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CAPACITY BUILDING POTENTIAL OF THE CALL CENTER SECTOR IN TURKEY

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Culture, Cohesion and Competitiveness: Regional Perspectives”

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Capacity Building Potential of the Call Center Sector In Turkey

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Abstract

Companies that adopted plain organization model in today's competitive environment procure phases and processes that do not create value from out of company. This way, company is able to reduce costs, have greater focus on its primary business, increase productivity, and make connections between different labor markets. As a result, relationships between suppliers and buyers become increasingly more important and new companies, which split out from large companies, enter to the market.

Also new business types emerge in service sector in parallel to transition to plain production. One of these new business types is call centers. Now taken out of company, call centers are moved to underdeveloped areas where costs are lower. In discussions in the literature, call centers are considered as an opportunity for economic growth of underdeveloped areas. However, use of perimeter labor force in call centers is seen as a significant restriction for this development. In this context, main research question of this statement is whether call centers operating in Turkey have the potential to develop labor force capacity.

The purpose of this statement is to discuss whether call centers are the correct and long term investment for underdeveloped areas in terms of their potential to contribute to development of local labor force capacity. In this scope, as a method, surveys were made with employees of two call center companies. Employees were asked 20 questions based on 5-response Likert Scale to measure their willingness to continue call center work and to develop their capacities. Whether there were any variances depending on the level of education, company type, gender and company type were revealed using statistical analysis methods.

1. Introduction

Companies that adopted plain organization model especially since 1980s have begun procuring phases and processes that do not create value from other companies. The purpose here is to reduce the costs while being able to use cheap labor without having to employ people that are not necessary on continuous basis (Scott, 2004; George, 2006; Eraydın, 1992). While professionals of vocations that produce relatively more information work in central works, unskilled labor work at in perimeter works (Gatrell, 1999). While central works remain in developed countries, perimeter works have been moved to developing countries, where the costs are lower (Özkalp ve Sungur, 1997; Feser, 2003). Thus, choosing different

geographical locations for central and perimeter works has brought about spatial differentiation of labor force (Massey, 1995; Bishop vd., 2003).

With the presence of information and communication technologies (ICT), workplaces have the advantage of technologies that enable transfer of data over electronic networks. Many organizations are becoming more complex, more decentralized, and more network-oriented (Richardson vd., 2000). This helps companies to broaden their geographical coverage and companies in the perimeter to penetrate to new markets.

Another type of labor that emerged with the growing use of contractors in service sector is call centers. Call centers are noteworthy as a sector that rapidly grows in parallel to companies focusing more and more on customer's demands and expectations (Strandberg ve Wahlberg, 2007; Carrim vd. 2006). Call center is defined as one of the back office works where nonphysical consumer relationships (i.e. telephone, internet, fax, etc.) are offered from a single central location. Most important factors in companies' choosing a location for call centers are lower costs, broader labor market, and presence of an advanced telecommunication infrastructure. While call centers were established in developed areas at first, with increasing costs in developed areas, companies have begun moving their call center branches to underdeveloped areas (Richardson ve Marshall, 1999; Richardson vd. 2000; Breathnach, 2000; Bristow vd., 2000; Richardson ve Belt, 2001; Benner, 2006).

Call centers, which are very labor intensive, is seen as a power that can solve the unemployment problem of underdeveloped or rural areas (Breathnach, 2000; Richardson, vd. 1999; 2000; 2001; 2003; Richardson ve Gillespie, 2003; Beekman vd., 2004). Nevertheless, career opportunities remain to be problem (Richardson ve Belt, 2001 Richardson et al (2000) are suspicious about the significance of establishing call centers in less popular areas. They assert that call centers cannot be seen as a general solution for these areas and that over confidence on the employment opportunities in this sector would be dangerous. Based on their researches where they studied call center sector and call centers that chosen locations in less popular areas of United Kingdom, authors assert that call center works are typically simple, routine and wages are low, and that the opportunities to gain new skills for employees were limited (Richardson, vd. 2000; Richardson ve Gillespie, 2003). Problems that are likely to emerge eventually were enounced to be that less popular areas becoming locations that provide service to developed markets, that internet and other technologic advancements to replace telephone conversations, thereby posing the danger of reduced employment opportunities in call centers (Richardson vd., 2000; Richardson ve Belt, 2001).

