

# Underlying Threats of Customer Service Jobs for Talented Graduates in Career Development in Bangladesh

Mahmud Wahid

**Abstract**— The objective of this article is to take a deeper look into the realities of career management by young graduates from the perspective of Bangladesh. Career management is a critical issue for every professional all around the world. Much depends on how an individual has planned his/her career and approached it with right and timely decision making. Although this proposition is ideal to expect, in practice, more precisely in the developing countries like Bangladesh, where the job opportunities are scarce, only a handful of organizations can afford or have the strategic objective to implement career development policies for its employees. The concern of this study is to understand the career path that are offered by service based organizations to its employees and see the possible implications on career that are purely focused on direct customer interactions for a substantial period of time.

**Index Terms**— Business graduates in Bangladesh, Career development, career planning, Call Center, career opportunity, depth interview, employer, employee, evaluation, Financial Institutes, goal setting, job market, MNC, manager, observation method, Qualitative research, Self-assessment, Service Organization, Telecom industry, unemployment

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Managing a career is a critical issue in any professional's life. Though it is not always in the hands of the employee but he needs to have a clear understanding of where he wants to see himself after a period of time; say after five years, and monitor the career development as time passes by. Employee needs to be committed to their career goals and may need to make necessary decisions that will support their career in the long run. Career related responsibilities should not be put on employee's shoulder all alone regarding career or management. The manager and employer have their roles to play in crafting a reasonable career for its direct employees (*Gary Dessler1999*)

The manager needs to facilitate the employee and the organization needs to support the whole idea of employees' career development and healthy growth. And the employee needs to be on top of his mission and own the whole idea of career development. In this competitive world it is not wise for an employee to think that opportunity will knock on the door and he will have an easy access to success. Career success is a combination of many factors including competence, diligence, networking, opportunity, industry growth, employer support and of course, lucks.

Roles in Career Development	
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Accept responsibility for your own career</li><li>• Assess your interests, skills and values</li><li>• Seek out career information and resources</li><li>• Establish goals and career plans</li><li>• Utilize development opportunities</li><li>• Talk with your manager about your career</li><li>• Follow through your realistic career plans</li></ul>
Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide timely performance feedback</li><li>• Provide developmental assignments and support</li><li>• Participate in career development discussions</li><li>• Support employee development plans</li></ul>
Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Communicate mission policies and procedures</li><li>• Provide training and development opportunities</li><li>• Provide career information and career programs</li><li>• Offer a variety of career options</li></ul>

• Mahmud Wahid is a Telecommunication Customer Service specialist and an adjunct faculty in BRAC University, Dhaka, Bangladesh. PH-01711505553. E-mail: mwzoheb@gmail.com

Source: Fred L. Otte and Peggy G. Hutcheson, *Helping Employees Manage Careers* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1992), p.56

This may sound very straight forward but in reality things may be quite different for an employee or it can also be very employee specific. The job search journey of a young graduate, is a grueling task that that will lead him to a promising career. In a recent study shows, the unemployment rate among the passing graduates in Bangladesh job market is around 47% (The EIU-BC Report, January 2015).

We take the scenario of Bangladesh, which is a developing country and struggling with unemployment like many others. Here decent jobs are scarce as very few companies have the ability or scope to offer a lucrative job. The industries that are leading in this perspective are FMCG, Telecom, Banking and Financial Institutes, MNCs, IT and some local and foreign development organizations. These industries employ people from different universities as fresh graduates in the entry level positions but there are also exceptions when recruits come from other organizations with some level of experience. In case of service based organizations like Banks and Telecom Operators there is a good need of employees who will have direct contact with their end-customers. These job categories are comprised of customer service managers, call center agents, retail banking cash officer or teller, etc. The number of people employed in this kind of role is much higher than people working in Marketing, Finance, R&D, Supply Chain and so forth. The reason is pretty simple, if you have more customers, you need more customer agents unless your service is fully automated. Even if there is automation and self care system, there will always be need of human agents who will take care of customer queries.

In the service industry, people working in the front-end, serving customers are actually the face of the company. The attitude and value they show towards the customers are believed to be the value the organization it nourishes. The front end customer service jobs require less specialization in many instances as the service deliverables are highly predefined and predictable. It is somewhat easier for a graduate to get a job in a customer service department than pursuing a career in Marketing, Sales, and Finance or in Product Development which require other types of skill sets as well. Since finding a decent job is always hard; people tend to jump into whatever they have got as long as it serves their purpose.

