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Industry-Based Course Syllabus for Fundamentals of Business Process Outsourcing

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ABSTRACT

The study generally developed and validated an industry-responsive course syllabus for the teaching of Fundamentals of Business Process Outsourcing, an enhancement course of some of the undergraduate programs of the Mariano Marcos State University. It was guided by the research and development approach with BPO personnel as key informants and seasoned BPO subject teachers as validators. A focus group discussion with the key informants was conducted to identify the required related industry skills that are perceived by BPO personnel from prospective industry employees. Results were then used as basis for the formulation of a syllabus following the OBE format. A validation checklist was used to determine the level of validity and usefulness of the designed syllabus along three areas: clarity and tone, course policies, and course characteristics. Results of the focus group discussion show that prospective industry employees are expected to have the following in order for them to function well in the industry: communication skills, language skills, intercultural communication skills, computer skills, and interpersonal skills. In general, the validators rated the developed OBE syllabus as highly valid and useful having an overall mean of 3.84; hence, is fit to be used by the university.

Keywords: Industry, Course Syllabus, Business Process Outsourcing

INTRODUCTION

In the province of Ilocos Norte, the IT – BPO industry has been booming since 2010 and has been offering the graduates of the Mariano Marcos State University (MMSU) and other universities key positions in the business. However, many of those applicants fail to make it in the job selection process due to their appalling English language proficiency level. This is important to note since most of them are high school and college graduates who are expected to have acquired a good level of proficiency given the training that they should have supposedly acquired in the classroom. Yet, reports on the English language proficiency level of Filipinos show otherwise (GMA News, 2019).

This reality is now a major concern of the IT - BPO industry. In order to sustain its needed pool of talents, the industry keeps on communicating said concern to educational institutions and inform applicants the needed industry skills required of them. Specifically, prospective employees are advised to learn how to communicate effectively their viewpoint at all organizational levels.

Aware on this necessity, MMSU designed and incorporated the offering of Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) subjects since 2013 in some of its program offerings such as the AB in English Language program. Said subjects aimed to orient students the entry skills that are needed in the industry. However, lack of instructional materials, specifically a syllabus to guide the BPO instructors in teaching the program greatly affected the quality of the teaching and learning process. Thus, the present study was focused on the development of a syllabus for the BPO subject offered to students of the ABEL program. Specifically, this research identified the needed industry skill needs of the prospective employees which was used as a springboard in formulating the course content of the BPO course. This is hoped to be used to facilitate the teaching of the course and to standardize the subject offerings of the subject.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used the research and development (R & D) design process which consisted of three stages: planning (identification of the required related industry skills that are perceived by BPO personnel from prospective employees), development stage (the development of the course syllabus), and 3) the evaluation stage subjected the output in a validation procedure as to clarity and tone, course policies,

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and course characteristics. It involved two sets of respondents/key informants: BPO personnel and subject matter specialists. For the first set, it involved 10 selected trainers, supervisors and human resource personnel of the major IT-BPO companies in the province.

Only those who are more than two years in the industry were considered to ensure that they are aware on the systems of their companies; hence, could give insights as to much needed information in this study. For the second set, on the other hand, three validators who are teaching the BPO subjects were considered. Moreover, this study used two data – gathering tools: a focus group discussion interview guide and the level of validity and usefulness checklist by the Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence (2007) which evaluated the following components of the syllabus: 1) clarity and tone of the syllabus; 2) course policies; and 3) course characteristics. Before the questionnaires reached their final forms, they were first pretested to ensure their reliability and validity. Prior to the conduct of this study, the researcher asked permissions first from various offices. Upon approval, the researcher met the target respondents and explained to them the nature and extent of their participation in the study. Those who signified their intent to participate in the study were asked to sign the Informed Consent Document. When all the preliminary requirements and procedures were conducted, the following stages were done: needs analysis, content – specification, syllabus organization, and validation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Perceived IT-BPO Industry-Related Skills

1. *Communication skills.* In the discussion that was conducted with the key informants, the following communication skills were identified as necessary in the IT-BPO industry in this particular order: *speaking, listening, writing, and reading.*

Speaking. According to the respondents, speaking is very important in the business. When listeners struggle to understand their fellow communicators, the former eventually ignore the latter. One of the causes of these struggles is the indistinctness of the sounds that speakers utter. Therefore, enhancing clarity and distinctness of pronunciation should be considered for it does not only strengthen someone's communication skills, but improve his/her image and make others more responsive to messages as well (Voice and Speech, 2013). This was supported by KI3 during the focus group discussion.

