INTRODUCTION

The Impact of stress on call center agents is adverse. CCAs both physically and psychologically are getting drained because of stress. Organizations are in a way getting affected with decrease in productivity and on the other by employee turnover. To mitigate the stress organizations, employees and various unions are collectively working.

5.1 ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONS TO COMBAT STRESS AMONG CCA’s

In order to relieve the employees from stress, various CCs organizations have taken initiatives, starting from redesigning of their work to providing facilities at the work centers with which employees can alleviate stress.

Workplace Ambience

Workplace ambience in call centers is described as an employer concern for employee well-being. Collegial atmosphere of the organization is promoted to energize and destress employees so that they can relate to the workplace and their performance can be maximized. The only thing that concerns to the employer organization is meeting client requirements in order to maintain competitive advantages. Work and fun are to be balanced to create a productive docile workforce and that employers’ espoused commitment to employee interests is eclipsed by the primacy of the management.

Fun activities held during work days are scheduled such that they never interfere with task requirements. Usually, fun activities are held either during breaks or before or after the shift. During the shift, such activities are held only when call volumes are low. Similar programmes during weekly and public or festival holidays are conducted with several purposes in mind. While such activities form part of the identity regulation-socio-
ideological control programme, they were means of understanding employees better. Using this information to organizational advantage of assessing employees’ commitment to work and to the employer organization. Such activities are working towards strengthening this end of facilitating team development, destressing the employees and thereby reducing turnover intentions. Fun activities include various games involving employees from various teams like musical chairs etc. Some call centers they take the employees for trekking during the holidays. All the fun activities and outing of employees will be during holidays or when the call volumes are very low.

Several organizations conduct EAPs (Employee Assistance program’s) to their CCAs. Many organizations like Genpact, Aegis offer EAP like Counseling. Through counseling employees overcome from personal and organizational stressors and adopt more effective coping mechanisms. Most EAPs are programs that counsel employees on any work or personal problems. In call centers EAPs help CCAs to tackle arrogant and abusive customers. Family problems often represent the largest percentage of EAP referrals, although this varies with organization to organization. EAPs can be one of the most effective stress management interventions where the counseling helps employees to understand the stressors, acquire stress management skills and practice those stress management skills.

Organizational leisure activities are generally planned during week end and public holidays involving agent’s families. This is considered as a measure to boost employee’s and increases their commitment towards the organization. Ng and Mitter (2005) observed that quite often such type of programmes involving agents’ families will enhance the family loyalty to the organization, so that indirectly agents’ commitment
could be strengthened, their performance could be improved and the chances of attrition could be stalled.

**Open door policy**

Employer organizations in communications to agents, downplayed bureaucratic structures and processes and emphasized integration. The orientation was particularly associated with superior-subordinate interactions and grievance handling processes. Agents assured that they were free to approach any superior in the organization to address their problem. Through this, agent’s reliance on the much publicized open door policy, employee commitment to the organization will increase. CCAs through this policy are able to express their problems and grievances which cause stress in their job and can share with their managers and are finding amicable solutions to the problems. Most of the organizations, even after implementing the open door policy, insist certain procedures to escalate these problems. They request the CCAs to first discuss the problem with their immediate supervisors/team leaders and among themselves. Still if the problem persists, then it should be addressed to the higher level officials, avoiding miss understanding among the immediate supervisors and team leaders.

**Development of Communal rituals**

Management of various call centers has developed communal rituals which celebrate the pleasures of customer contact, indicating that it is worth putting up with some pain in order to get some gains. In addition, management also understood the relevance of communities of coping where employees sought support from each other to deal with the strain of irate customers (Korczyński, 2003)\(^{162}\). But as Noon and Blyton (1997:140)\(^{214}\) caution, these groups serve as a curious mixture of, consent and resistance
to work. By helping agents to survive, the tension of their work, these communities preserve the social order of the workplace and reduce employee turnover, facilitating management requirements. At the same time, they can develop into strong informal subcultures that provide resistance and make workplace relations difficult for management to control.

