



OregonLive.com
Everything Oregon

FIND LOCAL JOBS FAST.
CLICK HERE

FIND A JOB YOU LOVE IN THE PLACE YOU LOVE
The Best Local Jobs
OregonLive.com

WHEN LOOKING FOR A JOB,
KEEP IN MIND THAT YOUR RADIO STATIONS
ARE SET THE WAY YOU LIKE THEM



With News & Classifieds From: **The Oregonian**

Home	News+Biz	Local	Sports	Forums+Chat	Cams+Radio	Living	Entertainment	CLASSIFIEDS
→ SEARCH								Get The Best Local... Jobs Autos Real Estate All Classifieds Place An Ad
→ FIND A BUSINESS								

Search

[Back To Your Search Results](#) | [Search Again](#)

The Oregonian

Click here to subscribe!

[» More From The Oregonian](#)

MORE SEARCHES

Classifieds

- » [Jobs](#)
- » [Autos](#)
- » [Real Estate](#)
- » [All Classifieds](#)

Death Notices & Obituaries

- » [Death Notices & Guest Books](#)
- » [News Obituaries](#)

Local Businesses

- » [Find A Business](#)

Entertainment

- » [Movies](#)
- » [Music](#)
- » [Arts & Events](#)
- » [Dining & Bars](#)

Local Web Sites

- » [Community Connection](#)

SEND THIS PAGE

PRINT THIS PAGE

» [Free Stuff, Deals and Fun- Click Here!](#)

» [Marketing Internship- apply here](#)

» [Send in your High School Sports Photos!](#)

A Special Destination Issue of Travel

Advertisement from **The Oregonian**

Send them in for Fans' PHOTO of the Week

ALL CURRENT HS PHOTOS WELCOME!
» [MORE INFO](#)

FROM OUR ADVERTISERS

U.S. calls, India answers

10/05/03

JEFFREY KOSSEFF

GURGAON, India G aurav Mendiratta stammers through a sentence he wrote for a class assignment.

"This customer is going through a spay-shal process," reads the tall 22-year-old college graduate, clad in a white T-shirt emblazoned with a Ray-Ban logo.

Meinka Sharma, barely 5 feet tall, perches herself atop the counter behind him, cranes her neck over his shoulder and yells: "SPE-SHUL! OPEN YOUR MOUTH. WHAT'S WITH YOUR MOUTH?"

Sharma, an instructor for training company Hero MindMine, is the drill sergeant for a boot camp in U.S. Culture 101. She berates Mendiratta and 15 other students from 6:30 p.m. to 3 a.m. every day of this late August week as she coaches them on handling U.S. customer-service calls. If they don't get it right, they face her

From Our Advertiser

wrath.

Their reward? Jobs with Hero MindMine's sister company, making less than \$2 an hour working nights.

Positions in call centers -- today's contact points between corporations and customers -- often are seen as stopgap measures in the United States. But they are among the most eagerly sought jobs in India.

Ambitious, well-educated Indian workers already do so well pretending to be Americans for U.S. companies that they have landed 171,100 call-center and back-office jobs in work ranging from telemarketing to medical consulting.

By dangling irresistible cost incentives in front of U.S. companies, India now threatens to disconnect one of Oregon's more promising lines on boosting statewide employment.

Oregon has staked training grants, tax breaks and technological upgrades toward luring call-center work as one answer to an overseas flight of manufacturing jobs. Service employment steadily grew through the 1990s, providing a counter to the volatile manufacturing industry. As of January, at least 75 call centers helped keep afloat more than 20,000 Oregonians -- up from about 15,000 2 1/2 years earlier, the state estimates. And the work is bolstering many hard-pressed rural areas.

But those jobs now, too, are vulnerable as technological advances enable them to flow abruptly to the lowest bidders continents away.

"Truly, the world is becoming a boundary-less arena," said Avaneesh Nirjar, chief operating officer of Hero ITES, where Sharma's students will work. This year, the company partnered with Portland-based LiveBridge to open a Gurgaon (ger-GON) call center that employs 345 people.

