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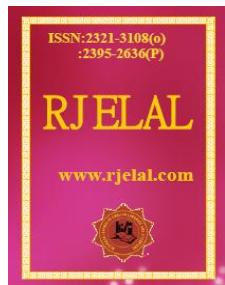


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J & K CALL CENTRE INDUSTRY & ENGLISH LANGUAGE: A BRIEF STUDY

HANAN KHALID KHAN, Dr. KHURSHEED AHMAD QAIZI

Srinagar, Jammu & Kashmir



ABSTRACT

In the contemporary society, call centers constitute a major industry which provides employment to hundreds every day. These have spread at a large pace across the country including the state of J & K over the last few years only to emerge as one of the significant contributors to the overall economic development of the country in general and the state in particular. These centers in the state provide services related to both – inbound calls and outbound calls. Today, this industry offers better job opportunities and good salary packages to its aspirants especially those who possess strong command and fluency in English language.

Research reveals that with almost every passing year, a new call center is established in the state by various multinational companies. One of the major reasons for the continuous growth of this industry here is enough availability of the cheapest work force and resources in the state. The presence of these centres within the state has motivated our promising youth to learn better English Language communication skills for these can pave way for their adjustment in these centers for their bright future and satisfactory career ahead.

This paper will focus on these call centres and the need of better English Language communication skills among the employees of the call centers in J & K.

Keywords: Call centers, Calls, communication skills, Good Speech & Jobs

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No variety of English has yet been found that satisfies everybody, everywhere, of all ages...

-*Prof. Lloyd James*

English is seen as a language of power and strength.

-*Anne Johnson*

Speaking English makes people open to Britain's cultural achievements, social values and business aims.

-*Robert Phillipson*

Main Argument

A thorough study reveals that Call Centers have emerged as popular centres of employment in the J&K. These call centres of varied multinational companies from all over the world require people with good speech and strong English language skills for responding to the queries of various callers/customers. Call Centers are actually centralized offices wherein the company's inbound calls are received and outbound calls are made. The Call Center industry in our country has raised the demand for better English speech and people have accordingly started to learn English with more

seriousness and dedication. This has enabled our youth to dream of better opportunities for a promising and challenging career ahead. This industry helps them to improve their English fluency so that they can eventually earn successful professional careers. Call centers also upgrade one's professional skills in their various departments such as – training department, quality department, management department, and even an IT department. Since these are all housed under the same roof, i.e., within the call centre, it is possible to learn these different skills in these departments quite easily once one joins this industry. Call centers like PC planet, Ageis Essar, S2F Technologies, Voice Com, Eyogi Solutions, and some others are centralized offices located in our State and are operating through an extensive open workspace with the help of call center agents who use a telephone / headset and a computer which is connected to a telecom switch for conducting purposeful business acts and interactions with customers / consumers or callers.

The call centers of the J & K state offer services related to both inbound / outbound calls. Inbound calls are made by consumers/customers for getting information about various products or to complain about services or products and ask for help/ assistance or guidance. In contrast to this, outbound calls are made by the agents to consumers / consumers, usually for sales purposes or telemarketing. Call Centers' staff is organized into a multi-tier support system for more efficient handling of calls. These services are provided largely to the native English speakers. These provide wide range of growth opportunities for the non-native English speakers who can after earning great proficiency and accuracy levels in English Speech, pronunciation, etc. prove greatest for these centers. Moreover, there perks usually include overtime pay, nighttime supplemental pay, medical coverage, productivity bonus and even signing up bonus. Research shows that the career's attractiveness for the call center jobs may be seen in job fairs where call centers are highly dominant among other companies while recruiting people.

