

A Qualitative Exploration of Employee Turnover in a Malaysian BPO Company

Reyilai Sidike & Nurul Afiqah Zulkifly*

Faculty of Educational Studies, University Putra Malaysia

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Abstract

The service sector has played a pivotal role in the economic growth of many countries and is notably the second-largest contributor to Malaysia's GDP. Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) services have developed rapidly within this sector, positioning Malaysia as a preferred destination for BPO operations among multinational companies. Despite this growth, employee turnover remains a significant challenge, impacting organizational productivity, and causing increased costs for the organization. Therefore, employee retention is important, necessitating focused efforts in human resource development areas such as career advancement, training, and organizational development. This study aims to explore the underlying causes contributing to employee turnover in Malaysia's BPO industry. Utilizing a qualitative case study research design, interviews were conducted with several customer service agents to gain insights into this issue. The informants revealed that inadequate HRD practices such as absence of career development, disruptions to organizational development, and lack of training development are the main causes of employee turnover in the company. Thus, our study is distinguished by its novelty, our study contributes to the improvement and development of HRD practices in BPO sectors in Malaysia.

Keywords: Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), Employee Turnover, Human Resource Development (HRD), Malaysia

Introduction

The service industry has been essential for economic growth in numerous countries worldwide, including Malaysia (Kamaruddin & Shamsudin, 2021). The service sector refers to the segment of the economy that generates intangible goods that offer intangible services rather than physical products that can be physically possessed, usually, the service sector includes services such as retail, banks, customer service, and information technology (Soriya & Dhaigude, 2016). With the development of service sectors, the term Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) has become one of the fastest-growing popular industries among other services (Bloomenthal, 2024).

The term "outsourcing" is a combination of the words "outside-resource-using" which means a company "contracting" a third party to perform a specific, strictly defined part of a company's operations such as non-core activities, so that the company can focus more on managing its core business (Krysińska, 2018). According to Biswaji (2004), the main motivators for these BPO providers are reduced labor expenses, enhanced productivity, and improved quality. BPO (2024) has reported that countries such as Brazil, the Philippines, India, Poland, Malaysia, Argentina, and Mexico, have witnessed an increase in the number of BPO provider firms catering to their clients' requirements. According to Kearney (2019), the Global Services Location Index (GSLI) shows that Malaysia ranked third in business process outsourcing (BPO) services due to its various advantages such as language proficiency and lower living costs. However, as a firm progresses, it unavoidably faces some obstacles. One of the most critical challenges is employee turnover.

Employees are essential for maintaining the continuous success of an organization by assuring its continuity. Nevertheless, recent studies have consistently shown that employee turnover poses a significant challenge for all organizations. Employee turnover is a widely used phrase in human resources that indicates the number of employees leaving the firm during a timeframe (Romainha et al., 2023). Employee turnover refers to the willingness of employees to leave their current employment or organization (Hassan et al., 2023). According to Al-Suraihi (2021), employee turnover is an ongoing issue that can negatively affect the organization's performance and profitability. It increases the risk of losing valuable employees and can result in direct and indirect expenses, especially undesirable turnovers. It is also mentioned that the high rate of employee turnover can negatively impact the quality of work they provide, such as time quality, cost, and overall performance disruption (Dewi & Nurhayati, 2021). Employee turnover is an unavoidable phenomenon in all industries and organizations. This issue is complex and significant, necessitating careful consideration and strategic management.

Employee turnover has been considerably impacting Human Resources Development (HRD) processes, either directly or indirectly (Fulmore et al., 2023). For instance, Kadiresan et al., (2015) used samples obtained from manufacturing businesses in Malaysia. The findings of the study proved that the implementation of HRD practices, specifically training and development programs, can enhance employee commitment and reduce turnover intentions. Wijesiri et al., (2018) used samples from three distinct Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industries in Sri Lanka to examine the correlation between Human Resource Development (HRD) and employee attrition. Additionally, a study was carried out involving 300 BPO executives in India to investigate the correlation between HRD practices, such as talent acquisition, and employee turnover (Srivastav et al., 2019). However, little qualitative research has been conducted, and its geographical coverage remains restricted. Further research in other regions and contexts, such as Malaysia, is necessary to supplement it. According to Nguyen (2021), several key features, including affordable living expenses, a robust local talent pool, and a high level of English proficiency (Abdullah, 2019) will give Malaysia's outsourcing business a distinct advantage over other Southeast Asian countries. Therefore, the primary goal of this qualitative research conducted at a BPO company in Malaysia is to gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the fundamental causes of why BPO employees leave the company. The research findings enhance the field of Human Resource Development (HRD) by exploring the potential influence of HRD practices and activities on employee

