



TECHNIUM
SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL

www.techniumscience.com



Vol. 75/2025
A New Decade for Social Changes

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COMMUNICATION P



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Communication & PR

Occupational Stress and Coping Mechanisms of Inbound Call Center Agents of a Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) in the Philippines

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Abstract. This study examined the levels of occupational stress and coping mechanisms among 132 inbound call center agents of a Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) in the Philippines using a quantitative descriptive-correlational design. The findings revealed that agents experience a moderate level of stress, with workload identified as the primary stressor. Despite this, agents demonstrated a high capacity for coping, primarily using problem-solving strategies. While demographic variables like age, marital status, and tenure did not significantly influence stress levels, sex was found to be a factor in coping, with female agents reporting a greater use of coping strategies. These results suggest a need for tailored, gender-sensitive wellness programs that promote resilience through problem-solving and positive emotional regulation. This research contributes to the academic understanding of stress in the Southeast Asian service industry and offers practical insights for developing evidence-based mental health programs.

Keywords. Psychology, Occupational stress, coping mechanism, Call center agents, BPO, Philippines

1.0. Introduction

Occupational stress is a significant global issue that severely impacts the well-being and job performance of call center representatives. This stress stems from factors like heavy workloads, extensive technology use, and the demanding nature of customer interactions, which directly affect agents' mental health and performance [1]. High stress levels are also linked to various work-related illnesses, highlighting the detrimental effects on an agent's overall health and job status. In response to these pressures, particularly inbound agents develop coping mechanisms, which are specific behaviors used to manage stress. However, these mechanisms can sometimes be counterproductive, leading to emotional outbursts, exhaustion, and reduced commitment to the organization [2].

Understanding and utilizing effective coping mechanisms are crucial for managing stress in the demanding call center environment. Coping mechanisms range from adaptive strategies, like taking naps and stretching, to maladaptive ones, such as using stimulants [3]. Research indicates a strong link between coping styles and burnout: adaptive coping is associated with lower burnout levels, while maladaptive coping increases the risk of burnout.

Therefore, promoting adaptive coping strategies is essential for reducing burnout among inbound call center agents [4, 5].

In the Philippines, inbound call center agents face unique stressors, including a heavy workload, emotional exhaustion, and difficult customer interactions. Local research shows that factors like resilience, income stability, and even access to urban green spaces can influence stress levels [6, 7]. Coping mechanisms are particularly vital for younger, single agents or those in leadership roles who may be more susceptible to burnout [8]. Strengthening adaptive coping strategies is key to managing emotional stress and preserving the well-being of agents in this high-pressure industry [9].

Filipino BPO agents encounter distinct stressors related to their work culture, such as demanding schedules, working on holidays, and missing important personal and family events. Interpersonal conflicts with supervisors and colleagues, along with negative office politics, also contribute to the pressure. To cope, agents develop various strategies, including prioritizing financial security, maintaining a positive outlook, and building resilience. They also engage in leisure activities like playing video games or cooking, acquire new skills, and seek support from colleagues and partners.

This study addresses a gap in existing literature by focusing specifically on the occupational stress and coping mechanisms of inbound BPO employees in Metro Manila. While previous research has identified general stressors and the benefits of resilience, it often failed to differentiate between specific roles or analyze coping strategies in detail [6, 9, 7]. Our research aims to provide a more nuanced understanding by assessing stress levels and providing a detailed analysis of coping strategies, classifying them into specific categories like problem-solving, religiosity, and emotional release.

Hence, this study assessed the extent of occupational stress and the specific coping mechanisms employed by inbound call center agents of a BPO in the Philippines during the year 2024. The findings from this research will serve as the foundation for a proposed wellness plan designed to meet the specific needs of inbound call center agents. The study sought to answer whether there is a significant relationship between agents' demographics (age, sex, civil status, and length of service) and their levels of occupational stress and coping mechanisms.

2.0. Framework of the Study

This paper examines how demographic factors like age, sex, civil status, and length of service influence occupational stress and coping mechanisms among inbound Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) call center agents. The core idea is that an agent's personal characteristics affect their stress levels and their ability to handle job demands. It's assumed that individuals who are more experienced, educated, or have strong social support are more resilient, while younger, less experienced, or isolated agents might struggle more. Understanding these connections is vital for BPO companies to create specific interventions like training programs, support systems, and well-being initiatives that address the unique needs of their workforce, ultimately enhancing employee resilience and job satisfaction. This study is grounded in two key theories.

