Changing face of the outsourcing industry in a VUCA world: Learning and Development Organizations the new frontier

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the impact of digital transformation on the Indian outsourcing industry, the challenges faced to stay relevant and the role played by Learning and Development in navigating through this change. Not knowing where the future is headed has created a 'volatile uncertain complex and ambiguous situation' leading to anxiety and confusion in the minds of the knowledge worker as well as the organizations. As automation, machine learning, artificial intelligence, data analytics and robotics starts taking center stage; knowledge workers are unlearning three decades of delivery and support experience. Reskilling and reworking the revenue models calls for the human teams to play a larger role in the evolving organization ecosystem. Outsourcing organizations are in the process of reinventing themselves as transformation experts with the required techno-functional expertise to help client organizations make the leap.

The learning and development teams in these organizations lead the change by being the change evangelists who are ushering in a new era as they redesign their approach to talent development. Gamifying the learning experience, rehaul of learning content, building commercially viable and scalable learning solutions and last but not the least need based up-skilling with a defined business impact are some of the initiatives being undertaken to align with concepts of modern work place learning. This approach instills confidence in the ability of the outsourcing industry to re-position themselves from back office service providers to consultants who can partner with the clients in their digital transformation journey. This would sustain India's competitive advantage gained as the preferred outsourcing destination across the globe for the next phase of growth.

Keywords — Digitalization, Competitive Advantage, Learning and Development, Learning Organizations, Outsourcing Industry, VUCA world

I. INTRODUCTION

India has been a preferred outsourcing and offshoring destination for the world for the last three decades. With more than 10 million fresh graduates being added to the workforce every year, the most valuable assets driving the economy has been the growing workforce. The BPO (Outsourcing and Offshoring) industry is bracing itself for a major transformational change, where re-skilling becomes important as we prepare for tomorrow. Arrival of new technologies like artificial intelligence, though driving prosperity, will create challenges for the low-skilled workers, as jobs they currently perform will be lost to the robot. This widespread job loss amongst employees who

have low foundational skills or inadequate skills can only be managed by re-skilling these workers and equipping them to seize the opportunities being provided by new technologies. BPOs thus need to have formal digital transformation strategy in place that is inclusive and places its workforce at the center. A robust strategy will help sustain the value they have historically provided and leverage three decades of experiential learning that cannot be easily replicated.

With the unfolding of disruptive innovation such as automation and artificial intelligence, a recent study has forecast a drop in hiring in the IT-BPM sector in India, from 6% to 3 -5% year on year (NASSCOM, et al,

392 | IJREAMV04I1046077   **DOI : 10.18231/2454-9150.2018.1337**

2018)[1]. Evolving technology is outpacing the production of digitally skilled professionals coming out of the formal education system in the country. Needless to say business is unhappy with the widening gap between skills acquired through graduation courses offered by colleges and the expectations from the changing digital ecosystem. More than 75% of the jobs in 2022 will require new skillsets (NASSCOM et al, 2018)[1] and as the skills required to stay employable and relevant continue to evolve rapidly, the labor market will need to adapt to stay relevant. Learning and development is making a difference reskilling to ensure this extraordinary and fascinating journey of the BPO industry in India does not culminate in job-losses and dropping levels of income impacting the story of India as developing economy.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Building a robust Learning and development strategy focuses on adopting an approach that all its initiatives and learning programs are completely in alignment with developing the employees for roles essential for the success of the organization, making it a strategic human resource development strategy (Walton, 1999)[2]. The success of the L&D function is defined by its ability to develop this human capital advantage and leveraging key characteristics like experience, domain expertise, skills and competencies to garner sustainable competitive advantage that cannot be easily replicated (Richard.W, 2001)[3]. Learning and Development teams therefore focus on skill/knowledge upgrades using latest technology to stay abreast in a world where information is generated at a much faster pace than it can be understood and consumed. 87% of the organizations feel that digital transformation is a competitive opportunity (Capgemini consulting, 2012)[4].

