RESEARCH ARTICLE

Factors that Leverage the Key Drivers of Creating a Culture of Employee Engagement in the Business Process Outsourcing Company: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

The business process outsourcing (BPO) industry has been an essential source of job opportunities in the Philippines. However, due to the fast-paced and stressful nature of the job, attrition and productivity among the employees have always been a challenge to the top management. This phenomenological study aimed to explore and describe the various factors that leverage the key drivers of creating a culture of employee engagement in the BPO company as experienced by managers and supervisors. Ten (10) people-managers were purposively selected as participants in the study. The data was collected through interviews and focus group discussions and was analyzed using thematic analysis. Setting clear vision and goals, igniting people participation, an engagement plan that brings out the best in employees, and the employee's language of the heart emerged as four themes on the key drivers that create a culture of employee engagement. Findings also revealed two major themes in the underlying concerns that have a negative impact on employee engagement: concerns about retaining excellent performing people-managers and Rank-in-File employees, and concerns about motivating office staff and agents to perform well. It is concluded that the employees in the BPO company adhere to and manifest the appropriate practices and policies that are needed for the sustainability of the company, and these positive work attitudes have become the drivers of employee engagement. It is also recommended to formulate an employee development plan to enhance a better work environment and attain organizational success.

KEYWORDS:
human resource management, employee engagement, business process outsourcing, company values, employee attrition

1 | INTRODUCTION

The Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry in the Philippines remains the global leader for voice business process management services and is a preferred site for non-voice services as it is exhibiting rapid growth and expansion along with metropolitan areas in the country. Human resources are critical to this industry because they are the ones who create value for BPO clients (Salipsip et al., 2019). The comparatively high attrition and turnover rates of employees have become one of the

major challenges for BPO companies. The latest data revealed that the attrition rate in the IT-BPM sector is 50%. This figure is 38% higher compared to the average turnover rate of US companies at 22% (Magellan Solutions, 2020).

According to Magellan Solutions' Call Center Benchmarking Report, 51% of the agents left the call center through voluntary resignations, while 1 in 10 agents were dismissed or retrenched by employers, and 1 in 10 agents did not renew the contract. On average, full-time employees (FTEs) who leave call centers stayed with the company for 18 months, while part-time agents stayed for an average of 6 months. Moreover, team leaders stay with the company for around 1.5 years, and call center managers are on duty for up to 4 years. To minimize the attrition rate, Philippine BPO companies put more effort into improving their company culture. Actively involved staff members are some of your company's greatest assets, but if the numbers are any indication, employee engagement is still an area that needs critical attention. If BPO companies want to retain the team while simultaneously improving the bottom line, focus on employee engagement should be increased (Grossmann, 2021). Further, engaged employees are more involved in organizations' issues and will perform better (Muchai Benson, 2014). Osborne and Hammoud (2017) posit that rewards and recognition, empowering employees, and building a bond between leaders and employees are possible strategies that can be applied to engage employees.

Despite the large population working in this sector, there are still many misconceptions about call centers and BPO companies in general. Due to the confidential nature of the information that agents are handling, as well as strict precautions that companies are taking to avoid fraud, there is only a handful of information made available online (Davis, 2020). Despite the many great benefits of BPO employees, employee attrition remains a major concern in the sector (Meyster, 2020).

The author, having been employed in various companies in the business process outsourcing (BPO) industry for seventeen years, had observed the expected high turnover rate among the employees, especially the call center agents. Those employees who resigned from their jobs gave several exit reasons, which the company's human resource department has grouped these factors per tenure group to be able to execute strategic plans for addressing attrition. In the BPO industry, management would look for the right skill-set during the recruitment and selection processes since accurate profiling of their qualifications is critical in human capital development. Grounded on experience, the top reason for attrition is the change in industry when employees decide to pursue other professions or venture into different employment that is influenced by the absence of career pathing, developmental learning, and promotions. Other cited reasons were relocation to another geographic area, irrespective of domestic or international location. A violation of attendance policy may also result in high turnover antecedents, child or family member care, low compensation, a return to studying, a more significant promotional opportunity outside the company, a conflict between work and life balance, and more significant learning or development opportunities from other industries. These details are employee turnover factors that should be addressed by the company through employee engagement, where the same opportunity needs much attention from the senior leaders of the BPO companies. The lack of interaction and support could disgruntle an employee from performing the set expectations.