## 2 Objective

In this literature WE shall try to understand how direct customer service positions may affect one's career goals by taking real life scenarios. The intention of this study is not to weaken the necessity of customer service based jobs rather to show some realistic stand points that the graduates may take while taking important career decisions. In today's world it is unimaginable for any organization which is not customer centric in its operations and in product development. So the necessity of customer centricity is imperative and the need of value driven customer service agents is ever increasing.

## 3 Methodology

This study has been done mostly using qualitative methods such as; group discussions, direct interviews. Some secondary data has been collected using industry analysis in South Asian countries and relevant case studies.

A major portion of this work has been done on case study methods, where individuals from the actual job location have been interviewed through detailed discussions. The discussions have focused on their educational fit, their ambitions, practical issues, opportunities and competencies.

Observational method has also been employed in developing the study as the writer has been in direct contact and in supervisory roles in various capacities. This has enabled first hand career observation for new entrants in the service sectors. The observation period ranges from 2006 to 2016 in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

## 4 SCOPE OF WORK

Service industry in Bangladesh is growing at a rapid pace. In this study we have identified only those industries which have a formidable foothold in their sector and influence a considerable number of people's lives. By influence in people's lives it is meant here by the volume of business graduates working in the corporate organizations. The organizations are profit seeking and have brand identity. Our primary focus in this study will be to focus on Banking, IT-Telecom and Call Center Based outsourcing organizations which employ a large number of graduates in the front end customer service positions.

## 5 CAREER RELATED DECISION MAKING

Career planning is not something that can be taken lightly. It is one of the most important decisions in a person's life. Career planning should be started much earlier than we normally think. Though it is not always possible for a young student to foresee where his career may end up but there are some personal traits that can dominate important career decisions. Taking the example of an under-grade student who has just taken bachelors in business may not necessarily know why he has chosen this particular category. Chances are high that he might have been influenced by a family member, friend or a high school teacher. There is nothing wrong in such decisions as long as it does not backfire in the end. It is wise to take an expert opinion while a high school graduate is deciding on which field he should be concentrating to. If we take the example of Bangladesh or India, the dominant career choices people want to make are in the fields of Medicine, Engineering, IT, and Business Administration. These are nothing but people's assumption of a better future/career without considering the core competence of the individual at all. So, the decisions are generally taken on the basis of popular beliefs. A person who might be a great lawyer may be dragged in to a profession where he may not excel in the future. There exists a flaw in the career choice in the very beginning.

Even if we consider that the decisions have been taken proper-

ly, there still remain a lot of pitfalls in right job choice. Before taking any major initial career decision one should follow the process of career planning as closely as possible. Career planning is the process through which individuals identify and implement steps to attain their career goals. There five basic steps in the career planning process: 1. Self-assessment, 2. Investigating career opportunities, 3. Goal setting, 4. Action planning, 5. Evaluation.

**The Career Planning Process**

**Self-Assessment**

Examine personal interests, skills, values, and abilities.

**Opportunity Exploration**

Seek information on available job opportunities from family, friends, online job boards, job fairs.

Examine the skills and abilities required.

**Goal Setting/Reality Checking**

Decide which job/occupational opportunities fit both personal interests and skills/abilities.

Set specific target job objectives for a defined time period.

**Action Planning**

Outline all steps needed to reach a specific career goal— formal training, internships, job search strategy development, network building, further career exploration, etc.

**Evaluation**

Review progress on steps in the action plan, realism of goals, and accuracy/currency of self-assessment.

Revise career plan based on new information

Source: Module 18W, Human Resource Management, Rebecca Ellis, Professor of Human Resource Management, Orfalea College of Business, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, 2009 The McGraw-Hill Companies