Information explosion has given rise to what is being referred to as the 'half-life of information'. In the 1900, knowledge as we know it doubled every 100 years. Fifty years later it doubled every 25 years. In 1982, it was doubling every 12 months (Fuller.R.B, 1981, et al)[5]. By 2020 it is expected to double every 12 hours. The half-life of knowledge and skills is even faster and diminishing just as fast, some within an 18 month window, therefore faster the pace of knowledge change, more valuable is the skill of learning. The half-life of information has been given little thought assuming that knowledge gained in school remains forever true (Arbesman.S, 2012, Parrish.S, 2018)[6][7]. Similarly the evolving work-force will no longer go through life in 3 stages: education-work-entertainment, instead we will see a multi-staged model where individuals may be in full employment, freelancing, or following a formal structured learning (Lynda Gratton and Andre Scott, 2016)[8]. They may change 17 jobs in 5 different

industries as an outcome of the modern workforce that is highly flexible, demanding and mobile. In the near future only 50% of the workforce in an organization will have Full time employees (John Younger, 2016)[9]. Similarly millennials - those born post 1980, will expect the organization to actively participate in their self-development throughout their work-life (Deloitte, 2018)[10]. Patty Woolock, was quoted to say that Future of learning in this environment therefore needs to be "just for me, just in time and just enough" (John Younger, 2016)[9]

Skills are becoming obsolete at an accelerated rate. And expectedly the work environment will go through some radical changes as automation will impact 750,000 jobs in the BPO industry but will also create 300,000 mid to high skill jobs by 2022 (Hfs report, 2018)[11]. Two key aspects coming to the forefront are: Reviewing approach to learning, measuring learning metrics, and the functioning of the L&D teams. As client organizations leverage automation to cut costs and enhance their products or service offerings. From theorizing over the unknown and how the robot could possibly take away jobs, we have arrived at a stage where the change has already started, and expected shift is occurring in the low skilled activities to begin with. Workers will see an average shift of 42% in required workplace skills in the period leading up to 2022. (WEF, 2018)[12]

III. THE CHANGING WORK-FORCE, WORK-ENVIRONMENT AND WORK

A recent research by NASSCOM research, (2018)[13] identified 3 trends that will impact the future of the BPO industry in India: the country's response to the impact of globalization, changing demographics and the adoption of exponential technologies.

Figure1: Challenges faced by BPO industry and the role of Learning and Development function
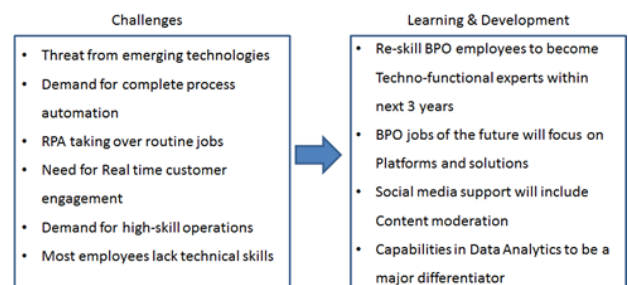
On a brighter side organizations will come up with new business models to continue to stay relevant and therefore the nature of 'work' itself will change. By leveraging automation, even with lesser cost and overheads BPO organizations will be able to offer more and earn more for a lot less. Jobs will evolve from low skilled data entry and rule driven work to medium and high-skilled work

performing complex autonomous tasks which require experience and expertise even as they work alongside robots. Research indicates that digitalization is resulting in adoption of human + machine technologies (Hfs, 2018)[11] i.e cognitive solutions. That is the work environment we are heading towards and the need is to create a happy workplace with a flexible work environment that gives the intelligent and knowledge seeking worker the freedom to choose the environment, and hours projects they want to be a part of (Hart.J, 2019)[14]. The scales seem to visibly tilt in favor of the empowered individual instead of the Organization, going forward.

The same expectations of change in approach, are also being set for learning and development in the modern workplace too, where the individual learning requirements need to be acknowledged with a structure that allows for flexibility on what, how and where they learn. The mix of automation and the human capital in the offering will lead to changing competency requirements redefining jobs in the new economy. Though 54% of the jobs will stay unchanged, 9% of the workforce is expected to be employed in jobs that do not even exist today and 37% will be aligned to roles that require a new skillset (NASSCOM, et al 2018)[1]. These changes to the BPO jobs have created an industry of the dooms day prophesiers, adding to the already volatile and ambiguous situation on the possible employee engagement models that will likely take shape. In addition to having employee on the rolls, new models of engagement will include contract employees, in-house entrepreneurs, free-lancers, SME, creative consultants, and project-based teams formed with each member brining in a unique skill. With changes being made to the existing processes, some of the BPO roles that will witness a change are back-office processor, database administrator, customer services, sales and digital marketing.