With the high attrition rate in the BPO industry, the human source department should assess the various aspects in the social resource management area to be able to devise intervention schemes to address the high-turn-over rate which relates to loss of loyalty, loss of knowledge and experience, and loss value on the expenses incurred in the training and development. Thus, this study aimed to explore and describe the various factors that leverage the key drivers of creating a culture of employee engagement in the BPO companies as experienced by managers and supervisors. Also, this study explored the underlying concerns that negatively affect employee engagement.

2 | METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach to research employing descriptive phenomenological inquiry was used in the study. The phenomenology design aimed to describe the lived experiences of the 10 junior and senior leadership team members from a BPO company who handle voice-over support with over 2,700 employees operating at Cebu, AsiaTown, and IT Park in Lahug, Cebu City, Cebu, Philippines. The management personnel informants were composed of 1 senior account director, 2 associate directors, 3 deputy directors, and 4 account supervisors. Face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions were used to gather the necessary data. The researcher asked permission from the management of the BPO company to conduct the study regarding employee engagement and the common issues in the BPO sector. To ensure that the rights of the participants were not violated, the objective of the study was explained to them, and they were asked if they would be willing to participate in the investigation. Those who signified their voluntary participation were made to sign the consent form. The proceedings also ensured that the cooperation was voluntary and that in the event that any participant withdrew their participation, it would not be held against them. Moreover,

the confidentiality of the data and information being gathered was also ensured. After interviewing the participants, the verbal responses were transcribed, coded, and analyzed thoroughly to come up with common themes. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the narration of the participants' lived experiences on the various factors that leverage the key drivers of creating a culture of employee engagement in the BPO companies and the underlying concerns that negatively affect employee engagement. The thematic analysis describes an iterative process as to how to go from messy data to a map of the most important themes in the data.

3 | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 | Factors that leverage the manifestation of managers, supervisors, and rank-and-file employees in creating a culture of employee engagement

Two themes emerged from the responses of the participants during the personal interview.

3.1.1 | The Setting of Clear Vision and Goals

The employees in the organization must be able to know the aspirations of the organization and witness beforehand that the managers and supervisor are taking actions that make the vision, goals, and objectives of the organization realistic.

…..good attrition score, if employees are engaged and have trust in their direct superiors, they open up normally to whatever personal issues or plans they have that will help supervisors or managers identify possible attrition and address it beforehand. In this way, the relationship and respect are built mutually. (Informant 4)

People managers have to set goals. Employees want to know how their position fits in with the other positions in the company. And, they want to learn how their work affects the business as a whole. People managers need to acknowledge employees. (Informant 5)

Based on the narratives of the participants, the employees have a high propensity to show engagement with their jobs when they are made aware of what the goals and norms that the leaders in the organization have set in terms of vision, mission, and objectives so that they will be able to do their part in contributing towards its attainment.

In the organization, motivation is built within the structure, process, and system that put rewards and incentives according to goals and performances. As the employee confronts office tension with the ability to do the job and recognize opportunities for self-growth, the purposes of the company are fulfilled, and the concerned employees are rewarded with incentives (Zarate, 2012).

