What's my role?

Role perception issues within a business process outsourcing software company.

MMIM592

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON
Te Whare Wānanga o te Ūpoko o te Ika a Māui

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Submitted to the **School of Information Management,**

Victoria University of Wellington

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Information Management

15 February 2011

Abstract:

Business process outsourcing of IT solutions is a common and well embedded practice in many businesses. There has been much research into the aspects of the relationships between businesses and their BPO IT partners that make these relationships successful. Very little research has, however, been undertaken at the lower level of relationships between the specialist professional groups within the BPO IT firms, and how these relationships are affected by the roles each group plays.

This paper explores these ideas using qualitative research methods within a current BPO IT firm to expose the key issues. Analysis of these themes is provided, and a model of roles and relationships for the professional groups that operate within such firms is proposed that combines the key attributes of the roles, the key relationships involved and the role each group plays within those relationships. Finally, recommendations are made as to the improvement of current practices to align behaviours with the proposed model.

Keywords: BPO, Client-vendor relationship, Information technology professionals, Relationships, Information Systems Outsourcing, Roles

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Section 1: Introduction

As technology continues to expand at an ever increasing rate, so have the layers of people required to develop new applications using this new technology. (Bell, 2009) What would have involved perhaps a group of young enthusiasts working on software in the back of a garage in the early years of IT development may now have a cast of thousands ranging from the hands on coder to the software architect, with a team of professional services encompassing project management, requirements elicitation and testing acting as middlemen. The knowledge required to design and build the ever more complex applications demanded by the business customer is extensive, and the gap between the understanding of the end user and that of the Information Technology (IT) team that built it of 'how it all works' is enormous. Without this gap however, no business would be able to readily use the amazing powers of the technology that IT can provide. The very power of the systems designed and used by business every day lies partly in their ability to be used by everyone regardless of their understanding of its inner workings. (Kawakek & Leonard, 1996) So complex have many of these vital systems become that for most businesses today, designing, building and maintaining them is simply not possible from within the business itself. Outsourcing of these functions is increasingly becoming the norm and with it the rise of the Business Process Outsource IT firm. Business Process Outsourcing has been defined extensively by others as the process of:

"…sourcing of goods and services previously produced internally within the organization from external suppliers. In simple terms, BPO is defined as the movement of business processes from inside the organization to external service-providers. Specifically, BPO involves contracting with one or more BPO service-providers (vendors) for the provision of execution of business process operations as per the client organization's requirements" (Bharadwaj & Saxena, 2009) pg 994

Whilst the explosive rise of the BPO sector has provided a plethora of choice for businesses in general, it has also given rise to a number of issues for both those businesses using them and the BPO

IT firms themselves. One of these issues relating to the confusion of roles within such a BPO IT firm is the subject of this paper.

Opportunity:

There was an issue within the researcher's current workplace whereby software solutions built for customers did not always meet customer needs both now and in the future particularly in respect to the time taken to build such solutions and the features needed within the software. Solutions would be scoped by sales people but ultimately built by software developers.

This presented an opportunity to investigate the causes of this issue and to propose not only a model of how the process currently works, but to make suggestions for improving that process to work better in the future. To that end, this research aimed to produce a model of roles, responsibilities and communication within the outsourcing vendor company which can be tested in further research, and/or adopted to help those involved better understand their contribution to the process.

Problem Definition:

The BPO IT firm used for this research specialises in providing information and communications solutions for customers. Large volumes of this work involve the receipt and processing of data from customers, according to business rules through custom software applications, with the resulting output being printed, enveloped and lodged for postal delivery. Other solutions involve email delivery, document archiving, processing of printed material to an electronic format and provision of software as a service offerings via web portals.

The issue has been identified as one of perception – the different roles within the firm have different ideas on what their roles actually are and what they should or should not do within those roles. This issue occurs when a software solution (encompassing deliverables that will include a required time frame) is sold to a customer without reference to supporting analysis of the issue, recommendations and design. Hence software that is delivered will meet 'someone's' idea of what it should be delivering, but the 'someone' may not be the customer. This requires yet more work to remedy the situation when the delivered solution is found not to meet the customer need when the required time

frame is the key deliverable, this extra work becomes highly emotionally charged and stressful of everyone involved from the developers coding software to the sales people who have to face an increasingly upset customer.

A deal of internal spend is required for this remedial work and this in turn means that other revenue generating work may be jeopardised due to the need to utilise the same people to do both pieces of work. It has been suggested that the solution to this lies in adopting a formal design step into the process of developing such software to ensure that the software is designed to adapt and expand to future customer requirements, however, such a step is already taking place in most cases just not in a formalised way. Those working within the various development teams of the firm have made various suggestions for rectifying the situation but none of these proposed solutions have ever been successfully implemented company-wide; probably because of a lack of buy-in from the other role groups involved with the customer: the Sales teams.

Without definitive research to pinpoint exactly what each group do and what they believe their roles to be, it is difficult to propose a successful solution to this problem. By gathering qualitative data from this study, a solution can be developed that is more likely to succeed and in turn can be offered to other BPO IT firms as a model of successful role definition.

Research Question:

What are the key features of the roles that each of the players (Sales, IT Development, Professional Services and the Customer) involved in a BPO IT software solution should play?

Section 2: Literature Review

Reviewing the current literature available, the majority of research has focussed on the relationships between Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) IT firms and their customers rather than within the BPO firms themselves.

There does not appear to have been a great deal of research done on roles and perceptions within BPO IT companies designing and building software for customers, specifically on what the players of those roles actually believe their roles to be and what they perceive to be the roles of others. The literature appears to take 'as read' that those acting in the various roles within an IT company such as Sales, Development, Architecture, Business Analysis and Project Management understand what those roles entail within the company they work within.

What is evident is that the customers of those BPO IT firms are united in their views on what they expect to be provided. The overriding themes within the literature are 'value' and 'quality'.(Aksoy, 2007)(Bharadwaj & Saxena, 2009)(Haried & Ramamurthy, 2009)(Niranjan & Metri, 2008)(Wijnstra, 2003)

'Value' as a concept is reasonably straightforward for all involved to understand and there are measureable outcomes relating to cost reduction, efficiency and throughput for instance, that can be accurately described and converted to metrics. (Bharadwaj & Saxena, 2009)

Measuring what is meant by quality has been covered extensively by many authors such as (Parasuraman, 1998), (Rust & Oliver, 1994), (Niranjan & Metri, 2008) and (Brady & Cronin, 2001). While there is considerable debate within the literature as to the key components of the service model, there is general agreement that what the customer is demanding is a quality product, whatever the exact definition of that may be found to be.