Call centers sector is a new and developing sector for Turkey. Therefore, there hasn't been enough time for observation of the sector with its surroundings and for measuring its potential impacts on the place and on regional development. However, it is possible to have some hints and discuss certain scenarios by analyzing the structures of companies, as they are important players in terms of sector and regional development. A considerable part of regional development literature emphasize the importance of improving the capacity of labor force since 1990s. Accordingly, sector has to develop local labor force capacity, begin learning process in the region, and trigger other companies (other sectors) so that regional development can be achieved. In this context, main research question of this statement is whether call centers operating in Turkey have the potential to develop labor force capacity.

3. Call Centre Sector in Turkey

Call centers and their importance begun to be widely heard after 2000s in Turkey. While call centers were locations, where simple telephony services were provided at the beginning, they became units that have the purpose of maintaining customer satisfaction at maximum level after 2000s. There are 850 call centers in Turkey according to 2007 data. 27.1% of call centers serve in manufacturing sector, 16% in finance (banks, insurance, other finance) and

wholesale/retail sectors. The rest serves in sectors such as logistics and transportation, tourism, health, outsourcing (İMİ, 2008).

Turkey's call center heart is Istanbul in terms of both number of companies and number of employees. However, companies that can no longer afford increasing costs of Istanbul, have begun to open new branches in underdeveloped areas since 2005. One of the most important characteristics of call centers is the increase in employment figures in parallel to increased customers and service figures. Consequently, it has potential for rapid growth. This resulted in companies, which concentrate in Istanbul in Turkey, to contribute the growth in provinces other than Istanbul (Erzurum, Erzincan, Diyarbakır, Sivas, Gümüşhane, İzmir, Ankara). In other words, while Istanbul is the place of birth of the company, provinces other than Istanbul are where a company grows.

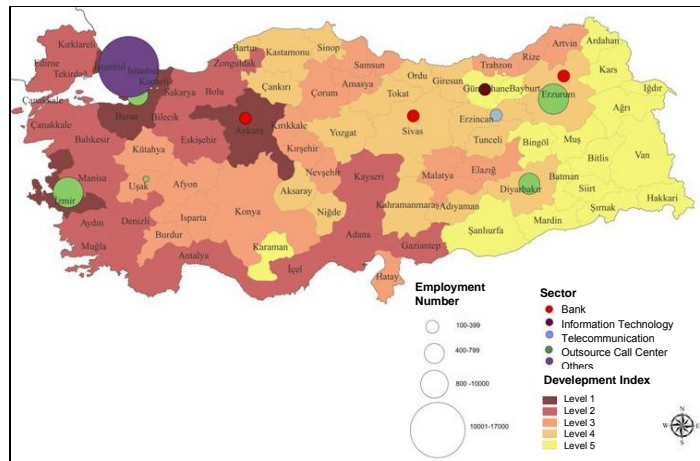


Figure 1: Sector distribution of call centers in Turkey (number of employees)

4. Research Method and Findings

This statement studies the profile of those who are employed in call centers and whether their perspective for this profession differ. Two call center companies based in Istanbul and have call center branches in underdeveloped provinces of Turkey are discussed. Surveys were made with employees that work in Istanbul as well as those who work in branches in other provinces. At 95% confidence range and 5% error margin, total of 620 surveys were conducted (187 surveys with company 1 and 433 surveys with company 2). Application took place between December 2008 – March 2009. SPSS 15 software was used for purpose of statistical analysis. 20 questions, based on 5-response Likert Scale (fully agree, somewhat agree, indecisive, somewhat disagree, fully disagree), were asked to employees to measure their outlook on call center work. Correspondence, anova, decision tree analysis were carried out using the data obtained from survey results and following hypothesis were tested:

H1: Outlook on call centers differs depending on the education level.