General Electric, American Express and other titans of U.S. industry use Gurgaon as their back office, and the business has transformed the city from a shantytown into the capital of India's call-center industry.

By contrast, Oregon's service employment may have topped out.

"I don't see a lot of new call centers opening in the U.S., let alone Oregon," said Patrick Hanlin, the Portland-based chief executive of LiveBridge. The company employs about 3,500 people in Gurgaon and seven U.S. and Canadian operations, including a nearly 800-employee headquarters call center in Portland.

During a break in Sharma's class, a few students sit on a table and sing Shaggy's "It Wasn't Me," a U.S. pop song about infidelity.

Naveen Khera studies notes he took from "Any Given Sunday," a violent movie about U.S. football, and passages from his 55-page text on American culture ("Oregon is a heavily forested state filled with incredible natural beauty and great pride.")

Tucked in his text is his hiring letter. His salary: 8,596 rupees a month -- about \$190.

"This is my first job," boasts Khera, 23.

- >> [Power your resume](#)
- >> [Find your dream home](#)
- >> [Super deals on new wheels!](#)

» [Advertise With Us](#)

OUR AFFILIATES

KBPS
Classical 89.9 fm

He asks what people make at U.S. call centers. Answer: about 400 rupees an hour -- less than \$9.

"Four hundred rupees AN HOUR?" he asks. "I should work there then!"

Cheap labor in Gurgaon Shilpa Thukral swaps a red tank top for a long-sleeve blue blouse despite sticky post-monsoon heat.

It's 3 p.m. Work starts at 6:30. But 20-year-old Thukral doesn't want to be late.

Outside her family's New Delhi row house, a company-paid driver in a blue van waits to ferry Thukral along a congested, cattle-lined highway toward LiveBridge's call center in Gurgaon, 10 miles south.

There, she'll dub herself Kristy Grover and try to drop her Punjabi accent as she calls Americans to verify credit-card applications.

Her pay: less than \$2 an hour.

But you won't hear Thukral complain about the money, hours, heat or traffic. Thukral views call-center jobs as steps in an exciting career path -- agent, supervisor, human resources, call-center manager.

New Delhi twentysomethings equate such jobs with information-technology work. Many want to apply lessons from college or advanced degrees, often in business. But with a national unemployment rate far higher than the United States', call-center work is the best most can do.

The spate of new jobs at Indian business-service firms has defied the worldwide downturn, even accelerated as U.S. companies have cut costs. Call centers, software developers and other business services in India employ 61 percent more workers than a year ago, according to India's National Association of Software & Service Companies. U.S. companies generate most of the work.

Telecommunication costs once posed a barrier to sending service work overseas. But competition has exploded since India deregulated its telecom industry a few years ago. The result: cheaper phone service and better data transmission.

Now wired, well-trained Indian service labor offers sharp cost advantages. Taking in all costs, a tech-service company can employ an Indian worker for \$11,854 a year, compared with \$58,598 for a U.S. employee, according to the software and service association, using data from Merrill Lynch. The figures include salary, benefits, real estate and telecom expenses.

As a result, young middle-class workers such as Thukral -- who has seen little of India, much less the world -- pose a serious threat to U.S. service employment.

Thukral has had her job about five months.

"I'm so proud of her," beams her married 23-year-old sister, Seema Vait, as she helps the family servant, a young boy known only as Pappu, clean up from lunch.

Thukral's driver heads toward Gurgaon. The van moves past a banner for an Indian tech school that brags "750,000 IT jobs, 100,000 scholarships."

It swerves to avoid a rickshaw, then again to dodge a thin cow.

Along a narrow street, co-worker Meenakshi Ahuja, one of Thukral's best friends, jumps into the van. Ahuja is pursuing a business graduate degree during the day, and Thukral plans to do the same.

They gossip in Hindi and English about their boyfriends. Thukral's enters data for General Electric Capital, one of the first U.S. service employers to open operations in Gurgaon.

At 4 p.m., the van arrives at the call center. There, Ahuja and Thukral wait in a coffee shop until their 6:30 p.m. shifts. They will call the United States for the next 8 1/2 hours, reading the same script again and again.

"This is Kristy Grover calling . . ."