There are many proposed models available for structuring IT projects (such as Agile, Waterfall, Rational, Six Sigma) (Grant & Mergen, 2009) but the literature does not show a great deal of

information collected about the wider structure of IT firms providing software solutions to their customers – what is available tends to be case studies from an individual firms perspective.

What the literature does show however is that there is a real need to align architecture and design with quality. Much research has looked at the problems of ensuring that what is built is of a suitable quality to do the job for which it was intended. (Davis, 1988)(Keane & Hussak, 1999)(Ovaska, Evesti, Henttonen, Palviainen, & Aho, 2010)(Wijnstra, 2003)

The critical success factors for projects involving BPO IT firms have been well explored and the themes that emerge revolve largely around communication and relationships; be they legal, cultural or contractual. (Haried & Ramamurthy, 2009) Delving deeper into these factors, it is evident that some of them are not easily distilled into a black and white list that can be used to check off vital components within a specific project. In particular, the way in which BPO IT firms and their customers interact seems to have an important influence on the way they view each other; their needs are after all not mutually exclusive and in fact, the relationships are quite symbiotic. (Goles & Chin, 2005) Both customer and BPO IT firm need each other to operate and therefore will bring perhaps much more to the relationship than merely an impersonal legal contract. Interpersonal relationships, obligations and feelings of personal commitment are all important aspects of the ties that bind the organisations together. (Haried & Ramamurthy, 2009) (Goles & Chin, 2005)

Aksoy (2007) points out the differences in the way that suppliers and customers perceive solutions, noting that suppliers tend to view a solution as a bundle of goods and services, whereby customers are more likely to view solutions in terms of relational processes. This may lead to a lack of effective upfront requirements gathering and post deployment support from the supplier as once the solution is in place; the customer order is effectively fulfilled. From the customer's perspective, this is not a delivered 'solution' as, being a process, a solution is not a time bound object. (Aksoy, 2007)

This is contrasted by the perception of customers explored by Mingay et al (1992), who looked at the way customers view the role of the 'IT Consultant' and concluded that consultants on the whole have a poor reputation as being both expensive and detached from the realities of the customers' business.

Perhaps the term 'consultancy' is the issue here – customers need such services to determine solution needs, but are perhaps wary of anyone carrying the title.

Finally, a comprehensive examination of relational exchanges between the parties involved in information system outsourcing by Goles and Chin (2005) provides a model of constructs that is a useful framework for looking at role attributes, particularly where the roles require significant interactions with others to achieve tasks as in the case of BPO IT projects. The key definers of relationships are further delineated into attributes and processes.

Attributes are factors of a relationship that: "…contribute to the functionality and harmony of the relationship." (Goles & Chin, 2005)

Attribute factors defined by Goles and Chin are:

- Commitment – this is the willingness that each of the parties has to the continuation of the relationship.

- Consensus – the level of agreement between the parties of the relationship.

- Cultural Compatibility – this attribute refers to organisational culture and the level to which that of each party is similar to the other.

- Flexibility – the willingness of the parties to adapt and adjust.

- Interdependence – the level to which each party is dependent on the other for success. In other words, the way that each party needs each other.

- Trust – the expectation that each party has that the other will behave in predictable and fair ways.

Processes are the described by Goles and Chin as the means by which the attributes of relationships are developed and achieved. Processes they define are:

- Communication – the exchange and sharing of information.

- Conflict Resolution – the ease or not in which disagreements are resolved and consensuses achieved.

- Coordination – the aligning of interdependencies to achieve tasks.

- Cooperation – this is a more abstract concept than the merely mechanical achievement of coordination. It refers to the way the parties in a relationship undertake activity that will be beneficial to the relationship as a whole and at the same time assist with the achievement of the task.

- Integration – this is probably the highest level of abstraction identified by Goles and Chin. It involves the adoption of many or all of the attributes and processes into the structures that make up the organisations that form the parties to the relationship.

These relationship factors are highly relevant to both the external and internal relationships required of a BPO IT firm when designing and building customer solutions. In the case of this research, an examination of the attributes and processes of the various relationships <u>within</u> the BPO IT firm is valuable in aiding understanding of the way relationships define a portion of the role that each professional group plays within the organisation.

Section 3: Methodology

Research Design:

This was a qualitative study involving the analysis of focus group data gathered from participants. Further insights were gained through the reflection of gathered material back to the participants to enable analysis of the responses to this feedback. Some have argued that distilling generalisations from qualitative research may be of dubious value due to the fact that the focus groups may not comprise a representative sample of the population being studied. (Kelle, 2006) This study's aim was not to provide a comprehensive overview of concepts and opinions within the whole of the BPO IT industry and therefore it is acceptable to take the generalisations made as representative of the ideas and issues within the business that the participants work within or with. Others may find these insights relevant to their own business and hence the research is offered up to those who may find it helpful to make use of it.

Participants in this study were professional individuals, either: employed by The BPO IT firm in a specialist sales role, as Information Technology professionals working within project teams as one or more of: Project Manager, Business Analyst, Test Analyst, Developer, Database Analyst or Infrastructure Analyst, or, representative of the business of a BPO IT firm customer as either a business owner, or solution owner within such a business. Participants from within the BPO IT firm were approached personally and invited to participate. Company support for this project means that individuals were enabled to participate if they so chose, but did not have to participate if they did not wish to. Customer participants were invited by the BPO IT firm CEO who selected those customers he felt were appropriate, with greatest consideration given to their ability to provide constructive and objective input. Of the four customer participants, two had openly acknowledged relationship difficulties with the BPO IT firm.

Participant Background:

To understand fully the context in which the issues addressed by the focus groups occur, the following information is useful.

BPO IT Firm Sales Staff

People employed as sales staff by the BPO IT firm are tasked with liaising with its customers and bringing in the work that generates the company's income. Each salesperson has an assigned portfolio of customers they look after, maintaining relationships and identifying new opportunities for work from those portfolio customers. A few salespeople also have responsibility for identifying and pursuing opportunities with new to the business companies and organisations. Sales staff are remunerated in part, on the basis of new revenue they generate for the BPO IT firm.

BPO IT Firm Professional Services Staff

Professional Services staff are IT professionals from a range of professions (Project Management, Business Analysis, Test Analysis) who work within projects specifying, building, testing and deploying custom software solutions for external BPO IT firm customers. Project Managers are responsible for ensuring that projects are delivered on time and on budget, Test Analysts develop and execute test plans for the software that is built to ensure it meets the specifications that are defined by the Business Analyst (BA). The BA works closely with the Sales team in the initial stages of defining the solution to be built, and then specifies in detail the requirements for that solution. All Professional Services staff are remunerated in part on individual performance measures which relate directly to meeting customer needs.

