

**Title: Dilemmas of organising call centre professionals: A choice between unions and professional associations**

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The identity dimensions of unionization has been largely ignored by labour researchers, many of whom appear to concentrate on equity and on the conflict of interest between labour and management (Milton, 2003). This observation is particularly relevant to call centre agents whose international clients were based either in USA, Canada, UK or Australia. Following a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to data collection and analysis, the core theme around which the identity of the call centre employees coalesced was that of being a professional. They identified with the elite class of professionals especially those working in the software industry and nomenclatures such as “cyber coolies” or “slaves on Roman ships” (see Ramesh, 2004) used to describe their working conditions were abhorred. Unlike government offices, call centres workplaces were bright, aesthetic, air-conditioned and well furnished. Working out of such buildings gave agents a sense of being valued as professionals (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2006).

Through continual socialisation, training and performance management system as well as through material artifacts, employers invoked the notion of professionalism to transform employees' sense of selfhood. Employer-defined professionalism created in employees a passionate commitment towards work and employer organisation to the exclusion of personal needs, an unquestioned acceptance of stringent techno-bureaucratic controls and a fervent desire to satisfy customers even in the face of abuse, all of which were deemed to be indispensable for the success of the organisation and for their own individual gain, career growth and development (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2006).

Naturally, this acquired identity had implications for organising call centre agents. In fact, employees of the call centre industry embraced the view that unions protect the less capable, compress salary differences and compromise highest standards and merit-based practices and unionisation of professionals would entail a rejection of key professional values (Raelin, 1989; Rabban, 1991) the most important in this case of call centre employees being customer satisfaction. Further, similar to professionals (Raelin, 1989) the call centre agents also argued that the use of coercive union tactics to advance their cause would only undermine their public image and equate them to factory hands. Thus, the professionals lofty social status is likely to work against their joining ranks with other occupations or using tactics that are identified with working-class unionism (Freidson, 1970) was also true of call centre professionals in India.

Nonetheless, in 2005 Union Network International Asia Pacific Regional Office (UNI APRO) went ahead with its efforts to organise these call centre professionals. Undoubtedly, the identity of the emergent organisation was of primary importance. The name UNITES professional (Union for Information Technology Enabled Services-Professionals) being a compromise between the senior leadership who wanted this new organisations to steer itself towards the union path and the call centre employees who wanted it to be a professional association. The debate clearly brought out Hurd's (2000) observation about the major difference between unions and professional associations. 'Unions focus on relations with the employer, while professional associations cater to individual needs. Professionals are drawn to associations for access to information, professional development, and networking while unions are relatively more concerned about fair treatment and more willing to participate in protests. Professional associations do not confront the boss, unions do; employers do not object to employee involvement with professional associations, but they may be extreme in their opposition to unionization'.

The last of those differences noted by Hurd (2000) seem to be critical in deciding the agents preference for professional associations rather than unions. As Harrison (1994) argues that the choice of professionals to unionise is contingent on environmental and workplace conditions that create pressures or opportunities to do so. Though the work context of the Indian call centre agent approximated the mass production model (Batt et al, 2005; Taylor & Bain, 2005) and would have many believe that it provided a fertile ground for unionisation (e.g., DeCotiis & LeLouarn, 1981) the external environment was hostile. Various state governments in India have initiated policies that are investor friendly leading some researchers to hurriedly conclude that most of the employees in ITES organizations have thus been pushed outside the purview of laws regulating the blue-collared workers (see Banerjee, 2006). IT/ITES organisation have downsized or closed down at their own sweet will with a total disdain for labour laws allowing for a conclusion that India is attractive to companies who wish to capitalise on the possibilities for flexible labour utilisation (Taylor & Bain, 2005).

However, UNITES professionals is in a unique position as it endeavours to subsume the role of the union and that of a professional association. In this regard, Rabban (1991), states that even traditional unions, now emphasize that collective bargaining can and should address distinctively professional concerns. Correspondingly, many professional associations have shifted from the view that collective bargaining is unprofessional to support for unions as a means to achieve professional goals. Which of these to emphasise will be the concern of UNITES professionals as well as that of this paper.

## **Selected References**

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