5.2 INDIVIDUAL STRESS COPING MECHANISM

Employees find their own ways of resisting the pervasive controls employed by call centers. Sturdy and Fineman (2001)\footnote{215} have suggested that as of now, resistance among call center agents is most likely to be covert, individual and temporary. Resistance takes on various forms. There are agents who learn to anticipate when they will be monitored and adjust their performance accordingly, who hang onto calls after callers disconnect to get breaks, who exploit supervisory inconsistencies (Bain and Taylor, 2000)\footnote{216} and who keep calls short to meet difficult duration and volume targets by providing partial answers or cutting customers off (Knights and McCabe, 1998)\footnote{217}. Many of the techniques noted in observational studies of specific call centers are examples of ways in which agents have learnt to exploit the loopholes in their particular set of information systems. Thus techniques used in one centre would not work in another – in one example agents had to manually disconnect calls and had a special category of calls that were expected to take longer and had higher time limits. If such a call turned out to be short, agents could extend it without affecting their call duration statistics unduly. The effectiveness of the strategy is thus dependent on a combination of technology and task-specific performance criteria. According to CCAs this is one type of stress reduction mechanism.
‘Making fun of a management style is a form of resistance’ (Mulholland, 2002:299). This creative and subversive humor represents a form of employee resistance against the totalizing systems of surveillance and control, demonstrating divergence and dissent from managerially defined norms of behavior has been brought out by Taylor and Bain (2003) while humor provides relief from stressful routines and makes work interesting, it goes beyond coping to provide a shared sense of self and a group identity and differentiation.

5.3 UNION IN CALL CENTERS

Reluctance of call center employees to join unions

As call center employees recognize themselves with professional identity, not only were they unaware of what the term union meant and how unions functioned, but when these were explained to them, they considered the idea to be strange and alien (Ernesto et.al.,). As professionals, they neither identified with unions nor saw their relevance. In their opinion unions were for blue-collared workers being exploited in factories and not for well-qualified people working in professional set-ups which looked after their interests. According to few of the call center agents intelligent, qualified, motivated, responsible and upwardly mobile professionals like themselves, whose jobs involved skill and challenge and provided good returns, whose work environments were modern and stylish and whose employers looked after their well-being were not in the same category as factory workers. It was this latter group which lacked abilities, skills, motivation and responsibility, preformed unchallenging tasks in dilapidated environments and experienced exploitation that required union protection. According to the study conducted by Hurd, (2000), call center agents maintained that unions were better suited
to blue-collar occupations and low wage service work. Hurd, in his study found out that call CCAs were relevant to join unions, because they were of the opinion that slogan shouting on the streets and picketing ITES-BPO organizations (Indiatimes, 2005)\textsuperscript{222} being seen as detrimental to their professional image, call center employees, in keeping with other professional groups, were not convinced that they must assume an adversarial role in advancing their professional image, call center employees, in keeping with other professional groups, were not convinced that they must assume an adversarial role in advancing their cause (Seidman and Cain, 1964)\textsuperscript{223}, which would only earn them disdainful titles such as ‘blue-collar officers’ (Sheth, 1993)\textsuperscript{224}.

**UNITES and trade unionism in India**

To counter the general democratic deficit within Indian BPO, UNITES (Union for ITES employees) was formed in September 2005 following an initiative by global union federation UNI (Union Network International) through its Indian Liaison Committee, preparatory organizing efforts under the provisionally named Centre for Business Outsourcing Professionals and an organizational break from the Information Technology Professionals Forum, which orientates on software/IT professionals. UNITES was therefore the first explicit attempt to give BPO employees an independent voice. Arguably, the broader context within which UNITES was proposing to operate was less than favorable. While trade unions certainly have legal status under the Trade Union Act of 1926, historically, trade unionism has been confined to a relatively small, formal or organized segment (Sheth, 1993)\textsuperscript{224}. A significant characteristic of the Indian labor movement has been differentiation, along political lines so that practically every party has had its own trade union wing. As illustrative of this legacy, in 1989 the
government’s verification exercise identified eight major union federations besides a number of small independent unions, which largely remained the case in 2002. Because of a complex of historical, political and economic factors, trade union affiliation to political parties at national and regional levels has manifested itself in trade union rivalry (Datta Chaudhuri, 1996). Union activity, particularly in terms of an ability to call ‘legal’ strikes, has also been restricted through regulation in the form of the Industrial Disputes Act of 1947, which instituted mandatory conciliation and arbitration procedures (Kennedy, 1966). The creation of these institutional arrangements enhanced the influence of the Congress Party controlled Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), leading to incorporation and further state mediation of the employment relationship (Chatterjee 1980). Compounding division and weakness was the emergence from the 1970s of more ‘self-interested’ unionism directed by bureaucratic businessmen-leaders and which was based upon groups of more prosperous workers (Sheth, 1993). This self-interested unionism eschewed the political unionism and external leadership characteristic of unions in the past and led to wider disillusionment with the union movement (Sheth, 1993).