**6 Job opportunities in Bangladesh**

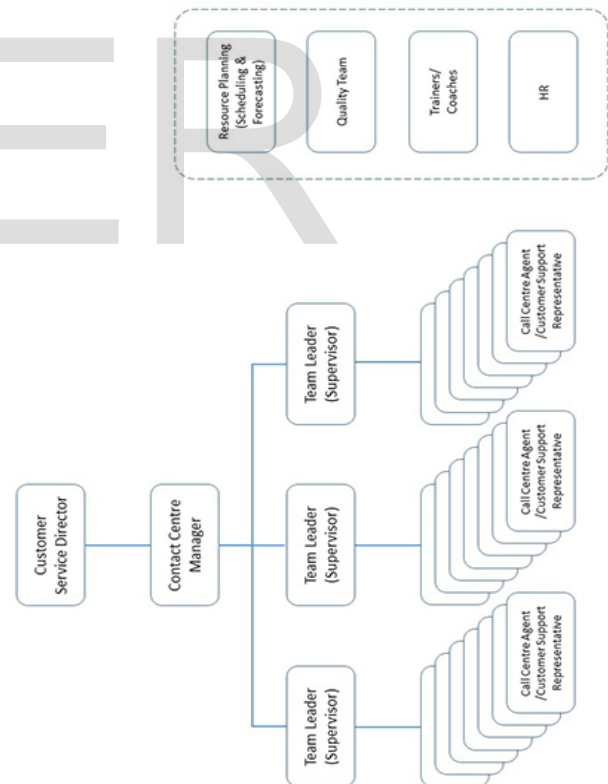
Job opportunities in developing countries are quite narrow compared to countries with better financial capabilities. Developing countries with a larger population makes it even harder for the job seekers to attain a desirable job. In the case of Bangladesh, jobs differ for people with various backgrounds. In the corporate arena, there are opportunities in different disciplines like Marketing, Finance, Engineering, Human Resource Management, General Management, Supply Chain Management and Service Marketing. A large number of employments are taking place in the readymade garments industry in Bangladesh for the last two decades where the entry requirement is different from the corporate jobs and require different set of skills, for example; fashion designing, textile engineering, merchandizing and so forth. In this capacity we shall concentrate our focus mainly on students graduating with business degrees.

Every discipline has its own career dynamics and prerequisites for a successful career. It is very important to land on the right job with the right background so that the career can expect to have a reasonable growth. Though in many cases graduates fail to get the right job as per their career planning and eventually join whatever that has been served on the ta-

ble. Number of new jobs in Technology, Product Development, Finance, Creative and Media are lesser than the opportunities offered in the fields of Sales, Customer Service. For this very reason aspiring graduates join various customer service based organization for a quick fix to their unemployment and it is adequately justified from the candidate’s perspective.

**7 ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF SERVICE BASED COMPANIES**

This will be inappropriate if it is said that service based organizations do not offer career growth. A service based organization or a customer service department in larger company works just same way other departments work. There are many internal sections and units within the departments which offer substantial career growth in the long run. The growth concern is with the positions that are in the entry level dealing direct customers whether face to face or over the phone as call center agents. The following organogram of a call center will give some idea about the scenario we are talking about.



Source: <https://www.callcentrehelper.com/typical-roles-in-a-call-centre-51389.htm>

The figure shows a typical organogram of a call center, the naming of the positions may differ from organization to organization. In the bottom of the structure we see customer representatives or customer agents who deal directly with the customers over phone or in a physical touch point. We observe the number of agents reporting to each supervisor or team leader can be as high as 20 so in a medium sized organization has 100 customer agents working in those positions. The number of the total customer agents varies on the scale of operations of the given department/organization.

In such an organization, career development for the customer service agents working in the bottom line of the organogram is naturally very slim, as there is only one opportunity for an agent who can become a team leader or more optimistically if there is any job opening in any other units within the department or elsewhere. The agents are left with little scope of internal lateral movement as well. A fast growing larger organization has a much better opportunity for lateral movement if their competencies match requirement. Still, these opportunities are hard to come by as there will always be better alternatives for the employer for filling the positions. So, in reality the career development for this front line customer agents are really bleak.

## 8 Drawbacks of staying in the same position for too long

In case of mid level or higher level managerial position it is not always a big risk to be in the same organizational hierarchy for a long period of time as long as the position is rewarding and the portfolio offers substantial opportunity for the employee outside the organization. But unfortunately the same doesn't happen for the front line customer agents who are most often involved in repetitive tasks with very little exposure to other functions of the organization. As employees remain in the organization for longer periods, their benefits tend to grow year by year even with smaller increments. Longer an employee is in an entry level position with higher salaries the lesser his/her chances to be hired by other organizations in similar positions unless he has proved his worth for a better role. This is really a tricky situation for many customer agents as by the time they have earned 4/5 years of experience under their belt they are faced with other practical problems such as family related issues. Most of the entry level employees tend to get married and have a family within 2/3 years after getting job in Bangladesh's perspective. Now they have more responsibility on their shoulders and they are unable to take extra risk to switch to a position which pays less but offers a better career path for the future. Not everyone can take such a decision, or even worse ever gets an opportunity as such. The only option they have is to remain in the position in hope that someday there will be a chance to move forward.

## 9 Worst case scenarios

In this very competitive time of business, the organizations can only survive if they have a big competitive advantage and

keep their aging front line customers agents with hefty payments which is unrealistic for their operational feasibility. The leading telecom operator in Bangladesh, Grameenphone Ltd, once had an internal slogan which echoed the same policy, "Lean, mean, fighting machine!"

