

Offshored call center work: transnational interaction and mediated co-present collaboration

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ABSTRACT

The globalization of IT-enabled service activities has intensified in the late 1990s as the result of advanced information technologies and falling costs of telecommunication. The number of call centers and employment rate have grown exponentially on a global level, both in Western and developing countries. Due to lower production costs in emerging economies, call centers are increasingly off-shored. Off-shoring implies distributed work across teams and intercultural communication between agents and customers who do not share the same cultural, temporal and spatial references. This paper looks into how everyday working practices and coordination are achieved in off-shored call centers, enabled and supported by technology. Distance – be it geographical or cultural – inherent to globally distributed work and transnational communication does not appear as “a problem”.

Author Keywords

Call centers, globalization of services, distributed work, computer-mediated interaction

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

General Terms

See list of the limited ACM 16 terms in the instructions, see <http://www.sheridanprinting.com/sigchi/generalterms.htm>.

INTRODUCTION

Call centers are technology-mediated service and sales operations that have become the major channel through which companies interact with their customers. They are new production units, or business functions that are taking on the features of an emerging sector [3], in a transnational context. The body of literature on call centers has continued

to grow over recent years in a range of analytical frameworks and methodologies [1], mainly investigating the themes of the nature of work, labor processes, control and surveillance and the (re)location of call centers offshore [12].

Call center operations are representative of what is new in the globalization of service work. They are located in many parts of the world, offer remote service via technology, and are displacing establishments that provided place-based service in local or protected markets [3]. The phenomenal growth of call centers and the changes it has brought can be attributed to three major causal factors: (i) the expansion and range of ICT, (ii) the restructuring of organizations enabled by ICT, and (iii) the use of ICT and restructuring of organizations to relocate sites of production and employment [4]. Transnationalized jobs, in particular, rely on sophisticated information technology. Satellites and optical fiber submarine communications cables allow calls to be seamlessly and inexpensively routed across large distances. Help or service work no longer implies face-to-face encounters with customers. It is increasingly carried out solely through spoken interaction, mediated by the telephone and across national borders. Calls are handled by subcontracting companies or off-shored call centers in Asia or Africa, creating a unique form of global connectedness.

In this paper, I analyze how this global service work is carried out by a “newly-emerging transnational labor force” [11] in an IT rich environment which is the call center floor. The analysis is based on a workplace studies approach, which combines ethnography with methodologies for studying human interaction developed within conversation analysis [7]. Workplace studies reveal the complex array of resources that inform the production and coordination of workplace activities, allowing a better understanding of work, technology and interaction. By detailing the socially sanctioned and ‘publicly’ available competencies used by individuals within real-time situations, as they achieve specialized tasks with the support of complex technologies, we begin to uncover the systematics that undoubtedly underlie human-computer interaction and computer-supported cooperative work [9].

The video data were collected in a French outsourced call

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center carrying out direct response marketing, which has off-shored its activity to Mauritius¹. The multi-camera recording device [13] gives access to the phone conversation, the screen activity and content, gestures of the call center agent as he/she orients to co-workers around, and a general view of the floor. It allows a global documentation of situated work practices of agents, which cannot be reducible to talking on the phone.

CENTER OF COORDINATION

Whether in-house or outsourced, call centers are IT rich environments and are characterized by specific work organizations. Thus, they can be included in the growing corpus of research that Suchman [14] has described as 'centers of coordination': emergency dispatch centers [15, 16], airline operations rooms [14, 7], news rooms, control rooms of the London Underground [8]. Empirical analysis reveals that this call center presents the main characteristics of a 'centre of coordination': (i) division of labor, (ii) co-location of colleagues, (iii) coordination between individuals' activities, (iv) distribution of information among equipment and personnel, and (v) availability of tools and technologies to facilitate the co-ordination of tasks [8].