H2: Career expectations at call centers differ depending on terms of employment.

H3: Outlook on call centers differs depending on gender.

H4: Outlook on call centers differs depending on the company.

General Characteristics of Workforce

66% of the employees subjected to survey were women while 34% were men; 80.7% were in 23-32 age group, 69% have made another job application before their current jobs, 19% of those who made another job application previously have sought employment opportunities in

call center sector. In review of terms of employment in call centers, it was seen that nearly 60% have worked in call center sector for 1 to 3 years. In review of the total term they were planning to continue in this work, it was seen that 25% wanted to work on this profession for a long term (8% until retirement and 17% for 11 to 20 years). 58% of the employees stated that they wanted to progress their career and eventually have management positions in the call center sector. On the other hand, 21% of those who were surveyed wanted to work in the same company in a department other than call center. Future career objectives of employees are twofold. While a great majority of employees wanted to continue this work in the future as well, another group wanted to relocate to another unit in the company. It is safe to assert that the latter group see call centers as a stepping stone to career in the company and not as a long-term employment opportunity. In review of the employees on basis of vocations¹, it was seen that people from various vocations were employed in call centers. In other words, specialization is not a requirement for employment at a call center. 50% of the employees used their vocational knowledge in their communications with the customer, 18% in sales techniques, 18% in understanding technical terminology, 4% in using computer programs, 4% in invoice calculations, and 2% in correct intonation. An example for areas where vocational knowledge were put in use: those of public relations, psychology and alike said that their educational background were useful in aspects such as empathizing with the customer and understanding customers' psychology during a phone conversation, those who had an academic background on computers have said that their vocational knowledge was useful in system use, while those who studied accounting-related disciplines have said that their academic background were useful in preparation and follow up of customer invoices.

All of call center employees have received vocational training prior to their beginning to work. Term of these training differed depending on the company and employee. 21% of employees have received 4+ weeks of training, 50% have received 4 weeks of training, 12.2% have received 3 weeks of training, 5% have received 2 weeks of training. 72% of employees have received revival training after beginning to work. These trainings were for introduction of a new product or for provision of a better service on the telephone. In review of these trainings in terms of their benefits for personal development, 83% of employees believe that trainings were beneficial for having a managerial position in the call center, i.e. making career progress, 17.6% believe that they were beneficial for relocation to another unit, and 8.9% believed that they were beneficial for establishing a call center company.

Call center employees were asked to comment on the level of their agreement to 20 opinions on basis of 5-response Liker Scale and responses given for each opinion were evaluated as follows (Chart 5.7): Subjects with greater level of agreement: "I am gaining new skills in call center work" (86.4%), "I love call center work" (83.9%), "I believe I have high chance of career advancement in this sector" (79.3%), "I believe call center work is a great advantage for students" (75.3%), "I am satisfied with the physical atmosphere of the workplace (seating layout, illumination etc.)" (70.8%), "I have the chance to make use of all my skills and competences in my work" (66.2%), "I want to continue my career in call center sector" (65.2%), "I received appreciation from my relatives and associates after starting to work in this job" (62.1%), "call center work is a stepping stone for relocating to another position" (54.9%), "I am satisfied with my office hours" (49.3%), "I don't want to work as a customer representative for a long term" (41.3%), "prolonged employment at call center would negatively affect my health" (39.4%). Subjects with greater level of disagreement: "Anyone can handle call center work" (77.3%), "I believe call center work is too monotonous"

¹ Archeologist, astronomer, banking and insurance, computer programming, press and publication, biologist, secretary, labor economics and industrial relations, pedagogical development and education, economics, human resources, business management, public administration, accounting, teaching, public relations, engineering, technician, sales and marketing, tourism and hotel management, accounting and those of no vocations

(72.1%), “I wouldn't work in call center if I had another employment opportunity” (53.2%), “I want to work in a different job relating to my profession” (46.4%), “I begun attending greater number of social activities (cinema, theatre, etc.) after I started this job” (45%), “my wage is enough to make a living for me” (34%).

