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Control and involvement HR practices in Indian call centres: Still searching for answers.

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Abstract

Call centres were established primarily to reduce organizational costs while simultaneously providing high-quality customer service. To support this 'twin constraints' strategy, a range of human resource (HR) practices tends to be used in call centres that focus simultaneously on both control and involvement. To date, there has been a lack of empirical evidence concerning the outcome of such HR practices on call centre frontline staff (call centre representatives – CCRs). Consequently, this paper attempts to bridge this gap using a sample of 250 CCRs from Indian call centres. The findings show that, while the simultaneous use of involvement-and control-oriented HR practices had a positive impact on CCR job satisfaction, it also resulted in employee exhaustion and disengagement. These findings suggest that while involvement-oriented HR practices enhance CCR job satisfaction, they come at a cost which is potentially a key factor leading to high CCR turnover.

It has been proposed that the twin demands made of call centre representatives (CCRs), namely, taking and making high volumes of calls, while maintaining call quality are fundamentally contradictory (D'Cruz and Noronha 2012; McDonnell et al. 2013). Clarke (2014) proposes that CCRs address these challenges by 'enacting roles' and 'using emotional labour'. These are performed through the scripting of conversations – thus, control over call interactions is removed from the CCR and placed firmly within the hands of management (Clarke 2014). To support the twin demands strategy, a range of HR practices tends to be used that focuses simultaneously on both control and involvement. While it is well documented that call centres use control-oriented HR practices (Holman 2002, 2005), some involvement strategies have also been included (Fleming and Sturdy 2011) which comprise programs focused on CCRs having fun in call centres. Several researchers have concluded that such programs are more about distracting employee attention away from other, more taxing controls (Kinnie, Hutchinson, and Purcell 2000; Todd and Burgess 2006). Fleming and Sturdy (2011, 177) assert that such programs serve as a distraction for CCRs, but also prove 'instrumental in capturing their sociality, energy and "authentic" or "non-work" personalities as emotional labour' and have wider implications for our understanding of worker autonomy in and around hybrid control systems. To date, there has been a lack of empirical evidence concerning the outcome of control and involvement HR practices with regard to CCRs in India. Consequently, managers and HRM practitioners are ill informed on how best to manage the inherent complexities of operating both approaches concurrently. This study aims to bridge this gap by expanding the extant research literature on control and involvement HR practices in what is currently an underresearched area. Specifically, this study concerns a participant sample of 250 Indian based CCRs.

Call centres have been the focus of much research attention over the past decade or so having been negatively associated with stress. This is largely attributed to CCRs experiencing consistent pressure while taking calls and being subject to intensive monitoring of their behaviour (Castanheira and Chambel 2010; Deery, Iverson, and Walsh 2002; Holman 2002; Russell 2008; Valle, Varas, and Ruz 2012). Other research indicates the importance of both the call centre and the HR context. For example, D'Cruz and Noronha (2012) and Fleming and Sturdy (2011) argue that, although many studies advocate high-commitment management (HCM) practices in call centres due to the many benefits said to accrue from their implementation, such practices have generally been associated with control in call centre research. D'Cruz and Noronha (2009) had also found that HCM practices were advocated as a means to ensure union avoidance. Contrary to reported research on the topic, Ball and Margulis (2011) argue that managerial surveillance may be viewed positively especially if the call centre's surveillance is used for the goal of improving efficiency and organizational performance. Consequently, surveillance may be accepted as legitimate because it promises fairness and impartial administration within the context of an employment contract that ensures the distributive justice of effort and reward for all (Sewell and Barker 2006).

These competing arguments highlight the need for further contextually situated research. Although call centres in India have received some attention in the research literature (Boussebaa, Sinha, and Gabriel 2014; Budhwar et al. 2009; D'Cruz and Noronha 2011, 2012;

Taylor and Bain 2005), the majority of HR call centre research has primarily focused on western cultures, leaving a gap in the current understanding of call centres in India and the type of HR practices being adopted there. As argued by Thite and Russell (2010) in their research on call centres in India, the relationship between globalization and HR has mainly been considered in a linear fashion, with HR 'best practices' expanding outwards from the West to the rest of the world. India is an important global emerging market, and, as Horwitz, Budhwar, and Morley (2015) point out, context, societal culture and religious values tend to be important in emerging markets and are likely to shape HRM practices at the firm level. For example, Taylor and Bain (2005, 271) argue that the characteristics of the Indian call centre industry can exacerbate what may be perceived as generic call centre problems, as 'call-handling for overseas customers takes place at night, or during evenings, on shifts that can last more than eight hours' leading to one of the most serious problems in Indian call centres – high CCR attrition (Wallace 2009).

Consequently, we argue that it is important to investigate, within national contexts, the impact of HR practices on frontline CCRs as they have a direct impact on various aspects of call centre organizational performance (Batt 2002; McDonnell et al. 2013).