Economic liberalisation from 1990 brought a sea change in industrial relations practices, with government and employers embarking on programmes of downsizing, flexibilisation, subcontracting and the transfer of jobs from ‘bargainable’ to ‘non-bargainable’ categories (Noronha, 1996). These pro-employer policies reflected the increased split between the unions and their traditional allies, the political parties, as the former opposed economic liberalisation, while the latter supported it (Kuruvilla et al., 2002). The fallout from these policies has resulted in the decline of employment
growth in the organised sector (both public and private) between 1994 and 2005 and the unorganised component of the total workforce grew from 91.2 per cent in 1999–2000 to 92.4 per cent in 2004–2005.

Despite these weaknesses, trade unions have demonstrated strong traditions in telecommunications, banking and insurance (Kuruvilla et al., 2002), in part a reflection of the legacy of state ownership. These sectors might be regarded as being closest to the business activities of contact centres and BPO. However, constrained by their pre-occupation with organisation-level institutional arrangements, unions displayed a reluctance to organise the new BPO workforce. Interviews conducted with national officers of the telecommunications and banking unions at the time India’s BPO industry was beginning to undergo dramatic expansion revealed their reluctance to engage Indian call centres and BPO in organising efforts, believing that BPO represented very difficult territory for trade unions. At the same time, any organising effort would have to confront employer hostility by Indian third-party employers, as evidenced by Ramesh (2005) and Cooke (2005), and the opposition of multinationals, such as IBM and EDS, which have industrial relations’ histories demonstrating deep antipathy to trade unionism. Nasscom has publicly denied that unions should play a role in BPO. Consequently, UNITES’ founders recognised the need to take account of employer hostility to trade unionism and of employees’ powerful sense of professional identity. A key element in UNITES’ approach was to promote itself as ‘a community of professionals’, providing information, advice and training services for its career-minded members.
Overcoming bureaucratic obstacles UNITES secured legal status through the Labour Commission in Karnataka and gained ‘Provisional Affiliation’ to INTUC. At the time of the research, it had organising centres and claimed viable ‘chapters’ in Bangalore, Hyderabad, New Delhi, Chennai, Mumbai and Kochi (UNITES, 2006). The distinction between fully paid-up members (600 rupees p.a.) and those paying an initial registration (100 rupees) is important. Officers report a willingness to pay the initial fee but some difficulty in translating ‘sign-ups’ into full membership. Thus, it is helpful to think of UNITES membership as stratified, with a committed core and a looser periphery, surrounded again by non-members who comprise a broader, interested constituency. Accordingly, although 7,000 recruits were claimed by late 2006, the General Secretary estimated full membership at 700–1,000 (Interview, November 19, 2006).