BPO IT Firm Development Services Staff

Development Services staff are also IT professionals, but their specialty skill is in software development, specifically in the writing of code that actually performs the tasks required within the specifications for the software, written by the BA. Staff employed in this capacity typically have qualifications in Computer Science and/or extensive experience building software on a variety of

platforms and in a variety of computer languages. Many have specialist skills in particular software toolsets used in application development such as SQL, XML, C# or Unix. Because software is always evolving and developing, these staff must continuously update their knowledge and skills to keep up with the requirements of external customers who utilise these new developments.

External Customers

The customers of the BPO IT firm range from government departments through to large, multinational organisations. Although the External Customers are recognised by the companies and organisations they represent, the individuals who act as representatives of these come from a wide range of roles and backgrounds. For some External Customers this may mean that their representative is someone from within their own internal IT departments who relates strongly at a technical level, but for others this person may be someone from within their business whose focus is on managing a business area or strategic focus.

Data Collection:

Four focus groups were established. These comprised:

- a group comprising customers of the BPO IT firm

- a group of sales staff of the BPO IT firm

- a group of professional services staff of the BPO IT firm

- a group of development staff of the BPO IT firm.

These groups met face to face to discuss the research questions.

Data was collected through the audio recording of all focus groups to enable analysis of both verbal and non verbal communication. Recordings were then analysed and information transcribed from participant responses.

Theoretical Framework:

To strive for the impartial observation as part of the proof of our experiments has been a tenet of scientific research since the Rationalist method of scientific investigation was first proposed by the likes of Sir Francis Bacon as long ago as 1600AD. Today it is part of the Western worldview to accept that this approach is what gives us the confidence of knowing and establishing the truth.

If the purpose of research is simply to expand that that is known to be true, it would seem sensible to adopt a positivist approach. The inference is that for something to be proved as a fact that can be added to the totality of humanly known facts, it must be objectively and independently proven. The reality of much of today's research is that at its heart there is a goal of discovering facts that can be applied to the solving of perceived problems and issues that beset society. Much social research falls well within this category, as there is cost involved and for that cost to be justified, some benefit must be perceived. (Baskerville, 2004) Hence the underlying motive for the research will not fit easily into a purely 'knowledge for knowledge's sake' category and a positivist approach may not generate the kind of results that easily translate into new policy and/or clear directives for improving the particular ill that was investigated.

An element of pragmatism seems to enter into the equation at this juncture: not just in the philosophical approach to the research style as suggested by Baskerville and Myers (2004), but grounded in the realities of the daily lives we lead. If research funding and time is granted by an organisation, it is sensible to expect some sort of positive and practical ideas/solutions to emerge from the research conclusions. The logical extension of this is that the reality of today's social research environment demands that researchers align themselves on the Constructionist side of the divide and accept that they themselves are as integral a part of the research process as their subjects. If what we are seeking are solutions to problems, then we must as researchers identify with the problems we are trying to solve – we must in some way acknowledge that there IS a problem that needs solving and that this shall be the point of what we research. (Annas, 2004)

This research was approached from a Constructivist viewpoint whereby it is assumed that the participants in the focus groups have all made sense of what they do and what their roles are based on their personal experiences and interpretations of the world in which they live and work. This approach is necessary to justify why there are differences between the way various individuals approach their roles and responsibilities at work. If a single universally understood definition of each role was available that all subscribed to, the problem that has been identified would more than likely not exist. However, if this were the case, the individual flair and inventiveness that so often is the key to identifying and solving a customer's information management problem would be hard pressed to exist inside the organisational roles played. Understandably too, the previous employment experiences of those contributing to the focus groups will have a large influence on the individual responses and interpretations. All companies have their own identifiable culture and ways of doing things, and exposure to such thing s over a period of time is part and parcel of an individual defining themselves in terms of their work role and their own understanding of that role. What may have made perfect sense in one organisation may be a disaster in another, and hence the individual will have adopted and adapted a range of different ideas throughout their working life through exposure to these differing cultures.

Analysis:

Qualitative analysis of the contents of the audio recordings was performed by analysing the detail of the responses and categorising these according to the themes that emerged. The aim of the analysis was to construct models of the interaction and roles that all groups play in the solution design process. Concepts of relation exchanges as described by Goles and Chin (2005) were used to critically examine the emerging themes.

The interpreted feedback from the three internal BPO IT firm groups was supplied back to all these groups ie. the Sales group got to hear the information from the Development and Professional Services groups etc. By further analysing the responses to this feedback along with the original analysis, a picture of the gaps (if any) in perception of roles and responsibilities was drawn. This analysis formed the basis of the integrated model of organisational roles and responsibilities being drawn from the data analysis.

Section 4: Findings

All the recordings were analysed through transcription of each idea into text followed by identification of recurring points. All the questions asked within the focus groups were open ended, and hence there were no single word answers to any of them that could be metricised for direct comparison. The initial questions inevitably led the groups to discuss a far wider set of ideas than those strictly required by the focus questions themselves. From this discussion, each question was able to be expanded upon within the context of the wider conversation without the questions themselves being put directly to each individual for their definitive individual answer. What emerged through the discussion were recurring ideas that are noted in summarised form below.

BPO IT Firm Focus Group Questions:

Question 1. What *is* your role when approached by a customer for a solution to a business problem? Direct quotes from the participants are included (in italics) to further illustrate the summarised statements.

Development Services Focus Group Summary

- o We aren't approached by our customers. We are approached by our sales staff.
- o Our role is to do as we are told.
- *"We're told what the solution is to be before we build it. We're set up to fail before we start. (There is) no opportunity of answering 'can we do this?' before the 'yes' is told to the customer."*

Professional Services Focus Group Summary

- o To assist the customer by translating their ideas and issues into a quantifiable problem that can be solved.

- o To assist the sales person with the customer by providing technical expertise and analytical thinking.

- *"Our job is to understand what our customer's businesses are all about, to know before they do what they need and to describe the issue exactly. Then we can begin working with the team that will solve the problem by building a solution."*

Sales Focus Group

- o To act as the go-between between the customer and our business.

- o To qualify and quantify the customer's thinking around their problem.

- *"How good are we really at being proactive at identifying our customer's problems? The availability of consultancy is an issue. There is a lack of clear role definition and a mandate for people to do that work."*

Question 2. What *does* your specialist role entail when solving a customer's business problem?

Development Services Focus Group

- o To develop and implement the solution for a customer

- o To translate requirements to the parameters of the toolsets available and to alert when there is a gap

- o To build reusable and repeatable solutions that can be managed by any developer

- o To ask 'why won't it work?'

