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THE LOCATION BEHAVIOR OF CALL CENTRE FIRMS IN TURKEY

51st Congress of the European Regional Science Association: "New Challenges for European Regions and Urban Areas in a Globalised World", 30 August - 3 September 2011, Barcelona, Spain

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30th August - 3rd September 2011
Barcelona, Spain

The Location Behavior of Call Center Firms in Turkey

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Abstract

Advances in information and communication technologies bring along changes in working and employment conditions. Automated work is moved to distant areas and businesses get elaborate, far from the center and network-based. Another change similar to the disintegration of production process is also seen in services sector. While jobs to develop technologies are left to the developed regions, routine and demanding jobs are transferred to peripheries. This situation brings about a centre-periphery division in structuring employment. One of the businesses that have emerged in this process is call centers. Firms, operating in various sectors, obtain call center service from outsource firms. Today, call centers are mostly located in less developed regions. While call centers first originated in developed regions, due to the increased costs in these regions, lots of firms have made their call service investments in less developed regions. Labor-intensive call centers are regarded as a solution to the unemployment in less developed regions.

Within this framework, cities in Turkey, were evaluated according to location factors that call center firms take into account in this paper. The second part, the discussions in the literature are presented. Factors that become effective location decision of call centre firms were cited. In the third part, cities in Turkey, were evaluated according to location factors that call center firms take into account. Cities that were suitable for call center investment has been determined. In point of view of employees in call centers located in five cities in less developed and developed regions differences was determined by ANOVA and correspondence analysis. In the result, suggestions have been offered for location decision of call center based on statistical factors and employees' point of view

Keywords: location factors, labour market, call centre, Turkey,

1. INTRODUCTION

In the literature on regional development, firms and firm behaviors have gained importance since 1980s. Organizational changes at the firm scale affected the economical geography during this period. (Ettliger, 2001; Schenk, 2006; Bathelt, 2006). Many firms

adopted a simple organizational model and outsourced costly tasks that are not central to its operations (peripheral tasks) (Evison etc., 2004). These changes brought to the fore two parties, namely suppliers and buyers. Some examples of such peripheral tasks are business processes, IT services, HR services (employment, payroll processing) and call center services (customer relations).

Call centers are workplaces in which phone calls are considered to be a routine business operation. The call center sector is labor-intensive, and the employees are mostly unskilled and low-paid. Call centers originated in developed countries. However, because of the increasing costs in the developed countries, firms in this sector became inclined to prefer locations where costs are relatively low (Breathnach, 2000; Richardson, etc. 1999; 2000; 2001; 2003).

Within this framework, cities in Turkey, were evaluated according to location factors that call center firms take into account in this paper. The second part, the discussions in the literature are presented. Factors that become effective location decision of call centre firms were cited. In the third part, cities in Turkey, were evaluated according to location factors that call center firms take into account. Cities that were suitable for call center investment has been determined. In point of view of employees in call centers located in five cities in less developed and developed regions differences was determined by ANOVA and correspondence analysis. In the result, suggestions have been offered for location decision of call center based on statistical factors and employees' point of view.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Call centers became a topic of debate in academic literature related to economical geography, labor market, organization and administration, women studies. Some studies discussed the impact of call centers on local economical development (Richardson and Marshall, 1999; Richardson etc., 2000; Richardson and Belt, 2001; Bristow etc., 2002). Focusing on determining the factors that affect the decision as to where call centers should be located, these studies identify a powerful and uninterrupted telecommunication infrastructure, low costs and a big labor market as the most important factors (Richardson and Marshall, 1999; Richardson etc. 2000; Breathnach, 2000; Bristow etc., 2000; Richardson and Belt, 2001; Benner, 2006; Taylor and Bain, 2005; Learner and Storper, 2001; Benner, 2006). These studies also consider call centers to be an opportunity for solving the problem of unemployment in disadvantaged areas (peripheral regions, rural

areas, places where unemployment is a big issue) (Richardson ve Belt, 2001; Richardson ve Gillespie, 2003). However, some authors argue that call centers cannot be a remedy for the problems of regional development because these centers do not increase the size of labor force (Belt vd., 2000; Richardson, vd. 2000; Richardson ve Belt, 2001; Richardson ve Gillespie, 2003). Drawing on the results of a research conducted on the call centers located in disadvantaged areas in England, some authors conclude that career opportunities are limited in workplaces where business operations consist of routine tasks that require no specific skills (Richardson, vd. 2000; Richardson ve Gillespie, 2003). With regard to the disadvantages of call centers in these areas, these authors point at the following risks: “Internet and other technological developments will decrease the number of employees at call centers. When these centers expand towards overseas countries due to developments in information and communication technologies, sustainable employment will no longer be the case. The presence of call centers will cause the low-wage labor market to persist in these areas” (Richardson vd., 2000; Richardson ve Belt, 2001).