3.1.2 | Igniting People Participation

One way of creating a culture of employee engagement in a business process outsourcing (BPO) company is by motivating its people to attend other internal and external activities and events. The following are the significant statement of the participants:

Managers' and supervisors' ability in each of the activities and promote the company culture in engagement is critical. Their ability to drive and influence is a must in making sure that there is 100% participation for the overall success of the activity. (Informant 2)

There are several avenues that managers and supervisors can create a culture of engagement. Depending on the activities, we have an outreach program, sports events, mentoring, development training. (Informant 3)

To be able to foster a culture of employee engagement, undertaking different activities where they will be able to participate and be given a chance to contribute towards the attainment of the aims of any initiative is the right approach. In this manner, employees can also acquire a sense of belongingness and importance, where they can feel that they are part of the organizational family. It is also in this way that the employees will be able to acquire more knowledge and skills through experience that they can secure through training or any event that helps develop a sense of empowerment.

According to Corpuz (2013), every person has different reasons for working. The reasons for working are as individual as the person. However, every employee works in order to obtain something. They need to improve morale, employee motivation, and quality of life. To create positive employee motivation, treat employees as if they matter, because employees matter. Moreover, individuals differ in how they respond to the conditions of work. While some employees may be highly satisfied with a particular job, other employees may find the same conditions extremely dissatisfying. An important issue surrounding every human resource activity is how it will influence the level of morale of employees.

3.1.3 │ Engagement Plan that Brings Out the Best from the Employees

The impetus for the employees' exhibition of positive working behavior is a personnel development plan set out by the top management. The development plan should include activities that will motivate the employees to perform their best in whatever tasks they are assigned.

A strong engagement plan is a critical factor. It has to be designed in such a way that it brings out the best interest and individuality of the employee. To sustain it is also another factor to consider in putting efforts on. (Informant 2)

Agents should leverage an approach where employee engagement results in the right conditions for all members of an organization to give their best each day, commit to their organization's goals and values, and be motivated to contribute to organizational success with an enhanced sense of well-being, not only to themselves but to others too. (Informant 5)

The main factor that influences the creation of a culture of employee engagement is a clear and concrete human resource development plan in which the employees will be allowed to acquire competencies and other talents in the organization that contribute towards the attainment of its goals and objects. This action is also a way wherein the employees will be empowered to make useful decisions in the performance of their jobs that are contributory to productivity and efficiency. If a leader wants to help the team stay focused, engaged, and enthusiastic about their work, he or she can make some simple changes, many of them subtle, to nearly every part of doing business (Craig, 2017).

3.1.4 │ The Employee's Language of the Heart

Another factor that leverages a creation of the culture of employee engagement is the values that employees have within their hearts, such as the spirit of volunteerism or doing jobs that go beyond the call of duty. Based on experience, the participants narrate the following:

It depends on the interest of the employee. His/her willingness and ability are also important. It is a factor to be considered in aligning engagement to the agents because the interest of one may not be necessarily the same as the rest. This is the challenging part. (Informant 3)

It is volunteerism where employees are willing to volunteer without force or any other hidden agenda. They feel the sense of belongingness to be part of the success on any activities and positive focus group discussion and employee satisfaction survey result. (Informant 4)

The factor that serves as leverage in the formation of the culture of employee commitment among the rank-and-file personnel is the ability to work their good interests. In this manner, they will be able to work on whatever tasks are assigned to them with an open heart without any complaints that would develop a love for what they do. Aside from that, the innovativeness and creativity will also come out naturally, which will, in turn, make their outputs expectedly exemplary. This is also one way to let them feel that they are important in the organization and that their efforts are given value by the management. To affect this approach, a reality check should be conducted as a step in career management. The organization's responsibility is to communicate the performance evaluations and the opportunities available to the employee, given the organizations' long-range plans (Noe et al., 2009).

3.2 | Underlying concerns that negatively affect employee engagement

In the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry, there are myriad concerns that management has to address to ensure that the employees are engaged with their jobs, which affects their productivity and efficiency considering that this type of business is labor-intensive. Thus, a strong human resource development plan should be developed and applied.

