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From Coolie to Cool Dude

From Coolie No.1 to Hero No.1

The image of call center workers as cyber coolies doing drudge work has entered popular imagination. After all, what do they do? Answer telephone calls or enquiries from US or UK clients using a faux American or British accent with falsified name like Jane or John, right? Dead end jobs high attrition rates, and possibly life – or at least social life – threatening because of the odd timings etc, right?

Partly true, but there is more to the call center job than you would have guessed. Take a call center in New Delhi that I visited recently. Part of this outfit's business is to serve customers of American retail and credit card companies. So a typical worker bee is a college graduate, what you'd call B.A pass. Put him through the accent and etiquette grind and he's good for a year or two as a phone jockey.

Now here is an unexpected opening. Among this call center's client is a large Silicon Valley multinational for whom it handles tech support for a range of popular printers. Typically, the tech support drones are engineers. But because of the shortage of engineers, and the fact that they move on to better jobs than just tech support, your B.A pass undergoes in-house tech training and moves from serving retail customers to tech support.

Of course, you might hear some customers complain that that might be one reason for dodgy service, but the fact remains that your B.A pass drudge has been turned into a part-time techie with some knowledge of the bells and whistles of computing and decent transactional skills.

The same principle holds in medical transcription. Manju Mathew has been working as a medical transcriptionist in a small firm called Transpert in Bangalore. After two years on the job transcribing the heavily accented, rapid fire, end-of-the-day notes of midwest American doctors, she has a pretty decent knowledge of medical conditions and prescription drugs. Who knows, in time, young workaday grads might see this as a route to a medical, pharmaceutical or nursing school.

So does this mean our army of phone jockeys, now heading towards the 500,000 mark, will turn into doctors and engineers? Of course not. But it is possible to move up the value chain. After all, this is how the Wipros and Infosys' began – doing low-end low-value work and gradually scaling up. Today, both firms have state-of-art global command centers that run the IT systems of American and British utilities out of Bangalore in a scene out of some sci-fi movie.

This business of outsourcing works in strange ways. Sitting with doctors in Bangalore one afternoon as they sliced, diced and interpreted X-rays sent from an American hospital at the end of the day's work there -- to be sent back before the US physicians return to work the next morning -- a thought occurs. If American hospitals can send X-rays for reading here, why not pathology samples or slides? And where will this stop? How about remote or robotic surgery?

Of course none of this will fully solve India's problems, even if the 500,000-strong army of phone jockeys grows to 5 million, given a labor force of 500 million which we will soon have. Mercifully, the delirium of the media has been tempered by sobering words from men like Narayana Murthy and Anil Ambani, both of whom agree that India is far from an IT super-power, let alone a super-power. But a half-a-million cyber coolies turned to cyber dudes and global professionals is a good start to getting there.