- *"Do we as a business really know when a job is finished? We have a lack of evaluation processes and lessons learnt as a business. There is a lack of ability to contribute to the evaluation and improvement process due to pressure of incoming work. The next job is always looming even before the last one is finished."*

Professional Services Focus Group

- o To coordinate across multiple parts of the business and with the customer to ascertain the business problem and plan and implement the solution to that problem

- o To ensure that the end solution fits all the requirements including time, cost and quality

- o To assist the development team translate customer requirements into software applications.

- *"I'm not sure I know who the sales people in our business really <u>are</u>. It seems we only see them when there is a problem. We offer opportunities that could be followed up but I don't feel they ever are. I don't get any feedback about my suggestions so I assume they have been ignored."*

Sales Focus Group

- o Providing pricing as fast as possible to the customer for what they ask for.

- o To see opportunities within our customer's businesses and take them on.

- *"I spend a lot of time on realigning customer expectations because we can't deliver what they would like. There is a real dependency on balancing the workload as to how effective we can be. Our customers have difficulty adapting to our changing business just as we are always scrambling to keep up with the changing businesses of our customers."*

Question 3. What *could* your specialist role entail when solving a customer's business problem?

Development Services Focus Group

- o To aid understanding of the value of what we are building for the customer and the other people in the business we work with

- o To design, build and maintain the infrastructure required for the future of the business. We would do this by being part of a team that is at the forefront of what our

> customers are looking for. To help customers by working side by side with them to develop what they need rather than what the y think they want.

> o To undertake research and development into new technologies and ways of using our toolsets so we can have things to offer when our customers ask for them.

- *"The platform improvements list is huge, but the customer projects take priority. The focus is always on billable work over infrastructure development."*

- *"A company mandate is missing for performing the consultancy role and working together as wider teams. "*

Professional Services Focus Group

> o To provide the customer with consultancy services around investigating their issues and proposing appropriate solutions

> o To see opportunities in customer problems and assist with profitable and forward thinking solution proposals.

> o To work in partnership with the customer.

- *"We could be heavily contributing to continuous improvement processes. Currently, the lessons learnt that we observe go into a black hole."*

Sales Focus Group

> o To be a partner with a technical 'wing man' from within our business so the customer gets what the need when they need it.

> o To qualify and quantify the customer's thinking around their problem before the price discussion.

> o To sell solutions that are profitable rather than just revenue producing.

> o To be viewed as a partner with the customer in their business.

- *"We have got to be driven by the market to stay successful. Overcooking process kills our business. What we need is a tight pairing of ourselves with a 'wingman' who can be our*

technical partner in client engagements. A partnership approach among ourselves would mean we could offer that partnership with greater integrity to our customers."

External Customer Focus Group Questions:

Question 1. How do you identify a business problem that will involve using the BPO IT firm as part or all of the solution?

- o They are the end of the chain in a long line of processes. We've worked with them for a long time so they are aware of what is going on for us as it happens. Sometimes they identify when their input is needed before we have realised ourselves.
- o We look for problems where we feel that they can add value and we can't.
- *"Often it is at the end of a process where our own business has been working on the issue for a long time. With hindsight, a lot of the time it would be better to have involved them right from the beginning so constraints are known before development is committed to."*

Question 2. What do you consider the BPO IT firm's role to be in solving that business problem?

- o Being in our business regularly and being committed to building and maintaining a relationship with us.
- o Adding value.
- o Understanding our issues and offering timely and cost effective solutions to those issues.

Question 3. What do you consider your role to be in solving that business problem?

- o Providing the information needed by the BPO IT firm to build the solution.
- o Recognising when we can't solve a problem but need to bring in outside expertise.
- o Controlling the scope of the project from our end where necessary to make sure that we get what we need delivered when we need it.

Key Relationships Identified:

From the identification of these recurring ideas, the common themes were further analysed. The most obvious of these was the connections between the groups particularly where the relationships had been identified as being absent or problematic. Mapping these relationships in the context of the BPO IT firm workflow structure was a logical next step.

In doing so, it is necessary to add to the original mix of groups the Service Delivery team who are an operational group focussing on managing daily production work through the systems created for external customers by the Professional Services and Development Services teams. Their presence effectively mediates the external customers' interactions with the IT systems and infrastructure, and they are intimately linked with the sales teams who look after the same customers from a 'new' work perspective. The Development Services group must maintain a relationship with them also, as production issues and fixes are managed through the Service Delivery Team. The Service Delivery team was excluded from the focus groups chosen due to the nature of their work being focussed not on working with external customers to identify and find solutions for problems, but primarily on managing a factory production type environment using the solutions built. Nevertheless, it is important to note their existence and interaction with the other groups involved in this research as it is another relationship that all the groups must maintain to some degree.

The key relationships identified by all the groups are shown in figure 1. This diagram demonstrates the way the Development Services group are excluded from the triad on the right of Sales, External Customer and Professional Service who all identified that each was a key player in the relationship with the external customer. The Sales group went so far as to state that they viewed the Professional Services group as the conduit of information between themselves and the customer, and the technical end of the business.
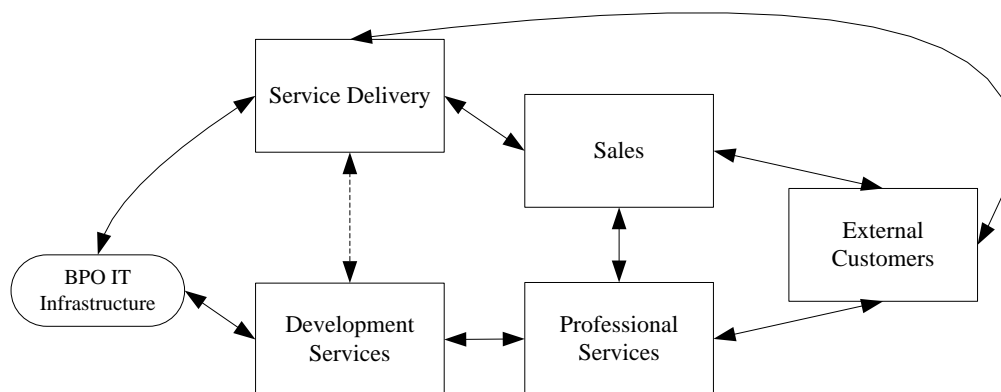
Figure 1: Focus Group Key Relationships

Others have identified the importance of communication and information exchange in the maintenance of successful relationships between customers and BPO firms. (Haried & Ramamurthy, 2009) Establishing and maintaining those links is vital in any kind of software development. Without the open exchange of information between the parties involved requirements are unlikely to be met let alone well defined. In reference to the relationships shown in figure 1, the strongest connections for the Development Services group are with the Professional Services team who are the translation link between customer solution needs and those who will build those solutions, and with the actual IT infrastructure on which those solutions are built and reside. Given that only one of those groups actually has the power of two way communication (IT infrastructure is notoriously lacking in sophisticated communication skills!) this is a very limited communication link for exchanging information with the wider group involved in providing that customer solution.

