March 2025

DIGITALIZATION AND LABOR CONTROL. THE CASE OF CALL CENTERS IN MÉXICO

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Following the 1980s economic crisis, a widespread shift of industrial activities from developed to developing economies began. It was driven mainly by lower labor costs, trade liberalization, and advancements in global supply chains. The United States played a central role in this transition, undergoing a significant economic restructuring. Between 1980 and 2000, a large portion of U.S. manufacturing relocated to Mexico, largely influenced by trade agreements like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which facilitated cross-border production and investment. As factories moved south, many once-thriving industrial cities in the U.S. faced job losses, leading to economic decline in regions historically reliant on manufacturing. This transformation contributed to the U.S. economy's shift toward service-based industries, with finance, technology, healthcare, and retail emerging as dominant sectors.

By the 2000s, outsourcing was no longer confined to manufacturing—it began reshaping the service industry as well. While many service-sector jobs within the U.S. still relied on migrant labor, particularly in hospitality, agriculture, and healthcare, a growing share was outsourced to other countries. Two primary factors fueled this trend.

First, rapid advancements in automation and digitalization enabled businesses to relocate service-oriented functions—such as customer support, data processing, and IT services—to offshore locations where labor costs were lower. The expansion of high-speed internet and cloud computing made it easier to manage operations remotely, leading to the rise of call centers, software development hubs, and financial service firms in countries like India and the Philippines.

Second, increasingly restrictive U.S. immigration policies limited the availability of foreign workers for certain industries, making outsourcing a more viable and cost-effective alternative. By hiring workers abroad instead of navigating complex visa regulations and labor laws, companies maintained efficiency while minimizing expenses. Migration policies played a crucial role in shaping outsourcing patterns. As U.S. immigration restrictions tightened, call center operations became increasingly concentrated along Mexico's northern border. Many of these positions were filled by deported individuals. Over time, as deportations spread nationwide, outsourcing expanded to other Mexican cities.

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This project is co-funded by the European Union

The global service sector underwent a major structural transformation, reorganizing and streamlining customer support and administrative tasks. This shift allowed businesses to improve operational efficiency, enhance service delivery, and elevate the customer experience. Among the key activities affected were:

- Answering inbound calls and directing inquiries efficiently.
- Providing detailed information about company products and services.
- Resolving customer concerns and troubleshooting technical issues.
- Managing and addressing customer complaints to ensure satisfaction.
- Processing purchase orders and handling transaction-related requests.
- Updating and maintaining accurate customer records in company databases.

These changes not only optimized business operations but also reinforced the service sector's ability to meet the increasing demands of a globalized economy. The globalization of the service sector has been propelled by offshoring and outsourcing, facilitated by the digitalization of production processes and led by major corporations within the industry. Customer service, technical support, and sales services are among the main activities that have been internationalized. Companies across various sectors—including delivery services, healthcare, car rentals, hospitality, banking, and airlines—have strategically relocated significant portions of their operations to offshore locations in developing economies such as México. This shift has enabled businesses to lower costs, improve efficiency, and tap into a vast labor force , fundamentally transforming the global service industry.

Major corporations in the service sector rely on specialized companies to handle their customer service operations through online support. In Mexico, this has given rise to large firms that provide these services to international corporations, primarily catering to the U.S. market. Notable examples include Telvista, Teleperformance, and Telchtec Group, among others. These companies run extensive call centers and digital service hubs, employing thousands of workers to manage customer inquiries, technical support, and sales for global brands. Mexico's appeal as an outsourcing destination stems from a combination of factors: a bilingual workforce—many of whom are deportees—lower labor costs compared to the U.S., and geographic proximity to North America, ensuring efficient coordination and real-time customer engagement. This sector has become a vital part of Mexico's economy, creating jobs and solidifying the country's role as a low labor cost-based player in the global service outsourcing industry.

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Call centers rely on a variety of specialized platforms to streamline customer service operations, enhance communication, and improve overall efficiency. Tools such as Freshdesk and Zendesk are widely used for managing customer relationships, providing ticketing systems, and automating workflows to ensure timely responses. Meanwhile, Aircall facilitates cloud-based call management, allowing seamless integration with CRM systems and improving call routing for better customer interactions. Genesys, another leading platform, offers advanced AI-driven solutions, omnichannel support, and workforce optimization tools, helping call centers handle high volumes of inquiries efficiently. By leveraging these platforms, companies can enhance customer satisfaction, reduce response times, and optimize their service operations.

The workflow in these call centers is often described as being under the "authoritarian management of platforms." Employee performance is closely tracked and controlled through digital tools that monitor every interaction, measure response times, and enforce productivity metrics that dictate both the pace and conditions of work. In essence, labor conditions in these call centers are entirely shaped by the operational demands of specialized platforms, where digital systems play a dominant role in regulating daily tasks, significantly influencing the structure and dynamics of employment in this sector.

In call centers structured around digital platforms, work is highly regimented and controlled. New employees undergo a two-week onboarding process to familiarize themselves with the platforms and operational protocols. The compensation system typically consists of low base salaries with performance-based bonuses tied to sales targets, creating an incentive-driven environment. Employees work in teams of 10, each led by a coordinator, and have variable schedules that require flexibility to accommodate the demands of the platform.

Work is closely monitored, with strict metrics for performance. Calls are timed, and voice volume is tracked to ensure efficiency and professionalism. Employees are permitted only two restroom breaks during a 9-hour shift, both of which require prior approval. Penalties are imposed for not adhering to these regulations, including repercussions for calls that exceed time limits or for failing to meet sales targets. Employees can also face severe penalties for overstepping break times or hanging up on calls prematurely, creating an environment of constant supervision and pressure to meet specific performance standards. These practices reflect the increasing control digital platforms have over the work process, shaping not only the tasks but also the behavior of employees.

The outsourcing of service industry roles, propelled by the use of digital platforms, has fostered a labor regime defined by low wages, intense monitoring, and limited autonomy for workers. This transformation underscores how digitalization functions not only as a tool for increasing efficiency but also as a mechanism of control, particularly in a global context marked by inequality and restrictive migration policies. Digital platforms allow for a heightened level of labor regulation and surveillance, transforming the traditional nature of work and further entrenching disparities in global labor markets.

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