Assessing Variances on Basis of Education Level

Bonferroni and correspondence analysis were carried out to measure how the desire for continuing call center work and making a career in this profession differed. Bonferroni analysis results reveal that following are the opinion that have significant variance among the high school and university graduates at 95% confidence: “I believe I have high chance of career advancement in this sector”, “I want to continue my career in call center sector”, “I wouldn't work in call center if I had another employment opportunity”, “I want to work in a different job relating to my profession”, “I am gaining new skills in call center work”.

In review of correspondence analysis results, it is evident that those who responded 1 - 2 (fully disagree, disagree) to questions “I believe I have high chance of career advancement in this sector”, “I want to continue my career in call center sector”, and “I wouldn't work in call center if I had another employment opportunity” were university graduates, those who responded 4 - 5 (fully agree, agree) were high school graduates; those who responded 4 – 5 (fully agree, agree) to question of “I want to work in a different job relating to my profession” were university graduates, and those who responded 1 - 2 (fully disagree, disagree) were high school graduates.

In review of bonferroni analysis results in addition to correspondence analysis results, call center work is a temporary occupation for university graduates. While university graduates desire to work in a job that is relevant to their vocation, high school graduates do not agree on this opinion. It is safe to assert that university graduates do not want to continue their career in call center sector while high school graduates think that they have chance to make career advancement and want to continue their career in this sector. While call center work is a work where high school (and inferior school) graduates can have new skills, university graduates find call center work to be monotonous.

In other words, university graduates and postgraduates do not want to work in call center work for a long term, do not acquire new skills during their employment in call centers, and wish to work in a job that is related to their vocation. Therefore, university students regard call center work as a temporary occupation. On the other hand, high school (and inferior school) graduates think differently than university graduates and postgraduates and wish to continue their employment at call centers.

Table 1 –Variances on Basis of Education Level

Among HIGH SCHOOL , Elementary school, high school, vocational high school) graduates and university (university, postgraduate) graduates	“I believe I have high chance of career advancement in this sector”	High school and inferior 4,25, university and higher 3,98, sig: 0,005
	“I want to continue my career in call center sector”	High school and inferior 4,03, university and higher 3,49, sig: 0,000
	“I wouldn't work in call center if I had another employment opportunity”	High school and inferior 2,33, university and higher 2,66, sig: 0,003; High school and inferior 2,33, junior college 2,58, sig: 0,042
UNIVERSITY graduates, than high school graduates	“I want to work in a different job relating to my profession”	High school and inferior 2,57, university and higher 2,88, sig: 0,006; junior college 2,54, university and higher 2,88, sig: 0,007
HIGH SCHOOL graduates and university graduates	“I am gaining new skills in call center work”	High school and inferior 4,27, university and higher 4,02, sig: 0,004

Assessing Variances on Basis of Gender

As per the results of One Way ANOVA analysis at 95% confidence level, there are significant variances between the responses of men and women to questions of “I love call center work”, “I believe I have high chance of career advancement in this sector”, “I want to continue my career in call center sector”, “Prolonged employment at call center would make me unhappy”, “I am gaining new skills in call center work”, and “I have enough time left for my family from my call center work”. Accordingly, as per the results of one way ANOVA analysis at 95% confidence level, hypothesis of “Outlook on call centers differs depending on gender” is plausible.