First, the Job Demand-Control (JDC) Model [10] suggests that high job demands combined with little job autonomy lead to significant stress. An agent's sense of control over their job is often shaped by their demographics, such as age and experience. For example, experienced agents might feel more in control due to their expertise, which can lower stress. In contrast, new agents facing the same high demands might feel overwhelmed and lack the coping skills needed to manage stress effectively.

Second, the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory [11] further explains how demographics like age, sex, and social support affect stress and coping. This theory states that stress happens when people feel their personal resources—like emotional energy, time, or social support—are threatened or lost. An agent's civil status, for instance, can affect the availability of support networks. Individuals with stronger family support may experience less emotional exhaustion and use better coping strategies.

In this study, coping mechanisms are viewed as a key component of resilience, which is critical for managing the varied stressors in call center work, from difficult client calls to administrative pressures. Although call center agents often get thorough operational training, there's a notable absence of programs dedicated to mental health and building better coping skills. Therefore, promoting these coping mechanisms is essential for improving employee well-being and performance.

3.0. Methods

This study employed a quantitative descriptive-correlational research design to systematically investigate occupational stress and coping mechanisms among inbound call center agents. The descriptive component aimed to define the prevalence and distribution of stress and coping strategies, providing a comprehensive overview of the key workplace stressors and coping techniques. The correlational component sought to determine the strength and direction of associations between occupational stress and coping mechanisms, as well as the relationships between these variables and demographic factors, such as age, gender, marital status, and tenure. This design allowed for the examination of these relationships without direct intervention.

The study's respondents were 132 inbound call center agents from business process outsourcing companies located in Quezon City, Philippines. A stratified random sampling technique was utilized to select the participants, ensuring a representative sample of the target population.

Table 1. *Distribution of Respondents*

Respondents	N	n	%
Male	80	53	40
Female	120	79	60
Total	200	132	100

Two primary instruments were used to collect data. The *Occupational Stress Scale* [12] was used to measure occupational stress. This standardized questionnaire assesses five key dimensions: responsibility pressure, quality concerns, role conflict, job versus non-job conflict, and workload. Respondents rated each item on a five-point Likert scale (0-4). The reliability of this instrument was ensured through a pilot test on at least 30 non-participating BPO employees, with internal consistency measured using Cronbach's Alpha. To assess coping mechanisms, the study utilized the *Filipino Coping Mechanisms Scale* [13]. This 37-item questionnaire uses a four-point Likert scale (1 = Never/Hindi to 4 = Often/Madalas) to determine the frequency with which individuals employ specific coping methods.

Prior to data collection, permission was secured from the call center manager, and participants were briefed on the study's nature and purpose. Informed consent was obtained before digital questionnaires were distributed via email. Once collected, the data was tabulated

and analyzed using appropriate statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage distribution, were used to determine the extent of occupational stress and coping. Correlational analysis, specifically the Spearman rank-order correlation, was employed to examine the relationships between occupational stress, coping, and demographic variables. The findings will be shared with the management.

The study adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Philippine Health Research Ethics Board (PHREB), following the principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. All participants were provided with comprehensive information about the study, and their participation was voluntary. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

4.0. Results and Discussion

Profile of the Respondents

Based on the data presented in Table 2, the inbound call center agents in Metro Manila BPOs exhibit a diverse demographic profile. The workforce is almost evenly split between two age groups: agents who are 25 years old and younger (50.8%, n=67) and those who are 26 years old and older (49.2%, n=65). The majority of agents are female (59.8%, n=79) and single (71.2%, n=94), which could suggest a younger workforce still establishing their careers. A significant 88.6% (n=117) of the respondents have worked in the industry for over two years, indicating strong employee retention.

The demographic findings suggest important considerations for occupational stress and coping mechanisms among the agents. The age diversity may mean that stress and coping strategies vary across different life stages, with younger agents possibly facing stressors related to career development, while older agents may be balancing work with other life commitments. The high percentage of female employees suggests a need for gender-specific stress management programs, as some studies indicate differences in how genders cope with workplace stress [14]. Lastly, the high retention rate among experienced agents might imply they have developed effective coping strategies over time, though it could also mean they have been exposed to prolonged stress, highlighting the need for robust support systems.

Table 2. *Demographic Profile of the Respondents*

Variable	n	%
Age (M=32.8 years old)		
Younger	67	50.8
Older	65	49.2
Sex		
Male	53	40.2
Female	79	59.8
Length of Service		
6 months to 2 years	15	11.4
More than 2 years	117	88.6
Civil Status		
Single	94	71.2
Married	38	28.8
Total	132	100.0

Extent of Occupational Stress of Inbound Call Center Agents

Inbound call center agents in Metro Manila face a moderate level of occupational stress, with a mean score of 1.66 (SD=0.99). The most significant stressor identified was workload (M=2.10, SD=1.11), followed by job versus non-job conflict, responsibility pressure, and role conflict. Quality concerns were the least reported source of stress (M=1.47, SD=1.09). Stress levels were found to be higher among specific demographics: married agents (M=1.81, SD=0.97), those with less than two years of service (M=1.67, SD=1.03), and female agents (M=1.69, SD=0.98), while younger agents reported the lowest overall stress (M=1.50, SD=0.98).