**Which issues union addressed**

UNITES’s office bearers remained clear that engaging constructively with industry did not amount to being co-opted by them. On the contrary, UNITES would retain its distinctive role in representing employees. The key to success was to reinforce the image of the union as a professional organization that can deal with management on its own level, but on employees’ terms (Hurd, 2000). UNITES made it clear that it would not hesitate from championing issues of employee rights, justice, fairness and corporate social responsibility and it would continue to represent employees with genuine grievances against their employers (Taylor et al., 2008). Further, globalization required employees to have a strong voice and UNITES remained committed to this end. Since
off shoring had pitted employees of different nationalities against each other, UNITES believed that the only way forward was for employees to come together and convince employers to rethink their strategies in favor of development that was sustainable for all. Present policies that suggested a race to the bottom were not in the best interests of employees, customers, national economies or sustainable development. Instead of responding to employer initiatives to relocate work overseas with arguments that could be misinterpret as racist, xenophobic or protectionist, the thrust required was that of decent work for all. According to UNITES, the only way to ensure compliance with decent labor standards was for employer organizations and UNI to establish global framework agreements which included clauses on employees’ rights, union rights, health and safety, elimination of discrimination, minimum wages and working conditions, employment stability, respect for others at work and respect for the environment. At the ground level, UNITES applied the fundamental principle of the organizing model (Taylor and Bain, 2008). UNITES’s chapters set themselves membership targets and agreed to a regular exchange of ideas and views including organizing periodic state and national conventions, promoting centers and web-based interaction, conducting training in organization development and developing a core set of leaders who would be trained in various laws and skills of collective bargaining. Among UNITES’s notable interventions are its campaign for employee safety in the aftermath of the tragic rape and murder of Bangalore-based Hewlett Packard employee Pratibha Murthy and the representation of employees of the Bangalore-based company BelAir who had been summarily dismissed without pay. UNITES also succeeded in negotiating four collective bargaining agreements (Excel Outsourcing Services, e-
Merge Business Processing, Infopoint and Transact Solutions). Clearly, UNITES has established a genuine, if limited, presence in Indian ITES–BPO, raising questions about NASSCOM and the industry’s assertion that the independent representation of employees is unnecessary and unwanted in the Indian ITES–BPO environment (Taylor et al., 2007). At the same time, UNITES has taken cognizance of its links to professionalism and, accordingly, its activities have embraced the servicing model of collectivist endeavours. Hurd (2000) states that an information-intensive approach to organizing, which addresses professional issues as well as workplace developments, has the potential to attract support from employees. Clearly, there is potential in unions embracing certain practices of professional associations as part of an effort to lay the foundation for eventual unionization.

Along with organizing, then, UNITES aimed at becoming a forum that could reflect the professional aspirations of its key constituency. Its members wished to develop UNITES as ‘a community of professionals’, which would ensure that it provided educational and training services as well as information and advice (Taylor and Bain, 2008). The services envisaged were good psychiatric support, counselling services and yoga/fitness clubs to promote members’ well-being, career development, financial services, group health insurance, placement consultation and legal support. UNITES was expected to establish a core certification programme with leading educational institutions like NIIT and Aptech, at the national level, for both employees and students, not only to draw people towards the association but also to establish the association’s credibility. Inter-facing with professional bodies such as HR fora, the Computer Society of India and the Manufacturing Association of India were foreseen as building the brand
image of UNITES. A newspaper called ‘Call Centre Voice’ was to be published to reach out to all ITES–BPO employees.

The unity of the organizing and the servicing models of union activity has become all the more promising with ITPF and UNI–APRO renewing their ties in February 2008. It raises hope of better coordination and cooperation in meeting the objectives of the ITES–BPO employees. While ITPF could concentrate on providing services to ITES–BPO employees, UNITES could continue to organize. In this manner, the potential for professional associations to move towards unionization as well as for unions to evolve towards professional associations can be exploited.

The formation of UNITES proves, without doubt, that the union organizing and servicing models are not mutually exclusive but supplement each other, providing the greatest opportunities for convergence (Hurd, 2000). Thus, as Taylor and Bain (2008) argue, in all likelihood, UNITES’s future success depends on its ability to straddle the contradictions involved in providing a network for ITES–BPO employees—that is, acting like a conventional trade union in the making while simultaneously developing forms of community unionism.
Chapter summary

CCAs and organizations consider various measures to combat stress. Organizations provide good work place ambience, provide EAPs (employee assistance programmes) and follows an open door policy approach to help employees overcome from occupational stress. Individual CCAs find their own ways to resisting the pervasive controls employed by CCs. UNITES (union for ITES employees) is taking initiatives to address various problems of CCAs.