New skills for upcoming roles include cyber security specialist, data analyst, Bot developers, block chain architects, and process modellers, all of who are parts of a fluid and dynamic workforce structure. People therefore need support to develop skills to manage a hybrid workforce comprising of automated workflows, highly skilled humans managing the exceptions, data analytics and increasingly complex customer-service. The need of the hour is to help organizations and people make sense of the situation and contextualize their role in the new work environment. Empowering the knowledge-worker with the skills needed to successfully deliver on these new roles will help allay the anxiety and confusion in their minds. Retaining experienced talent is detrimental to winning new customers and renewing old contracts as knowledge retention, ability to redesign automated business processes

and deep domain expertise is one of the parameters that influence the choice of a vendor partner (Nair.J, Pahurkar.R, 2018)[16].

IV. WHAT DEFINES DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION CAPABILITIES SOUGHT AFTER BY ORGANIZATIONS?

Outsourcing organizations are reinventing themselves as transformational experts who will partner with their clients in the shift to digitalization and are themselves moving towards the agile way of working. Revisiting how contracts are framed to build in hard savings through automation calls for reworking old revenue models. FTE based or transaction based pricing models increasingly move to a 'gain-share' approach or a platform based service offering where the high skilled techno-functional expert also becomes eligible for a much higher revenue than before, in the evolving digital economy. As the traditional knowledge worker in the BPO makes this transition and clients make the leap to digital, they will be required to un-learn three decades of delivery and support experience and re-learn new ways of doing business. A learning organization is one that facilitates learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself. (Pedler, et al, 1991)[17].

Automation is important to all clients, and they have robots performing repetitive tasks, data movement, updates, validation, with higher accuracy compliance and speed. BPOs are shifting from the traditional service delivery model to automated service delivery for cost optimization and efficiency. As the BPOs rewrite their own story to emerge as consultants and partners in this story of digital innovation, focus is on deciphering client requirements and providing solutions, by leveraging the domain expertise gained by its work force over the last three decades. Maintaining the focus on the clients means ensuring we add value to their business, and retaining the best talent. This means ensuring people are happy and energized to be a part of this transformation journey that will improve productivity and effectiveness with a higher ROI. The narrative shifts from the loss of jobs to what are the changes expected in the job market. In order to stay in the race BPO organizations will seek three digital transformation capabilities (NASSCOM, 2018)[1]: first is an understanding of existing and emerging technologies – Artificial Intelligence (AI), Internet of Things, Data science, Machine Learning (ML); second, ability to capitalize on new technologies and experiences to design new digital customer experiences and develop new business models; third, leading and managing a hybrid workforce in the digital age.

BPOs that display the six characteristics of a Learning Organization- Organizational Learning, Organizational environment, Entrepreneurial Orientation, Knowledge Management, Transformational Leadership and External Connect (Nair.J & Pahurkar.R, 2017)[16] are able to create an environment that is positive. Employees are encouraged to reflect on past experiences and think like entrepreneurs, they are fully aware of the external environment and evolving technology, a robust Knowledge Management framework, Transformational Leaders and an environment that encourages Organizational Learning, will be ones to make this a smooth transition. Though automation drives the new-generation of BPO Organizations, the various tools available in the market such as Automation anywhere, Blue Prism, UI path, work fusion etc. will allow the technical experts to monitor and govern the usage, but the domain expert is still a key player who is free to configure and use the technology as required within each business team. Flexibility and ease of deployment of these bots is making it a source of competitive advantage for BPOs who have already embarked on this journey. A workforce that has the skills needed to work with these tools comes at a premium and the ability to effectively retool existing take employees to take on these roles can be a game changer.

The leaders in the organization are expected to assume the role of the evangelists for digital transformation by persistently communicating the urgency to move from doers to thinkers. Senior leaders need to be transparent and clear when communicating, why, digital transformations are an essential initiative, and model the behaviors including risk-taking, tolerance for failure and collaboration. Mid-level supervisors need to work with their teams and communicate a shared vision for the organization, and offer relentless support for the transformation of the systems and processes. While managing a hybrid and global workforce, they need to listen to their teams and embrace diverse thinking from others across the organization, accept their own knowledge gaps and seek support when needed. By walking the talk, they become mentors who assist in overcoming the fear of technology and learning ways to work with technology. Employees who understand customer challenges and organizations which successfully crowd-source ideas to design new models of customer service will define the success of this journey. The ability to productize innovative ideas using automation and take it to the market will be a key differentiator (Nair.J, Pahurkar.R, 2018)[18]. As the workforce landscape changes, managers become the change as they understand how to engineer behaviours, encourage curiosity, dialogue, and experimentation. The capability of humans to interface seamlessly with machines and co-create innovative solutions collaboratively means

human intelligence can never be replaced by a machine completely.