Another line of research in the literature deals with the types of work and work/organizational psychology at call centers. In these discussions, some consider the call centers to be a rebirth of Taylorism because of the routine tasks and labour-intensive work schedule involved and state that such work conditions decrease the level of work satisfaction (Ferne and Metcalfe, 1998; Bain etc., 2002; Keser, 2006).

Similarly, Knights ve McCabe (1998), Taylor ve Bain (1999), Wallace, Eagleson ve Walderse (2000) identifies call centers as workplaces where monotonous tasks are performed as part of a stressful work schedule under a certain control mechanism (Strandberg, 2007). Since the tasks at call centers are routine and the employees are unsupervised, this sector is viewed as the modern version of Taylorism (Zaph vd., 2003), and is thought to mark the “industrialization” of jobs in the service industry because of the labor-intensive nature of the jobs involved (Gordi, 2006).

According to Putnam and Loppie (2000), dialogues that consist of pre-written texts turn the employees at call centers into robots (Carrim vd. 2006). Because of the constant supervision of employees, monotonous tasks and stressful work schedule at call centers, Garson (1988) considers them to be electronic sweatshops. Similarly, Taylor and Bain (1999) view call centers as sweatshops with a Taylorist work structure (Grip vd., 2006, Strandberg, 2007). For Dekker, De Grip and Heijke (2002), the labor market for the

workers at call centers is a secondary labor market due to low wages and limited career opportunities. Against such a claim, Grip, Sieben, Jaarsveld (2006) argue that the conditions of employment in the call center sector are heterogeneous and that the conditions of employment at the companies that have internal call centers are better than outsourcing firms that sell these services (Grip vd., 2006).

3. TURKEY FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE FACTORS THAT AFFECT THE LOCATION DECISION OF CALL CENTER FIRMS

Most of the call centers in Turkey are based in Istanbul. There are a total of 90 call center companies in Istanbul. The total number of employees in these companies is 13,835 (İMİ, 2008). Istanbul can be considered to be the heart of the call center sector in terms of both the number of companies and the number of employees. However, increasing costs caused the companies to shift to less developed cities. Since 2005, many call center companies have opened branches in less developed cities around Turkey. Among these cities are Erzurum, Erzincan, Diyarbakır, Sivas, Gümüşhane, Izmir and Ankara (Figure 1).

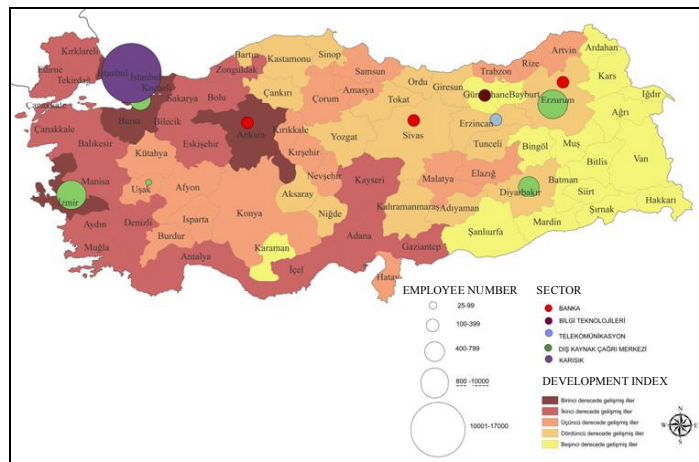


Figure 1. The total size of labor force in cities, the number of employees in call center companies and the distribution of employees across sectors according to the development index (Seçkin, 2009)