India – an important business process management destination

It is estimated that India controls 36% of the global business process management (BPM) sourcing market which is supported by call centres and information technology enabled services (NASSCOM 2016), affording India first position in the global BPM sourcing landscape in the world. The BPM industry in India has experienced exponential growth since 1995 in terms of increased depth and breadth of services with multifaceted offerings. These include data analysis, real-time processing and additional end-to-end services such as consulting, business transformation and optimization, with call centres playing a significant role in their facilitation. Despite competition from other countries, such as China and the Philippines, India remains the most important English-speaking country for offshore call centres by aggregate value and employment (NASSCOM 2012), with over 500 organizations offering BPM services to 66 countries (NASSCOM 2016). Apart from English-language proficiency, India has a number of other strengths, which include a well-educated workforce and lower employee costs. Despite the advantages that India offers as a BPM destination, there are also a number of challenges. Thite and Russell (2010) point out that Indian call centres have the highest employee turnover at 40% against a global average of 20% and that almost 60% of employees have <1 year of tenure and the highest rate of employee absenteeism (up to 15 days per employee per annum). Others have stressed problems related to stressful work environments and inadequate career development (Budhwar et al. 2009) particularly as CCRs experience the extreme elements of call centre environments with tight controls, authoritarian management practices and long work hours (Taylor et al. 2013).

While some organizations utilize call centres as recruitment entry points, and therefore accept some increased levels of turnover in this area, the increasing level of attrition in Indian call centres has raised calls for the modification of existing HRM systems (Budhwar et al. 2006; Lange, Pacheco, and Shrotryia 2010) and further consideration of increasing job satisfaction.

An improvement in CCR job satisfaction levels even by a small amount could potentially decrease recruitment replacement costs, training costs and lost productivity costs; and reduce CCR stress-related issues, resulting in improved service quality in call centres (Malhotra and Mukherjee 2004).

Our aim is to investigate the effects of high-involvement HR practices (Guthrie 2001) and control-oriented HR practices on job satisfaction and burnout in the context of Indian CCRs. Specifically, we are interested in the potential trade-offs that occur by simultaneously implementing these two opposing types of HR practices to people management. Fundamentally, we seek to understand the effects of implementing both practices, and whether the benefits associated with high-involvement HRM practices can be achieved while also implementing control-oriented HR practices simultaneously.

The sample reported here was drawn from call centres located in Delhi and Mumbai, two of the largest metropolitan cities in India. The findings are based on a survey of 250 frontline CCRs. In order to position the study, relevant literature on the topic of call centres and HR practices is reviewed, prior to hypothesising the relationships between HRM, dimensions of burnout, and job satisfaction.

Literature review and hypotheses

Call centre HR practices: control- and involvement-oriented HRM

Call centres are intensely competitive business environments, constantly striving to combine standards and profitability with flexibility and customized service delivery (Budhwar et al. 2009; Holman 2005). It has been argued that variations in the adoption of different types of HR practices in call centres can be explained by two service imperatives: cost control vs customization (Castanheira and Chambel 2010; Jenkins and Delbridge 2013). While call centre HR practices vary according to organizational goals (Batt 2002; Castanheira and Chambel 2010; Holman 2005; Kinnie, Hutchinson, and Purcell 2000), the need to standardize work and control costs are generally critical aspirations intended to keep them abreast or ahead of the competition. As call centre management is challenged with intensified competition and the imperative to keep costs down, they are simultaneously expected to balance this approach with raising volume in order to maximize profit. This promotes a reliance on 'short, standardized service interactions with greater emphasis on rules, regulations, and repetitiveness' (Castanheira and Chambel 2010; 1050). Holman (2005) explains that such control-oriented HR practices (which include performance monitoring) are aimed at ensuring that frontline CCRs adhere to standardized job requirements.

Organizations are increasingly challenged to simultaneously combine both HR control and involvement HR practices (Batt and Appelbaum 1995; D'Cruz and Noronha 2012; Frenkel et al. 1998), thereby utilizing hybrid HRM systems (Castanheira and Chambel 2010). Control-oriented HR practices are aimed at minimizing costs and maximizing volumes, resulting in tensions between management's goals of customer satisfaction and customer throughput

(D'Cruz and Noronha 2012). In turn, these goals can be stressors for CCRs, blocking their ability to provide high quality service and leading to emotional exhaustion (Noronha and D'Cruz 2009) and high turnover. The CCR turnover rate is particularly challenging for Indian call centres, as it is reportedly around 40% compared to 20% for call centres elsewhere (Budhwar et al. 2009). Indian CCOs also have the highest average number of sick days in the industry when compared globally (Wallace 2009).

Control-oriented HR practices, such as performance monitoring, are operationalized to encourage frontline CCRs to observe standardized job requirements (Holman 2005). By contrast, involvement-oriented HR practices are intended to improve service quality by enabling frontline CCRs to maintain a loyal customer base (Batt 2002; Kinnie, Hutchinson, and Purcell 2000). Initiatives such as quality interactions with clients are deemed critical in this regard. Therefore, investment in sophisticated and expensive HR involvement systems such as building a skilled workforce and developing an employee's commitment and loyalty to the organization is critical (Castanheira and Chambel 2010). In this paper, we draw the distinction between control-oriented and involvement-oriented HR practices and adopt a job demands–resources lens to examine the unique relationships that each orientation may have upon employee outcomes.