3.2.1 | Instituting a Career Path Within the Organization

Naturally, those employees who have high performance in the company are ambitious and will keep on looking for challenges. They would always strive hard to succeed in whatever tasks were assigned to them. If they lose, these organizational aspects might then feel bored and tend to leave the company to neither look for another type of job nor transfer to another company of the same nature of business. Based on the experience of the participants, they shared that:

I think it is quite normal that for your lifespan as an employee most especially if you are already a manager or a supervisor, there will always come a time that you question if you are still happy with your job. Most of the companies spend a lot of budget for operating expenses but sometimes if we talk about employee development that's something that is left behind. This is indeed one of the biggest challenges in companies and for employees to feel that there is constant learning and there is constant movement with their career. (Informant 2)

The second one would be, it's becoming a routine so you already know what you are doing and sometimes it prevents you to grow and utilize other tools and improve your expertise. So, I think, yeah, those are the two challenges especially when it comes to leading a particular team or making a particular metric work continuously. (Informant 5)

Based on the narrations of the participants, to keep the best managers in the BPO organizational structure, management should devise a clear plan for a career path that will allow all the employees to get promoted if they deserve it. Noe et al. (2009) said that the concept of a career has changed in recent years. In the traditional view, a career consists of a sequence of positions within an occupation or organization. Recently, however, changes such as downsizing and restructuring have become the norm, so the concept of a career has become more fluid. Today employees are more likely to have a variable career, one that frequently changes based on changes in the person's interests, abilities, and values and in the work environment.

3.2.2 | Ensuring Administrative Support

Another factor that serves as a challenge in retaining high-performing managers is ensuring that the administration will support their initiatives or else they will leave. An informant narrated that:

For me, the challenges in retaining excellent performing managers and supervisors are the lack of support in a very diverse industry. Performing managers and supervisors leave because of the generic approach or the lack of support and they leave when their personal growth is not met. (Informant 3)

The absence of support from the administration to the middle management in the organization, especially in terms of budget for training, conferences, and other activities for human resource development, the purchase of modern technology, and tools, would lead to the loss of motivation to perform well towards organizational success. Since these types of human resources are goal-oriented, they would want to be able to achieve the best in whatever tasks that they do. Thus, when they lack the resources to attain their desires, there will be an internal conflict. What will happen to an organization if its employees are disengaged? Employees who are not engaged are likely to be spinning (wasting their effort and talent on tasks that may not matter much), settling (they do not show full commitment, are not dissatisfied enough to take a break), and splitting (they are not sticking around for things to change in their organization), and have far more misgivings about their organization in terms of performance measures such as customer satisfaction (White, 2006; Perrin, 2003).

3.2.3 | Keep the Fire of Motivation Burning

One of the reasons why seasoned agents leave the BPO company is when they feel that they have lost the motivation to stay and they think that they do not have a brighter future ahead of them in the same organization. They narrated the following

significant statements:

This is when you know they will start to feel like my growth is stagnant and start asking the questions 'what's in it for me?' and the opportunities to look for them is just to keep their skills alive and then it plateaus and then it becomes difficult for us to retain them. (Informant 1)

So, in that case, that's when, you know, the problem comes because as a leader you have to dig deeper into the agent and you have to give him more opportunities to look forward to every day in work. So, yeah, you have to be very, I should say, artistic when it comes to making them realize that it's not all about, you know, maintaining a particular score or metric but also giving them the sense of why they are doing it. (Informant 5)

In consideration of the difficulty and the pressure that the agents in the BPO face every day in performing their jobs, they need incitement to keep their enthusiasm. The organization should have a concrete plan in place for the various activities and interventions that will keep employees motivated to become efficient and achievers in whatever tasks are assigned to them.In this way, the employees will not get exhausted and will keep on aspiring to attain more achievements in the BPO company with the end goal of getting more incentives in terms of money, benefits, goods, and even promotions.