31 managers who work in call center companies operating in various sectors were interviewed. Among the factors that affect the decision as to where the call centers should be located, a powerful and uninterrupted telecommunication infrastructure (89.7%), political security (72.4%), accent (69%), governmental supports and incentives (69%), extensive local transportation network (65.5%), tax reduction (55.2%), a high young population (51.7%), presence of a university (41.4%) were found to be the most

important. Since the service provided by call centers depends on communication technologies, the presence of a powerful and uninterrupted telecommunication structure and an easily understandable accent play a key role in the location decision of these companies. When call center companies look for a new location, they prefer areas where the local accent is easily understandable. Since the call center sector is labor-intensive, places where the number of potential employees is high is also preferred. In this regard, presence of a university in the area becomes an advantage. Whether the companies that sell software, training and consulting services and call center services are in the same region as the companies that buy technical and call center services is not an important factor. Call center companies do not need their suppliers to be in geographical proximity. As the presence of other call center companies brings about a completion in the labor market, cities without previously established call center companies are often preferred to others.

Call center companies that operate in Istanbul make their decisions based on the above mentioned factors. In light of these factors, one could say that the cities in Eastern Turkey are a more favorable location for call centers. However, the level of development and costs are not the only factors. Although the Black Sea and Mediterranean regions satisfy most conditions, they are not considered to be a good location for call center companies. Since there is an abundance of job opportunities in the Mediterranean Region, potential employees could easily shift to other sectors, thereby creating a smaller labor market for call center companies. The interviewed managers indicated that incomprehensible accent is an issue in the Black Sea region. According to them, the relative scarcity of job opportunities and a more comprehensible accent (than Black Sea region) make the Eastern Anatolia region more favorable. Local habits and characteristics therefore play a determining role in the location decision of call center companies. In this study, some cities in Turkey were compared with one another on the basis of the size of labor market, unemployment rate, level of education (the number of university students and the rate of university graduates), share in the total GDP, development index and telecommunication infrastructure.

As the call center sector is labor-intensive, it is important that the cities where the call centers are located have a high population. When the population of cities was analyzed, it was observed that most cities in eastern Turkey have a population below 500.000. In less developed areas, Erzurum, Diyarbakır, Gaziantep, Ağrı, Van, Şanlıurfa, Samsun,

Trabzon, Kayseri ve Adana stand out as the most populous cities (Figure 2). Call center companies try not to compete with each other in the labor market in order to avoid the risk of facing a shortage of potential employees. In this respect, call center companies would prefer getting scattered across various cities rather than concentrate in a single city. Therefore a concentration of call centers in the less developed areas of Turkey will never be the case.

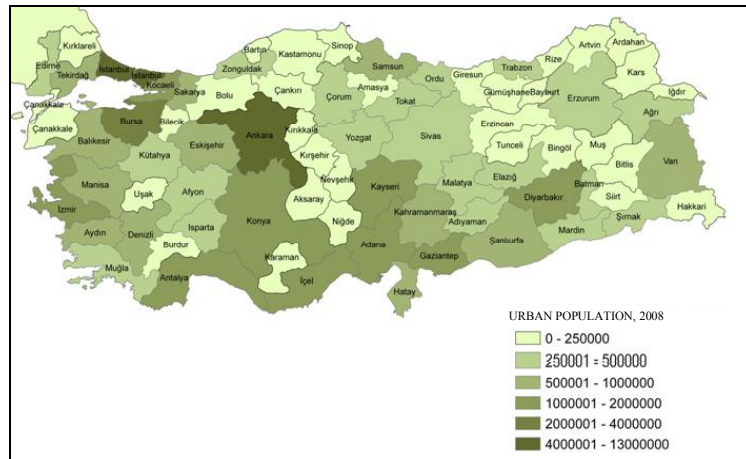


Figure2. The population of cities in Turkey (Seçkin, 2009)

Higher unemployment rate and bigger labor market in Eastern Turkey are attractive for call center companies. Cities in this region have a higher unemployment rate than those in the west (Figure 3-4). High unemployment rate also implies fewer job opportunities. Moving call centers to these areas could also be viewed as an opportunity for creating new job opportunities.