Employee outcomes

A number of empirical studies have linked monitoring practices with negative employee outcomes such as psychological stress, including burnout (D'Cruz and Noronha 2012; Holman 2005; Schaufeli and Buunk 2003). An interpretation of burnout has been reported in the literature to include two dimensions: exhaustion and disengagement from work (Demerouti, Mostert, and Bakker 2010). Exhaustion supposes a prior state of high arousal or overload (Maslach 1993) and is a consequence of intensive physical, affective and cognitive strain, predominantly as a long-term consequence of prolonged exposure to certain types of job demands (Shirom 2003). Thus, exhaustion directly applies to frontline CCRs whose work responsibilities include both physical and cognitive work as reported by Deery, Iverson, and Walsh (2002). Indeed, the speed, pace and duration (long hours) of work for CCRs can be a significant factor in the depletion of emotional resources and if organizations fail to address the determinants of emotional exhaustion, employees may adopt a strategy of withdrawal as a mechanism of coping. Disengagement refers to 'distancing oneself from one's work in general, work object, and work content' (Demerouti, Mostert, and Bakker 2010, 201–211). Kahn (1990, 694) defines disengagement as the 'uncoupling of selves from work roles; in disengagement, people withdraw and defend themselves physically, cognitively, or emotionally during role performances'. Demerouti, Mostert, and Bakker (2010) and Kahn (1990) explain that disengagement concerns the relationship between employees and their jobs, particularly with respect to their identification with work and their willingness to continue in the same occupation.

Castanheira and Chambel (2010) found that control-oriented HR practices that were associated with more emotional dissonance and less autonomy resulted in higher levels of burnout. Their findings are consistent with the job demands–control model (Alarcon 2011;

Karasek and Theorell 1990) and demonstrate the role that job demands and autonomy play in explaining the links between HR practices and employee outcomes, such as burnout (Häusser et al. 2010). Hence, the traditional and electronic monitoring aspects of HR control practices (Castanheira and Chambel 2010) create an increasing level of exhaustion and disengagement among frontline CCRs. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Exhaustion and disengagement from work are positively associated with each other in frontline CCRs.

Hypothesis 2: Control-oriented HR practices are positively related to disengagement in frontline CCRs.

Hypothesis 3: Control-oriented HR practices are positively related to exhaustion in frontline CCRs.

Involvement-oriented HR practices aim to improve individual performance by increasing the opportunity for employees to participate in the business as a whole (Lawler, Mohrman, and Benson 2001). Typical practices include participative decision-making; sharing of task-relevant information; job-relevant training and development, and rewards for involvement in these activities to engage and empower employees to improve performance (Lawler, Mohrman, and Ledford 1995). Research indicates that high-involvement HR practices are strongly associated with employees' work-related attitudes and performance outcomes (Appelbaum et al. 2000). Thus, it is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 4: Involvement-oriented HR practices are negatively related to disengagement in frontline CCRs.

Involvement-oriented HRM practices are also thought to impact on employees' emotional well-being. While studies in call centre settings found relationships between HRM practices and employee stress, little is known about the mechanisms that support this relationship (Castanheira and Chambel 2010). To address this gap, Castanheira and Chambel (2010) focused on linkages between HR practices and employee stress from a job demands perspective and reported that involvement-oriented HRM practices decreased employees' levels of burnout (exhaustion and cynicism) in call centres. Specifically, we aim to test and extend Castanheira and Chambel (2010) findings regarding involvement-oriented HRM practices and exhaustion within an Indian call centre context. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 5: Involvement-oriented HRM practices are negatively related to exhaustion in frontline CCRs.

Involvement-oriented HRM practices such as the perceived fairness of the payment system, the usefulness of performance appraisals, and the adequacy of training have been positively associated with job satisfaction (Castanheira and Chambel 2010; Frenkel et al. 1998). While these studies propose a direct link between involvement-oriented HRM practices and job satisfaction, Diamantidis and Chatzoglou (2011) found an indirect relationship with regard to involvement and job satisfaction. In particular, the authors concluded that the results underscore the effect of involvement in job satisfaction through direct effects on job and workplace characteristics. Involvement-oriented HRM practices in call centres tend to be especially designed 'to motivate workers, foster employee development, and keep them aligned with organizational goals' (Castanheira and Chambel 2010, 1049). Based on these arguments, it is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 6: Involvement-oriented HRM practices are positively related to the job satisfaction of frontline CCRs.