Examining these key relationships not only from the focus group data but through the lens of

attributes and processes proposed by Goles and Chin (2005) allows an assessment to be made of how

significant or compromised each relationship may be.

Attribute	Internal Relationship Sales, Professional Services, Development Services	External Relationship Sales, Professional Services, Customer
Commitment	Strong between Sales and Professional Services due to performance incentives and the mutual support in facing the customer with a united voice. Weak between these groups and Development Services due to a lack of incentive for Development Services to meet external customer requirements	Strong levels of commitment driven by performance incentives from the BPO IT firm and a desire to get a solution on the part of the customer
Consensus	Weak due to the push-pull factors between the groups that occur because of the issues faced when trying to build a solution without the entire appropriate infrastructure being in place.	Strong drivers for consensus among all parties due to the single focus goal of solving the customer's business problem.
Cultural Compatibility	Strong between Sales and Professional Services due to the shared focus on solving customer problems and being externally facing to the BPO IT firm. Weak in relation to Development Services due to the features of IT developer culture itself.	Strong due to the external focus of all groups and experience on the business to business relationship.
Flexibility	Weak between all groups due to the technical translation gap between Sales and Development Services	Strong drivers for flexibility among all parties due to the single focus goal of solving the customer's business problem.
Interdependence	Strong drivers between all groups as successful outcomes depend on all parties performing their roles.	A strong driver between all parties as each business is dependent on the other and therefore each group's role depends on the performance of the others.
Trust	Weak between all groups as demonstrated by the surprise all groups felt at discovering similar thoughts among all groups.	Strong driver for trust due to the interdependencies of the business and groups.

Figure 2: Comparison of Relationship Attributes as described by Goles and Chin (2005)

Process	Internal Relationship Sales, Professional Services, Development Services	External Relationship Sales, Professional Services, Customer
Communication	Weak and fragmented due to the need for the technical translation between Sales and Development Services.	Moderately strong as the effect of the power relationship of the external customer gives them more of a say in how things are done.
Conflict Resolution	Weak due to the problems with communication and lack of effective drivers for working together on a common focus.	Strong drivers to achieve resolutions due to the single focus goal of solving the customer's business problem and performance incentives.
Coordination	Weak due to the lack of trust and communication issues.	Moderately strong as the effect of the power relationship of the external customer gives them more of a say in how things are done.
Cooperation	Weak due to the role confusion that prevents Development Services being clear about their role, and Sales being faced with technical issues they are not equipped to deal with without the partnership of Professional Services.	Moderately strong as the effect of the power relationship of the external customer may tilt the balance in their favour, however, with customers who have a long involvement with the BPO IT firm this will be strong.
Integration	Weak due to a lack of shared vision, motivation and management mandate.	Strong as the outsourcing of essential business processes of the external customer integrates their processes totally with the BPO IT firms'.

Figure 3: Comparison of Relationship Processes as described by Goles and Chin (2005)

Further Themes:

After examining the key relationships in depth, four other themes emerged from the data. These were:

- The type of information to be communicated by each group towards the other groups

- The focus of the role of each group

- The partnerships that each group has with the other groups that are needed to get the job done

- The incentives each group perceive they may or may not have to ensure external customer focussed delivery. This last is only relevant to the BPO IT firm itself.

Here are all the themes found presented in summary:

|	Key Relationships	Communication	Role Focus	Partnerships	Perceived Incentive for External Customer Focussed Delivery
Sales	Between the business and the customer	Qualify and quantify the customer business needs	Single – customer needs	Customer and Professional Services	Financial and direct customer feedback
Customers	Between the business and the external IT company	Enunciation of business needs	Single – own needs	Sales and Professional Services	N/A
Development Services	Between the software and the business	Translation of technical requirements into actual software	Dual – customer solutions and infrastructure capability	Professional Services	None perceived due to lack of external customer contact
Professional Services	Between the business and the customer	Translation of business needs into technical requirements	Single – customer needs	Customer and Sales and Development Services	Financial and direct customer feedback

Table 1: Focus Group Key Themes

The greatest surprise from the focus group data was the finding that there is not a uniform view across all the groups as to whom or what constitutes the 'customer'. Whilst the external customers themselves are in no doubt that they are the customer being talked about, within the BPO IT firm itself there was not general agreement despite repeated references to 'customer focus', or 'the customer'. The Sales group were unanimous in describing the 'customer' as the external business contracting the BPO IT firm's services but the professional and development services groups talked about a concept of the development services group being an internal 'customer' to the BPO firm itself.

This can be represented in diagram form as below where the red lines represent a triad of external customer relationships and the blue identify the internal customer triad:
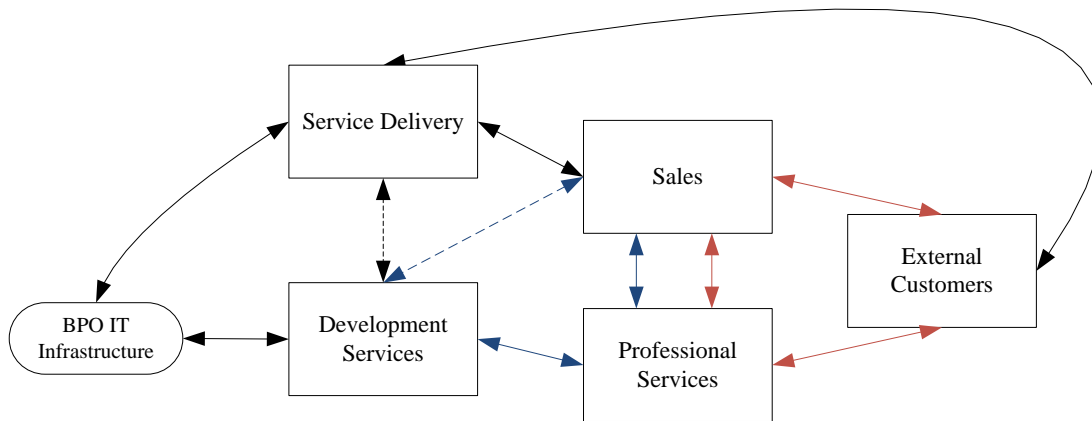