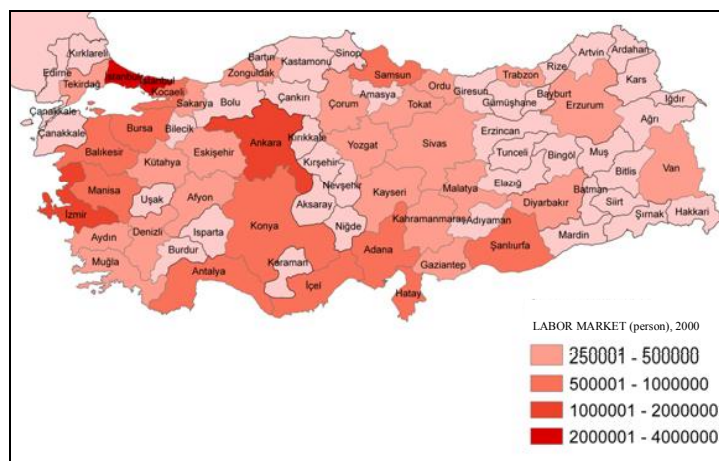


Figure 3. The size of labor market across cities (Seçkin, 2009)

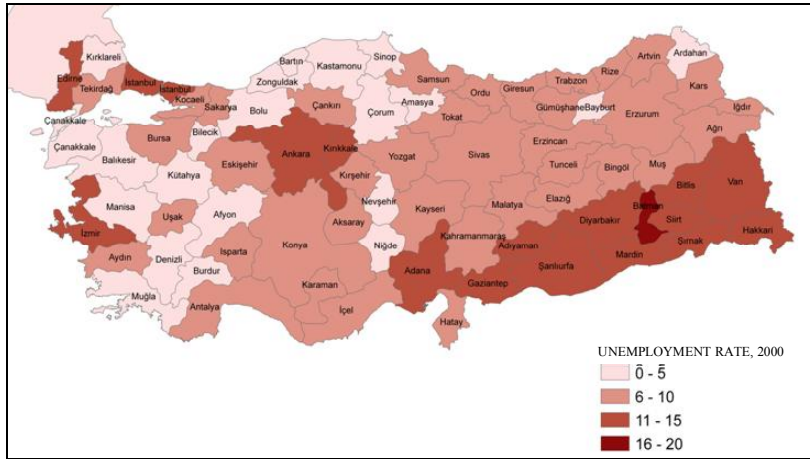


Figure 4. Unemployment rate across cities (%), (Seçkin, 2009)

Another determining factor in the decision as to where call centers should be located is the presence of a university. From the point of view of the total number of students, a striking difference between the Eastern and Western Turkey could be observed. Erzurum and Diyarbakır are the cities where the student population is relatively higher in the eastern Turkey (Figure 5).

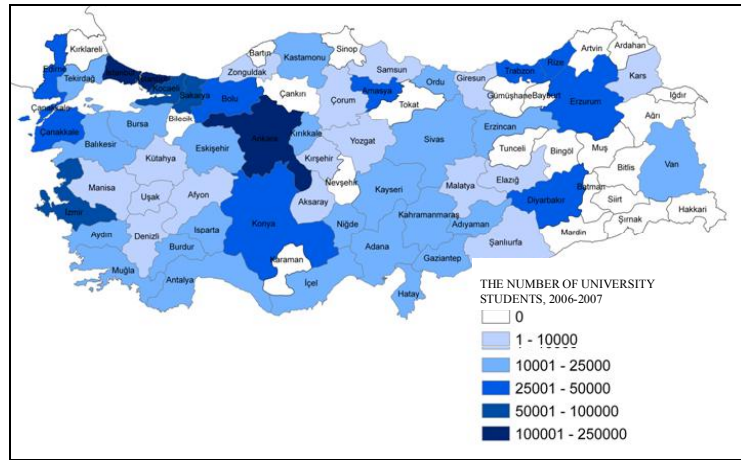


Figure 5: The number of university students across cities (Seçkin, 2009)

The most important factor in the location decision of call center companies is the presence of a suitable telecommunication infrastructure. In Turkey, there are seven regional directorates affiliated with the Institute of Telecommunications: Ankara, İstanbul, Samsun, Mersin, Diyarbakır, Erzurum ve İzmir. Call centers were established in five of these locations (Ankara, İstanbul, Diyarbakır, Erzurum, İzmir) (Figure 6).