Most LiveBridge agents choose their own names, although Thukral's was assigned. Ahuja is Monica Smith ("It has no rolling R's," she explains).

Thukral connects with an older man. She starts telling him she needs to verify information on his credit-card application. But the man shouts to someone nearby, "She talks so fast, I can't understand her."

His wife gets on the phone.

"Ma'am, if you want, I can speak slowly for him," Thukral offers.

Like most of her peers, Thukral learned English as a child and speaks it almost as well as Hindi. But for her job, she took weeks of "accent neutralization" training to learn which syllables to emphasize and how to use U.S. lingo.

Her Indian accent is still detectable. But Thukral is prohibited, even when asked, from confirming she is calling from India.

Some customers refuse to speak with her, demanding instead to talk to an American, she said.

Talking with the customer's wife, Thukral asks for her household's annual income.

"It's \$1,108 a month," the customer says.

"What is your total annual household income," asks Thukral, aware that she is barred from straying from the script and helping the woman multiply the monthly figure by 12. "If you'd prefer to give a range. . ."

"I'm not sure what it is," the woman tells Thukral.

Thukral, of course, could easily calculate the answer.

Oregon bets on call centers About the time Thukral starts her normal workday in India, Jane Steward wakes up in Sutherlin to get to work at 5:30 a.m. in nearby Roseburg. Both work shifts matching East Coast

business hours.

Steward supports herself and three teenage children with a full-time job at TMS, a call center that takes orders mainly for catalog companies and nonprofit fund raising. Starting wages range between \$7 to \$8.25 an hour, plus benefits.

Before starting at TMS three years ago, Steward was the front-desk receptionist at the Roseburg office of Charter Communications, the local cable company.

"Now I don't have to worry that someone's cable will be turned off or that they can't use their remote control," Steward says. "I log out of my phone, and I log out of my computer, and I'm done."

Call centers provide few high-end jobs, such as engineering. But Oregon's government welcomes them because they can locate in rural areas, where resource-dependent manufacturing jobs have dwindled. Although call centers pay little, they provide safe work settings and, often, benefits.

To lure employers, the state has offered financial incentives and rural telecom upgrades. The strategy has shown success: Some of the largest call center employers are located in small cities such as North Bend and Milton-Freewater.

"That's nothing to sneeze at," said Marty Brantley, the state's economic development director.

But with the recession, the job growth has stopped -- even as it has soared in India. Work in professional and business-service categories, including call centers, peaked in January 2001 with 187,100 jobs, then dipped, flattening off at 174,500 in August.

And for the very reason call-center employment suits rural Oregon, the industry is far more volatile than manufacturing: Call centers can easily ramp up -- or down -- wherever there are good workers and data hookups.

Stream International, for instance, said it has cut jobs at its Beaverton call center. It employed 1,000 people there in January, according to state records. In 2000, a few years after it opened the Beaverton center, Stream entered a joint venture to open a center in Mumbai, India. A spokeswoman for Stream's parent company, Solectron, attributed the cuts to the seasonality of call-center work -- not outsourcing to India -- and said Stream plans to expand in Beaverton.

Call-center job mobility is a concern, Brantley said. But he said the United States has a competitive edge: It can offer the best skills for high-end customer service.

To provide the best local information, Beaverton-based Metro One Telecommunications not only routes its directory-assistance calls through U.S. call centers, but it also tries to send them to whichever of its 31 centers are closest to callers.

Chief executive Tim Timmins said Metro One has considered going overseas with the work.

"Is it tempting? Yes," he said. "Maybe this is our undoing in the long run,

but I really believe in the United States and in Oregon."

Dotty Randall, chief executive officer of Roseburg's TMS, shows off an e-mail pitch from a Filipino call-center contractor that spells out the temptation. The pitch lists the challenges -- comparatively high wages, bad attrition rates and tough competition -- facing U.S. call-center operators. "This is where we can help you," it offers.

Randall, a former schoolteacher with a big laugh and even bigger pride in Roseburg, knows she could find people in India or the Philippines who would be ecstatic to earn far less than \$8 an hour.