Given previous findings, while high-involvement practices demonstrate a positive influence on employee outcomes, we expect control-oriented practices to have a negative relationship. Control-oriented HR practices have been found to relate to increased levels of psychological stress, including burnout (Holman 2005; Schaufeli and Buunk 2003) in call centre environments due to the number of controls that tend to be present, such as monitoring and surveillance (Castanheira and Chambel 2010; Deery, Iverson, and Walsh 2002; Holman 2002). Furthermore, as supported by Castanheira and Chambel's (2010) findings, it is important to distinguish between control- and involvement-oriented HRM practices as evidence suggests that each approach has different impacts on employee outcomes. Therefore, we offer the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 7: Control-oriented HRM practices are negatively related to job satisfaction of frontline CCRs.

Burnout and job satisfaction

Call centre representatives have frequent interpersonal contact with customers and are therefore highly susceptible to stress and burnout (Yagil 2006). Hock (1988) proposed that burnout in customer service employees can be demonstrated by a gradual decrease in concern about customers and co-workers, emotional exhaustion, and a reduced commitment towards the job and the organization. This study focuses on the disengagement aspect of burnout, which concerns the relationship between employees and their job roles (Demerouti, Mostert,

and Bakker 2010). Specifically, CCRs may have negative attributions towards their work and, as a consequence, distance themselves from it. Moreover, some researchers have noted that disengagement is negatively framed engagement (Demerouti and Bakker 2008; Demerouti, Mostert, and Bakker 2010) and that disengaged employees withdraw themselves physically, cognitively or emotionally while performing their job roles (Kahn 1990). Disengagement has been found to have an impact on a number of work related outcomes including job satisfaction (Wefald and Downey 2009).

Here, we view job satisfaction as a positive emotional state that results from an appraisal of one's job and job experiences (Locke 1976). Based on existing literature, it is proposed that disengagement (which represents a negative emotional state) is negatively associated with job satisfaction (which represents a positive emotional state) in that CCRs who are more disengaged are less satisfied with their job. This provides the underpinning for the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 8: Disengagement is negatively related to the job satisfaction of frontline CCRs.

Call centre representatives are required to engage in technology-assisted routines and scripted interactions with customers while coping with the emotional demands of maintaining a friendly manner (Holman 2005). Such conditions generate highly demanding, repetitive and stressful work roles leading to burnout and other negative outcomes (Deery, Iverson, and Walsh 2002). Several studies on call centres have reported high level stress and burnout among frontline CCRs (Castanheira and Chambel 2010; Sergeant and Frenkel 2000; Zapf et al. 2003), stating that burnout was caused by a number of factors that include excessive work such as high numbers of call handling per hour, the overuse of technology, lack of administrative support, poor salaries, lack of a supportive team and invasive HR practices. Given the findings to date regarding the nature of call centre work environments and the associated job demands, we argue that exhaustion is related to job satisfaction. Specifically, it is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 9: Exhaustion is negatively related to the job satisfaction of frontline CCRs.

A path model was developed to test the nine hypotheses (see Figure 1).

Methods

Based on our research objectives, a market research firm in India was engaged to collect the data from 250 frontline CCRs situated in five different call centres. Fifty CCRs from each

call centre were selected from some of the largest BPM firms based in the Indian cities of New Delhi and Mumbai. Both are Tier 1 cities – a term that is commonly used where BPMs cluster, making it easier for CCRs to change jobs. All were multinational firms and dealt with both inbound and outbound calls. CCRs were surveyed by telephone.

The sample comprised a relatively young cohort (between 18–21 years old, 61.6%) who were mainly male (79.6%), had worked for their respective organization for between 1 and 2 years (43.2%), were unmarried and educated to degree or diploma level (92.8%). The majority of respondents were permanent, full-time (82.8%) and worked more than 8 hours per day (50%). Less than one-third of the respondents (28.8%) worked < 20 night shifts per month. Fifty per cent of the respondents spent between 6 and 8 hours interacting with clients. The average number of calls taken was between 80 and 250 per day and the average length of calls was < 5 minutes.

Respondents were asked to rank the survey items using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ('extremely dissatisfied/strongly disagree') to 7 ('extremely satisfied/strongly agree'). Prior to the widespread implementation of the survey, it was sent to a small sample of individuals who were employed in the Indian BPM sector to check the relevance of the scales in an Indian call centre environment as well as the wording and content validity of the items and no modifications were suggested to the survey items.

Data were analysed using Mplus version 7.0 (Muthén and Muthén 1998–2011) software. The scales adopted in this study were drawn from previously validated scales. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was then undertaken for each of the scales and the analysis showed that the scales met the minimum fit indices, as reported in the following section.

Measures

HRM practices

The HRM practices were operationalized as HRM control and HRM involvement. These practices were adopted from a study undertaken on call centres in Portugal by Castanheira and Chambel (2010). CFA analysis resulted in two factors – control-oriented HR practices (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$) and involvement-oriented practices (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$). The items are presented in Appendix Appendix .

Burnout

We utilized the 16-item Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (Demerouti, Mostert, and Bakker 2010) to operationalize burnout. As confirmed by the CFA, this construct has two negatively correlated subscales: exhaustion (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$) and disengagement (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$). See Appendix Appendix for items.

Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction comprised two dimensions: intrinsic and extrinsic satisfaction, adopted from Warr, Cook, and Wall (1979) and was treated as a composite variable (15 items) with a combined Cronbach's α of 0.97. The items are tabled in Appendix Appendix .

Common method bias checks

In the current study, we undertook two post-hoc checks on common method bias in our data. The first test was the Harman's 1-factor test. An unrotated factor analysis was undertaken. Results of the analysis showed that there were seven factors with an eigenvalue of > 1.0 . The largest factor explained 31.2% of the variance. This result provided some support that common method bias is not an issue of concern.

Next we incorporated a common method marker variable into the path model. In this instance, we used the 10-item social desirability scale from Crowne and Marlowe (1960). While there was a small improvement in the goodness of fit indices when compared to the hypothesized model ($\chi^2/df = 1.166$, RMSEA = 0.026, CFI = 0.999, TLI = 0.997, standardized RMR = 0.003), the only statistical significant path was from HRM control to social desirability. Therefore, the results of both of these tests showed that common method bias was of no major concern in the current dataset.

Results

Internal reliability coefficients are reported in Table 1, together with descriptive statistics and intercorrelations. Results of the path analysis are presented in Figure 2 and Table 2. The model had a good level of model fit, as indicated by the fit indices ($\chi^2/df = 1.445$, RMSEA = 0.042, CFI = 0.999, TLI = 0.994, standardized RMR = 0.003). These indices satisfied the guidelines recommended (Byrne 2012). It can be seen from Figure 2 and Table 2 that five hypotheses, namely numbers 1, 4, 5, 7 and 8, were supported.

The findings provide support for utilizing two-dimensional HRM bundles, representing control and involvement orientation. Specifically, control-oriented HRM was found to be positively associated with involvement-oriented HRM. Contrary to the hypothesized relationship, involvement HRM practices were found to have a positive impact on disengagement and exhaustion although exhaustion and disengagement were positively correlated in common with prior research studies. Supporting the hypothesized relationship, involvement-oriented HRM resulted in more job satisfaction, whereas, disengagement was also found to result in more job satisfaction, contradicting the hypothesized relationship.

While we did not hypothesize for mediation, a post-hoc test was conducted to investigate the mediation effects of both bundles of HRM systems on job satisfaction. This was undertaken by using PROCESS macro with model 6 SPSS version 22 (Hayes 2013). As control HRM was co-varied with involvement HRM, the independent variable, we followed Hayes (2013, model 6) in order to test the relationships between the two variables in addition to the mediating effect of disengagement on job satisfaction. Mediation analysis showed that involvement HRM has a direct effect on job satisfaction and it also has an indirect effect, via disengagement (see Table 3). However, exhaustion did not mediate the HRM bundles or job satisfaction.

Discussion and implications

The overall aim of this study was to examine the effect of HRM practices on the job satisfaction of frontline CCRs in Indian call centres. A comprehensive review of the relevant literature led to the development of a research model (Figure 1) that included control- and involvement-oriented HRM practices, two dimensions of burnout (disengagement and exhaustion) and job satisfaction. While the model postulated nine hypotheses, the empirical testing provided support for only five of them (see Figure 2). Hypothesis 1, which argued that exhaustion and disengagement from work are positively associated with each other, was supported. Indeed, disengagement and exhaustion are related aspects of burnout (Demerouti, Mostert, and Bakker 2010). In our study, frontline CCRs, who as a consequence of their work roles, demonstrated exhaustion on account of overload or prolonged exposure to a routine and repetitive work environment, were disengaged from their work. Similarly, frontline CCRs who demonstrated disengagement from their work, whether that was in general or in relation to their work object or content, revealed that they were exhausted. This finding reiterates the nature of the stressful call centre environment and the work roles that frontline CCRs are subject to (Budhwar et al. 2009). As a result, it is contended that the intensification of business environments in India where call centres face stiff competition results in more pressure on call centre staff. Consequently, the relationship between exhaustion and disengagement is strongly pronounced.

Hypotheses 2 and 3 argued that control-oriented HRM practices are positively related to disengagement and exhaustion respectively. These hypotheses were not supported by the empirical findings. While it is clear that the 'cut-throat' competition that challenges Indian call centres necessitates the common features of control-oriented HRM practices (Castanheira and Chambel 2010), the standardization of work practices (Taylor and Bain 2005), the control of costs and consistent monitoring through traditional and electronic surveillance, frontline CCRs are likely to expect these practices when recruited into this type of business. Consequently, they do not directly lead to burnout.

Hypotheses 4 and 5 postulated that involvement-oriented HRM practices are negatively related to disengagement and exhaustion respectively. The empirical analysis, however, suggested that involvement-oriented HRM practices result in more disengagement and exhaustion among frontline CCRs. While this finding contradicts the literature (Appelbaum et al. 2000; Castanheira and Chambel 2010), it resonates with recent evidence from the Indian call centre context suggesting that involvement HRM practices, typically developed and implemented in the West, may not translate as might be expected (Budhwar et al. 2009; D'Cruz and Noronha 2011). This is because they tend to be perceived by employees as being associated with managerial control (D'Cruz and Noronha 2012). As a consequence, negative outcomes such as exhaustion and disengagement may in fact mitigate attempts to implement standard involvement-oriented HRM practices.