3.2.4 ∣ Appreciation Means Gratification

It is a common human nature that a person needs to be appreciated, especially if he or she can do something good or has attained certain achievements in their jobs or in other dimensions of life. Hence, the participants shared the following statements:

Retaining excellent performing rank-and-file employees or agents, usually leave because their talents or skills were not appropriately utilized. Performing agents need the urge to be empowered, they feel the need that they can do more. (Informant 3)

The participants pronounced that the key to keeping the rank-and-file employees from staying in the BPO company is to adopt a system where their good and excellent performance will be recognized. Somehow, recognition of commendable performance is tantamount to giving monetary rewards so that they will be able to feel and enjoy the fruits of their hard labor. Another dimension that will satisfy the employees is enabling them to feel that their skills and competence are highly used and recognized in order to be able to contribute something towards the company's achievement.

Goal acceptance, which is similar to the idea of goal commitment, is the extent to which people consciously understand and agree to targets. Accepted goals are more motivating than unaccepted goals. Performance feedback is information about the quality or quantity of past performance that indicates whether progress is being made toward the accomplishment of a goal. Performance feedback is more motivating than no feedback. In short, goal setting theory says that people will be motivated to the extent that they accept specific, challenging goals and receive feedback that indicates their progress toward goal achievement (Williams, 2012).

3.2.5 ∣ Money is the Greatest Employee Motivator

Just like other employees in the BPO company, employees would be motivated to work hard to be able to earn enough for survival or to have a comfortable life. So, the participants explained that:

The reasons of the motivations that make it difficult. Others are motivated because of money. (Informant 1)

Well, motivation is…it comes in two factors, I guess. It can be coming from within yourself or it can also be external. I think the monetary value is as important and for us to….so in that matter, I think, budget allocation is a challenge for activities that will help motivate our office staff. (Informant 2)

You know the money would be number but there are other factors, like personal problems or sometimes they are not open to the real setting of their lifestyle or in their area. So, as a leader, you need to, you know, talk to them, to be more open to

them. (Informant 5)

The employees disclosed that one of the reasons they work hard is to be able to earn a living. The higher the pay that they receive, the more satisfied they become the less likely they will leave, change jobs or transfer to another company. This result indicates that the employees expect to receive the amount of pay that corresponds to the extent of their energy in doing their job. Although other factors would motivate them, such as understanding when they have personal issues, developmental learning, skill-building, etc., monetary considerations are at the top of the reasons.

3.2.6 | Keep the Employees Growing

Another way of motivating the employees to excel in their job is the provision of better career opportunities within the organization. This is a way of ensuring personal and professional growth in the company. The following are the significant statements of the employees:

.....challenges in motivating are getting their commitment and buy-ins, that's what's common. (Informant 3)

......when it comes to office staff, it has something to do with giving them the chance to grow because in this industry we…I mean, competition is very tight. Although we are saying, or the higher-ups are saying that there is always room for growth in this kind of industry. But then again, in reality, that's not happening the way we…or the way we let people see it, or the way we perceive it. So, it has something to do with growth. And…I think it has something to do with the opportunity that we give them. (Informant 4)

The employees' decisions to stay in the BPO company depend on their outlooks on life and how they see their careers developing in the company. However, most millennials, who currently make up the majority of BPO company hires, would prefer more work opportunities within the organization or an explicit career path in which they will be given the opportunity to grow professionally.

The goal-setting theory explains that people will be motivated to the extent that they accept specific, challenging goals and receive feedback that indicates their progress toward goal achievement. The essential components of the goal-setting theory are goal specificity, goal difficulty, goal acceptance, and performance feedback. Goal specificity is the extent to which goals are detailed, exact, and unambiguous. Goal difficulty is the extent to which a target is hard or challenging to accomplish. Difficult goals are more motivating than easy goals. Goal acceptance, which is similar to the idea of goal commitment, is the extent to which people consciously understand and agree to targets. Accepted goals are more motivating than unaccepted goals. Performance feedback is information about the quality or quantity of past performance that indicates whether progress is being made toward the accomplishment of a goal (Williams, 2012).