Employees and trainees should be able to pro-actively and consistently speak in a conversation. Their pronunciation should be detailed	KI3
As agents we must sound fluent in using the English language. Our delivery should be clear, should not sound scripted, and should be conversational.	KI9

According to Lockwood (2012), spoken English language communication is a 'core commodity' for successful call handling and customer care in call centres. As mentioned by KI3, smooth and easy flow of the language is a vital factor in establishing a good conversation in the industry. BPO personnel are expected therefore to show a certain degree of command of the English language as said proficiency manifests a considerable level of credibility. Moreover, as mentioned by KI9, clarity on the sounds and tone of the voice are both important for the employees to not sound scripted in a conversation. However, these skills are observed to be lacking among prospective employees. This was reflected in the interview transcripts of KI7, KI1, and KI10 below:

Aside from many stutters and do experience verbal paralysis during the interview phase of the selection procedure, many fail to join the workforce because applicants have problems on sounds. For instance, there are issues on the production of the critical sounds of English. There are those who are confused in pronouncing 'p' and 'f', 'v' and 'b' and the sibilant sounds like 's', 'sh', 'zh.'	KI7
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According to the Information Technology & Business Process Association Philippines (2013), the IT-BPM industry is a multi-lingual industry and fluency in a second and even third language is always an advantage. The main reason job applicants do not get hired in this industry is their poor English communication skills both in writing and in speaking. This manifests that fluency in the English language is needed for aspiring call center agents.

Listening. It is a common misconception that speaking is the only needed communication skill in the industry. In fact, as mentioned by the key informants, listening is as important as the speaking ability. This is reflected in the transcript below:

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We need to be good listeners. You cannot say anything if you did not understand the message of your customer. It is not right for you to keep on asking your customer to repeat his/her message. Your manger will call your attention if you are wasting your time on air. K14

As mentioned by K14, good listening ability is a must in the industry. Hence, prospective employees are expected to practice good listening, specifically listening for information, for specific details, and for comprehension.

Writing. In the industry, one might be asked to write a report, strategic plan or strategy at work, grant application, and responses to managers' inquiries. This is captured in the transcript below.

Employees should be effective in writing in business setting, not physical letter because we are paper less company. More on emails, they must be educated with the different etiquettes and technicalities in email writing. Email composition is important; we call it business writing. K15

Email-based communication offers advantages, the few of which is that it lends formality between customers and business (Open Access BPO, 2013). Response to the customer email requires a higher standard compared to ordinary emails and must be properly written as it reflects the company's image. This shows that email writing is a skill that must be possessed by applicants in the BPO industry.

Reading. Although reading is not tested in the job selection process of the BPO industry, the key informants still emphasized that prospective employees should have a good reading ability. One of the key informants said that agents and managers still use such skill in the business:

We need agents who can easily comprehend with written announcements because we sometimes send them updates via email. This is important because these changes usually focused on the changes of our process ... required by our clients." K17

As presented in the transcript, K17 emphasized the need of having good reading skills in the industry. It was made to understand during the focus group discussion that majority of the announcements are given through emails as employees do not have the luxury of time to convene and discuss issues given their work schedules.

2. **Language skills.** Based on the FGD, good understanding on the following grammatical units/components are identified as necessary in the industry: *syntax, determiners and quantifiers, subject-verb agreement. Prepositions, tenses, idiomatic expressions and variety of English* were identified that also need enhancement from prospective employees.

Syntax. In the focus group discussion, it was found that applicants have issues as to syntax. This is reflected in the following transcripts:

During interviews, applicants sometimes commit errors in word order. This is necessary as said order affects the clarity of the message. If this is committed in the call, for example, customers might ask questions on the clearness of the message. K16

As reflected in K16, there are cases when errors on the following are observe: confusion on the use of but and however, improper usage of pronouns like he, she, and they and confusion on the use of has and have. In some cases, grammar lessons are offered to applicants prior to going onto the floor in order to ensure language accuracy at the sentence level (Lockwood, 2012).