Furthermore, we contend that given the Indian call centre context and related work environment, attempting to utilize these practices without addressing the broader job design issues (repetitive, monotonous work, night-shifts) and the political environment (D'Cruz and Noronha 2011), will not yield the desired results for frontline CCRs. Indeed scholars have argued that involvement-oriented HRM practices decrease employee levels of burnout because they reduce the job demands associated with emotional dissonance (Castanheira and Chambel 2010; Harney and Jordan 2008). The adoption of these practices, without addressing inherent challenges of work design and environment, may lead to increased work intensification and higher levels of stress, instead of the desired effect of improving employee well-being outcomes (Godard 2004).

Hypothesis 6 proposed that control-oriented HRM practices are negatively related to the job satisfaction of frontline CCRs. This hypothesis was not supported by the empirical analysis. In common with the lack of support for hypotheses 2 and 3, control-oriented HRM practices are an inherent feature of Indian call centres, and as such, were not shown to have a direct impact on the job satisfaction of frontline CCRs. In reality, CCRs may expect to encounter such practices given the widespread understanding of the nature of the job, especially considering the growing intensification of competition among call centres within India and increasingly from the Philippines and China.

Hypothesis 7 postulated that involvement-oriented HRM practices are positively related to the job satisfaction of frontline CCRs. Unsurprisingly, this hypothesis was supported, as involvement-oriented HRM practices are traditionally designed to motivate employees through fair pay, performance appraisals and relevant training. While this hypothesis empirically assessed the direct linkage between involvement-oriented HRM practices and job satisfaction, specific workplace characteristics and employee outcomes could have an indirect link between involvement-oriented HRM practices and the job satisfaction of frontline CCRs (Diamantidis and Chatzoglou 2011). Thus, we conducted a post-hoc mediation analysis that showed that disengagement mediated the relationship between involvement HRM and job satisfaction. This finding suggests that involvement-oriented HRM practices impact CCRs' levels of disengagement which, in turn, have an impact on their level of job satisfaction.

The final two hypotheses proposed that the two dimensions of burnout, namely disengagement (hypothesis 8) and exhaustion (hypothesis 9), are negatively associated with the job satisfaction of frontline CCRs. Hypothesis 8 was supported given the disengagement of frontline CCRs was shown to be negatively related to their job satisfaction levels. This finding supports an earlier study by Wefald and Downey (2009) who reported a negative link between disengagement and several job-related outcomes including job satisfaction. Clearly, frontline CCRs who are disengaged from their work physically and/or cognitively (emotionally) are most likely to be in a negative frame of mind, which impacts negatively on their job satisfaction. Hypothesis 9, however, was not supported. While this finding was

surprising, it is contended that the understanding that call centres are stressful environments (Budhwar et al. 2009) and that call centre work is associated with a caveat of long hours and monotonous work is commonly accepted by current and potential CCRs. Therefore, a CCR's physical and/or cognitive (emotional) exhaustion was not seen as a factor negatively impacting on their job satisfaction.

Overall, this study provides empirical findings to support the factors that influence the job satisfaction of Indian frontline CCRs. These include the bundling of HR practices, causing a differential effect on the burnout and engagement of frontline CCRs as well as influencing their job satisfaction. Consequently, as indicated in the literature, job satisfaction can result in frontline CCRs providing a higher quality of service (Malhotra and Mukherjee 2004). The results of the present study indicate that while two different bundles of HRM practices co-exist within the Indian call centres studied, their impact and influence on work-related outcomes can vary.

The findings have several implications for HRM. All five call centres included in this study were located in Tier 1 cities – Mumbai and Delhi. These major industrial cities are where call centres are likely to experience even greater retention problems than call centres elsewhere in India due to the high levels of competition. Of the 250 survey respondents in this study, most were male (80%), 18–25 years of age (62%), and 44% had been with the organization for < 12 months, but in a CCR position for 1–2 years (43%), indicating that most were young graduates in their first or second jobs in a labour market that was competing for their skills. These factors pose a number of challenges for HRM. For example, it may be that the young, mostly male graduates employed at the call centres are using their CCR jobs as ‘stepping stones’ and do not consider the call centres to be in a position to offer them long-term career opportunities. Hence, they may not wish to become engaged in involvement HR practices, instead being content to work within control practices until what they may perceive as a better work opportunity arises. As Thite and Russell (2010, 368) argued, ‘the relationship between work design, strategic HR practices and employee retention is moderated by external labor market conditions, changing business models, emerging technologies and employee aspirations’. Thus, it may be beneficial for HR practitioners to find out what their newly recruited CCRs aspirations may be and, if possible, develop CCR career pathways that alleviate the monotony of call centre work, while reducing the stress of call monitoring where possible.

