

*April 17, 2005*

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## **Left Brain, Right Brain**

**T**his is the week of filing tax returns in the United States (April 15 being the annual deadline). Or, as many Americans will tell you, it is the week of death and taxes. Some will say this is the month of death, taxes *and* allergies (spring also brings forth a burst of allergy-causing pollen in many parts of the country), not necessarily in that order.

Between sneezes, million of Americans are sweating bullets filling in various forms after the cracking a tax code that could give the IIT-JEE aspirants the heebie-jeebies. One survey has shown that Americans will spend 14 hours on an average this year on filing returns, which is probably more than the time they spend mowing lawn or raking leaves.

Of course, you may suggest they can always outsource the filing of their tax returns, as tens of thousands of individuals and corporations do amid moans that cheap accountants in India are swiping well-paid American jobs. But before you get smug about this process, here's a word of caution for the BPO brigade: If a \$ 500-a-month accountant in India can do it cheap, a \$ 50 Turbo Tax program can do it cheaper.

Yes, more Americans use automated tax prep software to file their returns than send them to India, and therein lies a lesson: No job is forever.

The effect of such process automation was brought home to me rather rudely recently when I called to book tickets on United Airlines. Service calls of all kind (airlines, credit cards, computer support etc) going to India isn't a surprise any more; I'm surprised when calls *don't* go to India.

So I waited patiently as the disembodied automated voice response system ran me through the initial queries about my destination, date of travel etc, before I would be transported to "Julia" or "Brad" in Gurgaon or Bangalore.

But the AVRS ran me through the whole menu, sought my credit card information, and completed the full transaction without any human interface. Evidently, voice recognition software has improved dramatically in recent months, a development that BPO India would do well to note. As America's information age guru Daniel Pink put it, any job that can be reduced to a set of rules is now at risk, whether in India or U.S.

In a recent tract, Pink reflected at length on the left brain-right brain theory, the left brain being the part that handles sequential, repetitive, computational work, while the right brain is tasked with conceptual tasks. The left brain has produced abundance, taking up the grunt work of the industrial age and the drudge work of the information age.

But the output of the left brain is not enough to meet human aspirations. It's now the era of the right brain. To illustrate this, Pink offers an illuminating example -- electric lighting was rare a century ago, but now it's common.

Yet in the U.S, candles are a \$2 billion a year business – "for reasons that stretch beyond the logical need for luminosity to a prosperous country's more inchoate desire for pleasure and transcendence."

The implication is India could lose its BPO jobs – unless we started working that right brain. Why would an airline direct a left brain task to a \$ 200-a-month drudge in India if it can be done by a piece of software?

Of course, what most Americans don't take into account is that Indians are right up there with right brain tasks too. Which is why some of the pioneering work in voice recognition has been done by Indians.