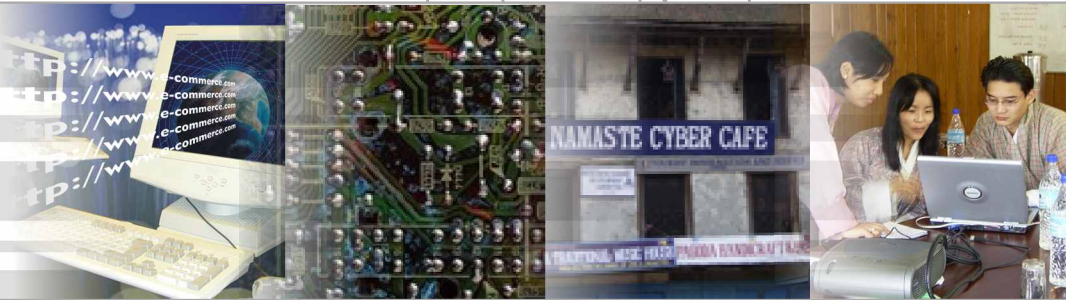


UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT

BUSINESS PROCESS OFFSHORE OUTSOURCING

Untapped Opportunities for SMEs



UNITED NATIONS

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

Business Process Offshore Outsourcing

Untapped Opportunities for SMEs

Guide for SME Managers

Prepared by the UNCTAD secretariat



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OBJECTIVE OF THIS PUBLICATION

The primary purpose of this publication is to be useful to SMEs in developing and least developed countries willing to sell business process services to organizations in the developed world. However, this publication could indirectly be useful to any large or small organization from either the public or the private sector.

While the focus of this publication is on the interests of SMEs in developing countries, it also takes a detailed look at buyers of outsourcing services located in developed countries. The rationale is that it is essential for service providers to gain an intimate understanding of their clients' behaviours and motivations.

The publication presents case studies to illustrate how SMEs in developing can successfully provide business process services to organizations and international companies in the developed world.

The publication draws primarily on the author's nearly 10 years of practical experience and the many interviews with companies in developed, developing and least developed countries. Secondary sources are used to supplement and support the experiences of the author.

This manual can be seen as an extension of the "Use of the Internet for Efficient International Trade: A Guide for SME Managers,"¹ a publication by the same author and also published by UNCTAD.

¹ UNCTAD/SDTE/TIB/2003/3. The publication can be downloaded free of charge from the UNCTAD website (www.unctad.org).

INTRODUCTION

What does *business process outsourcing* (BPO) mean? Simply put, it means the transfer to third parties of the performance of service-based functions once carried out within a company, or more generally, within an organization.

BPO can occur onshore (i.e. within national borders) or offshore, that is in (remote) foreign countries. In this manual, we refer specifically to offshore BPO, hence the term *business process offshore outsourcing* (BPOO). Special emphasis has been placed on the BPOO occurring in developing and least developed countries

It is not a new phenomenon for companies to outsource part of their activities to developing countries. Until recently, the major scope of these outsourcing activities was manufacturing and assembling. One well-known example is the multitude of Mexican "maquiladoras" (i.e. export assembly plants) located near the United States border and working for US companies. However, over the last decade the outsourcing of services in developing countries has become more and more important thanks to the rapid development of the Internet and the accelerating digitization trend. Outsourcing of services is now comparable with the relocation of manufacturing activities in terms of its importance in the corporate strategic agenda.

The following are the main trends in BPOO activities over the last decade:

(a) BPOO has gained in importance for the economies of developed, developing and least developed countries. Without any doubt, this importance will increase further.

(b) BPOO has become more important primarily thanks to two technical advances:

- The availability of low-cost (high-speed) data networks, primarily the Internet;
- The widespread digitization of texts, images, sounds and videos. In other words, by having digitized files, it is easy to send them at very low cost virtually anywhere in the world.

(c) As a consequence of the two aforementioned technical advances, an increasing number of corporate functions have become mobile, that is outsourceable offshore. Besides, the sophistication of these "relocable" functions has been increasing steadily: not only simple functions such as entering data or answering simple phone calls are outsourced to remote countries but also complex tasks such as financial analysis. In a way, there is a real globalization of white-collar jobs.

(d) BPOO is now a strategic option not only for large organizations: SMEs in both developed and developing countries have much to gain as well.

This manual is structured in the following way. Chapter 1 focuses on the BPOO market, describes what activities can be outsourced offshore and analyses what countries are particularly strong in the provision of such services. Chapter 2 looks at benefits and risks arising from BPOO, especially for the companies that outsource services offshore, and briefly also for BPOO providers. The same chapter sheds some light on the current political discussion about the potential consequences of BPOO at the national level. Chapter 3 presents a number of recommendations for companies wishing to engage in the provision of business process services, and, to a lesser extent, lists some measures by Governments that could help companies in their countries sell such services on a competitive basis. The Annex illustrates some interesting cases of SMEs from developing countries that have been successful in selling business process services to developed countries.

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