Green (2006, 9) proposes that ‘the quality of work life or job quality is constituted by the set of work features which foster the well-being of the worker’. Recently this has been evident in demands for more holistic management styles in Indian workplaces which allow ‘strategies, processes and techniques that energize people and aligns resources to emerging opportunities and challenges’ (Nankervis et al. 2013, 20). Guchait and Cho (2010, 1232) report that approximately 80% of CCRs in India look for better opportunities in the industry; agents want to become team leaders; team leaders want to be promoted to supervisors, then managers; and therefore, managing the workforce is a constant cycle of recruitment,

selection, training, and retention strategies. Given the cost of recruiting and training new CCRs, it may be more economically sound to pay bonuses to CCRs who stay with the organization for a stated period of time or who commit to a projected career path and begin a development program one year after joining. Conversely, it may be that HR practitioners need to accept that CCR turnover is always likely to be high in India, especially in the Tier 1 cities.

Limitations and future research implications

The limitations of this study relate to the number of frontline CCRs in the assessed sample (i.e. 250 from five call centres). Given some of the unexpected findings resulting from this study, it is recommended that further research be conducted which examines the relationship between involvement- and control-oriented HR practices, and the productivity of frontline CCRs based in Indian call centres. Further research would help to validate these findings, consistent with research directions relating to strategic HRM (see Guthrie 2001; Teo, Le Clerc, and Galang 2011). In addition, there is a need to explore the role of individual-level factors (demographics such as gender and age as well as prior experience in call centres) and organizational-level factors (work specifications, organizational climate, and HR support as a moderator of the relationship between HRM practices and job satisfaction).

While the current study has not been affected by common method bias, there is room for extension in the research design which relies on data collected only once from the participants at a single point in time.. Further extensions could include a multi-wave data collection design and collecting the objective assessments of frontline CCRs supervisors.

Conclusion

In summary, this study contributes to the strategic HRM and call centre management literature in identifying the different configurations of HR practices adopted for the management of CCRs in Indian call centres. These bundles of HR practices were found to have different effects on the burnout and engagement of frontline CCRs, and, consequently, to directly and indirectly impact their levels of job satisfaction. The findings support the job demands–resources model and also offer theoretical and practical implications.