impressions of the BPO organization and their intentions to leave the company. This expertise can guide HR professionals in the development and execution of efficient HRD programs.

Previous studies have identified training, career, and organizational development as critical components of human resource development that influence employee satisfaction and retention, however, little research has been conducted to look at how these practices specifically impact turnover in the BPO context, particularly in Malaysia. To fill this gap, this study aims to explore employees' perceptions of HRD practices and their role in turnover decisions. The research questions involved are:

- 1) What are the key HRD practices influencing employee turnover in Malaysia's BPO industry
- 2) How do employees perceive the effectiveness of HRD initiatives in addressing turnover challenges?
- 3) In what ways do HRD practices contribute to employee turnover in Malaysia's BPO sector??

As such, this study consists of five sections. The current section provides a brief overview, motivation, and introduction to the study. Section 2 presents a comprehensive research framework and thoroughly examines existing literature. Section 3 provides a detailed explanation of the methodology used, including the sampling technique and data collection tool. Section 4 will present the study's main findings while the last section offers the key results and implications for BPO companies, followed by the limitations and future research recommendations.

Underpinning Theory

Mobley Turnover Model

The classic theory of voluntary turnover describes the complete process, starting from employees assessing their current job and eventually making the decision to leave the organization (Mobley, 1979). In the theoretical model shown in Figure 2.3, Mobley outlines the primary instrument through which job dissatisfaction is translated into actual turnover, summarized in three distinct turnover cognitions, evaluation of current employment, experience of job dissatisfaction (which is the point that some employees are thinking of quitting and start to search other job opportunities), finally the employee decides to leave the organization (Peter W. Hom, 1984). However, it was argued the limitation of Mobley's theory. The model solely includes the connections between an individual's purposes and the turnover process, without considering the aspects of job satisfaction components and organizational commitment that contribute to turnover (Allen & Shanock, 2013; Samad & Mohd Yusuf, 2012). While Mobley's turnover model does not provide a specific metric for evaluating job dissatisfaction, the theory of Perceived Organizational Support (POS) offers valuable insights. According to POS theory, employees who perceive high levels of support from their organization are more likely to exhibit loyalty, enhanced job performance, and reduced turnover intentions. Integrating these two theoretical frameworks can yield more meaningful insights into employee turnover. This perspective is corroborated by Tsang (2022) who asserts that employing a multi-theoretical approach, as opposed to relying on a single theory, facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of phenomena. It addresses existing gaps, fosters innovation, enhances analytical depth, and advances knowledge within the field.



Figure 2.3 Sources from (Peter W. Hom, 1984)

Perceived Organizational Support

Santiago (2020) has recommended that employees should encourage favorable interactions with their managers and develop generalized ideas regarding the level of support they receive from their employers. In alternative scholarly sources, the concept of POS is further explained as the measure by which employees perceive the level to which their organization places importance on their contributions and demonstrates concern for their overall welfare and personal well-being (Al-Hamdan & Issa, 2021). Perceived organizational support (POS) is a concept that employees who hold the belief that their organization puts value on their contributions and shows concern for their well-being are motivated to experience elevated levels of job satisfaction and commitment while showing reduced intentions to engage in turnover. Manuela & Marina (2020) posit that job satisfaction among employees significantly influences their job performance and organizational contributions, without considering leaving the organization. Mobley (1979) mentioned that job satisfaction has significant importance in the voluntary turnover model. Therefore, when employees are dissatisfied with their jobs, their behavioral attitudes might cause intentions to quit, which ultimately results in actual turnover behavior (Pinnington et al., 2023). The main purpose of this study is to explore other factors that may contribute to an employee's decision to resign from the business process outsourcing (BPO) organization. Therefore, the empirical evidence obtained from the interview of employees within the ABC BPO organization can offer authenticating support for the theoretical framework as mentioned. Suppose the research findings explored the potential circumstances that led to dissatisfaction and ultimately influenced the decision to leave the ABC company. In that case, this evidence enhances the validity and reliability of the two theories.