These findings are consistent with existing research, which highlights workload as a primary stressor for call center agents due to back-to-back calls and performance monitoring [1, 15, 17]. The study also underscores the role of work-life balance and role conflict in contributing to stress, particularly for married agents and those with longer tenure. However, while workload is a significant factor, structured protocols and coaching in BPO operations [16] appear to mitigate stress from responsibility pressure and quality concerns. The study's demographic findings align with previous researches [17, 8] who also found that age, gender, marital status, and tenure influence how individuals perceive and manage stress. Addressing these moderate stress levels is crucial to prevent escalation into more severe issues like burnout, absenteeism, and high attrition rates [18].

Table 3. *Extent of Occupational Stress of Inbound Call Center Agents of a Business Process Outsourcing in Metro Manila*

Variable	Occupational Stress			Responsibility Pressure Items			Quality Concerns Items			Role Conflict Items			Job vs. Non-Job Conflict Items			Workload Items		
	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int
Age																		
Younger	1.50	0.98	Poor	1.49	1.03	Poor	1.29	1.02	Poor	1.34	1.20	Poor	1.38	1.11	Poor	2.00	1.13	Mod
Older	1.83	0.98	Mod	1.72	1.05	Mod	1.65	1.13	Mod	1.77	1.16	Mod	1.82	1.19	Mod	2.20	1.08	Mod
Sex																		
Male	1.63	1.01	Mod	1.65	1.12	Mod	1.38	1.06	Poor	1.53	1.22	Poor	1.53	1.34	Poor	2.04	0.94	Mod
Female	1.69	0.98	Mod	1.57	0.99	Poor	1.53	1.11	Poor	1.57	1.19	Poor	1.63	1.04	Mod	2.14	1.21	Mod
Length of Service																		
6 months to 2 years	1.67	1.03	Mod	1.64	1.11	Mod	1.31	1.18	Poor	1.49	1.37	Poor	1.47	1.17	Poor	2.42	1.09	Great
> 2 years	1.66	0.99	Mod	1.60	1.04	Poor	1.49	1.08	Poor	1.56	1.18	Poor	1.61	1.17	Poor	2.06	1.11	Mod
Civil Status																		
Single	1.61	1.00	Poor	1.61	1.05	Poor	1.39	1.09	Poor	1.46	1.21	Poor	1.49	1.16	Poor	2.07	1.08	Mod
Married	1.81	0.97	Mod	1.61	1.03	Poor	1.65	1.08	Mod	1.77	1.16	Mod	1.84	1.16	Mod	2.18	1.17	Mod
Whole	1.66	0.99	Mod	1.61	1.04	Poor	1.47	1.09	Poor	1.55	1.20	Poor	1.59	1.17	Poor	2.10	1.11	Mod

Note: Mod=Moderate

Extent of Coping Mechanisms of Inbound Call Center Agents

Inbound call center agents in Metro Manila predominantly use proactive and constructive coping mechanisms to manage job-related stress, such as problem-solving, cognitive reappraisal, and engaging in relaxation/recreation (M = 2.89, SD = 0.42). They utilize these strategies to a "great" extent, suggesting a healthy and adaptive approach to their work environment. Conversely, less constructive methods like substance use (M = 1.48), overactivity (M = 2.24), and emotional release (M = 2.40) are rarely employed. Interestingly, demographic factors like being female, single, or having a shorter service tenure correlate with more frequent use of these coping strategies.

The strong reliance on problem-solving aligns with Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model of stress [19], which highlights directly confronting a stressor. This finding is further supported previous research [20], which emphasizes how proactive coping strategies can enhance control in high-pressure roles. Similarly, the frequent use of cognitive reappraisal demonstrates a healthy way of managing emotions by reframing difficult interactions for

personal growth, a practice [4, 7]. Spirituality is another crucial coping mechanism, serving as a buffer against stress and a means of disengaging from work demands [21]. The prevalence of these constructive strategies suggests that agents prioritize their professional well-being and seek to manage stress in a healthy way.