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Figures & Tables

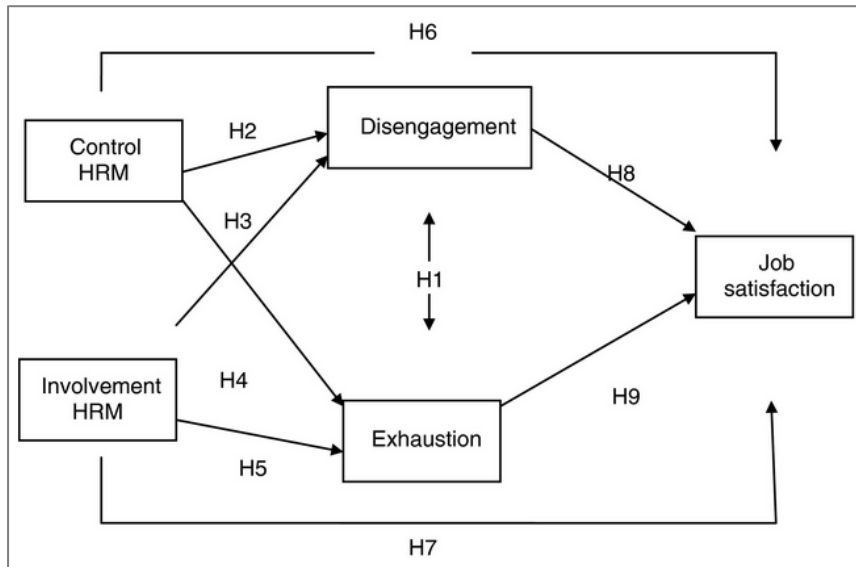


Figure 1

Proposed research model

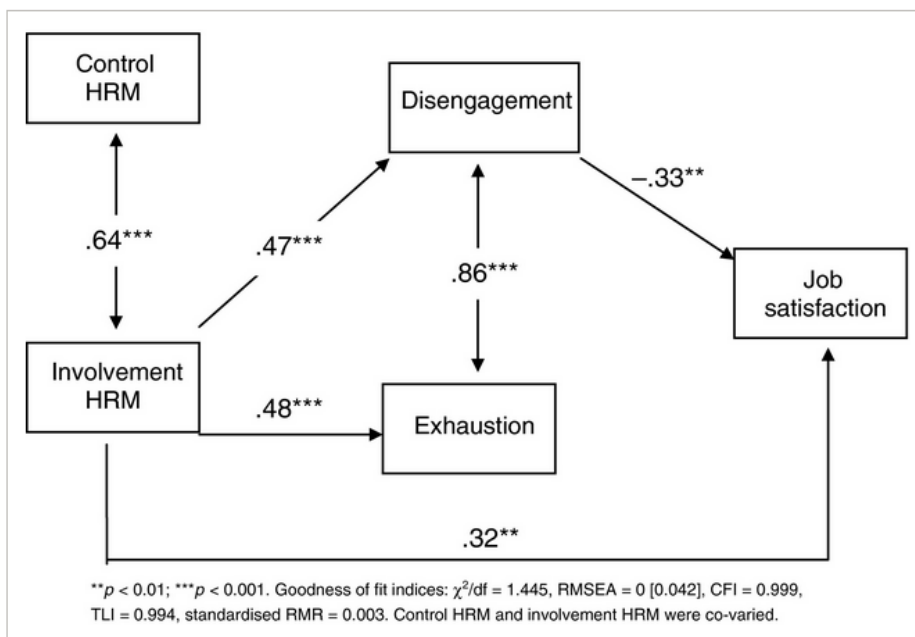


Figure 2

Results of path analysis

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1 Involvement HRM	5.48	.88	1.00				
2 Control HRM	5.64	1.00	.63 ^{***}	1.00			
3 Exhaustion	3.80	.41	-.15 [*]	-.21 ^{**}	1.00		
4 Disengagement	3.86	.42	-.05	-.21 ^{**}	.51 ^{***}	1.00	
5 Job satisfaction	3.14	1.32	-.46 ^{***}	-.23 ^{***}	-.05	-.15 [*]	1.00

n = 250. **p* < 0.05, ***p* < 0.01, ****p* < 0.001.

Table 2. Summary of hypotheses testing

Hypotheses	Coefficient	Sig. value
1 Disengagement ↔ Exhaustion	.86	***
2 Control HRM → Disengagement		ns
3 Control HRM → Exhaustion		ns
4 Involvement HRM → Disengagement	.47	***
5 Involvement HRM → Exhaustion	.48	***
6 Control HRM → Job satisfaction		ns
7 Involvement HRM → Job satisfaction	.32	**
8 Disengagement → Job satisfaction	-.33	**
9 Exhaustion → Job satisfaction		ns

ns = not significant; ***p* < 0.01, ****p* < 0.001.

Table 3. Test of mediation

	Effect (Boot SE)	Boot LL 95% CI	Boot UL 95% CI
Involvement HRM → Disengagement → Job satisfaction (covariance: Control HRM)	-.2073 (.0664)	-.3651	-.0997

Appendix – Measures

HR practices

Control HRM

During my work, my performance is monitored by:

- 1 The tone when I answer the calls
- 2 The empathy that I transmit to the customer
- 3 The enthusiasm when I answer the calls
- 4 My education when I speak with the customer
- 5 My sympathy towards the customer

In my performance monitoring, the most important is:

- 1 Listening to the customer
- 2 Being gentle
- 3 Supplying customized services
- 4 My satisfaction when I talk to clients
- 5 Being competent and professional

During my work, my performance is monitored by:

- 1 Length of calls
- 2 Time between calls
- 3 Number of calls
- 4 Number of calls waiting

Involvement HRM

In this call centre...

- 1 We have group meeting and discuss about problems
- 2 We give suggestions
- 3 We have the opportunity to participate in other projects

- 4 We receive regular information about the firm
- 5 I had initial training to perform my job
- 6 We receive ongoing training to outperform our tasks
- 7 Training is focused on specific knowledge to perform my job
- 8 I receive a benefit if I accomplish my goals
- 9 My income depends on the quality of my performance
- 10 I have well-defined goals to achieve

Burnout

Disengagement

- 1 I always find new and interesting aspects in my work [rev coded]
- 2 It happens more and more often that I talk about my work in a negative way
- 3 Lately, I tend to think less at work and do my job almost mechanically
- 4 I find my work to be a positive challenge [rev coded]
- 5 Over time, one can become disconnected from this type of work
- 6 Sometimes I feel sickened by my work tasks
- 7 This is the only type of work that I can imagine myself doing [rev coded]
- 8 I feel more and more engaged in my work [rev coded]

Exhaustion

- 1 There are days when I feel tired before I arrive at work
- 2 After work, I tend to need more time than in the past in order to relax and feel better
- 3 I can tolerate the pressure of my work very well [rev coded]
- 4 During my work, I often feel emotionally drained
- 5 After working, I have enough energy for my leisure activities [rev coded]
- 6 After my work, I usually feel worn out and weary
- 7 Usually, I can manage the amount of my work well [rev coded]
- 8 When I work, I usually feel energized [rev coded]

Job satisfaction

Intrinsic

- 1 The freedom to choose your own method of working
- 2 The recognition you get for good work
- 3 The amount of responsibility you are given
- 4 Your opportunity to use your abilities
- 5 Your chance of promotion
- 6 The attention paid to suggestions you make
- 7 The amount of variety in your job

Extrinsic

- 1 The physical work conditions
- 2 Your fellow workers
- 3 Your immediate boss
- 4 Your rate of pay
- 5 Industrial relations between management and employees
- 6 The way your organisation is managed
- 7 Your hours of work
- 8 Your job security