Use of Determiners and quantifiers. It was also found in the focus group discussion that there are confusions among applicants regarding the use of determiners.

Applicants have a problem sometimes on the use of 'a' and 'an'. This is not a very serious problem in the industry. However, we still discuss this in our trainings. K16

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Based on the transcripts above, proficiency on the use of determiners is also needed in the industry. This is because determiners provide context and specifically to nouns, since they are words that come before a noun and serve to modify the noun.

Subject-verb agreement. This should not be a problem among applicants as majority of them are college graduates. However, it was revealed by the key informants that many applicants need to enhance their knowledge on subject-verb agreement.

The topic subject-verb agreement is supposed to be basic for the aspiring call center agents however, they still commit mistakes.” K12

As mentioned by K12, subject – verb agreement should be mastered by those who have intentions to work in the industry. This was further clarified by key informants when they mentioned that applicants have problems on the agreements of sentences that have intervening phrases, those that are joined by ‘or’, ‘nor’, ‘neither/nor’, ‘either/or’, and ‘not only/but also’, those with indefinite pronouns, units of measurements, collective nouns, and prepositional phrases.

3. *Inter-cultural communication skills.* This skill looks at how people from differing cultural backgrounds communicate, in similar and different ways among themselves, and how they endeavour to communicate across cultures.

Based on the interview with the key informants, there is a need to orient the applicants as to good intercultural communication.

As agent, you need to have a good background on cultural dialectics. This is important because your understanding on the cultural background of your caller would help you decide as to your approach in talking with them. K12

Based on the transcripts, employees of a business process outsourcing company should be effective cross-cultural communicators. Cross-cultural communication may be particularly challenging for agents with minimal exposure to various cultures (Lockwood, 2012), making cultural sensitivity training (Subramanian, 2005) all the more relevant for contact centre agents. By incorporating this type of training, agents can become more culturally sensitive and tactful in call handling and messages are delivered quickly without the risk of miscommunication.

4. *Computer skills.* Based on the interview with the key informants, the following computer skills were identified as necessary in the IT-BPO industry: knowledge on Microsoft Office and Basic Keyboard Shortcuts.

Enhancement of using excel and Microsoft word should be trained. It is an edge if you are knowledgeable of these. K15

They also do some reporting using Microsoft PowerPoint and Microsoft Word. They should be trained on these. K14

According to K15, it is an edge for the applicants if they are knowledgeable of Microsoft Excel and Microsoft Word. This means that, the use of such is a part of the selection process, specifically on non-voice positions. K14, on the other hand emphasized that said skills are vital once employed in the industry.

Employers across many BPO industries expect job seeker to have Microsoft Office skills, and it is probably the most preferred productivity software in business around the globe. According to Doyle (2019), one may not need to be an expert in Microsoft Office, but he/she will be considered for more roles if he/she is at least acquainted with the basics.

In the BPO industry, an agent needs to work on several things at the same time. For instance, one may receive a call while speaking and typing what he/she is receiving from the caller. Hence, multi-taking is observed in the workplace.

In order to facilitate the accomplishment of tasks, said agent should know at least keyboard shortcuts which will save him/her time in the process. This was noted by K18 in the transcript below.

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There are times that when you are in your cubicle, one hand is working on the microphone while the other hand either types or writes. So as an agent, you should know how to use effectively your resources, your keyboard for instance. So what I usually do is, I use shortcuts in my computer. And it helps. K18

According to Piton-Global (2019), if someone wishes to work in a BPO someday, one of the most common things he/she should prepare for is to practice handling multiple task at once. Hence, basic keyboard shortcuts are of great importance.

5. *Interpersonal skills.* Based on the interview with the key informants, the following topics on customer service were identified as important to be taught to prospective employees and trainees in the BPO industry: delivering excellent customer service, and customer satisfaction measures.

Delivering excellent customer service. Excellent customer service is basic of the industry. After all, there is no business without a customer. This is the reason why companies invest and conduct trainings on the delivery of excellent customer service. This is also a prime concept in the BPO industry as manifested in the transcript below.