Social support is also a vital coping mechanism for call center agents, as they believe it reduces stress by fostering a sense of understanding and connection [22]. This is reinforced by the strong family ties prevalent in Filipino culture [23], which encourages agents to seek guidance and emotional closeness from family members. Demographic factors also play a role, as younger, less experienced, and single agents tend to favor adaptive mechanisms like social support and religious coping, highlighting the importance of both external and internal resources for managing daily stressors [21, 24, 25, 26].

Table 4A. Coping Mechanisms of Inbound Call Center Agents of a Business Process Outsourcing

Variable	Coping Mechanisms			Cognitive Reappraisal			Social Support			Problem-Solving			Religiosity		
	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int
Age															
Younger	2.68	0.43	Gr	3.06	0.63	Gr	2.55	0.84	Gr	3.50	0.56	VG	3.01	1.03	Gr
Older	2.66	0.39	Gr	3.07	0.67	Gr	2.45	0.79	Gr	3.52	0.53	VG	3.22	0.83	VG
Sex															
Male	2.58	0.43	Gr	2.96	0.65	Gr	2.43	0.74	Gr	3.44	0.62	VG	2.97	0.99	Gr
Female	2.73	0.39	Gr	3.13	0.64	Gr	2.55	0.87	Gr	3.55	0.47	VG	3.21	0.90	Gr
Length of Service															
6 mo. to 2 years	2.56	0.35	Gr	2.97	0.74	Gr	2.29	0.68	Mod	3.50	0.62	VG	2.88	1.16	Gr
> 2 years	2.68	0.42	Gr	3.08	0.64	Gr	2.53	0.83	Gr	3.51	0.53	VG	3.14	0.91	Gr
Civil Status															
Single	2.65	0.45	Gr	3.02	0.68	Gr	2.45	0.80	Gr	3.46	0.56	VG	3.03	1.01	Gr
Married	2.72	0.31	Gr	3.18	0.54	Gr	2.64	0.86	Gr	3.63	0.49	VG	3.32	0.70	VG
Whole	2.67	0.41	Gr	3.07	0.65	Gr	2.50	0.82	Gr	3.51	0.54	VG	3.11	0.94	Gr

Note: Po=Poor, Mod=Moderate, Gr=Great, VG=Very Great

Table 4B. Coping Mechanisms of Inbound Call Center Agents of a Business Process Outsourcing

Variable	Tolerance			Emotional Release			Overactivity			Relaxation/ Recreation			Substance Use		
	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int
Age															
Younger	2.84	0.88	Gr	2.03	0.67	Mod	2.41	0.66	Mod	3.24	0.67	VG	1.61	0.82	Po
Older	2.79	0.82	Gr	1.85	0.63	Mod	2.33	0.64	Mod	3.15	0.67	Gr	1.65	0.67	Mod
Sex															
Male	2.75	0.95	Gr	1.76	0.63	Mod	2.21	0.63	Mod	3.17	0.68	Gr	1.65	0.74	Mod
Female	2.86	0.78	Gr	2.07	0.64	Mod	2.47	0.65	Gr	3.21	0.67	VG	1.62	0.76	Mod
Length of Service															
6 mo. to 2 yr	3.03	0.81	Gr	1.88	0.53	Mod	2.51	0.70	Gr	2.92	0.76	Gr	1.36	0.54	Po
> 2 years	2.79	0.85	Gr	1.95	0.67	Mod	2.35	0.64	Mod	3.23	0.65	VG	1.66	0.77	Mod
Civil Status															
Single	2.79	0.88	Gr	1.98	0.68	Mod	2.35	0.63	Mod	3.20	0.68	Gr	1.67	0.80	Mod
Married	2.88	0.79	Gr	1.86	0.58	Mod	2.42	0.69	Gr	3.18	0.66	Gr	1.54	0.60	Po
Whole	2.82	0.85	Gr	1.95	0.65	Mod	2.37	0.65	Mod	3.20	0.67	Gr	1.63	0.75	Mod

Note: Po=Poor, Mod=Moderate, Gr=Great, VG=Very Great

Relationship between the demographics and the occupational stress of inbound call center agents

Based on statistical analysis, there's no significant relationship between selected demographic characteristics and occupational stress among inbound call center agents in Metro Manila. The study found that variables such as age, sex, length of service, and civil status all had p-values greater than 0.05, meaning they don't significantly influence the level of stress

experienced by agents. This indicates that an agent's personal background doesn't determine how they cope with job-related stress, suggesting that other, non-demographic factors are at play.

The findings align with the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model and other research, which posits that occupational stress in this field is primarily driven by organizational demands rather than individual characteristics. Specifically, factors like responsibility pressure, quality concerns, workload, and repetitive tasks are the main contributors to stress [15, 1]. This suggests that stress is a widespread experience within the BPO environment, largely stemming from the nature of the work itself and the institutional structures in place, such as quotas and limited recovery time, rather than an agent's personal attributes.

