

Theme 3 – Human capacity issues

This theme synthesizes human resource issues in South Africa, India, Mauritius and Kenya. In general, BPO&O firms will prefer destinations where they can get an abundant supply of skilled human resources. University/College graduates have been noted as one of India's biggest assets. On the 2009 A.T. Kearney Global Services Location Index, India leads with a score of 2.48 on "people skills and availability" sub-index, with South Africa and Mauritius at 1.02 and 0.95 respectively. Kenya is yet to make it to this index.

India produces approximately 1 million graduates per year. The other countries compare very badly on this score; South Africa 120,000, Kenya 30,000 and Mauritius about 10,000 (estimated). Similarly at the secondary/high school level, while we are talking about tens of million of school leavers every year for India, South Africa, Kenya and Mauritius have 730,000, 250,000 and 30,000 respectively. It is therefore obvious that the size of the labour market in Mauritius is the smallest, creating scalability problems. Indeed, Mauritius is keen to collaborate with other African countries to address this challenge. However, despite the small labour pool, Mauritius has done very well compared to Kenya. The driver has therefore not been the manpower pool but rather a favourable policy, legal and institutional frameworks and the aggressive marketing (and the resulting changed perceptions) of Mauritius as a favourable BPO&O destination.

For India, other related issues include:

- Fluent English, communication and customer service skills are generally strong in India, however accent is still a big issue.
- A strong culture of science and technology exists in India, right from Nursery School age. Young children are introduced to science and technology at a very early stage and this helps to nurture interest in these fields.
- Continuous recruitment and training of call centre agents by the call centres. They maintain a database of suitable candidates, and are thus able to meet their client's demands of scalability on time. This is a strong selling point to clients.
- Numerous international brands have their offshore operations in India and send experienced and highly skilled staff from their home offices to work in the India operations, thus transferring skills to the local population.
- National Skills Registry - an industry initiative to ensure that individuals employed by organizations have their background and antecedents verified, thereby preventing, if not eliminating, the menace of fake resumes. This is an institutionalised mechanism through which objectively verifiable data of an individual is independently checked (*independent of NASSCOM, the employer or the employee*).

For South Africa, other issues are that Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) policy ensures equitable distribution (by race) of workers in the BPO sector and that senior managers in the BPO sectors are mostly white. The latter gives the impression of 'white-culture' which is a strong marketing point for BPO industry in mostly Europe and USA.

In Mauritius, training is key as illustrated by the initiative to create an ICT Academy by OTAM (the BPO industry association) with the Mauritius Government to train people after Higher School Certificate, where they would be offered vocational and professional courses. In addition OTAM wants a public-private partnership with the University of Technology of Mauritius that would also offer training to people in Reunion and Madagascar. It would be Government funded but much more oriented to the private sector.

With English being the official language in the country, and Kenyans generally having a neutral accent, this is a big selling point to international companies looking to outsource call centre functions such as customer service. Kenya's human resource capabilities and numbers will probably form the basis of the niche that the country should carve for itself in BPO&O sector. India, for instance, whilst providing call centre services, has carved a niche in Software Development and Engineering due to the large numbers of graduates they produce every year in these fields.

On training, it emerged that companies in Kenya impart formal communication skills through in-house peer assessment and continuous improvement techniques. This ensures that the right standards are attained in terms of floor etiquette, team etiquette, productivity, and reliability. Indeed, one of the larger companies operating in Kenya is preparing to invest in a training centre in the near future. The new multi-media university (former KCCT) has been designated as a key trainer in the BPO&O sector (any one with status of the training?).

Discussion Q1. We do not have accurate information on the human resource skills that we have as a country. What should Kenya do to profile its relatively large human resource pool and exploit it in order to grow the BPO&O sector?

Discussion Q2. What strategies should Kenya pursue to continuously create skills much more focused on the BPO and Off-shoring sector?