How are the BPO industry players, preparing for this impending change to the skills required from low skilled workers to niche skills in automation analytics AI and Machine learning? How will the industry equip the employees to be thinkers who delight the end customer through the thought leadership and innovative ideas and creative design solutions? And how can managers become the change evangelists managing a hybrid, global and diverse workforce? The Learning and development teams have stayed in synch with these changes and continue to deliver on the promises and expectations of the organizational leadership, business partners, employees and other stakeholders in reskilling the workforce in preparation for the disruptive changes expected.

V. ROLE OF LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT IN RESPONDING TO THE DIGITAL CHALLENGE

Employees will need to learn new skills to retain their jobs or sustain their current level of earning; organizations too will look for potential employees who have the relevant skills to remain competitive. Drawing from the works of Peter Senge (1990)[21], we see that a robust Learning Organization where systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, systems thinking, shared vision, and team learning are central to the culture of the organization, will be able to rise up to the challenge posed by digitalization of the service industry and providing directional guidance for all the participants in this organizational ecosystem, the new hires entering the workforce, the potential job seekers still a part of academia, existing employees, and the policy makers in the organization. Learning and development teams coach managers to tackle the insecurities, fears and anxieties of their teams and partnering with them in the reskilling journey. An approach designed along the lines of adult learning principles outlined by Knowles where the motivation to learn is internal and they prefer self-directed learning that augments the years of experience they have already gathered (Knowles. M, 1984)[19]. Modes of learning for the adults in the BPO, therefore need to be open, accessible, engaging, experiential and guidance needs to be available when required. Recognizing the profile of the learners L&D teams have successfully started to engage with the experts in the field of learning technology to make learning accessible and scalable, as organizations navigate through the demand and supply for ready talent in the VUCA world.

In the current market where access to finance, technology and materials has evened out, standing out as a specialist is quite difficult. Additionally, given the easy mobility of talent, being able to successfully attract and retain top

performers is a challenge in itself. Providing avenues for individual development through learning partnerships and opportunities for reskilling can be a major game changer. With the talent pool being a true differentiator bringing in competitive advantage, presents opportunities for L & D to design learning solutions and offerings that go beyond the traditional class-room trainings. A multi-generational talent pool necessitates a multi-pronged approach to skilling. Building upon the 70-20-10 model of learning which summarizes how people learn effectively i.e 70% learning is through experience in handling challenging assignments, 20% learning through social interactions and 10% of learning occurs in the classroom or through training and courses. (Lombardo et al, 1996)[21].

This model provides the guidelines for learning by creating opportunities for people to reflect on experiences (Argyris & Schon, 1978)[22], learn from each other and mentor their teams on innovation projects with no fear of reprisal for errors. Moving away from rigid career paths and taking on new responsibilities requires, empowering people with the right skills which enable them to make a difference even as they invest in themselves and their work-colleagues in meaningful ways. This would mean augmenting existing skills required to successfully meet the expectations from the inevitable digital transformation coming their way. This would include technical trainings on big data, analytics, design thinking, agile project management, and automation tools that can strengthen the knowledge of the domain expert and result in solutions that redesign processes. The need for behavioural coaching to develop new mind-sets, cultural flexibility, collaboration and an adaptive mind-set would be equally essential to better manage, the change.

For the modern professionals learning is not limited to the classroom, but happens in many different ways, both while at work and away from it. Modern professionals may learn from structured formal educational events or learn continuously from experiences (Hart.J, 2019)[14]. They do not just learn to be compliant with organization mandated learning hours, but also for personal or professional enhancement reasons. Their most valued ways of learning is through personal experiences, self-managed, and integrated into routine daily work. The modern workplace learning framework therefore involves three streams of activity: the first, promoting continuous independent learning where the individuals are responsible for their own development; second, providing continuous improvement at work supported by managers, establishing a knowledge sharing culture and third, curating and creating a flow of continuous learning opportunities using modern formats and delivery methods.