Applicants should be industry ready in a way that they must have not just ideas of but should know how to deliver excellent Customer Service. K12

As mentioned by K12, excellent customer service is important in the industry. This is because, if clients are not satisfied, then they may not avail the services of the BPO company again. It is implied that agents are the frontrunners of the company. Hence, they should be equipped with skills that foster good relationships with the customer. It was further mentioned during the discussion with the key informants that *awareness on the customer service interactions, customer service principles and practices, and managing customer interactions* are viewed as skills necessary for establish good customer service.

According to McQuerry (2019), customer service is not just about being courteous to customers – it is a vital element of business operations that can impact how the company viewed by the public.

Customer satisfaction measures. Since customers are considered as the lifeblood of the company, it is deemed necessary to know as well their satisfaction measures. This gives the BPO employees ideas regarding their manner of handling their customers.

I believe that knowing key performance indicators will help you in the business. Of course, if you want to be retained, then you need to give your all. And giving your all means satisfying your customers. K18

As mentioned by K18, it is also important to learn satisfaction metrics of the customers. For instance, a client's public feedback on a social networking platform can make or break a brand. Hence, customers' life cycle management is of utmost priority for those working in BPOs.

Industry-Responsive Syllabus for the Fundamentals of BPO

The developed syllabus was drafted based on the data gathered from the perception of the BPO personnel as to the must-have skills of prospective employees. The development of the syllabus was guided by the OBE Syllabus.

Generally the syllabus that was established has three components: 1) preliminary parts; 2) course outline and time frame; and 3) learning plan.

1. *Preliminary parts.* This part of the syllabus includes 11 components. These are course name, course code, course credit, course description, contact hours/week, prerequisite, course outcomes, vision of the university, mission of the university, institutional outcome, and program outcomes.
2. *Course outline and time frame.* This part contains the six (6) different chapters that will be taken in the course and the number of hours that will be spent in each chapter. Aside from that, a one-hour orientation is included in the syllabus.
3. *Learning plan.* In the learning plan of the syllabus, seven (7) distinct parts were incorporated: intended learning outcomes (ILOs), course content / subject matter, textbook / references, teaching and learning activities (TLAs), assessment tasks (ATs), resource materials, and time table.

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Content Validity of the Industry-Based Syllabus for the Fundamentals of BPO

Based on the outcomes-based teaching and learning framework, a syllabus that was industry-based skill needed in the BPO industry were developed. After the development, experts subjected the syllabus to content validation in terms of clarity and tone, course policies, and course characteristics. Table 1 shows the overall validity of the syllabus as rated by three seasoned teachers / professors of the BPO subjects.

Table 1. Overall Validity of the Syllabus

Criteria	MEAN	DESCRIPTIVE INTERPRETATION
1. Clarity and tone	3.71	Highly Valid
2. Course policies	3.89	Highly Valid
3. Course characteristics	3.92	Highly Valid
Mean	3.84	Highly Valid

Legend:

- 3.51 – 4.00 Highly Valid
- 2.51 – 3.50 Valid
- 1.51 – 2.50 Moderately Valid
- 1.00 – 1.50 Needs Improvement

The data reveal that the overall level of validity of the proposed syllabus is *highly valid* with an overall mean of 3.84. This implies that the proposed syllabus is fit to be used in the IT – BPO subject of the new curriculum of the AB in English Language program.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions are drawn: 1) among the communication skills, speaking and listening seem to be the most important in the BPO industry; 2) aside from communication and linguistic skills, relationship building and technical skills deemed to be important in the business.; 3) the fact that prospective employees were able to identify the needed skills from prospective employees, the former seems to lack the necessary skills that are expected of them; and 4) the syllabus is comprehensive enough for it caters to the development of all the skills necessary in the industry.

Based on the findings and conclusions, the researcher offers the following recommendations:1) BPO teachers are encouraged to use the developed syllabus in teaching the BPO subject to prepare prospective employees of the industry; 2) researchers should use the course content and the syllabus as bases in developing teaching resource materials for the BPO' and 3) though the BPO is offered to ABEL students only, said program is encouraged to be offered to other students who might need the program.

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