The concept of Call Center in our state started in 2009 with its first base operation at the IT park Rangret, Srinagar. This was truly a great step towards better economic development of the Jammu & Kashmir state. By now many private call centers have popped up within the state. According to Dara Singh Bali, system executive IT department J&K Government:

At present, atleast 20 private call centers are registered with the Jammu and Kashmir Information Technology Department.
(Personal Interview)

This speaks a lot about the growth of these centers within such a short span of time in the state. These have adjusted hundreds of our youth who earn their livelihood and run their families. While talking to many executives of these centers, it got revealed that many more centers will now start their operations in the state. Thus, they will absorb and adjust our major unemployed youth for realizing their career dreams. In view of the growth and development of the call center in the state, it is obligatory to state what forms the basis of the fundamental requirement for entering into any such center as a worker. It was found that the call centers look for the aspirants who have good command over the English language. The recruitment department of a call center takes care of measuring a candidate's competence in English communication skills. They choose the candidates by evaluating some main aspects of speech like pronunciation, fluency, intonation, grammar, ability, accents, clear questioning, to convey / receive messages etc. Through this programme, the call center industry evaluates and determines the level of English competence among candidates who can meet upto the expectations of the Client requests. Every call center has its own scale to judge the oral proficiency level of a candidate's performance. This is mainly based on the Clients requirements i.e., depends on their needs. A candidate must possess atleast 85% of the minimum English level proficiency for becoming eligible to a call center executive job. Since the majority of the employees within the recruitment department are native speakers, they are able to know a candidate's

competence level in English language which they are looking for these jobs.

According to the candidates whose applications were rejected i.e., they were not hired because their communication skills were not good enough to qualify for a call center position / job. However, they were suggested to improve their English language skills. The candidates need to be trained for equipping themselves with the Interview skills, Listening skills, etc. They were also suggested to develop their personality by overcoming shyness, fear, confusions in order to earn confidence by inculcating strong basis of attitude, self-motivation, body language, leadership skills, interpersonal skills, time management, conflict management (managing anger and abuse) and stress management. They must be motivated to be aware of various types of customers, customer handling techniques and the basic attitude required for dealing with them. The aspirants must be empowered with common communication styles telephone etiquette, confidence over phone call / telephone handling, inbound / outbound calling, the cycle of calls, active listening, script writing, customer service and sales technique, presentation skills, clarity in both oral/written, making the customer understand, what the center has to offer as services.

We should not forget that today in the contemporary business scenario, communication matters. Marketing researchers have moved from what they call 'transaction-oriented models' of service provider - customer interaction, to one that focuses on relationships (Gronroos, 1993). The nature of the communication sets up a temporary relationship that leaves the customer with an impression of the quality of the service, which impacts directly on whether they will buy, and crucially, whether or not brand loyalty is established (Keaveney 1995).

If the customer is to leave with a sense of having been served well, communication must be clear, and any transactions effected swiftly. But there is a tension between effectiveness and personalization. This is where training and assessment come in - to ensure that the call centre staff is maximizing the key element of 'rapport'

between the operator and the customer (Gremler and Gwinner 2000).

It is realized that any type of miscommunication will surely lead to customer frustration, and the result would be that the telephone would be slammed down immediately by the customer in exasperation. This happens especially when the person we're talking to is probably in another country with different cultural etiquettes and background. The customer turns angry and if the operator just doesn't have the control over language or pragmatic skills for dealing with the situation and cool the consumer / customer. It would mean a great loss. Thus, the Call Centre owners wish to hire such staff who can build up customer loyalty to their brand by motivating the customers / consumers through their language, questioning techniques and telephonic etiquettes.

Research reveals that the individual who possesses good English communication speech / skills is able to effectively communicate with the native English speakers and thus earns heights and excels in the call center industry. Hence, across the country and here too i.e., in the J&K state Call Center agents whose native language is not English must learn to comprehend English quick and speak it effectively with the customers. Now we know that grammar, listening, accent and strong business vocabulary are also essential ingredients for any call center agent for handling a call properly. There are also some other aspects considered by recruiters while assessing their applicants. Some tests that evaluate the applicant's functional abilities, personality, experience, background, job stability and computer skills are also used. The basic requirement an applicant must fulfill is English communication skills (being from 85% to 100%), basic computer skills, proactive personality, good tone of voice and commitment to the call center they are applying for.

In light of the research conducted on call centers in the J&K, it is recommended that call centers are widely acquiring newer heights and rapidly gaining significance within the state. It is, therefore, recommended that Certificate / Diploma programmes in English Language Learning should be launched and encouraged at higher secondary and

college levels for students who want to improve their English skills for these programmes would make them employable at least in these call centres tomorrow.

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