Methodology

The primary goal of this study was to explore the personal experiences and observations of BPO employees to understand the factors that lead to employee turnover in Malaysia's BPO industries. We chose to apply a qualitative research method because it was believed more suitable for exploring different perspectives, which aligns with the statement by Pratt (2009) that qualitative research is suitable for finding answers for how-questions, understanding the

different perspectives of those being studied, and examining processes. The study is a case study that involved interviewing current and former employees of a BPO company to collect information. We used qualitative approaches to gather in-depth information through a combination of structured and semi-structured interviews. Creswell & Poth (2016) suggested that the minimum number of informants for a qualitative study is between three and seven, based on data saturation. The current study obtained data from 3 interviewees (two current employees and one former employee of a BPO company) who showed saturation as the same themes reappeared in the following interviews. This study used individual interviews to collect data and before the actual interview sessions, a pilot test involving two participants was conducted. The interview procedure and questions were adjusted based on feedback from the pilot study and the interviewees. Due to our unfamiliarity with the informants, we used the snowball method to make initial contact with them. Initially, a brief discussion was conducted with the HR officer of the company to discuss the research proposal in depth. We successfully convinced the HR officer to help select informants based on specific criteria such as diversified job titles, varied tenure, and diversity.

The study included 3 informants from a BPO company located in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. They were from different ethnic groups, different departments (projects), and with various years of work experience with the company (Table 1 shows the details). We adopted a combination of structured and semi-structured interview methods for data collection to gather more comprehensive and detailed data, and this method worked effectively. This combination of interview methods enhanced participant engagement by providing a formal structure while allowing them to share their experiences and thoughts. After the data collection process was completed we used a thematic approach to analyze the data.

The interview protocol was created to address the research questions. It covered participants' views on the causes of turnover at the company, and their suggestions to reduce turnover at the company. Each topic was explored through 2-3 specific questions. The interview took place in a pleasant and private setting with two informants, allowing both individuals to discuss their experiences freely and openly. Another interview was done through a video call at the informant's request. The video call interview also proceeded successfully without any interruptions.

Table1

Research Participants from a Selected BPO Company

Projects/Position	Pseudonyms	Years of Working	Ethics	Current/Formal Employee
Project CR/ Customer Service Agent	Informant A	2	Chinese	Current
Project CR/ Customer Service Agent	Informant B	1	Indian	Current
Project SN/Customer Service Agent	Informant C	1.5	Malay	Former

We gave enough time to the informants to share their thoughts and insights in as detail as possible. During each interview session, we took notes attentively and asked clarification questions to obtain as much information as we could. To ensure dependability and validity, we thoroughly discussed the research design, sample selection process, and data collection methods. The following part will outline a comprehensive data analysis procedure. We also made sure to build a trustworthy relationship with each informant before the interview by explaining the data collection method and study purpose in detail to increase the validity. Triangulation is a method of enhancing validity by using many sources of data, methods, and insights to confirm results and enhance credibility (Brink, 1993). In this paper, our target sample consists of three categories: HR officers, also current and former employees of ABC company. This allowed us to get data from various perspectives and enabled us to enhance the validity.

Barrett (2018) indicated that there are three core approaches for data collection in qualitative research, which are interviews, focus groups, and observation. Interviews provide the most direct method for collecting rich and detailed data on a phenomenon. Also, according to Creswell (2014), interviews are one of the most useful data collection tools, because participants can provide historical information and it will allow the researcher control over the line and pace of questioning. Hence, this study used interviews as a data collection tool to get more detailed and straightforward information on employee turnover in ABC BPO company. The participants were interviewed using semi-structured protocols that developed from the research questions of this study. All the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using a web-based transcription software "ATLAS.ti", a data management software application for coding and analysis.