Table 2 - Variances on Basis of Gender

Variances on basis of gender	“I love call center work”	Men 4,34; Women 4,06, sig:0,000
	“I believe I have high chance of career advancement in this sector”	Men 4,22; Women 4,07, sig:0,051
	“I want to continue my career in call center sector”	Men 4,02; Women 3,70, sig:0,000
	“prolonged employment at call center would make me unhappy”	Men 2,48; Women 2,76, sig:0,004
	“I am gaining new skills in call center work”	Men 4,39; Women 4,04, sig:0,000
	“I have enough time left for my family from my call center work”	Men 3,26; Women 2,90, sig:0,000

Assessing Variances on Basis of Company Type

Variances of employees’ opinions relating to call center work on basis of the company type were examined using decision tree and one way ANOVA analysis. Consequently, opinions subject to variance between Company 1 and Company 2 at 99% confidence level in ANOVA analysis are as follows: “I love call center work”, “I want to continue my career in call center work”, “call center work is a stepping stone for relocating to another position”, “I wouldn't work in call center if I had another employment opportunity”, “I have the chance to make use of all my skills and competences in my work”, “I received appreciation from my relatives and associates after starting to work in this job”.

In review of the decision tree analysis results, Company 1 and Company 2 differ in relation to opinion of “prolonged employment at call center would make me unhappy”. Percentage of those who responded “fully agree” or “agree” to this question is greater in Company 1 while percentage of those who responded “fully disagree” and “disagree” is greater in Company 2. Percentage of those who responded “fully agree” or “agree” to opinion of “I want to work in a different job relating to my profession” were greater in Company 1 while that of those who responded “disagree” and “agree” is higher in Company 2. In other words, there is a dichotomous structure in the company in terms of employees’ outlook to these opinions.

In review of results of two analysis together, it is safe to assert that those who are employed in Company 1 see their current jobs as stepping stone for relocating to other units while those who are employed in Company 2 want to continue their careers in call center works. Consequently, as per the results of one way ANOVA analysis at 99% confidence level, hypothesis of “Outlook on call centers differs depending on company type” is **plausible**. Variance between the two companies may be due to different sectors of the two company or due to the difference in education levels of the employees.

Table 2 - Variances on Basis of Company Type

Variances on basis of company type	"I love call center work"	Company 1: 3.96; Company 2: 4.24, sig:0.000
	"I want to continue my career in call center sector"	Company 1: 3.46; Company 2: 3.86, sig:0.000
	"Call center is stepping stone for relocating to another job"	Company 1: 3.63; Company 2: 3.16, sig:0.000
	"I wouldn't work in call center if I had another employment opportunity"	Company 1: 2.78; Company 2: 2.39, sig:0.000
	"I have the chance to make use of all my skills and competences in my work"	Company 1: 3.60; Company 2: 3.81, sig:0.018
	"I received appreciation from my relatives and associates after I accepted this job"	Company 1: 3.64; Company 2: 3.84, sig:0.010

5. Conclusion

It is essential that call centers develop the local labor force capacity and start learning process in the area, triggering other companies (sectors) for call centers to contribute to development of less popular areas. In this statement, the issue was addressed in terms of employment opportunities created by call centers and hints pertaining to regional development due to call centers are determined as follows.

Call Centers in Terms of Their Potential to Develop Local Labor Force Capacity

At their current state, call centers are satisfactory for high school graduates in terms of their developing capacity, learning new skills, and career opportunities offered. On the other hand, university graduates find the knowledge and skills attained in call centers to be inadequate and call centers to be temporary occupation. Accordingly, university graduates that do not want to work in call centers opened in underdeveloped areas will continue to migrate to developed areas. There are two models in terms of the type of service offered at call centers: First is mass consumption model, in which works are routine and require no specialization. Second is professional service model, in which specialization and experience in certain field is essential. While those who are employed in the first model are defined as customer representatives, those who are employed in the second model are defined as consultants. Second model goes beyond the standardization and includes employees in business processes. In other words, this structure model helps emergence of custom-tailored service provision model (Batt and Moynihan, 2002).