Figure 4: Customer Relationships both Internal and External

The concept of the essential triad of customer, consumer and vendor has been previously well described by Niranjan & Metri, (2008) and can be expanded to include the BPO IT firm/external customer relationship. Niranjan & Metri conclude that the weakening of any of the links between the three players results in the destabilising of the entire relationship and the triad falling apart. Figure 5 shows the externally focussed triad of those involved in defining the customer's business problem.
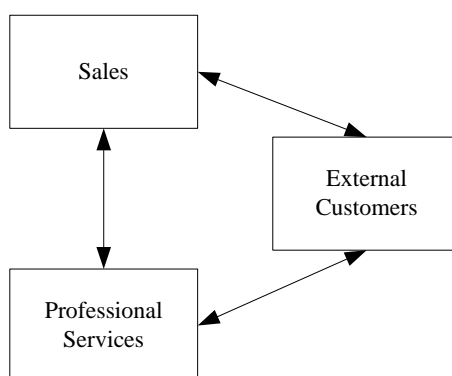
Figure 5: The Essential Definition Triad

This relationship triad is all very well for establishing a clear understanding of what the customer's business problem actually is but is hardly helpful in moving on to define what the solution to that problem might be. To do this another strong triad is required.
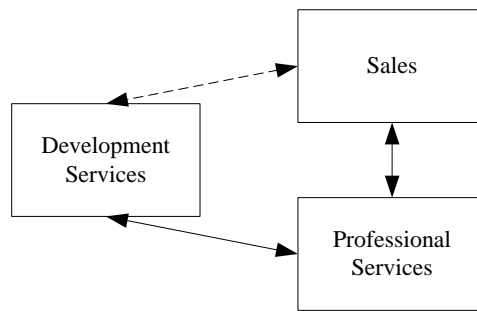
Figure 6: The Essential Solution Triad

Figure 6 shows the internally focussed triad that is involved in defining what the solution to the customer's business problem will be. The connection between the Sales group and the Development group is represented by a dotted line to indicate that although this is a legitimate relationship, there is a degree of distance between these two groups brought about by a lack of shared technical understanding. That understanding is provided by the Professional Services group who serve as a bridge between the two and tie the team into a whole. As can be seen in figure 2, the Professional Services group effectively provides a bridge not only between the Sales group and the Development group, but also between the two relationship triads themselves. In any disagreements or disputes, they are effectively placed in the position of United Nations delegation to broker a peace treaty!

Focus Group Reflection Review:

The summarised answers to the three focus questions were presented back to the groups from the BPO IT firm only, along with the summarised external customer group answers also. Each group were shown the answers of the other three groups and asked for their feedback on the answers given.

Group	Responses Viewed for Feedback			
	Sales & Service	Professional Services	Development Services	External Customers
Sales		●	●	●
Professional Services	●		●	●
Development Services	●	●		●
External Customers				

Figure 7: Focus Group Feedback

All the groups expressed surprise at the alignment of every group's thoughts around what their roles <u>could</u> be.

Two further important ideas emerged from these reflective sessions as a result of the original participants hearing and responding to the thoughts and themes of the other groups. These were:

- All the groups appear to be aligned in terms of the vision they have for their roles; what is mentioned by all is a desire for partnership with customers and collaboration with each other.

- All the BPO IT firm groups stated that they felt they needed a company mandate to start the process of breaking down the communication and collaboration that they identified currently exist. There is consensus that each group knows there are things they need to do to work better with each other, but do not feel they have permission to make the changes necessary.

Sales Focus Group Feedback

Discussion focussed on ideas of coming together as a wider team to improve understanding and customer outcomes. It was noted that within the individual teams, shared vulnerabilities improve performance through honesty and everyone gets more out of their work when they know each other better as they feel more confident communicating. The group were unanimous in noting that the same messages were being spoken by all groups – partnership, sharing and process improvement.
"There is a big divide between 'them' and 'us'. We want a management mandate for bridging the gaps between the groups."

Development Services Group Feedback

This group discussed the concept of customer focus extensively. They agreed that for most of their colleagues in the wider Development Services team facing customers regularly, particularly if having to give bad news was not something that they felt comfortable doing. They noted that external customer partnerships and consultancy was well up stream of their work, and that in fact for themselves, the customer they thought most about was actually the end consumer (the external

customer's customer) as this is who would ultimately be the recipient of the products of their work. A surprising observation was that the Sales team hadn't indentified the somewhat obvious part of their role from a commercial perspective – making sales, but had instead focussed on the parts of the role dealing with relationships.

"What we need to feel comfortable that we are helping customers is to know that resource of the right kind will be available at the right time so that developers won't have to chop and change the work they are focussing on or have constant priority calls made on their time. It s really hard to be productive when you can't focus on one job at a time."

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Summary of Professional Services Group Feedback

Discussion focussed on the degree of alignment between the answer to question three, 'What *could* your specialist role entail when solving a customer's business problem?' There was general agreement that the lack of focus on a road map for the future proofing of infrastructure was a common thought within the Professional services team as well as the Development Services team and that not having the right information at the right time caused problems to occur.

"We're all talking the same language but not connecting with each other."

Section 5: Analysis and Recommendations

Areas of Commonality:

Despite the differences in response between the groups to the same questions, there were in reality a significant number of commonalities. If the confusion over who the 'customer' is in each of the relationships is put aside, all groups mentioned the goal of solving customer's problems and gaining satisfaction from so doing. All groups except the Development group identified that their roles had a single focus – the customer's needs. Both the Sales group and the Professional Services group stated that working in partnership with each other was what they desired, seemingly unaware that the other was thinking the same thing. The Customer group also identified the desire to work more closely with the BPO IT firm representatives which are those that they have contact with - the Sales group and the Professional Services group as the outcomes from projects where this approach was taken were viewed as more successful.

Recommendation 1:

> *That BPO IT firms ensure that clear definitions of the role of the BPO IT firm as a 'customer' of the Development Services team are agreed and understood by all so as to enable customer focus to be a key role component of all groups.*

Areas of Divergence:

Perhaps the single most important point of divergence was in the identification of the dual role of the Development Services group. This is in striking contrast to the other groups and is born out in the data as the root cause of much frustration and conflict. The requirement of the role to focus dually on customer solutions and the upcoming infrastructural development required to support those solutions generated more identifiable comments than any other key theme identified. The need for a separation of these activities within a mature IT organisation has been identified by many researchers in the field. Without a sound infrastructure with clearly defined capabilities and a widely published future direction strategy, a BPO firm will struggle to keep up with matching customer demands to the available technology. (Zannier, Chiasson, & Maurer, 2007)

Recommendation 2:

That the role of the Development Services team within a BPO IT firm should be divided into two distinct roles to enable members to focus their energy and skills on a single task – either: infrastructure improvement and future development or: providing customer solutions built on currently available platform infrastructure.

