

UNIONISATION OF INDIAN CALL CENTRE AGENTS: THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

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Introduction: ‘The hypothesis that dissatisfied workers are more likely to vote pro-union has received more empirical attention than any other hypothesis in trying to understand union voting behavior’ (Barling et al., 1992: 48). However, recent research has shown that extreme work conditions such as those present in call centres may not provide sufficient push towards union organization and recognition (Taylor and Bain, 2003). Further, viewing unionization simply as a response to dissatisfaction and adversity masks the complexities of both the effect of identity on the propensity of workers to unionize and the role that unionization plays in worker identity (Milton, 2003). Indeed, the identity dimension of unionization has largely been ignored.

Method: The present study, located in Mumbai and Bangalore, India, had two phases. The first phase was guided by van Manen’s (1998) phenomenological research strategy where conversational interviews held with 59 call centre agents employed with international facing call centres were subject to holistic and selective thematic analyses. The core theme of ‘being professional’ as defining agents’ identity emerged. The second phase of the study explored the implications of ‘being professional’ for unionisation. Data, collected by interviewing labour activists and trade unionists and by attending union meetings, were analysed using Miles and Huberman’s (1994) techniques to generate themes, categories and patterns.

Findings: Call centre agents’ identity of being professional complicated the process of unionisation. Consequently, dissatisfaction emanating from work systems, job design elements and work conditions, normally considered to be push factors towards unionisation (DeCotiis and Le Louarn, 1981), were deemed insufficient, triggering changes in the approaches that trade unionists and labour activists were required to employ. Activists and unionists realized that, as in the case of professionals (Cohen & Hurd, 1998), the combination of a desire for voice, aversion to conflict, preference for cooperation and concern about preserving individualism presented a challenging mosaic of issues confronting collective action initiatives among call centre agents. In addition, employer hostility, government apathy and unions’ ability to perform functions of a professional association, while simultaneously embracing unionism, presented formidable dilemmas. In such a situation, it was considered appropriate to use partnership rather than militancy to unionise call centre agents.

Conclusion: The identity of ‘being professional’ among Indian call centre agents not only posed serious challenges to unionising but also dictated the strategy and the course that initial union organizing took.