Call centers still has the structure that is explained in the first model above. Further to our research, it is understood that vocational knowledge is not essential and that employees are educated by means of trainings given in the company (trainings on product knowledge, type of service, and call center work). However, there are some call centers that include the person factor in the process where vocational competence is important. For instance, there is a discernable development abroad in the health sector: a new system, referred to as tele-medicine, is developed to reduce the patient volumes at hospitals. First diagnosis, home care, and patient consultation services are offered on the telephone by means of expert consultants. It is essential that those who are employed in this type of works are qualified and experienced in health sector. However, in case where those who are employed in this type of places are semi-qualified, perimeter will be exposed to risk of being no more than provider of service to center. Accordingly, provision of services targeting to increase expert labor force in call centers will facilitate overcoming this problem. Change of content of call center work will be effective in ensuring that its effects are positive in terms of place. Characteristics of the company's internal structure (such as the content of the work, operation conditions, labor force profile), rather than the characteristics of the cities, are important for long term presence of the company in any geography.

Keeping expert labor force in the region and attracting expert labor force from outside

It is essential to create job opportunities in region especially to keep expert labor force in underdeveloped regions. In this case, employees' seeing call center work as a long-term job opportunity depends on that this occupation is perceived as a vocation, that they gain an advantage in their career, and that they attain knowledge and skills. Therefore, capacity of the local labor force may develop as the content of the call center work becomes complicated, or in other words, works are less standardized.

Another recommendation is to create call centers that use local knowledge base. For instance, companies specializing in tourism services may focus in a given area that is specialized in tourism. On the other hand, companies that provide services in health sector may chose a location in a given region with many specialists in health services (interpreting medical analysis and x-ray results, offering consultancy services over the telephone, etc.). At this point, local administrators may organize the operations to attract investment opportunities that are suitable for the qualities of the labor force in the area, and increase the capacity of the local labor force to attract more investments.

Another issue is to create build-up in underdeveloped regions. In parallel to advancements in communications technology, service sector is going through a transformation and now many services can be offered over the telephone or the internet. Back office works (such as reporting, accounting, data entry, reading examination results, invoicing) that can be carried out over several communication channels (internet, fax, etc.) have emerged as new work types. In addition to call centers, a concentration that is also based on back office works other than call centers can also be created in underdeveloped areas and economic development of this type of regions can thus be achieved. This way, expert labor force existing in the region can work in this type of works while new labor force can be attracted from other regions. Another important aspect at this point is the quality of living. Another issue that is decisive in ensuring that labor force can stay in underdeveloped regions on long term basis is the quality of living. Companies that provide professional services typically employ highly qualified personnel and high quality labor force typically prefer locations with higher quality of living and do not want to work in underdeveloped areas. Therefore, companies that provide professional services of the type that would contribute to development of underdeveloped areas may be hesitant about choosing a location in underdeveloped areas. It is essential to prevent this risk and to increase the quality of living in underdeveloped areas for companies and call centers that provide back office services using professional labor force. It may be possible to create a call center concept that includes the human factor in the process from the traditional call centers that see human as a component of machine. This way, a transformation would take place from cheap, young, short-term basis, less qualified labor force with no labor safety, namely perimeter labor force, to long term and experienced labor force that has labor safety and career opportunities, namely center labor force.

In conclusion, call centers may be seen as an opportunity for underdeveloped areas but certain restrictions of it should not be overlooked. Overcoming those restrictions is only possible by matching the content of the work to characteristics of the labor force in the area. Call centers are not the type of workplace where only perimeter labor force can work. They may be opportunity for expert labor force as well. Reinforcing the future importance of this occupation depends on long-term labor safety, career opportunities and its perception as a vocation.

Call center work is an occupation that is worked willingly and seen as career. Moreover, employees receive appreciation of relatives and associates after accepting this job. It is safe to assert that above-mentioned appreciation has to do with wide awareness of the name of the company and the sector where the subject company operates. In other words, working in a

bank's call center may be prestigious for people. Although the content of call center work is not truly known by the relatives and associates, company that runs the call center is more likely to be known by the public. Therefore, it is safe to assert that basic reason for people's preference of call center works is that call center is an easy access point to company, for eventual purpose of employment in different positions. In addition, there are some who work in this job on temporary basis. Leading reasons for their willingness to leave call centers is their desire to work in a vocation that relates to their profession and tiring working conditions of the call center. 7/24 service provision and working on shift basis make individuals unhappy as they cannot have enough time for themselves and their families.