Results and Discussion

The data analysis led to the development of three major themes. This study found that most of the participants pointed out that the company offers remote work or hybrid options which increases work-life balance. Also, they have a positive relationship with colleagues. However, most faced challenges and problems in the company's HR practices. According to this main theme, there were two sub-themes identified such as, "*Absence of career development*", "*Disruptions to Organizational Development*" and "*Lack of Training and Development*". And each sub-theme was analyzed with detailed categories which is shown in Table 2.

Human Resource Development Practices

Human resources are a very fundamental feature of organizational success, and human resource development (HRD) practices use a range of structured human resource activities to enhance employees' competencies and knowledge (Thuy & Trinh, 2020). It was also mentioned that HRD practices are a key strategic tool organizations use to stimulate employees' attitudes toward their work and encourage positive behavior in them, boosting output and performance (Swanson & Holton, 2008). Otoo (2022) suggested that the adoption and improvement of well-planned and developed HRD practices improve employee engagement, and when employees perceive that their employers are implementing good HRD practices, they are less likely to leave the organization. Thus, the successful use of thoughtfully planned Human Resource Development (HRD) practices is essential to reducing employee turnover in a company. Long-term success and organizational stability are greatly enhanced by such approaches, promoting career advancement, skill development, and employee engagement. Hence, the informants provided diverse feedback on the HRD practices within the BPO company, highlighting these practices as a potential contributing factor to employee turnover.

Absence of Career Development

According to the HR and learning and development experts, a lack of growth opportunities will be the most influential factor in turnover. Employees want to learn, contribute, and grow personally and professionally, and if they don't get the opportunities they will look for such possibilities elsewhere (Reeves, 2024). For instance, it was highlighted that opportunities for career development, such as internal promotions, are notably limited at the BPO company. Informant B stated that,

"...We can't grow in this company, I think so, because there are no promotions, no matter how many years you work, you will be still a normal agent....."

Informant C (former employee) added that,

"...I worked 1.5 years as a customer service agent without any promotion, everyone should have an equal chance to climb up the ladder...."

Moreover, job stability can be defined as the belief that an employee will remain at their current position for the near future unless they decide to leave or resign (Mansour & Hassan, 2019). Job stability was also explained as the key to gaining job satisfaction. Thus, the benefits of job satisfaction for both employees and organizations considerably reduce employee turnover (Balz & Schuller, 2018). Informant B talked about the job stability within the company and said that,

"There is no job stability here, sometimes the project you doing ends, and HR tells you, "Ok, we put you on hold now, because no new project yet". I experienced this before, project ends, they put you on hold, you don't know for how long, and during this time, no job no salary....."

In summary, employees of the BPO company stated their dissatisfaction and frustrations regarding the lack of career growth opportunities and job stability. Hence, these concerns were identified as one of the main factors contributing to employee turnover.

Disruptions to Organizational Development

A toxic work environment causes employees to experience unpleasant and painful situations, which eventually affect their physical and emotional health (Iqbal, Asghar, & Asghar, 2022). A

toxic workplace is characterized by dysfunctional relationships between employees and the organization, resulting in reduced job satisfaction and subsequently higher employee turnover (Samma, Zhao, & Rasool, 2020). Informant C stated that,

"... the work environment was OK at first, but because of a lot of toxic people, there is a lot of personal interest in the company. So due to that, the environment became so toxic...No one wants to work in a toxic environment".

Informant A also added that,

"...one more main reason for people to leave is the toxic environment, the people in this company are very toxic, but I believe all call center (BPO) companies are the same, the work environment is a bit toxic, but at this company is very serious..."

Favoritism has been found as one element that reduces employees' energy psychologically and mentally (Lasisi, Constanța & Eluwole 2022). Akangbe (2021) stated that favoritism happens when managers reward employees based on personal preferences rather than job performance, resulting in dissatisfaction, low morale, decreased production, and increased turnover as unrecognized employees seek better possibilities somewhere else which has a fair management.

The informant C also added that,

"...the management showed favoritism, they keeping preferred employees but supported others to resign without effort to retain them when they want to leave. I was mistreated by management, that's why I left..."

