

Ethnographic Study of Outsourcing through oDesk

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Organization Dynamics

Ethnographic Study

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Abstract

This study evaluates the hire, train and manage phases of communication for outsourced workers through the outsourcing service oDesk. oDesk native tools and resources external to oDesk are considered. External tools include process management, screen capture and helpdesk systems. Survey data from a pool of primarily US based small business owners highlights the current strenghts and weaknesses of available outsourcing services. Communication quality and its effect on the natural development of relationships is also discussed.

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Observations on Outsourcing

Recent decades have seen a marked increase in the outsourcing and off-shoring of American jobs. The effort has been spearheaded primarily by larger companies with sufficient resources to build up infrastructure in other countries. Over time, the nature of the work sent off shore has grown from mostly low skilled labor to include many highly skilled thought workers. While the results have been mixed in terms of quality and output (Barthélemy, 2001), the value proposition is appealing due to the low cost of the available workers and the absence of obligations required for American workers, such as health care and unemployment insurance (Posner, 1974) (Kahn, 1988).

The proliferation of the Internet and high speed connections for both home and business users has had significant impacts on commerce and social interaction. In many cases it has reduced costs and time to communicate. It has done the same for outsourcing. Websites like oDesk.com, Elance.com, guru.com, freelancer.com, among others, have reduced the investment cost and time required to outsource to a point where virtually anyone company outsource. It's no longer the exclusive domain of large companies.

This study focuses on experience employing workers in a half a dozen countries, on both an hourly and project basis. The bulk of the data is based almost exclusively on using oDesk to source and manage workers for a small American software company. There are both economic and communication drivers that led to the choice of oDesk over alternative outsourcing services and even over hiring directly. Ancillary tools and processes which supplement those provided by oDesk are also discussed.

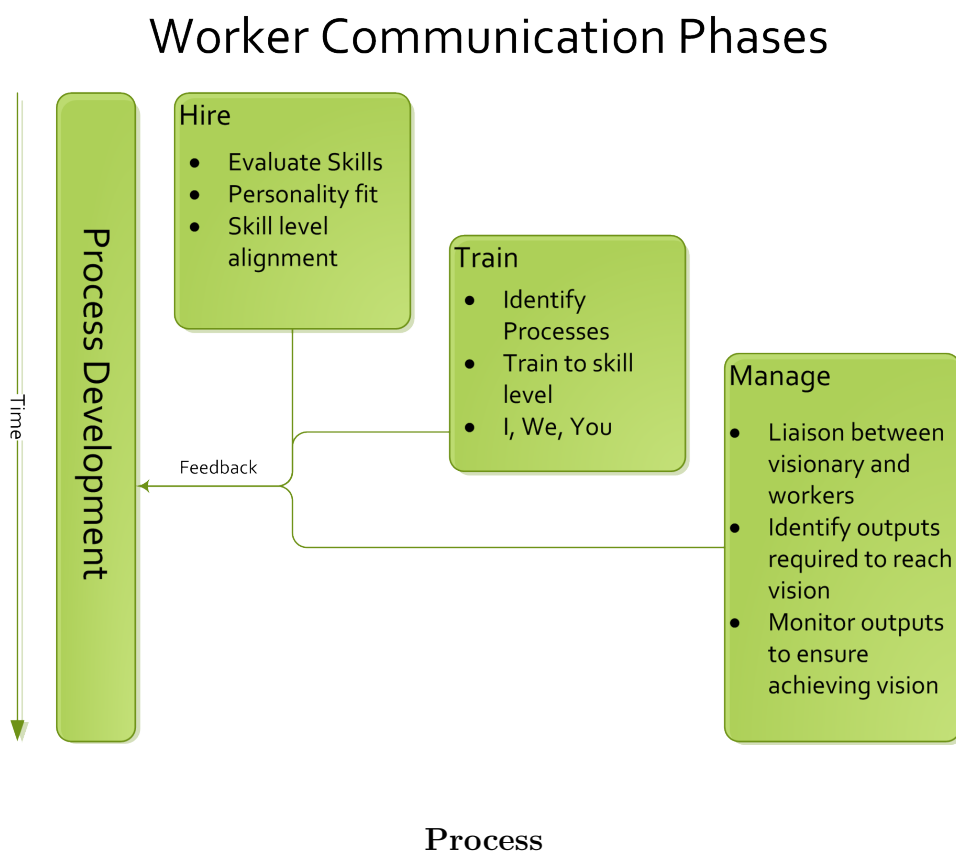
Phases of Communication

The analysis is segmented into three distinct phases of communication, including hiring, training and managing outsourced workers. The hiring phase deals primarily with assessment of skills and fitness for a particular position. Training involves education and

conditioning of workers to perform specific tasks. It further distinguishes differences related to worker skill level. Managing, which encompasses the majority of the worker interactions over the employment life cycle, deals with the monitoring of worker output to ensure productivity and quality standards are met.