But Randall realizes that if she hired out to India, she could put many of her employees out of work. The center employs 175 people, but the number will increase to 350 in the next few months as TMS hires seasonal workers to handle holiday gift calls. Many TMS agents are single moms, she said, and they would face bleak prospects. Roseburg's Douglas County has one of the state's highest jobless rates: 9.3 percent in August.

"We're not a nonprofit -- don't get me wrong," she said. "But we are a member of the community."

And Randall trusts TMS can provide a quality level of service only U.S.-based call centers can offer.

Although TMS asks agents to be efficient and follow a script, for example, it also allows them to chat and joke with customers to help them feel comfortable enough to keep shopping.

Steward presses her headset closer to her ear as she prepares to make her sales pitch. She can earn extra money by "upselling," or enticing callers to buy products beyond ones they initially seek.

After one caller orders some eye masks, Steward says, "We have some specials today." Blemish 911, on Page 32, is on sale for \$26.98, down from \$29.98.

The caller sounds interested but unsure.

"It's a popular item," Steward urges. "Would you like to try one?"

Ka-ching: \$144.57.

India's sharp edge Driving down Highway 8, the main route through commercial Gurgaon, Pradeep Yadav can't conceal his delight.

"It's a builder's heaven here," Yadav exclaimed, driving past projects to build sleek office buildings, flanked by groups of gypsies living in cardboard-box tents.

Yadav is president of the Haryana IT & Enabled Industries Confederation, a coalition of Indian and U.S. companies with offices in Gurgaon and elsewhere in Haryana state. A few years earlier, as Yadav was building a telecom company here, the highway stretched through wheat fields and jungle, he recalls.

Facing backlash from displaced workers, lawmakers in some U.S. states have introduced legislation to prohibit state government agencies from

hiring out tech services offshore. But for the time being, Gurgaon has clinched a dramatic competitive advantage, call-center operators are hiring workers to fill call centers as fast as they can be built, and Gurgaon is tapping seemingly any U.S. service business that its workers can do remotely.

Highway 8 now is home to dozens of extra-wide, call-center towers that would fit well in downtown Seattle. Interspersed are high-rise apartments to house call-center workers and four sleek, multilevel shopping malls -- complete with Ruby Tuesday's, McDonald's and shops selling U.S. brands such as Reebok.

The highway, mostly two lanes in each direction, is spilling over. It bulges into as many as five rows of traffic each way, depending on how daring the drivers of Hyundais, rickshaws, and scooters feel -- and how many cattle graze along the highway's dividers. After years of complaints, the government soon will widen Highway 8.

With an investment of about \$20,000, anyone can open a small call center that soon makes about \$5,000 a month outsourcing work from U.S. companies, said Yadav, whose wife runs one.

Hanlin, the LiveBridge chief executive, said most of his workers live in North America, and the company has been adding about 1,500 positions worldwide. But growth is fastest at the new India call center, where it charges customers about 35 percent less than at LiveBridge's U.S. centers.

"We've seen some clients who just have a resistance to offshore, whether it's accent or travel, instability," Hanlin said. "That will go away. It has to for them to remain competitive."

Kiran Karnik, president of the Indian software and service trade group, claimed that as India gains U.S. service work, the shift enables cost-saving U.S. corporations to create new high-quality jobs. Asked what types of jobs, Karnik pointed to general categories such as quality control.

But a tour of Gurgaon businesses with Yadav showed Indian workers already taking on U.S. work in such areas.

In a red building, Hughes Electronics, a subsidiary of General Motors, has a 570-seat center where employees field tech-support calls for DirecWave, its satellite Internet service.

At Aithent, a four-story complex of green cubicles and orange walls, young software engineers shout in Hindi as they develop software for state insurance regulatory agencies in the United States.

But the laws of supply and demand apply even to Gurgaon.

Turnover at the city's call centers has increased -- not nearly to U.S. levels, but enough to drive up average monthly wages from about \$200 to about \$300. As a result, Karnik predicted, businesses may shift the fastest service-sector growth to south India, where real estate and labor are cheaper.

Either way, India, not the United States, has the cost edge, and experts expect the country to continue seeing gains. And Yadav, who earned