Table 5. *Relationship Between the Demographics and the Occupational Stress of Inbound Call Center Agents*

Variable	r _s	df	p
Age	0.150	130	0.086
Sex	0.053	130	0.548
Length of Service	0.003	130	0.972
Civil Status	0.111	130	0.205

Note: correlation is significant when $p \leq 0.05$

Relationship between the demographics and the coping mechanisms of inbound call center agents

Based on the statistical analysis, there is a significant relationship between an inbound call center agent's sex and their chosen coping mechanisms ($r_s(130)=0.178, p=0.041$). This suggests that men and women may cope with occupational stress differently. All other demographic variables—age ($r_s(130)=0.037, p=0.673$), length of service ($r_s(130)=0.093, p=0.287$), and civil status ($r_s(130)=0.087, p=0.320$)—did not show a significant relationship with coping mechanisms. This finding indicates that, aside from sex, these demographic factors are not primary determinants of how an agent copes with stress.

This observation suggests that while gender plays a role in coping strategies, other demographic factors like age, tenure, and marital status have no significant influence. This could be because the standardized corporate wellness and stress management programs offered by call center companies provide a consistent set of coping resources to all employees, regardless of their personal background. This aligns with Conservation of Resources Theory [11], which posits that a uniform supply of resources can help neutralize individual differences in coping abilities. The finding also supports that BPO employees are exposed to similar resources, leading to more consistent coping behaviors across these groups [17].

Table 6. *Relationship between the Demographics and the Coping Mechanisms of Inbound Call Center Agents*

Variable	r _s	df	p
Age	0.037	130	0.673
Sex	0.178*	130	0.041
Length of Service	0.093	130	0.287
Civil Status	0.087	130	0.320

Note: correlation is significant when $p \leq 0.05$

Overall, demographic factors like age, marital status, and length of service did not significantly correlate with the coping mechanisms of inbound BPO agents; only sex showed a significant correlation. The moderate stress levels observed align with the Job Demand-Control (JDC) Model [10], suggesting stress is more influenced by workplace factors—such as workload, shift schedules, and customer demands—rather than personal demographics. Agents demonstrated strong psychological resilience, with female agents reporting more frequent use of coping mechanisms than their male counterparts. Consequently, BPO organizations should implement gender-sensitive stress management interventions and wellness programs that focus on enhancing problem-solving, recreation, and emotional regulation to build workforce resilience.

5.0. Conclusion

This study found that inbound call center agents experience a moderate level of occupational stress, with workload being the primary stressor due to demanding performance metrics. While agents have effectively internalized procedures, making quality concerns the least stressful factor, the high workload often leads to physical fatigue. Agents show a proactive and high overall capacity for coping, primarily through problem-solving. Less common coping methods include overactivity and emotional release, with substance use being the least preferred. Interestingly, while demographic factors like age, civil status, and tenure didn't significantly impact stress levels, female agents displayed a slightly stronger use of coping mechanisms, possibly due to a greater inclination to express emotions and seek support. These insights highlight the need for management to focus on mitigating workload pressures to improve employee well-being.

6.0. Limitations of the Findings

This study, a quantitative cross-sectional analysis, examined only inbound call center agents in Metro Manila's BPO companies, omitting those in outbound or blended roles. It was further limited by the exclusive focus on demographic data such as age, sex, civil status, and length of service, and didn't account for company-specific wellness policies. Consequently, it couldn't explore the qualitative experiences of agents regarding occupational stress and coping and was unable to determine causal relationships.

7.0. Practical Value of the Paper

This research provides key insights into occupational stress and coping mechanisms in the Philippine business process outsourcing industry. The findings can help human resources departments, wellness coordinators, and mental health professionals create evidence-based programs that build employee resilience and reduce burnout. Ultimately, the study underscores the need for preventive mental health care in high-pressure work settings, advocating for the integration of coping-skills training into employee development. It also offers empirical data to the academic discourse on occupational stress within Southeast Asian service industries.

8.0. Directions for Future Research

Future research should use qualitative methods to explore the lived experiences of call center agents and longitudinal studies to track stress and coping over time. Expanding the demographic scope to include educational background, income level, and job position will provide a more comprehensive picture. Additionally, exploring the effectiveness of

interventions like mindfulness training, peer support, or hybrid work models in reducing occupational stress is crucial.

9.0. Declaration of Conflict of Interest

No potential conflicts of interest relating to the research, writing, or publishing of this work were disclosed by the authors.

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