No organization wants to operate too heavy and they always tend to shed extra fat from different parts of their organization. Organizations re-structure themselves on a continual basis for the optimum use of their resources, engage third parties for operations that can be outsourced at a lot cheaper rate, offer voluntary retire schemes and so on. In any of these cases the aging front line executives are more often in the line of fire if the organization cannot give any other scope to continue. So, whatever the outcome may be their career is somewhat ruined for good.

## 10 Findings and analysis

We shall look into the career of some potential graduates coming out of from one of the top universities of Bangladesh, and how their career choices have made a major impact in their lives.

### Case-1

When Ms. Sadia first got the chance to enroll in the BBA program of University of Dhaka, which is considered one of the best in Bangladesh, it was a huge achievement. Not only the BBA program but the Finance major she got was fought over thousands of aspirants where one in twenty will get a chance at each available seat. She successfully completed her BBA and MBA from the same university with good grades and also got hired in one of the top mobile operators in Bangladesh. Her job role was to work in the customer service department where she was to attend to the inbound calls in the call center. A very lively and charming person she was well received from all in the organization. After three years into her career she had little to choose from the available roles and she continued with the same. After 3 years the company opened a state of the art physical touch points one of the best in Bangladesh and the company employed the best of its front liners in these positions. Sadia was one of those who were picked in the role of serving customers face to face. She had a little luck when she was given the role of deputy supervisor of the entire team in her touch point. But this role was a functional one and in the organizational hierarchy her benefits remained the same. She had some supervisory capacity deputizing the manager but she also had to continue her role as a front line agent as well. As a finance graduate from a top university this was not something she had hoped to end up in. While her juniors in other roles in the back office continued to grow in the career path she remained the same for another 5 years moving from one location to another. Her annual increment grew, so that was not a problem but her chances of getting a job elsewhere with similar salary were gone. If she had to leave, she had to settle for a much lesser salary which she didn't want. Already a mother of a daughter she was afraid to take any more challenges in a new environment while she already crossed 10 years in that reputed Telecom operator. Her company at one point offered a voluntary retirement scheme with attractive package in the 11<sup>th</sup> year of her career. Like many, the dream of

a flying career was long gone for Sadia, the only motivation she had was to take the extra monetary benefits on top of her regular provident and gratuity funds and say her career goodbye.

### Case:2

Another young graduate, Mr. Zaman coming with a promising track record in the academic arena had joined another Telecom Services based organization and he too got chance in the customer service department. Though his first assignment was not in the call center but it was a back office job where he had to manage clients' activation and deactivation based tasks. These tasks were hugely monotonous as he had to repeat almost the same software based activities for every client with minor changes to the intended packages. After some time, he was transferred to another unit where he had to do digital archiving of customer information for future reference. As it understandable that none of these tasks was significant enough but what a rookie can do about it? In the year of 2006 he joined the front line customer service job in the physical touch point in Dhaka. The managers of the organization spoke highly about the future career potential for the front liners who would join the new fleet. In the long run we would see that those encouraging words were nothing but empty words to attract employees who can serve better their customers. Since then, it has been 10 long years for Mr. Zaman who has been doing the same job, serving customers from the front end. His benefits have increased in a natural manner but there has been no organic growth. He has applied in numerous positions internally and externally for a change in the role or a better position. But till then nothing seems to work. As we spoke to him, the numbers of such employees who are struggling in the same position without any career movement are a lot, roughly 1200. When he was asked about his future plan, he said that he will keep looking for a position inside his current organization or may be relocated in a different area, gather some experience and move out of the company. Already a father of a son, Mr. Zaman finds it even harder to take desperate moves, for example joining in another organization in an entry level position that offers better future. Because, he wouldn't be able to support his family with a lesser income. It seems his career is in a quagmire, slowly but surely it is going down, unless he gets a strong footing elsewhere.

### Case-3

We take another profile of a contemporary customer service agent just like Ms. Sadia and Mr. Zaman. They had the same realities of career choice but very interestingly the outcome was quite different than the previous ones. Mr. Ahmed joined the same organization in 2005 and has been a part of the front line customer service operation till 2007 when he successfully moved to a lateral position in a different department in Customer Lifecycle Management. Though his move didn't gave him any edge immediately but it paid off in the long run. He got his first promotion after 2 years and then on he moved up the career ladder on a regular basis and now in 2016, he enjoys a decent position in the mid-level management and no imme-

diated career threat. This is a great example of a graduate who comes from a different discipline but eventually makes his way in the upper layer of a leading corporate organization where leadership comes most often from the business graduates.