Negative Comments:

Within the BPO IT firm focus group discussions there was much mention of a lack of understanding from each of the other teams as a reason for problems to emerge as frequently as they do. This was particularly marked towards the Sales group. The following graph illustrated the negative comments recorded about one group by another.
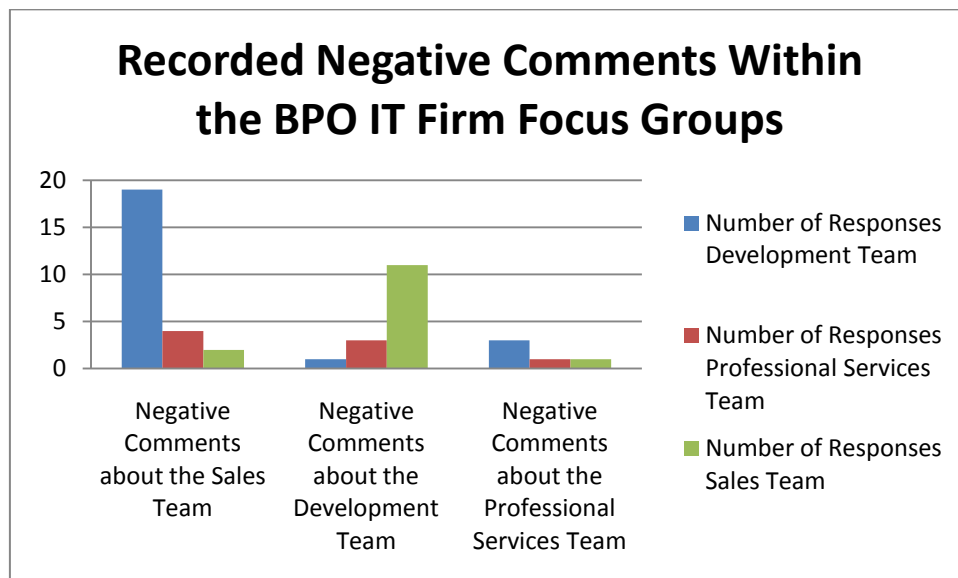
Figure 8: Negative Comments by Focus Group

This is of concern in relation to the previously described importance of the strong triad between these groups in maintaining clear communication and information exchange for successful outcomes. Clearly, improving communication and understanding between the groups is a real need.

Recommendation 3:

That BPO IT firms develop strategies to strengthen the ties between the internal BPO IT firm groups to enable clear communication and information exchange to occur.

To effect this recommendation further development of the ideas of commonality between the groups may be useful in helping them to define more clearly the roles that individually they play as described by recommendation 1.

The Research Question Reviewed:

To return to the original question posed:

What are the key features of the roles that each of the players (Sales, IT Development, Professional Services and the Customer) involved in a BPO IT software solution should play?

From the data collected and analysis performed, a possible model has emerged that describes the essential features of the roles involved that must be present to avoid the conflicts and issues identified.

	Key Relationships	Communication	Role Focus	Triad Partnerships	Who is the Customer?
Sales	Between the business and the customer	Qualify and quantify the customer business needs	Single – customer needs	Customer and Professional Services	The external customer
Customers	Between the business and the external IT company	Enunciation of business needs	Single – own needs	Sales and Professional Services	I am!
Development Services – Customer Solutions	Between the software and the business	Translation of technical requirements into actual software	Single– customer solutions	Professional Services and through the mediation of Professional Services, the Sales team	The BPO IT firm represented by the Professional Services team as a bridge to the external customer
Development Services - Infrastructure	Between the software and the business	Translation of both business and technical requirements into actual software	Single - infrastructure capability	Professional Services and through the mediation of Professional Services, the Sales team	The BPO IT firm represented by the Professional Services team
Professional Services	Between the business and the customer	Translation of business needs into technical requirements and vice versa	Single – customer needs	Customer and Sales and Development Services	The external customer

Figure 9: Role Essential Features

Alongside these identified key features must lay a more detailed look at the key relationships these features suggest. Extending the previous relationship diagram shown in figure 4, below is a graphical depiction of these key relationships within the proposed role features.
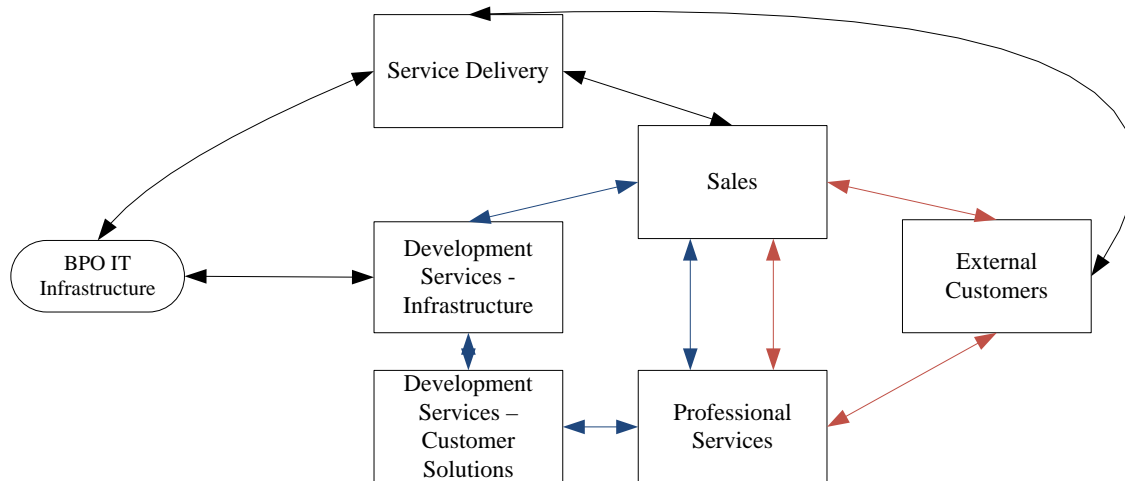
**Figure 10: Proposed Key Relationships Model**

Blue lines again represent the internal relationships but now the Development Services group has two distinct sub groups each with their own set of key relationships. The addition of the Infrastructure role has meant that Customer Solutions can become a role in its own right and has a key relationship with both Professional Services and now the Infrastructure focussed group also. The Sales relationship with Development Services is focussed on transmitting the emerging ideas of external customers rather than mixing these with that part of Development Services focussing on customer solutions of today.

Red lines again describe the external facing relationships as previously shown in figure 2. Black lines relate to the operational part of the business that must either manage production, or enable the framework for production to be built on as for example must be done when a new customer solution requires infrastructural hardware and software to be introduced or a customer's data requires processing through an existing application.

Defining the Customer:

One final piece of the model is required to complete the picture. This is to address the issue of who the 'customer' is for each of the groups.

