes musculoskeletal disorders (MSD) of the neck, back, and upper limbs. It is characterized by discomfort or pain of the tendons, muscles, and other tissues. There are several factors which contribute to the MSDs that the call center agents are experiencing. Listed below are the discussion for each MSD.

3.2.2.1 Back Pain
Back pain is caused by doing tasks which require repetitive activities like sitting for long hours and slouching, twisting or pulling when lifting an object, and changing of joint and discs with respect to its normal condition (Abad, Galarido, Tiu, 2014). Call center agents experience back pain because they sit for too long often in a static position or slouching. Whenever a call center agent sit in an awkward position, he tends to use additional muscle in order to support the other body structure.

3.2.2.2 Long Sitting
Call center agents seat for a long period of time while being in the same environment as well as doing repetitive tasks. For the entire duration of their shift, they are seated while answering calls. Moreover, when an agent is seated for a long period of time, he/she tends to twist his/her back which adds up to the pain.

3.2.2.3 Neck Pain
Often making holding the neck in a forward bent posture for a prolonged time, and often working in the same position for a prolonged time were significantly associated with neck pain. Moreover, physical and psychosocial work factor are associated with the frequency of neck pain (Cagne, et.al., 2007). Call center agents often work for a long period time in a static position while demonstrating an awkward posture which could be a reason as to why they experience neck pain.

3.2.2.4 Carpal Tunnel Syndrome (CTS)
Carpal Tunnel Syndrome is the numbness, tingling, weakness, and other problems in the hand because of pressure on the median nerve in the wrist. The median nerve controls the movement and feeling in the thumb and first three fingers. When the person feels pain, numbness, and tingling in the three fingers and the thumb, this could be a symptom of CTS (WedMD, n.d.). Since call center agents spend their time in front the computer using their mouse and keyboard, it could affect their fingers which could lead to CTS. The repetitive motion of the hand increases their chance of obtaining CTS (Tecsorn, 2011).

3.2.2.5 DeQuervain’s Tenosynovitis
Also known as wrist tendonitis is a painful condition affecting the tendons on the thumb side of the wrist. Having DeQuervain’s Tenosynovitis will hurt when the person turns the wrist, grasps anything, or make a fist. The repetitive motion of the wrist causes De Quervain’s Tenosynovitis (Mayo Clinic, n.d.).

3.3 Impact to Work
Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) are the leading cause of work disability, sickness absence from work, ‘presenteeism’ and loss of productivity. This is a major issue that should be addressed because workers should be physically fit in order to perform their tasks well. If a worker is not fully-conditioned when working, then it may lead to a poor delivery of service and are more prone to error.

Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) may even get worse if left unaided may lead to a more serious case. Hence, as a business, it is important to address these kinds of issues most especially to their employees. Otherwise, good to great employees will immediately shift careers when their health is at stake.

3.4 On Sustaining Talent
3.4.1 Common Misconceptions
Talent Management, since it is still in its early stages has been unpopular in some geographical areas and viewed in different perspectives. Some believe that Talent Management is simply the work of people in the Human Resources
(Bandari and Migiro, 2015). Krishnan and Scullion (2016) argued that Talent Management is a capability left to the multi-national enterprises (MNE) and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are an exception. In the light of Sustaining Talent, further misconceptions are evidenced in literature. Allen, Bryant and Vardaman (2010) cited that employee turnover can be summarized into five which are all misconceptions due to the limited view of talent management. According to their journal article, they identified that people quit because of pay, managers can do only a small amount to affect turnover decisions and that there is a cookie-cutter strategy that will be effective in sustaining talent. Based on their research these are all misconceptions because they have argued the existence of evidence-based perspective coming from literature.

3.4.2 Management Efforts
In the light of these common misconceptions on Talent Management we can therefore conclude that such efforts of sustaining talent are not just within the hands of the human resources people, but rather a concerted effort of the various stakeholders of the organization.

3.4.2.1 Building Reputation
First management effort in sustaining talent is to build reputation. Harvey and Grousis (2015) argues that reputation is an important factor in attracting and retaining talent. However, if the management is not keen on building the safety and welfare of these night workers, high performing employees can just flee from one call center to another and when their health takes toll, they shift careers in the daytime and see call center career as just a “stepping stone or entry to the corporate world”. Thus, this paper proposes the following management efforts in building reputation:

- Do a site assessment. Through analysis and employee interviews a simple site assessment conducted by an occupational healthcare organization will you pinpoint where hazards lie given the nature of the job and the common ailments that comes with it. Even small & medium call centers who can go through an ergonomics checklist and act accordingly can fill any gaps.
- Make workstations adjustable. Having employees move workstations frequently does not have to be a huge ergonomic headache. By simply providing the right ergonomic keyboard, adjustable chairs and desks and a handsfree headset can go a long way to avoid common ailments cited above.
- Vary posture. Encourage employees to move around when they take their breaks. The more movement, the more natural it will become, the greater the reduction in muscle strain, mental fatigue and metabolic disorders
- Make it a management priority. When management makes ergonomics a priority, employees are more likely to adhere to these corporate practices. Managers can make great role models showing the team that extra care and support for their well-being.
- Check in with workers frequently. It is important to keep to communication lines open, since our call center agents are the front liners and are exposed to the hazards of shiftwork and prolong seating. They are have the greatest insight as to whether interventions are working. The more call centers feel they are involved in these changes the more likely they are actually changing their behaviors and their attitudes towards the company.

All these simple management efforts in lieu of building reputation were concluded by Sparrow and Makram (2015) as Talent Management initiatives that are value-driven processes. To make such efforts achieve the bottomline of the organization, that is competitiveness, profitability and growth, Lewis and Heckman (2006) argued that Talent Management should be a strategic decision of the leadership of the enterprise as these leads to meaningful measures to be done in the workplace in order to improve the quality of employees well-being in the organization.

3.4.2.2 Importance of Training.
Training, though an intervention in the Talent Management also known as “developing talent” requires a separate discussion as proposed by literature.

Moraes, et. al (2015) concurred that telemarketers are exposed to various ergonomic hazards due to the nature of their work. Even though their organizations are regulated for a span of eight years, still some of these organizations are guilty of executing the right ergonomic practices. Thus, they argued that training to the various stakeholders are vital and should be mandatory requirement that must be adopted by all companies involving workers. Tornstrom, et. al. (2008) in their study of the company Volvo argues that ergonomics assessments must be in place and the best way to ensure such practices are thriving in the organization is to optimize call center trainings during their downtimes or allotted on their serviced country holidays where there is no work, yet employees are paid and complies to the Philippine work calendar.

4. Conceptual Framework
After the thorough literature review, this paper came up with a conceptual framework below:

At the first part of our discussion, we have introduced Talent Management and how literature discusses its evolution stage that is why it is presented in various perspective. Talent management, as an HR concept is something that is essential in keeping and sustaining a pool of right people in the organization. However, the nature of the Business Process Outsourcing work – that is where employees are exposed to shiftwork and computer related problems are work hazards that are legitimate excuse for them to leave their respective call center organizations.

This study aims to enlighten various HR practitioners to embrace a different intervention in keeping talent and that is...
making ergonomics a corporate norm. However placing ergonomics as a buzzword is not enough, it should be practiced, introduced and must be a role of everyone in the organization, starting from the top management. Opportunities such as training programs, HR engagement activities and employee orientation to communicate the seriousness of the organization to ensure the well being of employees will not only lead to higher employee productivity but also increase in corporate reputation and higher levels of talent attraction. Lewis and Heckman (2006) stressed that Talent Management can be strategic advantage of corporations, why not add the flavor of being the “first ergonomically friendly BPO”? Pfeffer (2001) on the other hand claims that in order to win the “War for Talent” requires fixing the culture inside to attract the best talents outside and to keep and further develop the employees within. Bandari & Migiro (2015) in their study of IT Companies in India concluded that factors such as “quality of training received”, “scope of learning” and “work culture” are key factors of keeping their talented IT from going overseas. Moraes, et. al (2015) ultimately proves that preventive measures through training on ergonomics leads to a high reduction of illness rates are work when these are fully adopted by the worker.

5. Conclusion

There is a cost for every hire that we put in the workplace. Companies do expect a return of investment for every single individual they ask to join. However, with various “poaching” practices of various industries, not to mention that literature has provided where employees tend not to stay long in companies add to the long concern of talent management of organizations. BPO is not spared in this predicament. To add to this phenomenon, the nature of their job where work related disorders are evident, it is really difficult to sustain talent if companies will not change their HR strategies. It can be concluded therefore that as companies would like to achieve their competitiveness, profitability and growth, they would have to look at a multi-disciplinary approach on keeping their talents. Ergonomics in the workplace must be a constant practice and properly educating their Human Resource Department of its rewards, benefits and execution will yield to a more informed workplace. Further, companies must also have the initiative and not just wait for labor laws and magna carta for call center employees to really provide the employee value proposition. If employees feel from day 1 that their organization cares for their well-being and provide preventive measures rather than curative means to avoid workplace disorders, then employees will be able to further value the company and no need to seek for greener pastures.

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