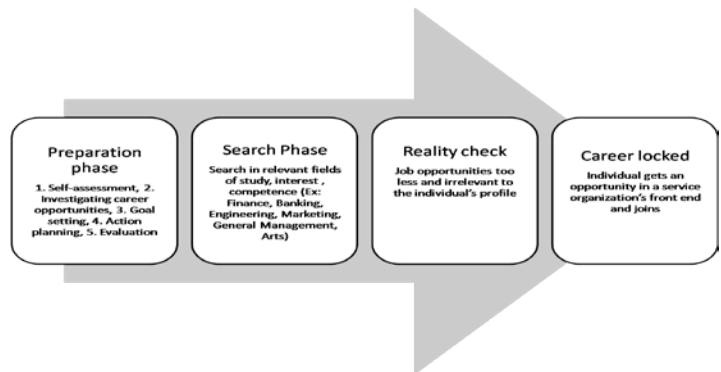


Diagram: Practical phases in career path of a graduate in Bangladesh

As indicated earlier, customer service organizations offer the same level of career development opportunities in some layers or units of the organization, but there is an inherent problem that due to the sheer size of the entry level customer service agents it is not always practically possible to offer career growth opportunities for all. As the competition in any industry is growing bigger and bigger the need for customer centricity is even larger. No organization can willingly ignore the fact that customers are becoming more aware what has been offered to them and what options do they have. But the underlying issue of customer service agents' future remains under addressed.

While organizations are fighting hard to win back a tiny share from the market, the career development plan for all its employees doesn't always comes at the top of the agenda. Given the case studies that have been observed in the above discussion, it is very clear that employees stuck in the same position, a position that doesn't help getting a job outside the organization is a very big mistake from the employee's point of view. It is impractical to expect that the organization will teach them regarding possible career pitfalls which is embodied inside that very organization. It is just very unrealistic to expect!

Employees need to understand their position in the total organization structure and where they may end up in the long run considering all possibilities. Having 100 to 500 front liners in a big/mid-sized organization it is ludicrous to assume all of them will have a fair share of success. Not even 10% of these employees have decent chance to grow and go up the ladder. The situation is even worse in the organizations where company growth is low so that it cannot create new jobs.

If a graduate wishes to grow big in career he needs to properly go through the career planning process and follow it as closely as possible. It is true that reality is much different than whatever that is written in the text books, but one must be aware of his goals and always needs to pursue that even the circumstances are not right. Another issue involving these long timers and under achievers is that, at some point of time they enter a comfort zone where they are unwillingly to get

out of and face the challenges of different dimensions. It is a vicious cycle they enter over time without consciously knowing the after effect. From inside they are dissatisfied with their current job, their paycheck is not so enough but enough for as a livelihood but there is a sense of fear of failure inside their minds which eventually stops them from taking a leap of faith in the unknown.

## 11 CONCLUSION

There is no quick turnaround button for those who have already committed themselves to an entry level position for too long and now facing a situation where they can't find a job internally or externally with a better scope for the future. Those who have got them out of this situation have taken different types of measures. Some have enrolled into some short courses that will give them an entry opportunity to another field of job such as supply chain management, merchandizing in readymade garments industry and so forth. They have taken the risk to start their career afresh without wasting much time in the reputed but less promising customer care jobs.

Realizing the scenario is an important part and letting himself understand that this job is not going to pay off in the long run. People tend to act blind and ignore the fact and at some point of time they have to pay a heavy price for that. Companies do not keep employees whose salaries fall in the positive outlier; meaning someone's salary is higher than the maximum salary offered to a particular job grade. These employees are offered with voluntary or sometime mandatory separation package. This is certainly not a healthy outcome for any individual unless he has figured out what he is going to do afterwards.

In Bangladesh not all educational institutions teach the students how to plan and approach career and job search. Only a handful Universities have a proper focus in this area where students are briefed on career planning and placements. But, whatever the university or the employer does for the student, the whole responsibility of one's career development, falls on the student himself. He has to own and have clear focus on where his career is moving in relation to his skills, capabilities, interests and goals. There should be a clear communication from the educators in each discipline who guide the students for better preparation for their career and manage their expectations. A compulsory credit based course can be offered in the under-grade level which will include self assessment techniques to let students understand which career path they should pursue.

As more and more companies are shifting their focus on third party involvement in their regular operation to reduce costs, call centers, customer touch points are becoming franchise owned. Eventually the pay from such jobs is heavily declining and so does its attraction to potential graduates. In many cases, such call center or customer care points are using current students since they can be hired at a much cheaper rate. Even then company-run customer contact points exist in many organizations. Students and graduates need to make careful evaluation of their role portfolio before committing to these kinds of jobs for a long haul.

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