Concurrent with the hire, train and manage phases is the continual process of codifying and refining business processes. Process development is a feedback loop that informs the methods and procedures used during the hire, train and manage phases.

Throughout this study the terms worker, contractor and employee are used synonymously. Similarly, employer, entrepreneur and company are used to represent someone who employs a worker.



The concept of a process is essential to effective outsourcing and central to all three phases of communication described in this study. A process is a type of formula for achieving a particular outcome. Most often in business a process is a sequence of actions

which are intended to be repeated over and over again. This may seem a rather obvious description of what many consider a simple concept. What's puzzling is the fact that so few businesses take the time to define processes. Instead they invest time in project management, which treats every business outcome independently and requires manual attention at every phase.

An analogy that furthers my point is had by looking at a fast food restaurant and comparing it to a fancy restaurant. The experience at the fast food restaurant is always the same and reliably consistent from one location to another. A fancy restaurant depends on new and unique dishes, inspired by a trained culinary master. From a business perspective there are implications in both cases respecting how scale and turnover affect the bottom line. Since low skilled workers can easily be taught a simple process involving normalized ingredients, turnover has less impact on the daily function of the business. Low skilled workers are available in abundance, which further lessens the effect of turnover and improves scalability. On the other hand, someone with culinary mastery who is able to work with random ingredients and produce high value output, would be much more difficult to replace. He will also be more expensive to retain. Since he cannot be duplicated, scalability is severely restricted. In this last case, scale can be achieved by normalizing the offering and creating a process that low skilled workers can learn. (Gerber, 2001)

A business model must be able to identify whether it relies on high or low skilled workers. High skilled workers command higher margins, but come with higher risk. Low skilled workers bring lower margins, but also represent less risk. Despite lower margins, companies that effectively leverage low skilled workers can scale up for profit, by which they benefit from economies of scale and improve their margin through volume.

The most effective outsourcing efforts observed have been focused on process development while engaging with low skilled workers. This can be especially true when a plurality of high skilled workers are independently contracted to provided different products and services. The resulting components often integrate poorly, fail to follow a

unified vision and age more rapidly.

Mechanics of Communication

Communication is a critical aspect of effective employer, employee relationships. As mentioned above, this analysis is segmented into three phases: hiring, training and managing.

Hiring

In the hiring phase, the employer must assess whether a candidate is a fit for a position and for the overall organization. This may include evaluation of skills, personality and preferences, among other qualities. These characteristics must then be weighed against existing business processes, tools and team members. While it's unlikely that an employer will find many candidates that constitute a perfect fit, it's important to take potential gaps seriously. The cost of hiring the wrong person can be extremely high (Del Boca & Rota, 1998) (Yager, unknown).

Evaluation of worker skill level during the hiring phase can be challenging. Some tools used in this phase may include web based tests and evaluations, completion of simple tasks and initial probationary employment. Some employers have even begun to administer personality tests as part of the hiring process. Experience suggests that there is no surefire method for evaluating worker skill prior to hiring (Stabile, 2002).

Training High vs. Low Skilled Workers

Once a hiring decision is made, the training phase begins. The method used for training will vary depending on the skill level and role of the selected candidate. For low skilled workers, and where a well established process exists, most of the training will focus on the process. This is sometimes called a standard operating procedure (SOP). This is most helpful when a worker will be doing the same general thing over and over again. If it is a low skilled position and a process has not been established, its generally undesirable to

task the new worker with development of the process. Instead the process should be developed by someone with deep knowledge of the desired outcome and thoroughly documented.

For highly skilled workers, there may not be an established process on which to train them. This is often the case when a worker will be producing something unique with each task. It may also be that there are a variety of inputs which add complexity to a task and influence the outcome. In this case, the nature of the training becomes more individual and requires that the trainer (or mentor) possess a high skill level himself.

I, we, you. One approach that can be effective for both high and low skill workers is often referred to as the I, we, you method. This is understood from the employer perspective to be “First, you watch as I do it, then we do it together, and finally you do it on your own”. In other words, initial training requires the worker to observe someone else do the work. Following observation comes mentoring, where the worker begins to do the task with the assistance of a mentor. Finally, the worker grows independent enough to perform the task on his own.

Managing Workers

Many businesses and professionals invest a disproportionate amount of time on the management of workers. It doesn't help that there are a disproportionately high number of books, methods, techniques and even general rhetoric around the role of manager in business today. As an example, consider these search results from Amazon.com in books (August, 2013).

Search term	No. results
“how to hire employee”	417
“how to train employees”	812
“how to be a manager”	47,734

While managers may participate in the hiring and training process, the majority of their daily effort involves communication with workers and monitoring of outputs. A manager must act as liaison between company visionaries and workers. It's essential that a manager grasp the vision established by company leaders. Managers aren't required to have the same expertise and skill set of their subordinates, and it may be better that they don't. However, they must have enough understanding to judge the quality of the outputs and their fit to the company vision (Gerber, 2001).