3.2.7 | Building Deeper Employee Relationships Through Empathy

Another important aspect that the management of the BPO company needs to do to keep the people working and moving is understand what they would want and compromise towards a win-win situation between both parties in the organization. Based on the personal points of view of the participants, they shared that:

........but they become useless if they are not motivated to take advantage of them. Usually, it's all about education, it's all about understanding, it's all about building a relationship, this is about engagement and making them understand that these are designed for them and making them understand that this is what fits their needs. So, sometimes, they are not motivated because we are not selling the programs or we are not fostering that relationship to make them value these programs. At the end of the day, motivation should come from that x-factor about true engagement in the workplace. (Informant 1)

Another reason why employees would feel love towards their employer is when they feel that they are understood and that their needs and problems are being heard and considered when their superiors deal with them. Hence, executing empathy is an effective way of building a more profound relationship between the company's management and the employees, especially those at the rank-and-file level, since they are more sensitive to this matter.

Markos and Sridevi (2010) found that employee engagement is a stronger predictor of positive organizational performance and clearly showed the two-way relationship between employer and employee compared to the three earlier constructs: job satisfaction, employee commitment, and organizational citizenship behavior. Engaged employees are emotionally attached to their organization and highly involved in their job with great enthusiasm for the success of their employer, going the extra mile beyond the contractual employment agreement.

3.2.8 | Transformational Leadership

The role of the leader in the organization is of primordial importance to employee satisfaction and well-being in the organization. Based on their feelings, they shared that:

Well, for agents they have to be recognized constantly, I guess. And since they are directly in contact with our customers daily, you must know, we keep them happy, and creating activities and strategies that will constantly make them happy is a challenge. (Informant 2)

Ahm, I think I can of… what I can think of right now based on what is happening is getting everyone to be involved. Getting everyone not only involve in the success of the business and success of the process but also being involved in decision making and also… and I thinks we tend to forget to put them in a situation wherein they are… where they think that we are not engaging them at all. Engagement in a sense not only in work-life balance but also engage in our daily routine on what we do and involving them. I think that's it. (Informant 4)

Aside from monetary gratification, the employees would not resign or leave the BPO company if they were properly guided by their managers or immediate superiors. Thus, when the leaders in the company possess the ability to build a good rapport with their subordinates, the high attrition rate problem can easily be mitigated. Aside from that, leaders should be creative in carrying out activities that keep people engaged with the organization and its goals.

4 | CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Employees in the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) company adhere to and manifest the appropriate practices and policies that are needed for the sustainability of the company, and this positive work attitude has become the driver of employee engagement. The manifestation of this altruistic behavior paved the way towards a more profound commitment between the employer and employees to work on the attainment of the company's goals and objectives. Moreover, various impetuses serve as the leverage towards employee engagement, such as employee development plans, the undertaking of other internal and external activities that forge employee participation and other motivational initiatives that enable the employees to feel that they are an essential asset in the organization. Furthermore, the concerns about retaining excellent and performing managers, supervisors, and rank-and-file employees have been uncovered through instituting career paths within the organization, ensuring administrative support, keeping the fire of motivation burning, and appreciating that gratification are themes that are considered relevant in employee retention. Also, motivating the office staff and agents to perform excellently can be done through several factors, such as money, the greatest employee motivator, keeping the employees growing, building deeper employee relationships through empathy, and transformational leadership, which should be an integral part of the employee developmental plan in the business process outsourcing company.

It is recommended that an employee development plan should be developed and adopted by the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) company to enhance a better work environment and attain organizational success. For future work, a more in-depth analysis of the factors that influence employee absenteeism in the BPO industry may be conducted. Also, the work-life balance among BPO employees can be studied to explore the trend of attrition rate in the BPO industry.

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