Apart from that poor communication was also proven one of the reasons for employee turnover in the BPO company. According to Sesay (2023), poor communication lowers employee engagement, leads to poor morale, and increases turnover by weakening relationships and reducing employee involvement. Informant A expressed his dissatisfaction with HR and management and said that,

"...HR and management are not very efficient in their communication, because we can't get clear and solid answers or solutions whenever we have any issues, they just keep repeating themselves..."

Informant C also added that,

"...HR department tends to distance themselves from the staff, which to me is not correct, they should approach the staff, communicate with them, and ask them what they need..."

To sum up, managerial favoritism and workplace toxicity are significant challenges within the BPO company. While organizational development promotes creating a caring, fair, and collaborative working environment, these unethical behaviors from the management undermine its goals, leading to employee dissatisfaction and increased turnover.

Lack of Training and Development

Training programs significantly benefit organizations by addressing employees' weaknesses, enhancing productivity, and reducing employee turnover. Additionally, well-designed and meaningful training programs improve employees' job performance and contribute to greater job satisfaction (Sundharavadivel, 2018). However, it was proven by informants' responses that there are lack of well-designed and meaningful training programs. Informant C said that,

“...like some company provides regular monthly training for every of the staff or even management itself. Because we are human, and we should keep ourselves upgraded from time to time you know, especially in the BPO sector, we almost do the same thing every day, and it gets boring one day ...”

Informant A also added that,

“...the training for new joiners is not very good, they only train for three days and let them start working already and then we have to teach them if they don't know, it's like we are doing HR's job, but no one is talking about our workload...”

In summary, it has been confirmed that the absence of effective onboarding training increases the workload of existing employees, while the lack of other training programs contributes to job boredom, reduced job performance, and lower job satisfaction. These factors, including increased workloads and reduced satisfaction, can ultimately lead to higher employee turnover within the BPO company.

Table 2

Themes and Sub-Themes of Interview Protocol

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Categories
HRD Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Absence of Career Development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lacking Structured Career Path Inconsistent job Stability
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disruptions to Organizational Development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Favoritism Poor Communication
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of Training and Development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ineffective Training Programs

Conclusion

This qualitative study explored employee turnover in a BPO company by highlighting the role of Human Resource Development (HRD) in the company. The findings reveal that the absence of structured career development, disruptions to organizational development, and a lack of training and development programs play significant roles in high employee turnover. Based on the observations of current employees and the experience of former employees it was reported that experiencing a lack of career growth opportunities, inconsistent job stability, and favoritism, which negatively impacted job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Poor communication and ineffective training programs are also serious phenomena that hinder both individual performance and organizational consistency.

The study suggests that reducing employee turnover requires better HRD practices. Establishing transparent and unbiased management procedures, well-defined career

pathways, and extensive training and development activities should be the top priorities of future efforts and practices. In addition, fostering open communication and supporting organizational development initiatives may help address and resolve many of the issues identified by the employees.

However, this study is limited by its focus on a single BPO company and a small sample of informants, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other industries or organizations. Future research could broaden the scope of different BPO companies and a larger number of participants, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing employee turnover in the BPO field.

Contributions

This study significantly contributes to theory by combining Mobley's Turnover Theory with Perceived Organizational Support (POS) Theory to explore employee turnover within a Malaysian Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) company. Mobley's Turnover Model provides the perceptual and behavioral process that contributes to turnover, whereas POS theory emphasizes the effect of employees' perceptions of organizational support on shaping their satisfaction, commitment, and retention. By integrating these two theoretical frameworks, the study offers a new level of comprehension of what role organizational support plays in employees' decision-making processes about turnover, especially related to high-stress, high-turnover rates industries such as BPO.

Contextually, this study provides the unique cultural and operational dynamics of the Malaysian BPO sector, which is a rapidly growing yet still under-researched area. The findings contribute to the existing knowledge by emphasizing the relationship among organizational practices, especially HR practices, employee perceptions, and turnover intentions. They provide practical recommendations for BPO firms in Malaysia and similar settings to build related retention strategies and promote a more conducive and supportive work environment.

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