Process Development

Process development should run concurrently within all three phases. In some cases it may be necessary to hire expertise sufficiently skilled to develop a new business process. This may happen when a proprietor lacks the necessary expertise, and the expertise is an integral part of a product or service offered by the company. In this case, it can be beneficial to create an abstract business process which draws heavily on desired business outcomes rather than process specifics. If a desired business outcome is not obvious, additional motivational details explaining why that outcome is desirable for the business can help an expert to craft the right process.

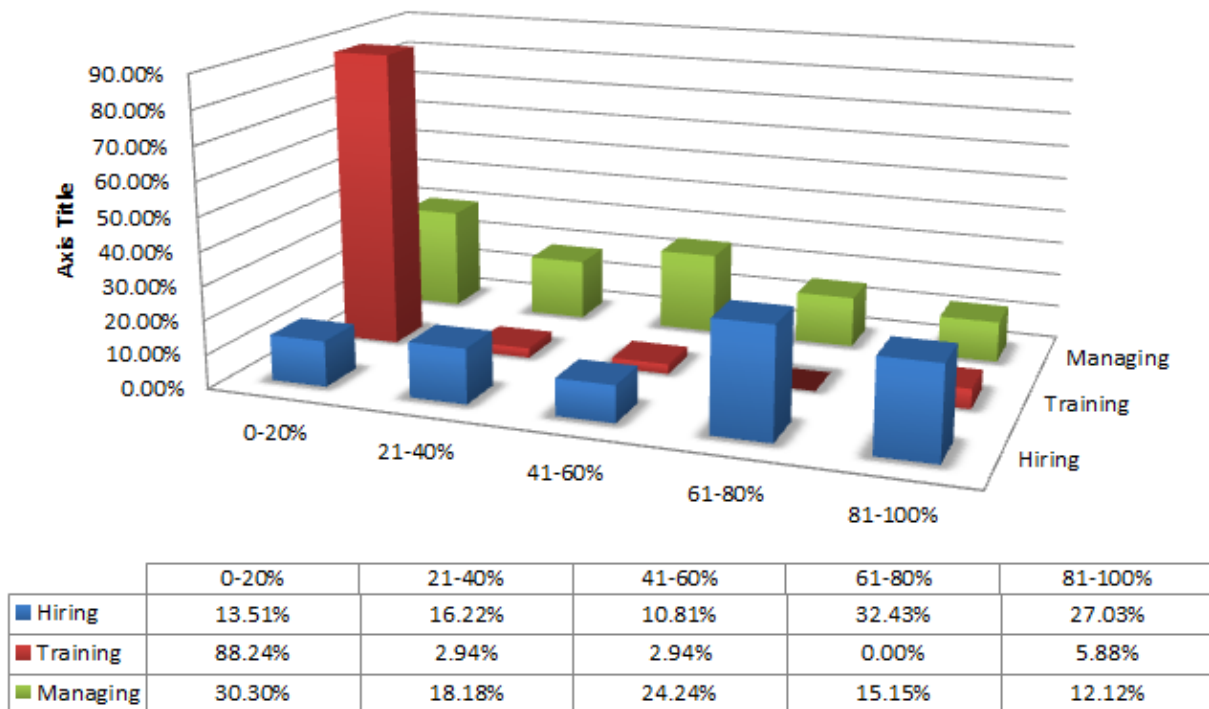
While it may be tempting to highlight the desired business outcomes for all processes, there are some cases where providing that level of detail to low skilled workers may actually run counter to business goals. It can be confusing. It might be misinterpreted. It could even be used to justify deviations by well meaning, though ill-prepared workers.

State of Outsourcing services

A survey conducted among a sample of 40 employers who make use of outsourcing services shows that, for hiring, outsourcing services mostly provide resources and information that are relevant and helpful. According to survey results, the tools provided to manage workers once they are hired are sometimes sufficient, but often not. The survey

shows that when it comes to training, outsourcing services provide almost no resources to employers for their workers. Some explanations for this are presented below.

Percentage of Needs Met by Outsourcing Service

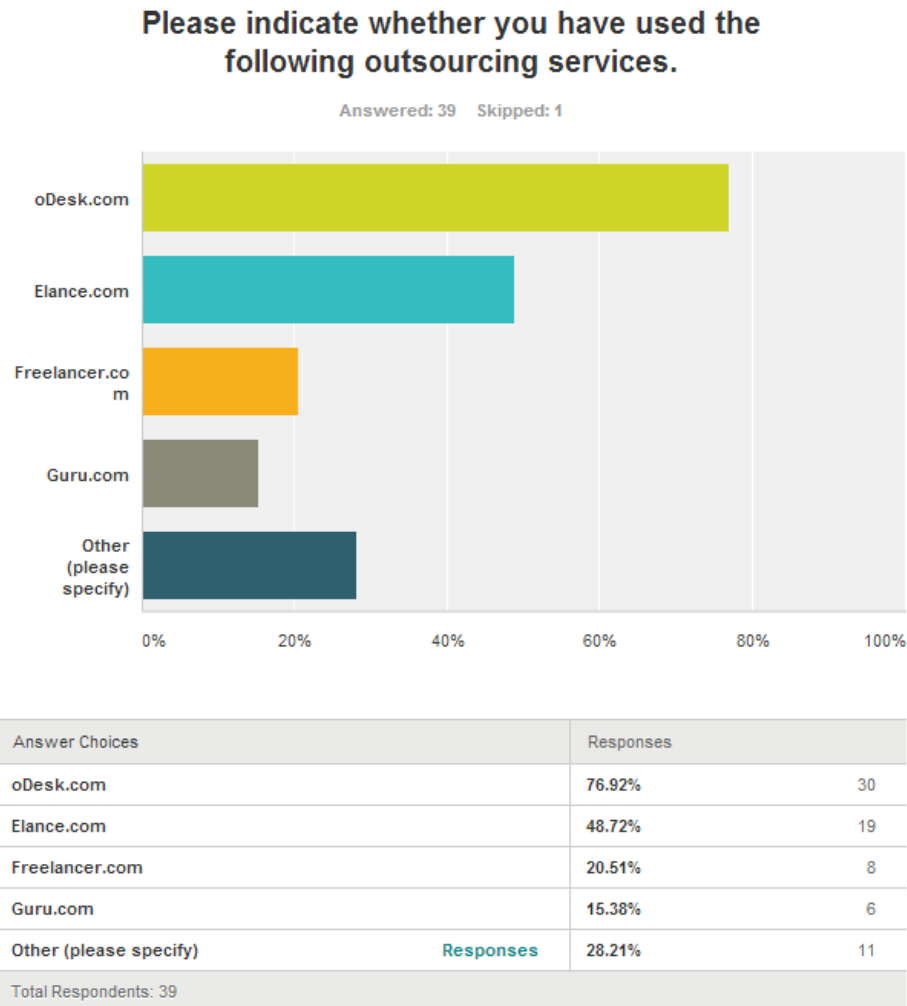


oDesk

oDesk provides tools which inform hiring decisions and enable management, although they are limited. There are no oDesk tools designed to facilitate the training process, and one questions whether they would be useful. Most businesses are as unique as their proprietors or management and so the processes and training are expected to be unique. Equally important to understand is that oDesk's primary market are small to medium employers, who, by virtue of their size, have less regulatory burden in terms of training (Groysberg, Thomas, & Tydlaska, 2011).

oDesk is one choice among many companies that provide outsourcing. It is extremely popular among entrepreneurs. A survey of 40 small business proprietors conducted for this study shows that 76.92% of their outsourcing efforts make use of oDesk, with the next

most used company, Elance, coming in at 48.72%. The average number of outsourcing providers used per company is 1.9, indicating that few small companies single source their outsourcing.



Among the “other” responses, the most popular source was fiverr.com.

oDesk Worker Profiles

oDesk worker profiles present information from two primary sources. The first is the worker himself. It’s possible for a worker to upload details about his skills, interests, desired wage, certifications and a cover letter. He may also upload files to his portfolio representing work he has done in the past and that illustrates what an employer might expect if he were hired.

The next source of information is generated by oDesk by way of a few different mechanisms. Details about every job are tracked, including job title, timing, duration and cost. When a job is completed, the employer is given the opportunity to rate the employee. Ratings cover various categories, such as communication, deadlines and skill, among others. The employer is also allowed to leave a comment about the worker.

The screenshot shows an oDesk profile for a 'Zend Framework Programmer'. The profile includes a header with a contact button, a 'Save as Favorite' link, and a table of job statistics. The main body contains a 'Work History and Feedback' section with two job entries. Annotations with red boxes and arrows point to specific features:

- Self identify skills:** Points to the 'zend-framework', 'php', 'drupal', 'joomla', 'magento', and 'ruby-on-rails' skill tags.
- All time rating from employers:** Points to the 4.44 star rating (4.44) and the hourly rate of \$8.89 / hr.
- Work history, including title, time frame and cost:** Points to the 'Web Developer (PHP, MySQL, API integration)' job entry, which shows a fixed price of \$200 and a 'Full time 7\$/h backend web developer, permanent job' entry showing 195 hours at \$7.78/hr for a total of \$1,518.
- Amount of experience:** Points to the 'Jobs', 'Stars', and 'Hours' columns in the job statistics table.
- Longevity and recentness:** Points to the 'Member Since' date, May 7, 2009.

	Jobs	Stars	Hours
All Time	35	4.44	1,029
Last 6 months	3	4.69	310

Location	Goraya, India
English Skills	5 out of 5 (self-assessed)
Last Worked	
Member Since	May 7, 2009

Job Title	Time Frame	Cost
Web Developer (PHP, MySQL, API integration)	Jun 2013 - Present	Fixed Price \$200
Full time 7\$/h backend web developer, permanent job	Apr 2013 - May 2013	195 hours @ \$7.78/hr Earned \$1,518

oDesk also provides tests which are free to take and which evaluate the skill level a worker has on a specific topic or tool. The profile indicates where in the population of all test takers that worker performed.

Portfolio (6)



StatusNet



Backupify



Vilago

Certifications

OSSCube [c857689354192007] | OSSCube

2007 | OSSCube - PHP and Linux Certification

Tests

Name	Score (out of 5)		Time to Complete	
Drupal 5	5.00	1st Place!	10 min	Details
HTML 4.01	4.40	Top 10%	36 min	Details
Joomla 1.5	4.40	Top 10%	35 min	Details
PHP5	4.40	Top 10%	26 min	Details
Advanced PHP	4.60	Top 10%	17 min	Details

Finally, oDesk displays the total number of hours worked for all time and in the last six months, along with an average rating over that period. Also visible are the date when the worker joined oDesk and the last date the worker actually worked on an active job.

The amount of attention a worker gives to his profile directly impacts his prospects for getting hired. Consequently, the employer has abundant data points from which to determine fit and skill level.

Phase Relevance - Hiring. The information communicated through the worker profile is most relevant during the hiring phase. In some cases, information on the profile can be misleading. For example, a worker may choose any title he wants, suggesting a particular expertise. However, there are cases where the title doesn't not match up with the work history, suggesting that the worker's rating may not validate expertise in the subject matter suggested by his chosen title.

oDesk Interview Process

Employers may post as many jobs as they want. Workers are then free to place bids on those jobs. When an employer is creating his job he can provide guidance about the type of worker he wants, including the selection of thresholds related to the information on the worker profile. Each bid then indicates to what extent the worker satisfies the desired criteria.

Python REST with bottle.py
Public · Posted 17 days ago · [View](#) or [Edit](#) this job post

5 applicants Sort by: Newest Applicants ☒ Show Agency Contractors

Applicants		5
✓	Shortlisted	0
✉	Messaged	2
✕	Hidden	2
2 Pending Invitations		
4 Withdrawn or Declined		

Applicant 1: PHP, CakePHP, CapsuleCRM, CodeIgniter, NodeJS, web crawler, Yii, Ze...
\$7.22/hr 5 stars 100+ hours Vietnam 4/5 qualifications
Dear sir!! I am in Viet Nam, i would like to work with you on this project please check my currently Python project http://play.jupo.com/news_feed I hope i can ...

Applicant 2: Experienced Python and Django developer
\$7.78/hr 5 stars New to oDesk Russia 2/5 qualifications
Hello! I have a lot of experience in Python/Django and also using REST API from Python my own python library for REST API - <https://bitbucket.org/ad3w/amber> ...

Applicant 3: Software Engineer
\$7.00/hr No Feedback New to oDesk Ukraine 3/5 qualifications
Hello, I'm a keen Python developer with 5 years of experience. I checked out your website outsourcing software licencing process look like an interesting idea. ...

Applicant 4: Python Programmer
Invited \$7.78/hr 4.44 stars 1000+ hours India 3/5 qualifications
Received 17 days ago: Hello Daniel, Received your message. I have worked ...

Feedback Score
At least 4.5 out of 5

Hourly Rate
\$4/hr - \$7/hr

English Level
At least 5 out of 5

oDesk Hours
At least 100 hours

Contractor Type
Independent Only

If an employer is interested in a proposal, he advances to the interview stage by sending a message to the worker. oDesk facilitates the messaging process, which protects the personal information of the employer, such as his email, and also retains a record of the

interview communication. Occasionally the interview communication process will expand to include the use of Skype or other chat or calling software. From the bid detail page it is also possible to decline the bid or hire the worker.

The screenshot shows a contractor profile on oDesk. On the left, there's a profile picture, a 'Save' button, and a list of skills: PHP, CakePHP, CapsuleCRM, CodeIgniter, NodeJs, web crawler, Yii, Zend. Below the skills are various technology tags like php, asp.net, html, jquery, mysql, sql, .net-compact-framework, etc. A 'Cover Letter' button is at the bottom left. On the right, a box titled 'Contractor's proposed terms:' shows a rate of \$7.22/hr (contractor receives \$6.50/hr) and a 'Send Message' button. Below this are buttons for 'Decline' and 'Hire Now'. Further down, it shows 'Rate on Profile' as \$16.67, 'Location' as HCM, Vietnam, 'English Level' as 5 out of 5, and 'Last Worked' as October 13, 2012.

Phase Relevance - Hiring. The communication facilitated through the interview process is most relevant during the hiring phase. It's important to remember that the more communication that occurs, the more easily patterns can be identified. Short, incomplete answers may be a sign that the worker does not understand or is unable to communicate his answers. Willingness to communicate through other mediums may be a good sign that they are willing to engage in more real-time interactions.

oDesk Messaging

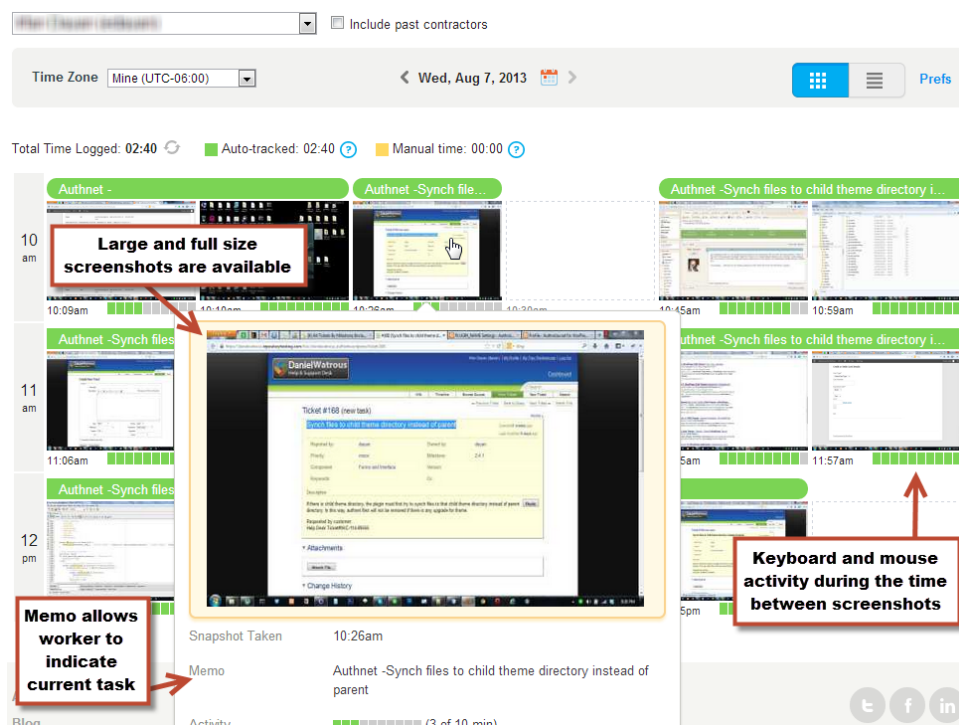
After hiring a worker, oDesk provides a messaging function to facilitate communication. This functions very similar to email, but has the added advantage of retaining communications, including attachments, on the oDesk site. Changes to email or disputes about what was communicated can be verified through oDesk without relying on external tools.

All messages sent via oDesk are sent to the primary email associated with the worker or employer account. It is possible to simply reply directly to those messages. In that case, oDesk receives the reply and updates the message thread and finally forwards your reply on to the worker. At times this process can feel bloated when compared to email.

Phase Relevance - Managing. The messaging facility is most relevant to the managing phase. While a messaging facility is useful, in practice it is often displaced by use of traditional email or live chat programs, as discussed later in this study. Due to the easy play between regular email and messaging, the oDesk inbox is easily neglected.

oDesk Work Diary

oDesk provides a work diary tool that monitors the worker as he works and tracks his hours. It is installed on the worker's computer and takes screenshots on set intervals. It also measures the number of keystrokes and mouse movements during the period between screenshots, which it presents as a measure of overall activity. These diary images are made available to the employer, who can review them to ensure that workers are working on the desired tasks and following any instructions that were given.



Phase Relevance - Managing. The information viewed in the work diary is most relevant during the managing phase. Observation shows that this resource is most useful during the initial weeks and months of employment. Once expectations are set and

training has been completed, the work diary serves the same purpose as a time card, with little, if any, attention being given to the screenshots or activity.

Ancillary Communication Tools

The previous section detailed the built in mechanisms available through the oDesk platform. As shown above, oDesk does not provide any tools designed to facilitate the training process. The primary management mechanisms include messaging and work diary. Many of the resources in this section address training and additional management, especially management related to interactions with the employers clients.

Process Manager

The Process Manager is designed to capture a process (Gerber, 2001) (Ferriss, 2009) and then guide a worker through the process. Whereas project management software is designed to manage progress where steps are unique, the Process Manager helps workers through the same process over and over. Training can include text, audio, video, images, etc. A process can be made up of any number of steps. Each step can be updated independently, and workers can flag process steps that may be out of date or need attention. (Watrous, 2011)

The screenshot displays the Process Manager interface. At the top, a video player shows a man speaking, with a red box labeled "A current listing of all current jobs" pointing to the video. Below the video, a red box labeled "Training can include video, text, diagram, etc." points to the video player. To the right, a "Jobs" section lists tasks with completion percentages: "Authorize.net sa" (100%), "Backlinking Basics" (100%), "Squidoo Lens" (60%), "Introducing Posterous" (0%), "Setting Up Posterous" (0%), "Add Sites To Posterous" (0%), "Ezine Articles" (0%), and "WordPress.com websites" (0%). A red box labeled "Every step in the process for that job is defined, including completion level" points to this list. At the bottom, a progress bar for "Authorize.net sales page" shows a 20% completion level with a red box labeled "The worker can update how much is complete, add notes, and even flag" pointing to the progress bar. The progress bar includes a color-coded scale (20%, 40%, 60%, 80%, 100%) and an "Update" button.

As a worker progresses through a process, Process Manager shows how much progress has been made and what remains to be done. This makes it easy to see progress by all workers at once and to dig deeper to see the specifics of any one assignment. Discussions related to worker productivity are more focused when they center on actual assignments and desired outcomes. Evaluation of employee performance against process documentation also draws out flaws in process definition.

Phase Relevance - Managing and Hiring. The process manager is relevant during the management phase, since it defines the processes workers should follow in addition to tracking their progress as they work. The feedback provided to both worker and employer is useful for making quick corrections and estimating time lines. Adjustments to existing processes are immediately visible to all workers assigned jobs based on that process.

Process Manager can also be relevant to the hiring process. Assignment of evaluation tasks to workers measures their ability to follow instructions, and the speed and quality of their work. This has the added benefit of training them while on the job.

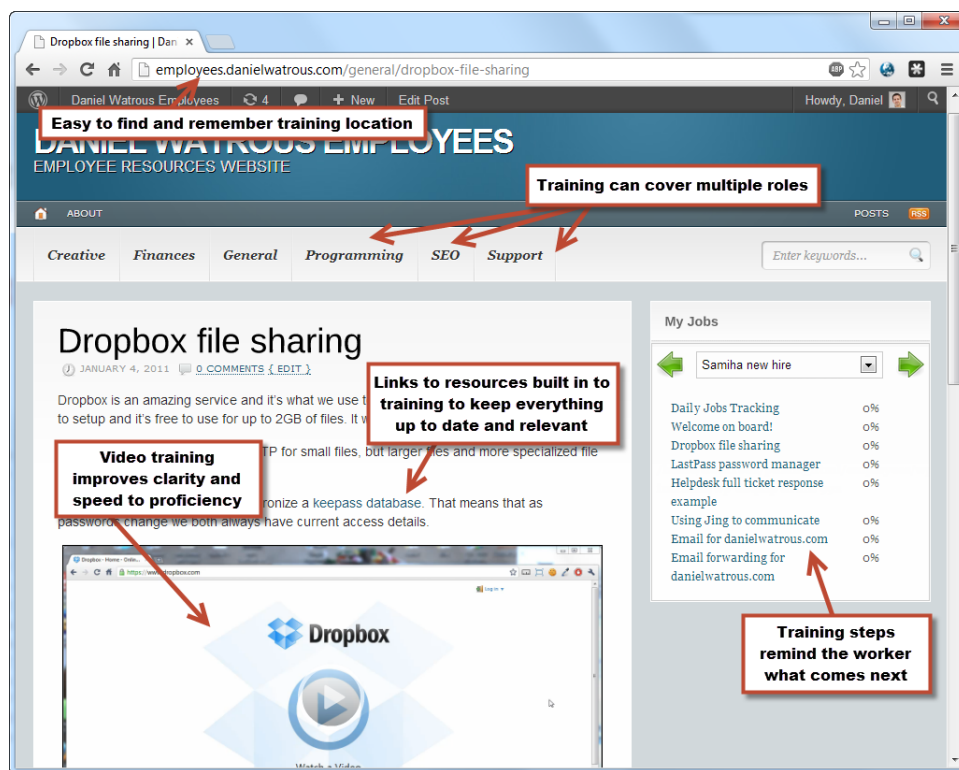
Training and Operations

Training represents the biggest gap in functionality from the large outsourcing services, and there's a good reason for it. First is that most services try, to the extent possible, to be industry and task agnostic. It's in the interest of the outsourcing service to accommodate all types of work. Furthermore, any training that they might provide, may not be a fit for the business or project to which it is applied. The variables are so numerous, and the differences in approach so broad, that it would be fruitless to attempt to train workers for specific tasks on behalf of potential future employers.

An argument could be made that more generalized training on the use of general applications like Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Gmail, Outlook, etc., would be useful to all workers. While this may be true, the actual value to an employer is minimal for two

reasons. One is that most workers already have exposure to these technologies and such training is already available in other locations for little to no cost. The other is that proficiency with these types of applications is presumed, and brings no industry or business specific benefit.