Figure 2: Application of Principles of Adult Learning in the modern workplace

Principles of Adult Learning in the BPO industry
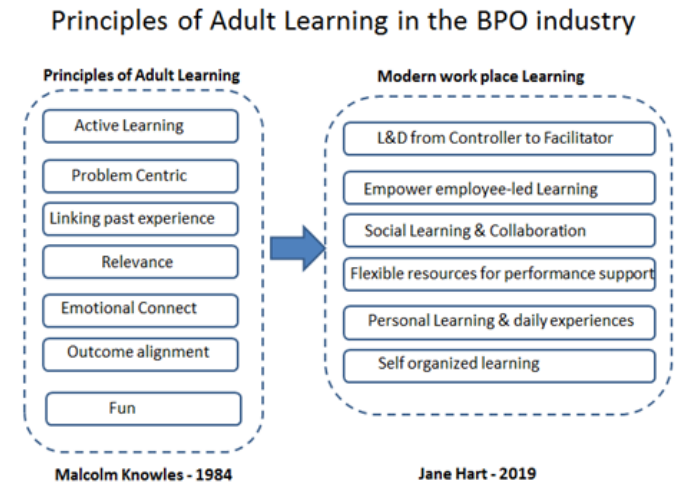
Investing in self-paced courses that focus on an immersive learning experience through scenario-based approach for Soft skills, functional skills, new age skills like data literacy and automation addresses key aspects of adult learning. Learning content availability is no longer an issue with the copious number of open courses over the internet. The expectation from employees is for instructional content that is hyper-relevant and targeted at not just their current roles but also the aspirational role that is still just taking shape. Thus curating learning content, aligning it to critical skills, job roles, business outcomes and enhancing accessibility is paramount to the success of the L&D team. Making learning a continuous process that employees can include in their work day is important and is now easily addressed through technology which does not limit itself to providing single click access to recent update but also provides real-time analytics of millions of learner interactions, consumption patterns and recommends customized learning paths.

For the L&D teams continuous learning takes away the focus from designing, delivering and managing training content to a more supportive advisorial and consultative role in the organization, where individuals become more self-reliant and self- sufficient. Helping managers build a knowledge sharing culture and support reflective activities and assisting managers address performance issues and identifying solutions as they actively engage in developing the skills and competency gaps in their teams (Hemphil & Coons 1957)[23]. The role of the leaders in the organization changes to one of enablement and empowerment and mastering change, challenging mind while empowering their teams to reach their full potential" (Carly Fiorina 2000)[24]

The role of L&D shifts from being controllers of knowledge to facilitators of knowledge, through organizations social collaboration platforms. Key activity that L&D teams focus on is to curate learning resources to

support the organization's digital transformation and provide learning content that is fresh and engaging. The learner today is immersed in a social world through networking, blogging, texts, and instant updates and these tech-savvy learners expect learning content to be made available through similar platforms (Dede, 2005)[25]

Leveraging a gamified learning process, when reskilling non-technical employees in automation tools, design thinking and demystifying digital, makes the process interesting and minimizes the anxiety and fear experienced in similar situations (Nair.J, Pahurkar.R, 2018)[18]. Augmented reality, virtual reality, hackathons, world cafés are some of the recommended approaches to building skilling campaigns engaging with the BPO employees when running digital skilling programs meant for adult learners. Partnerships with online learning content developers, MOOC providers (Massive Online courses), webinars and conferences allow the employees to engage with experts in the field real time. The business impact and ROI is evidenced in the innovative service design models and ideas the employees are able to generate in an encouraging positive organizational environment.

VI. CONCLUSION

BPOs in India are increasingly becoming globally competitive and are now focusing on digital transformation, leadership development and talent management in their quest for success. Digital transformation is not limited to adopting new technology; instead it includes the cultural shift in the organizational mind-set and while the routine jobs may come to an end we still have the time to develop the skills needed to perform those roles. This change is never easy and can only be managed when there is a large-scale momentum that is built through leadership communication and cost effective learning solutions available at scale. Establishing a learning culture that has worked its way into the organizational DNA would take sustained effort and 'C-level" sponsorship. All of this means providing learning opportunities that are at scale, on demand and current.

Learning and development teams are playing a vital role in the cultural evolution consuming the digital organization as it drives digital dexterity and encourages disruptive innovation. To drive the paradigm shift within the organization, they are emphasizing on the learning culture (Reynolds, 2004)[26] within the organization. They have leveraged technology to provide on demand learning content that appeals to the millennials as much as it does the Gen X and Gen Y employees. Through impactful, learning solutions that adopted AR /VR are immersive and learner centric the L&D team is leading this transformation. Democratizing the learning irrespective of

location, demography and culture requires, developing boutique learning options as well as a skills marketplace depending on the need of the hour. Partnering with technology companies who have simplified automation they have put it within reach of the average non-technical employee a digital sand-box or simulations that uncomplicated the preserved realm of the techie. The Learning and Development function is at the forefront in taking this challenge head on and re-tooling the traditional knowledge worker in a BPO to retain their jobs, and play vital role in ensuring India continues to be a preferred outsourcing location for all.

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