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Focus

Abuse comes with the job

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Many young Indian call center operators are suffering from stress because of the abuse received from American customers angry about outsourced jobs.REUTERS

Rohail Manzoor thought he had what it took to work in a telephone call center. All he had to do was pick up the phone and answer queries from American customers about their long-distance bills. He was armed with lessons on how to speak English like the Americans - adjust the r's, say "zee" instead of "zed," "mail" instead of "post."

He even called himself "Jim," and figured he would pretend to be an American customer service agent.

But nothing prepared him for the shower of curses that came his way when he picked up the phone one night on the job.

" 'You Indians suck!' an American screamed on the phone," recalled a soft-spoken Manzoor, 25. "He was using a lot of four-letter words, too. He called me names left, right and center."

Call center executives and industry experts say abusive hate calls are commonplace, as resentment swells over the loss of American jobs to India. According to a survey in November 2004 by an Indian information technology magazine called *Dataquest*, about 25 percent of call center agents identified such calls as the main reason for workplace stress. The survey said the calls often were ``psychologically disturbing" for workers.

``When some callers are unhappy with the service, their frustration often turns racist," said Amit Narula, 25, a call center agent. ``They would say, `This is why you should not handle our work. Indians are not good enough.'"

As a result, the call center workers are feeling stressed. Manzoor said he developed high blood pressure and chest pain in November, and quit his job. But in two months, he was in another call center processing credit card applications for an American company.

The outsourcing industry earns US\$5.1 billion (HK\$39.78 billion) a year and employs more than 350,000 people, according to the National Association of Software and Services Companies, and is projected to grow 40 percent in the coming year. The vast pool of low-cost, English-speaking and tech-savvy Indian workers has attracted back-office service operations of companies such as American Express, Sprint, Citibank, General Electric, Ford, Hewlett-Packard, IBM and firms that process US tax returns and welfare benefits.

Some of the offices serving these companies hold stress-management workshops, set up gyms and pool tables, and even offer classes in meditation, breathing techniques and yoga.

``This is a high-stress business, and most of our agents are between 22 and 25 working during the graveyard shift. I have noticed a sudden plunge in their confidence level after an irate, abusive or racist caller," said Rohit Gadhoke, a senior quality analyst with Daksh call center, a subsidiary of IBM, adding that such calls were routine. ``They begin to fumble with words and get nervous. I counsel them not to take it personally."

Although a handful of call center companies now encourage agents to reveal their real name and location when an American calls, many fear backlash and still do not allow it. In Bangalore, Ankur Jaiswal, 22, whose phone name is ``Mike," answers calls from Americans who need technical support with their computers.

``Many callers refuse to speak to Indians and ask for an American right away," Jaiswal said in a telephone interview. ``So I tell them, `I am an Indian but I live in America.' They ask, `Where in America?' I tell them I cannot disclose my location. But they are still suspicious and start asking about the weather."

Industry watchers say some call centers have giant TV screens showing the weather in different US cities, the scores from latest New York Knicks game or news about the latest play on Broadway. The agents use the information on the screen to make small talk with the

caller and mask their location in India.

The training given to the call center aspirants not only involves diction, but also a crash course in American culture. Maneesh Ahooja, a voice and accent trainer for call center employees in Mumbai, often makes them watch popular TV shows such as *Friends* and *Dharma and Greg*.

``I also teach them about the nuances of American lifestyle," Ahooja said. ``I explain to them that unlike India, young people live on their own in America and not with their parents, that in times of crisis they depend on friends more than family."

But many agents confessed that they empathized with the pain and anguish of the angry callers.

``I would be mad too if somebody took away my job," said Vidya Ramathas, 24, who works in a Bangalore call center servicing an American Internet company. ``I love my job. It has brought me freedom. I moved out of my parents' home. I don't ask them for money anymore. I do what I want to. I don't ask for their permission."

Ramathas, whose uses ``Amanda" as her phone name, added: ``In that sense, I am like an American."THE WASHINGTON POST

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