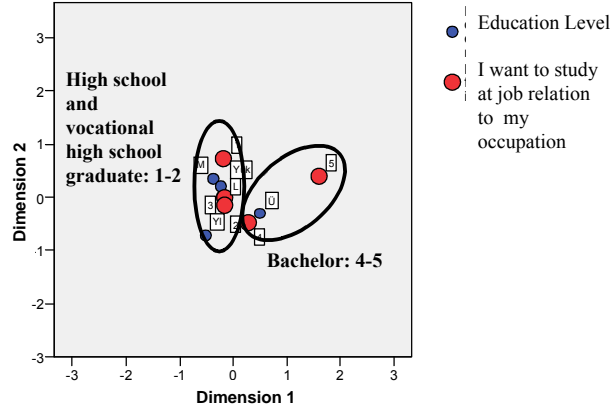
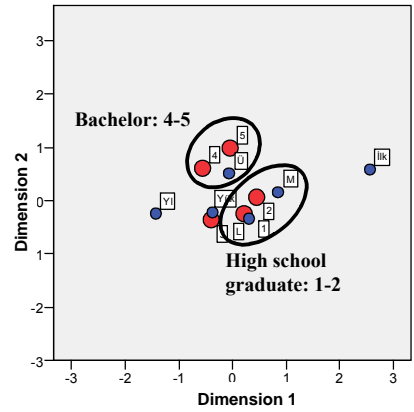
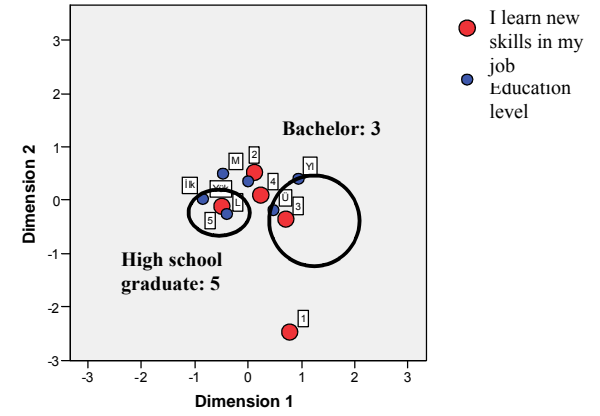
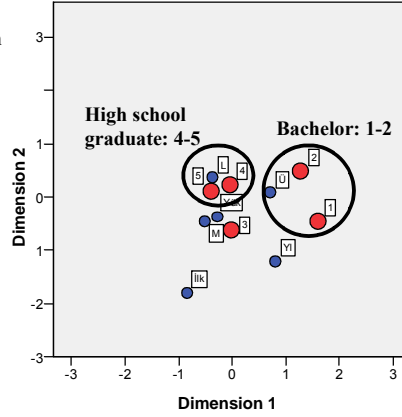
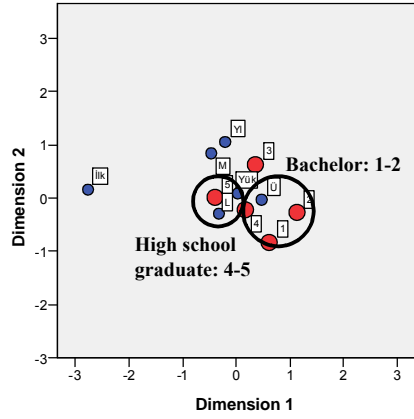
In conclusion; in order for call center companies to contribute to development of their area, it is expected that –in addition to call center investments, knowledge and technology is also transferred to area, an environment that would lend itself for information exchange with the area is ensured, and that call center has increased learning skills of the area.

Call centers have the potential of creating employment opportunities in terms of regional development. However, call centers receive criticism for their creation of less qualified labor force and failure in provision of career opportunities. Accordingly, achieving the desired result from regional development is dependent on transformation of call centers from the current structure an expert labor oriented structure that provides professional services. Instead of seeing the people as components of the machine, call centers have to include people in business processes and further develop labor force capacity.

