

Possibilities of and Predisposition to Trade Unions in Philippine Call Centers and Business Process Outsourcing Firms

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Introduction

A social science theory must have the capacity to describe, explain, and predict social phenomenon. It has both normative and positive dimensions. The former deals with "what might be" and "what ought to be," while the latter delves into "what is." Thus, a theory has descriptive, prescriptive and predictive values. A theory must be simple and elegant yet possess empirical warrant. This indicates the pulls in two opposite directions of social science theorizing: theoretical parsimony versus pragmatic richness (Kettl, 2000).

As a discipline, industrial relations (IR) had undergone a similar process. According to Kaufman (2004), the process involved three faces: the science-building, problem-solving and ethical/ideological faces. Kochan (1980) captures the multidisciplinary character of IR as he notes that the field encompasses the study of all aspects of people at work, including the behavior of employees or employers who may or may not join unions or organizations, the economics of employment relations, the legal framework governing

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employment conditions and relations, and the comparative analysis of different IR systems in different countries and time periods.

The global sourcing phenomenon has drawn much attention to the recent boom in call centers and business process outsourcing (BPO) in the Philippines, which have fomented many IR researches. This essay discusses extant theoretical and empirical studies focusing on call centers, BPO and trade unions in the country. In fine, the sample studies presented here explore the possibilities of and predisposition to trade unionism in call center and BPO firms. Albeit, it should be noted at the outset that positive attitudes to trade unions, if any, would not automatically or necessarily translate to new unions and higher union density, for attitude is just one variable among several that could influence individual decisions and actions. The essay also broaches a research agenda on the subject matter, particularly the relationship, if any, among turnover, voice, and risks in call centers and BPO.

Extant researches

A one-shot survey form (Appendix "A") was used in a study done for the Union Network International (UNI) – Philippine Liaison Committee in 2005.¹ The survey form is an abridged version of the UNI – April 2005 survey forms on workers' terms and conditions and attitudes to unions. Due to accessibility and time constraints, nonrandom (nonprobability) sampling was used to determine the 101 respondents covered by the survey. The sampling procedure involved two stages. In stage 1 contact persons working in the industry were asked to fill out the survey form and/or help determine other potential respondents. In stage 2, the other potential respondents mentioned in stage 1 were requested to answer the survey as well. Thus, the number of respondents grew from one stage to the next. In social research literature this is referred to as the "snowballing" technique (Labovitz and Hagedorn, 1981). Actual interviews were also conducted to obtain other relevant information about the industry. Four (4) respondents – one of them a Team Leader – and a physician providing medical services to call center and BPO firms at Eastwood City, Libis, Quezon City were interviewed for the purpose. For some data, central tendency (i.e., mean and mode) was computed. Aside from percentages, ratios and proportions, data were analyzed by categorizing them into nominal, ordinal, explanatory and dependent variables. Gathering, categorizing, tabulation, analysis, interpretation of data and writing of the survey report were performed from May 3 to 30, 2005. Following were the findings, analysis, interpretation, and conclusion: