Abstract

The rapid evolution of the Internet and global telecommunication infrastructure has provided organizations with a choice of service providers located anywhere in the world. This has lead to a sharp growth in organizations outsourcing their business processes (BPO) to service providers situated in countries like India.

Industry surveys predict that Remote Customer Support Services or Call Centers will be the fastest growing BPO area in this decade. Call centers are used for a number of customer related functions like marketing selling, information dispensing, giving advice etc. A combination of factors characterizing call centers like the information intensive nature of the task, the high levels of monitoring that support agents are subjected to, the continuous repetitive nature of work and the lack of co- presence with the customer, make this kind of an organization different enough to demand research that is focused on such organizations.

Though the literature has traditionally characterized remote customer support tasks as routine and repetitive, recent academic literature acknowledges that remote customer support services are not uniform and can contain elements of knowledge intensive work. Knowledge Intensive work is characterized by high Task Variety, Task Complexity and Task Interconnectedness. The well developed notion of "fit" in organizational literature states that the Organizational Capabilities required for effective service performance would depend on the Task characteristics as well as the effort required to perform the task. Hence the organizational capabilities of remote customer support services can be expected to be impacted by the Task Knowledge Intensity of the remote support task. Also Remote Customer Support can be delivered through Voice, email and text based Chat technologies. These media differ in terms of their richness and hence their ability to facilitate information exchange. As the richness of the media varies it can be expected that the Organizational Capabilities required for delivering effective service performance would vary.

There have been few studies that have compared and contrasted different services that vary in task knowledge intensity. Hence there is need for research that examines the relationship of task knowledge intensity and organizational capabilities in remote customer support. Similarly there is very little research that examines the organizational capabilities required as media richness varies. Hence there is need for research that examines the relationship between media richness and organizational capabilities in remote customer support.

This study examines the relation of Task Knowledge Intensity and Media Richness to Organizational capabilities in remote customer support services, with a focus on organizational processes. A qualitative research methodology has been adopted in order to present an in-depth view of the issues involved and to study individuals in their natural settings. A multiple case research strategy was used, with a remote-customer-support-project as the unit of analysis, and six such projects across two organizations were studied. These cases essentially belong to the remote technical support domain and the financial services call center domain. In all the case studies, the primary source of data was semi-structured interviews, supplemented by observations and internal documents. The data were analyzed within each case, as well as across the six cases, to detect similarities and compare differences. Propositions have been generated based on the cross-case analysis, for evaluation in future research. These propositions relate to People, Process and Technology capabilities of remote support service providers.

An important contribution of this study is the theoretical framework that has been proposed for organizational capability in remote customer support services. The contextual insights derived from the case studies, regarding the organizational characteristics of remote customer support providers, is another significant contribution of this study. Further, the propositions generated from the cross case analysis can be used for further research with the aim of building remote customer support theory.

The study also provides directions for future research including replicating the study across other cases with different task knowledge intensity and media richness and research that further examines end customer expectations in remote customer support.