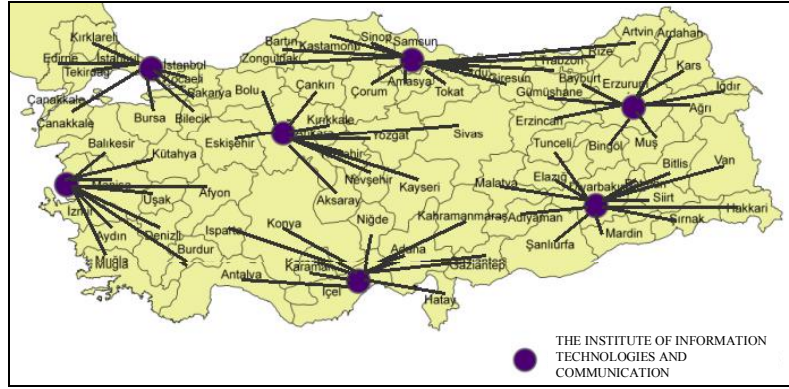


Figure 6. Regional Directorates of the Institute of Information Technologies and Communication and the cities affiliated with them (Seçkin, 2009)

4. RESEARCH METHOD AND FINDINGS

A survey was conducted with the participation of customer representatives of two companies based in Istanbul as well as in other cities (Erzurum, Diyarbakir, Ankara, İzmir), operating in the banking and telecommunication sectors. The main reason why these companies were selected was because they provide call center services in more than one city, especially in less developed cities. In order to identify the effects of location, Istanbul and four other cities were compared on the basis of how employees view their jobs. Similarities and differences between the five cities were determined.

Company 1 had a total of 620 employees. 400, 100 and 120 employees were employed in Istanbul, Ankara and Erzurum respectively. Company 2 was an outsourcing firm that provides service as a business partner of a company that operates in the telecommunication sector. The total number of employees in Company 2 was 4.500. 1900, 800, 800 and 400 employees were employed in Istanbul, Izmir, Erzurum and Diyarbakir respectively. The survey started in December 2008 and was completed in March 2009. A total of 620 surveys were performed with a confidence interval of 95% and a 5% margin of error: 187 and 433 surveys in Company 1 and 2 respectively. 49% of the surveys were from Istanbul, 22% from Erzurum, 15% from Izmir, 10% from Diyarbakir and 4% from Ankara. In both companies, randomly selected employees were asked to fill in the survey. Correspondence, ANOVA, and decision tree analysis were performed on the data to test the hypotheses. SPSS 15 software package was used for statistical analysis. A total of 20 questions prepared in 5-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree) were asked to quantify the employees' view of their jobs in these companies. Correspondence analysis was used to ascertain

similarities and differences between the views of employees in different cities in terms of the level of agreement with the statements in the survey.

Two hypotheses, namely “H1: There is a difference in the employees’ views of call centers between developed and less developed cities” and “H2: There is a difference in the employees’ demographical characteristics (age, level of education, gender) between the call centers in metropolitan and less developed cities” were tested using the Bonferroni test and decision tree analysis respectively.

Findings

The results of Correspondence analysis:

- *Employees in Diyarbakır are not happy about working at a call center. Such a conclusion would be valid if the participants from Diyarbakır mostly disagree with the statements “I think I could go up in my career in this sector” and “I can spare enough time to spend with my family”, while the participants from other cities mostly agree with them.*
- *Employees in Erzurum are not only satisfied with their jobs but they also consider working at the call center to be prestigious. Moreover, they think that this job is beneficial for their personal development. Employees in Erzurum agree more with the statements “I acquire new skills at the call center”, “This jobs allows me to use all my skills and capabilities”, “I took part in social activities more often ever since I started to work at the call center”, “The wage I receive is enough for a living”, “I was held in high regard when I started working at the call center”, “I am satisfied with working hours”, compared to other cities.*
- *While employees in Ankara and Diyarbakır consider their job at the call center as a step to other jobs in their work lives, employees in Erzurum and Diyarbakır would like to go up in their career at call centers.*
- *The fact that employees in Diyarbakır do not like their jobs at the call center and that they are not satisfied with working hours could explain why they view their jobs as a temporary solution.*

The results of Bonferroni analysis:

Using the Bonferroni analysis with a confidence interval of 95%, a significant difference was found between the following cities on the basis of whether employees would like to keep their jobs and go up in their careers at call centers:

- Between **ERZURUM and Istanbul**, there is a significant difference in the views on the statement “I think there are many opportunities for me to go up in my career in this sector” (İstanbul 4,04, Erzurum 4,34, sig: 0,015). There is a significant difference in the views on the statement “This job at the call center is a step to another job” between **İZMİR, Erzurum, Ankara and Istanbul** (İstanbul 3,39, İzmir 2,95, sig: 0,004; Erzurum 3,34, İzmir 2,95, sig: 0,045; Ankara 3,63, İzmir 2,95, sig: 0,027).
- There is a significant difference in the views on the statement “I would like get a job related to my profession” between **DİYARBAKIR, Istanbul and Izmir** (İstanbul 2,64, Diyarbakır 3,12, sig: 0,009; İzmir 2,36, Diyarbakır 3,12, sig: 0,000). There is a significant difference in the views on the statement “If I could find another job, I would not work at the call center” between **İSTANBUL and Erzurum** (İstanbul 2,61, Erzurum 2,31, sig: 0,038). **ANKARA, Istanbul, Erzurum and Izmir** (Erzurum 2,47, Ankara 3,22, sig: 0,016; Ankara 3,22, İzmir 2,27, sig: 0,001) differ from one another in the views on the statement “Working at call centers for too long would make me unhappy”.
- There is a significant difference in the views on the statement “I acquire new skills in my job at the call center” between **ERZURUM, Izmir, Diyarbakır, Ankara and Istanbul** (İstanbul 4,08, Erzurum 4,51, sig: 0,000; Ankara 3,96, Erzurum 4,51, sig: 0,015; İzmir 3,99, Erzurum 4,51, sig: 0,015; Diyarbakır 4,09, Erzurum 4,51, sig: 0,007). **ERZURUM, Izmir, Ankara and Istanbul** (İstanbul 3,63, Erzurum 4,13, sig: 0,000; Ankara 3,33, Erzurum 4,13, sig: 0,001; İzmir 3,64, Erzurum 4,13, sig: 0,002) significantly differ from one another in the views on the statement “This job allows me to use all my skills and capabilities”. There is also a significant difference in the views on the statement that “I think my job at the call center is monotonous” between **DİYARBAKIR and Erzurum** (Erzurum 2,08, Diyarbakır 2,54, sig: 0,035).
- **DİYARBAKIR** significantly differs from **Erzurum, Ankara, and Izmir** (İstanbul 3,14, Diyarbakır 3,02, sig: 0,000; Erzurum 3,05, Diyarbakır 3,02, sig: 0,000; Ankara 2,89, Diyarbakır 3,02, sig: 0,000; İzmir 3,24, Diyarbakır 3,02, sig: 0,000) in the views on the statement “I could spare enough time to spend with my family”. Moreover, there is a significant difference in the

views on the statement “I took part in social activities more often ever since I started working at the call center” **between DİYARBAKIR, Erzurum, Izmir and Istanbul** (İstanbul 2,90, Diyarbakır 2,06, sig: 0,000; Erzurum 3,09, Diyarbakır 2,06, sig: 0,000; İzmir 3,16, Diyarbakır 2,06, sig: 0,000). There is also a significant difference in the views on the statement “I was held in high regard when I started working at the call center” between **ERZURUM, Ankara and Istanbul** (İstanbul 3,73, Erzurum 4,02, sig: 0,013; Erzurum 4,02, Ankara 3,30, sig: 0,001).

- Between **ERZURUM, Diyarbakır, Istanbul** (İstanbul 2,92, Erzurum 3,23, sig: 0,036; Erzurum 3,23, Diyarbakır 2,54, sig: 0,000), **İZMİR and Diyarbakır** (İzmir 3,09, Diyarbakır 2,54, sig: 0,012), there is a significant difference in the views on the statement “My wage is enough for a living” (İstanbul 2,92, Erzurum 3,23, sig: 0,036; Erzurum 3,23, Diyarbakır 2,54, sig: 0,000). There is a significant difference **between ANKARA, Erzurum and Izmir** (Erzurum 2,94, Ankara 3,70, sig: 0,012; Ankara 3,70, İzmir 2,84, sig: 0,004), as well as between **İSTANBUL and Izmir** (İstanbul 3,24, İzmir 2,84, sig: 0,026) in the views on the statement that “Working at a call center for too long is bad for health”. There is a significant difference in the views on the statement “I am satisfied with working hours at the call center” between **DİYARBAKIR, Erzurum, Izmir, and Istanbul** (İstanbul 3,39, Diyarbakır 2,45, sig: 0,000; Erzurum 3,54, Diyarbakır 2,45, sig: 0,000; İzmir 3,22, Diyarbakır 2,45, sig: 0,000).