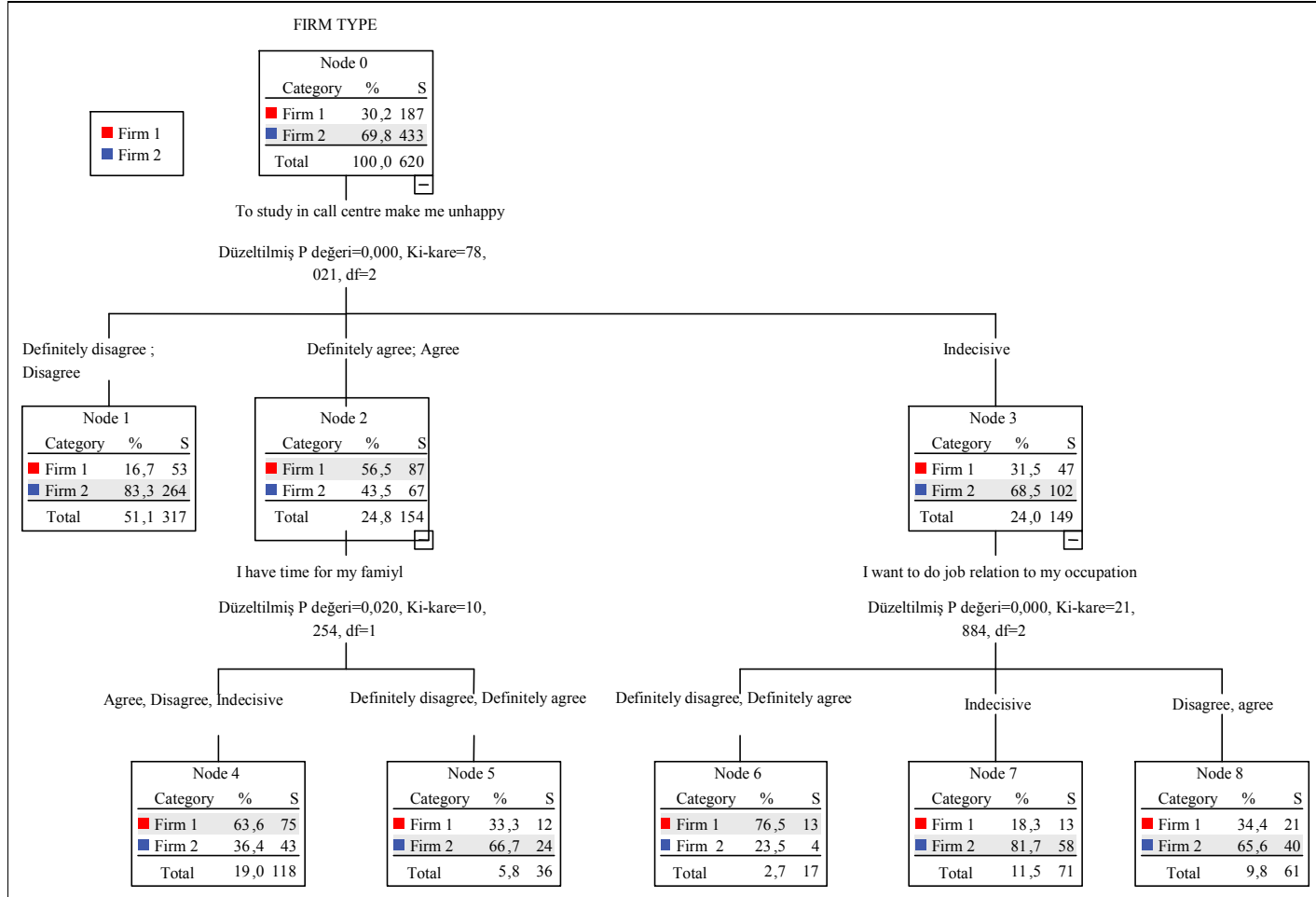
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Şekil: Correspondence Analysis



Şekil: Decision Tree Analysis