

■ Upwardly mobile

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If you have lost your credit card, bought an insurance policy, reported a fault on your mobile phone or tried to book a holiday in the past six years, you have probably spoken to someone like Siddharth Bahl. If you were satisfied with the response you probably thanked him for his help, noting his unfailing courtesy and impeccable English. If not, you may have shouted at him before hanging up in frustration and muttering something about how it would be nice to speak to a customer service representative who was actually on the same continent.

To British and American consumers, Bahl and millions like him at business process outsourcing (BPO) companies across India are faceless voices at the end of a telephone line. But who are they? What motivates them to work long, stressful shifts servicing the whims of demanding, and often rude, customers? Why do they do a job that most of their Western peers consider beneath them?

Bahl is an articulate and thoughtful young man intent on going places. A 27-year-old accounting and economics graduate from Punjab, he has moved quickly from the shop floor working the phones to managing the end-to-end business solutions of FTSE 100 and Fortune 100 companies. His father has come round to the idea that his son will not be pursuing the traditional Indian education route to a postgraduate degree, but is instead building a career in the boom business of outsourcing. "Times have changed," Bahl says. "BPO is not a low-end job. I get exposure to the best practices of the best global companies and could go out and get a job in a top bank or telecoms firm because I already know their processes."

Hungry, disciplined and highly educated, Bahl is among India's next generation of service-sector employees. Earning more in a year than their parents could hope to over their entire working lives, these twenty somethings are the fuel for their country's growth. They are worldly, determined to marry for love and unwilling to wait until retirement to enjoy themselves, and will be the most voracious consumers of the next decade. During the day they put their heads down to forge successful careers in growth sectors such as telecoms, banking, venture capital and engineering. The especially bright ones would walk into any top job abroad but choose to stay to play a role in India's economic rise. The more creative ones, probably with the cushion of family money, may try to make their name in the Hindi film industry — the world's most prolific — or open the latest trendy restaurant where all the socialites will want to be seen.

At the Bombay headquarters of Intelenet, a BPO joint venture between Barclays Bank and HDFC Ltd, a leading Indian financial services group, they troop in sporting the latest fashion accessories before sitting down to an eight-hour shift solving problems for people they will never meet. Some have been bussed in from their suburbs and, if they work irregular hours, will be dropped back to their doorsteps. Many drive themselves, finding after just a year in the job that they have saved enough to buy a car.

The canteen at lunchtime feels like a university campus. Staff, whose average age is 27, tuck into a vast array of Indian food and fresh fruit juices at heavily subsidised prices. A tasty and filling curry costs just 15 rupees (6p). Some settle down to a game of carrom, an Indian board game similar to billiards: others pass the rest of their break seeking tax advice from counsellors while they wait for their mobile phones to recharge at nearby power points.

Mario Caldeira, 29, is playing table tennis. A commerce graduate, he wanted to be a professional footballer but opted to join the BPO industry and start the company's league-topping team instead. "Job security doesn't happen very easily in India," he says. "Before this, getting a cell phone or a DVD player was a luxury. Right now I have my own house. I am proud to be part of this generation. My dad ran an auto garage and he always said to me there were no free lunches. This is a performance-driven industry so you have to work hard. It can get a little stressful but, then again, we have table tennis."

His opponent is Ramesh Shukla, a 30-year-old quality analyst, whose very presence at the table is remarkable: he lost both his legs at the knee in a train accident and stands on artificial limbs. His analytical skill, however, means there is a place for him behind a desk in the burgeoning new economy. "This is an up-and-coming industry and most of the jobs are with hand, eye and mind," he says. "I'm even getting new UK-made legs."

Far from being low-grade, working in a call centre in India offers millions of graduates a ticket to the good life. Besides a starting salary, depending on qualifications, of between 120,000 and 240,000 rupees a year (£1,370-£2,740), which is decent by Indian standards and roughly 25 per cent more than they could expect to earn in other domestic industries, the job comes with some rather nice perks. They help to create what Manuel D'Souza, Intelenet's head of human resources, describes as "a lovely, positive environment".

Employees have free use of a 24-hour gym staffed by personal trainers, a library, a doctor, a transport network, a tax-return filing system and a concierge service. To compensate for long hours with few breaks and their location on an IT park in the middle of former industrial wasteland, they can have everything done for them from depositing a cheque, paying a speeding ticket or finding a handyman, to booking a holiday, getting a club membership or organising a party.

Work has never been so much fun. "We give them a particular lifestyle to which most of them aspire," says Susir Kumar, the chief executive. "When I left college in 1988, graduates were happy to earn between 2,000 and 7,000 rupees a month. Some of us told ourselves we would focus on learning and not on money. The avenues to spend our money were much less anyway. Now job opportunities have opened up significantly and there are movies and malls. I have a feeling that this will be a generation of spenders."

As Intelenet's employee attrition rate is half the industry average of 40 per cent, the company must be offering more than its rivals. To hear the recruitment process described in detail, landing a job is tough despite the demand for people to staff India's expanding BPO sector.

Manuel D'Souza says he needs to recruit between 400 and 500 employees a month but receives up to 4,000 applications. "These are the plum jobs. About 150 applicants walk through our door every day," he says.

Before a candidate is even offered a post, he or she will have passed six selection stages, from a screening to gauge personality and attitude through to a computer-based aptitude test, an accent assessment and a formal interview. Those who do not have the “right voice” will be channelled into data processing work. Those who do, or can have their accents “neutralised” (the ideal, apparently, is a Canadian newsreader), will go for further training to ready them for real customers. Five per cent will not make it through two weeks of voice training and cultural sensitisation. A further 5 per cent will fail company process training. It may sound like human programming but it is a far cry from the early days of outsourcing, when companies would give their employees English or American pseudonyms and fictitious biographies. “I remember in our first batch, Sangita became a Suzy and could choose her birthplace and where she went to college,” says Sandeep Aggarwal, Intelenet’s sales director. “This was when clients were extremely concerned about telling their customers that the calls were going to India. What’s changed is that this is no longer a secret. Ninety per cent of our clients have authorised us to reveal where we are if we are asked. Thankfully not a single one asks us to lie.”

Companies who outsource to India can make cost savings of between 40 and 50 per cent, and the flood shows no signs of abating: yesterday it was announced that 1,000 jobs at Norwich Union in the UK are to be moved to the subcontinent. The result is an element of xenophobia.

Aggarwal says: “When I used to go out and sell in the US, I had to tell people that I did have electricity in my house, that I drove a car and did not go to work on an elephant. Just a few weeks ago a big British company came here to see that we were not running a sweatshop: that we had air conditioning. People who have never traveled to India have no clue.”

The industry has also suffered an image problem as stories circulated about a wild partying culture among workers with more money than sense. There is certainly truth to the stories, but India’s youth in general are letting their hair down in a way their parents were never permitted to. “My father reads about drugs in the industry and yes, there are sections of people who see this as a fun job to kill some time, but there are also many people who treat it as a serious career,” Bahl says.

Intelenet says most of its 11,000 employees are very career-orientated and Kumar appears to bear a sense of social responsibility for putting money in the hands of people barely out of their teens. His free financial advisory service reflects this. Nevertheless, the growth of the industry coupled with a looming shortage of talent means his employees hold the trump card and job-hopping for a little more money is the norm.

But while the pay and perks are competitive, they will stick around for the experience even if they are valued more by their employers than the clients’ customers. “Maybe 5 per cent of the callers are angry and use foul language,” says Rukhsar Balsara, 28, an assistant pre-sales support manager. “But the pay and the growth prospects are not available in other industries. If I give myself another five years here, I know I am going to go places.”