

At last! BT brings Indian call centres back to Britain

By **Sean Poulter**
Consumer Affairs Editor

BT is to bring its call centres back home from India in a bid to improve its appalling customer service record.

The telecoms giant is reversing a decision made in 2003 that was part of a wider trend by British business to export call centres - and tens of thousands of jobs.

The U-turn means more than 80 per cent of BT's customer service calls will be answered in the UK by the end of 2016 and it intends to go further.

It has created more than 1,000 jobs to meet this target and plans to create hundreds more over the next year. When BT closed its British call centres, the move infuriated staff and customers, who felt standards of service declined. Its directory inquiries service suffered because customers and operators could not understand each other.

People complaining about problems with BT's internet service say they are fed up with being fobbed off by call centre staff in India who have no power to remedy the situation and simply recite stock phrases from a company script.

Research suggests overseas call centres are much less likely to resolve problems at the first attempt. BT was given the

Exodus that flopped

THE exodus of call centres abroad involved some 30 major firms and saw more than 50,000 UK jobs lost.

Banks, insurers, retailers and airlines shut offices in Britain and switched customer service or administration operations to India and the Philippines.

They included HSBC, Lloyds Bank, British Airways, RSA, Axa Sun Life, Harrods, Debenhams, Top Shop, Dorothy Perkins,

Burton and Monsoon. The appeal was that Indian graduates would work for £2,500 - a fifth of the going rate in the UK.

After complaints from customers, many firms reversed the policy, including Lloyds, Santander, RBS and mobile phone company EE, which admitted some users had to call staff in the Philippines or India eight times to get problems fixed.

Money Mail Wooden Spoon Award for rotten customer service in 2013 following complaints from readers.

This week it came third from bottom in a customer service league compiled by Which?. The consumer group's executive director, Richard Lloyd, welcomed the news saying: 'Consumers tell us that call centres not being based in the UK is one of their biggest bugbears, so it's good to see BT responding to what their customers want.'

'Companies that don't give customers the care and atten-

tion they deserve risk losing out.' John Petter, chief executive of BT Consumer, said the firm is responding to consumer demand but BT will continue to outsource functions that do not involve taking customers' calls.

'Our customers have told us that they would prefer to speak to a contact centre in the UK when they call us,' he said.

'Our offshore partners have provided a good level of service for our customers and we will still have offshore partners to help us to deliver various campaigns and services. However, we

believe now is the right time to commit more investment to the UK and that this is something customers will appreciate.'

Jo Causon, chief executive of the Institute of Customer Service, said: 'It is encouraging to see one of main telecoms players listening to its customers.'

BT transplanted much of its call centre operation to the Indian cities of Bangalore and Delhi from 2003 onwards, cutting its workforce by some 2,000.

It did so to save money - it was able to hire graduates in India on around 20 per cent of the pay of its UK staff.

Indian workers were given British names such as Tom or Alice to use on duty.

They also had crib sheets about life in the UK, including tips about the latest plot twists in TV soaps such as EastEnders and Coronation Street or songs in the charts, to allow them to build up a rapport with callers.

However, like many other firms that made the move, BT suffered a sharp decline in customer service standards that threatened to wreck its reputation and hit profits.

One independent study found that three in four consumers felt more negatively towards a company if their inquiry was diverted to a foreign call centre.