H1: “There is a difference between the employees’ views of call centers in developed and less developed cities” was rejected according to the results of ANOVA post hoc (Bonferroni) analysis with a confidence interval of %95.

*In conclusion, it was found that employees in the call center companies in Erzurum were able to acquire new skills, were satisfied with their salaries and held in high regard for their jobs and thus had a more positive outlook on working at a call center compared to other cities. However, in Diyarbakır and Ankara, the employees had a relatively more negative view of working at a call center. Diyarbakır is distinguished from other cities in terms of working conditions at the workplace. It could be concluded that the factors that affect the views of employees on working at a call center depend on the work conditions at the workplace.*Karar

The results of Decision Tree Analysis:

In the Decision Tree Analysis, Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir were classified as “metropolitan cities”, while Erzurum and Diyarbakır were taken as “less developed

cities”. This distinction was used to categorize the demographical characteristics of employees. According to the results, of all participating employees, 67.4% work in metropolitan cities, while 32.6% work in less developed cities.

The comparison of metropolitan and less developed cities on the basis of age, gender and level of education yielded the following results:

There were three nodal in age groups. Nodal 1 covers employees who are between 23-27 years of age, Nodal 2 those between 28-32 years of age and above 33, and Nodal 3 those between 18-22 years of age.

- Among the employees between 18 and 22 years of age, 43.2% of the women and 72% of the men
- Among the employees above 28 years of age, 13.2% of the women and 24.7% of the men
- Among the employees between 23 and 27 years of age, 30.4% of the women and 44.6% of the men

work at the call centers in less developed cities. This result suggests that men and the young are preferred at the call centers in less developed cities.

Among the employees over 28 years of age,

- 62.2% of the men with a high school or lower degree work in metropolitan cities, while 37.8% work in less developed cities.
- 88.9% of the men with a university or master’s degree work in metropolitan cities, while 11.1% work at call centers in less developed cities

In light of these results, it could be concluded that while employees with a high school or lower degree are the majority in less developed cities, the rate of employees with a university or higher degree is higher in metropolitan cities.

Therefore there is a significant difference in the demographical characteristics of call center employees such as age, marital status, and level of education between metropolitan and less developed cities. It could be concluded that while call centers in less developed cities prefer young individuals (between 18 and 22 years of age), men , people with a high school or lower degree and singles; people over 23 years of age,

women, people with a university or higher degree are rather preferred in metropolitan cities..

Both H1: “There is a difference in the employees’ views of call centers between developed and less developed cities” and “H2: There is a difference in the employees’ demographical characteristics (age, level of education, gender) between the call centers in metropolitan and less developed cities” were accepted in light of the results obtained from the statistical analysis performed.

5. RESULTS: SOME PREDICTIONS ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTION OF CALL CENTERS TO REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN TURKEY

The expansion of the call center sector that originated in Istanbul towards less developed areas is an important development. The number of companies operating in the call center sector continually increases. But are the call centers really capable of the realizing the potential as expected? Results relevant to this question could be summarized as follows:

There is a difference in the general employee profiles between developed and less developed cities. While younger people, men and high school graduates are employed more in less developed cities; there is no strict preference for a particular age group although women and university graduates are employed more in developed cities.

Since employees in Diyarbakır are not satisfied with their jobs while the opposite is the case for the employees in Izmir and Erzurum, it does not follow that working at a call center is more satisfying for people who live in areas where job opportunities are scarce and unemployment rate is high nor that people in less developed areas are more willing to keep their jobs for a longer period compared to those in developed cities. Different work conditions and longer work hours might play a role in the general dissatisfaction of the employees in Diyarbakır.