There are three situations for which 'who is the customer' must be described. Figure 9 show the situation where Sales and Professional Services are engaged with an external customer. This is an outwardly facing engagement and is shown with a red line as before. Here it is clear that the 'customer' (shown in green) is the external customer; a role that is straightforward to define by the nature of their interaction with the BPO IT firm itself. If they are external to the firm; they are an external customer.
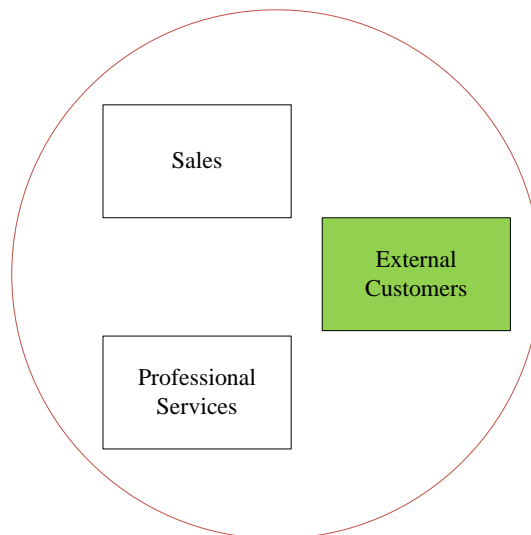
Figure 11: The External Relationship Customer

The other two situations involve inward facing relationships involved in either designing and building a customer solution, or exchanging information about what future infrastructure will need to support in the way of customer solutions. These are inwardly facing engagements and are outlined with a blue line as before.
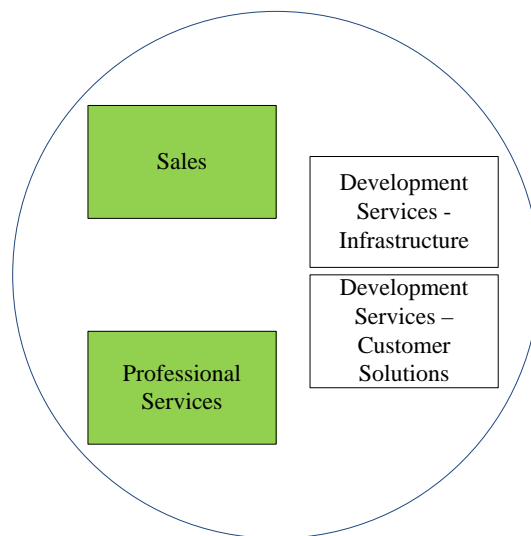
Figure 12: The Internal Relationship Customer

In both these situations, the 'customer' relationship is more complex than in the externally focussed arrangement. This is due to the technical divide between Sales and Development Services necessitating the mediation layer of Professional Services to act as 'translator' between the technical and non-technical. Despite this need for translation, the concept of 'who is the customer' is much clearer for either of the Development Services roles, as they only have to concentrate on interactions within the BPO IT firm itself and being internal, known people rather than dealing with the extra complexity that is the external customer and their business needs. It also makes clear who the internal 'customers' need to interact with to get things done.

Working through an example helps to illustrate this. Imagine that a Sales person has just visited an external customer who is expressing a desire to purchase a solution that involves components that the Sales person is not sure are currently supported. By approaching the Development Services-Infrastructure role (who understand current capabilities having built them themselves) they can check this out and perhaps initiate a piece of work to get the required components built. They may have involved the Professional Services team in the external customer engagement to ensure that all the technical details were captured correctly.

Meanwhile the same Sales and Professional Services people have been working with another customer for whom a solution has now been defined. This solution is being built by the Development

Services – Customer Solutions team using current infrastructure. Having defined the solution, the individual from Professional Services is working with that development team to ensure what gets built meets the required business need of the external customer.

In each scenario, 'who is the customer' is clear because the key attributes and relationships of that role are well known and therefore the individuals know how to interact with each other because they understand the roles that they are playing in each instance. With no role confusion, the expectation would be that communication is clearer, information is more easily exchanged, and all involved can get on with the job in hand more efficiently.

Section 6: Conclusion and Limitations

This study is of significance for all BPO IT firms providing customer IT solutions, as customer satisfaction levels, quality of product and possibly future sales opportunities are all affected by how well an organisation understands and delivers to the needs of its customers. (Bharadwaj & Saxena, 2009)

Because of the highly technical nature and the large cost of many IT solutions built and delivered for customers, there is a need for clear understanding of what is actually needed and required and hence an alignment of the perceptions of all involved in deciding on the solution to be delivered.

The benefits are potentially threefold: more efficient working of all parts of the organisation towards the common goal (making money), more satisfied customers (happy customers) and finally, a more satisfied workforce delivering the solutions (happy staff).

By investigating the relationships between the various roles involved in these types of projects and presenting a model of roles, focus, responsibilities and communication, it is hoped that those involved will better understand their contribution to the process and therefore improve the outcomes for customer IT solution projects. Clear role definitions are a solid foundation for establishing further incentives for improving outcomes; without a clear role definition, establishing suitable, achievable and measurable key performance indicators by which an individual's performance within the role they are assigned is not an easy task. And without goals to strive for it is all too easy for staff to become demoralised and unfocussed. A clear answer to the question 'what's my role?' provides every individual worker with the information they need to be able to focus on the job in hand and in that way, help to achieve an organisation's wider business goals.

Limitations:

For the purpose of this research, no debate over the definition of what constitutes a 'quality' product was entered into. It was assumed that to be deemed a quality product, it met customer requirements. This presents an opportunity for further research exploring the synergies and conflicts of ideas among the various professional groups within the BPO IT firm as to what they understand 'quality' to mean

in relation to the products they build for customers. It would be useful to have this insight alongside the current conclusions to perhaps enable a more detailed model of the perceptions of the various groups involved. Discussion over individual characteristics of those suitable to fill the roles required was also deliberately avoided. Such discussion should be confined to those who have responsibilities for the filling of those roles. The research purpose was to investigate the key features of the roles only, and not the features of the individuals who should perform those roles.

Further Research Possibilities:

This research convened focus groups from within the head office of the BPO IT firm however there are regional branch offices which also have Sales and Professional Services staff. A useful further line of research is suggested that would involve running focus groups for these two groups within both the branch offices and then undertaking a comparison analysis. It may be found that certain issues relate specifically to specific teams and locations.

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Appendix

Focus Group Questions

1. **BPO IT firm staff questions (identical for both focus groups)**

   1. What is your role when approached by a customer for a solution to a business problem?

   2. What *does* your specialist role entail when solving a customer's business problem?

   3. What *could* your specialist role entail when solving a customer's business problem?

2. **BPO IT firm customer questions**

   - How do you identify a business problem that will involve using the BPO IT firm as part or all of the solution?

   - What do you consider the BPO IT firm's role to be in solving that business problem?

   - What do you consider your role to be in solving that business problem?