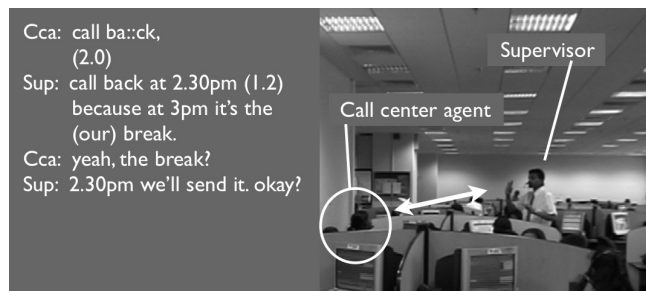


Figure 1. Supervisor collaborating in real-time with a call center agent

These workplaces are also, Suchman says, characterizable in terms of participants' ongoing orientation to problems of space and time. Even though people and equipment are not deployed across distances in the same way as in airline operations rooms, agents working in off-shored call centers have to deal with 'problems of space and time'. Their task is to make outgoing telemarketing calls, while maintaining good customer-organization relations. Establishing this relationship may be rendered more difficult when work is distributed across spaces and when customer and agent are not provided with the same cultural, temporal and spatial references. How do call center agents manage the global distribution of work – in terms of management paradigms and agent-customer interaction? How do they succeed in rendering the off-shoring aspects unproblematic for the interaction? How is the management of problems which may arise from the global distribution of work supported by

¹ Mauritius is an emerging economy, situated east of Africa in the Indian Ocean, whose aim is to become a cyber island. It welcomes both French and English speaking call centers.

technological tools and artifacts?

ACHIEVING THE "LOCAL"

In the short transcript of the interaction presented on Figure 1, the call center agent and her supervisor collaboratively organize her future action. She needs to program on her computer the task of calling back the customer. At the scheduled time, that is 2.30pm, a reminder will appear on her computer screen. First, we can see how task management is supported by the features built into the software package. Second, they achieve the intelligibility of actions by an orientation to time, which is used to structure and organize the future activity. Reference to clock time for scheduling the calling back is situatedly and locally constructed with regards to a relevant calendar of events (Button, 1990), which includes the break. Then, in terms of transnational context of work, their referring to time raises interesting questions about place.

In winter, there is a three-hour time difference between Mauritius (GMT + 4) and France (GMT + 1). This time difference is completely embodied in the call center's entire organizational structure, working processes, and interactional routines on the phone. The common references to time during the call on the phone is, first, accomplished *interactionally*. When talking in real-time to prospective customers, agents refer to the French time. Other studies have shown that collaborative work between distributed teams across three time zones in the United States required negotiation or temporal coordination. For example, they would specify the meeting in three different time zones in their emails: Eastern, Mountain, and Pacific Time Zones [10]. By mutually and intelligibly orienting to time and anchoring the conversation with the customers in the 'here' and 'now', agents achieve the 'local'. They make geographical distance non relevant for the practical purpose at hand and socially achieve a common sense of place in and through interaction.

Second, the transparency of distance is accomplished *organizationally* and *technically*, as it is embodied, in the Computer Telephony Integration. This main tool used by call center agents and which manages most of their work, is in fact set to the French time zone as displayed on the agents' computer screens. Scheduling a call back – what the agent does – or doing any other operation is accomplished at a particular calendar time: GMT + 1.

Third, *structurally*, the call center working organization also uses the French time zone: the agents, and even some of the administrative personnel whose activity is not directly linked to call making, start working at noon, when it is 9am in France. This time-sensitive synchronous customer service work has been termed by Adam [2] as a form of "globalization from above".

The French time zone is so far embodied in the work practices that agents not only align to French time references during calls, but also refer to the French time

zone in their collaborative talk on the floor (transcript of interaction in Figure 1). When referring to their own break, they integrate the French time in their work experience. When they refer to their break being at 3pm, it is actually 6pm in Mauritius. 6pm to 7pm is the main break time, during which the call center professionals have dinner, having started their day work at noon. While French time is embodied in the working tools, and implemented in the call center's organizational routines and hours, Mauritian time is integrated in more personal devices, like agents' watches and mobiles, mealtimes and references to closing time.



Figure 2. Scheduling a task on the computer

CONCLUSION

This paper is part of a research program which aims at understanding the ways in which individuals ordinarily accomplish technologically supported work tasks, interact and collaborate in the workplace. Examining offshore call center work practices allows an insight into how meaningful locales are produced by people and actions rather than bounded by walls and ceilings [5]. The computer-mediated activity of delivering service through language and social interaction allow a form of real-time connectedness between people across borders and across cultures. 'Neutralizing' distance through establishing common time references constitutes one of the strategies to allow the formal and professional nature of the call to be conversationally achieved.

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