This study outlines some predictions about how the recently blossomed call center sector could possibly affect regional development in Turkey. In order for call centers to contribute to regional development, they should increase the labor market size, instigate a process of learning in the region and attract other companies (and sectors) to invest in their areas. Here are some predictions as to how call centers will affect regional development (Seçkin, 2010, 2009a, 2009b, 2008).

Call centers;

- **In the short run** will not concentrate in less developed areas, and the services needed by the call centers in these areas will continue to be provided from Istanbul. Therefore a learning process will not begin in the region, and no local companies will start up business in the call center sector (Figure 7) (Seçkin, 2009).

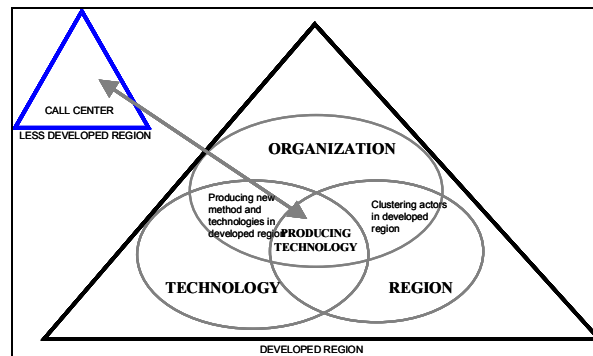


Figure 7. The case in which call centers could not accelerate regional development

(Seçkin, 2009)

- **In the long run**, a concentration might be observed in various regions, and new suppliers might emerge as a result of increasing number of call centers. One of the cities in these regions may stand out as a center for the suppliers of call center companies. A competition might emerge among less develop cities for attracting call center companies or companies that provide office services. Local call center companies might go into business after learning from the call center companies that came from other regions. In case of a concentration, companies that focus on creating new technologies might also emerge. Less developed regions might thus depend less on developed regions, and an interaction between companies could develop in less developed regions. The presence of call centers might also help other sectors such as housing, transportation, entertainment, cultural activities, food and drink, freight, security, computer maintenance and sale also develop (Figure 8) (Seçkin, 2009).

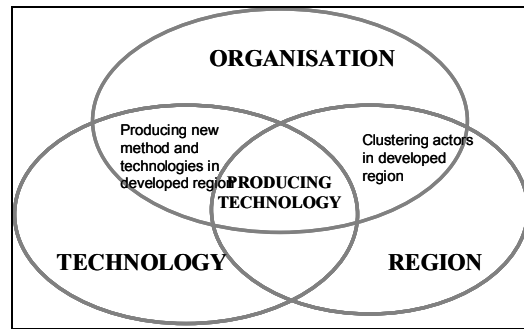


Figure 8. The case in which call centers could accelerate regional development (Seçkin, 2009)

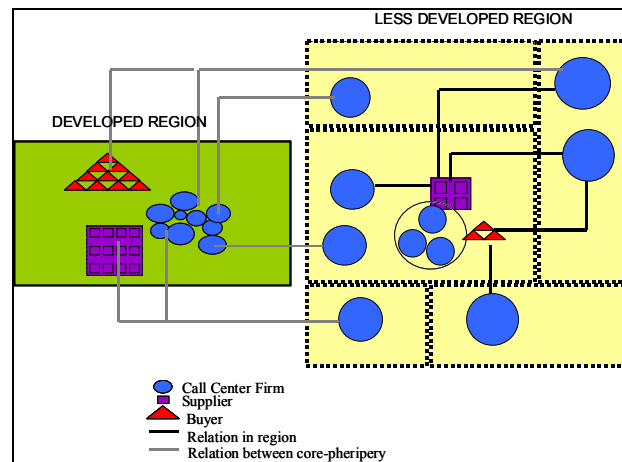


Figure 9. The network of relations that might emerge in the long run as a result of the expansion of call centers towards less developed regions (Seçkin, 2009)

Viewing call centers not only as a potential workplace for the labor force in the peripheries but also as an opportunity for the professional labor force and for establishing a long-lasting job security at the workplace might help further consolidate the significance of this job in the future. In this way, call centers will be considered a type of business, and working at a call center will be regarded as a profession. As a result of the increase in the level of completion among less developed cities, investments for improving both the labor market size and the quality of life will also increase (Seçkin, 2010, 2009a, 2009b, 2008).

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Appendix 4 Correspondence Analysis Graphics

According to Cities