Modern Operations Manual. The most typical answer to the need for new worker training is to compile an operations manual. In the Internet age, that material is increasingly created in an electronic format and published on a website available only to people within a company network. This is called an intranet. A similar approach places the same information on a public, but protected website that enables workers to see only the training that pertains to their role. (Watrous, 2013b)



The Process Manager, mentioned above, works in collaboration with several other tools to create a complete training site for outsourced workers, including prospective workers. This allows segmentation of training for the various functions within a business, such as technical programming and accounting, or creative and finances. As training is

added or changed, this modern electronic delivery method ensures that everyone immediately has access to the updated material.

Phase Relevance - Managing and Hiring. The most obvious application of an operations manual is to manage existing workers and capture the evolution of processes. It is therefore relevant to the management phase of communication. Employees that are learning their role, refer to the documented process. More advanced workers may make changes or contributions to the documented process as they find improvements that can be made.

Another relevant application is during the hiring phase. This could be as simple as documenting the recruiting and hiring procedure. A more involved process may include providing candidate workers with smaller portions of the process documentation and paying them to do actual work. Evaluation of their output and observations about how closely they follow direction can then be compared to the larger worker population. Hiring decisions can then be based on the evaluation of actual output.

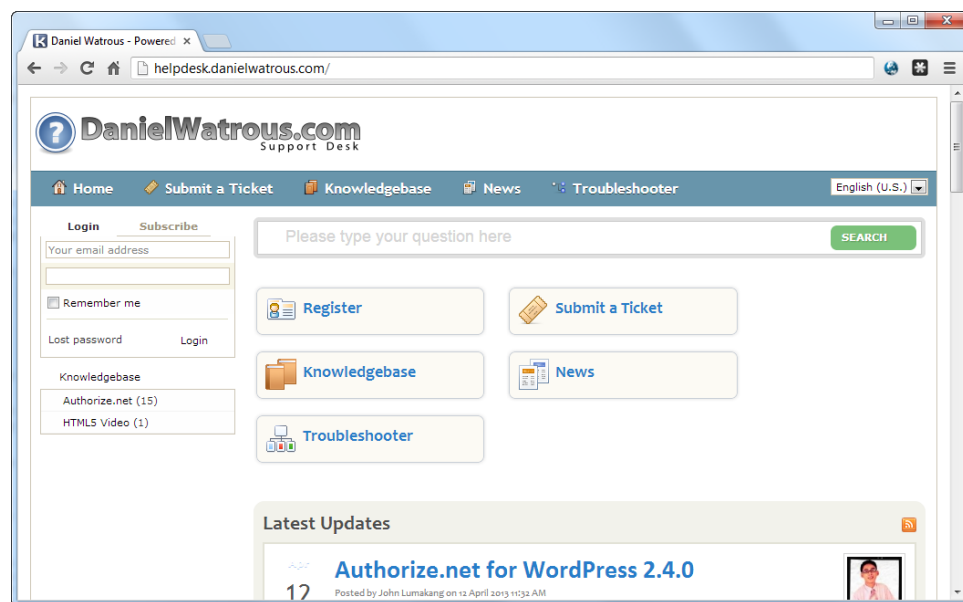
Customer interactions

Many business models require that workers interact with customers. Some contexts for this interaction include sales, support, training, etc. It is often desirable to have a monitoring and quality assurance process to ensure that worker's communications with clients are consistent with company expectations.

Helpdesk. For the support function, a modern helpdesk is a useful tool. This provides clients with a single, consistent interface for communicating with the company. Requests for support can be routed and re-routed as the nature of the support evolves. Common questions and solutions can be captured in a knowledge base for customer self service and as training for future support workers. Macros can automate some typical interactions. Every support interaction is followed up by a survey. News items can inform both workers and clients who are registered with the helpdesk. Workers can communicate

with each other via notes in the context of a specific support interaction. Employer and employee can create self-notifications for every interaction type.

Interactions of this nature were observed during this study through the industry standard Kayako helpdesk software. (Watrous, 2013a)



Phase Relevance - Managing. Helpdesk interactions for support are most relevant during the management phase. An employer can monitor the number and nature of tickets, review surveys from clients and participate with workers in support interactions when necessary.

Camtasia, Snagit and ScreenSteps

Many of the tasks assigned to workers are carried out on a computer. Training is most effective when it takes the same format and appearance of the actual tasks they will be expected to complete. Screen capture software satisfies this very effectively.

As part of this study, three specific solutions were observed. Two screen capture tools from TechSmith were used to create both still image captures of the user's screen and full motion video with microphone audio of the user's screen. These images and videos can

then easily be posted to the training site and made available to the workers that would benefit from them.

Another solution used was ScreenSteps. This is similar to the above tools except that it is intended to capture smaller areas of the screen in the context of a document that describes a process. The mix of screen capture and documentation makes this a great tool to create manuals and employee training sequences.

A picture is worth a thousand words, and screen capture can be an extremely effective tool. One potential drawback to screen capture is that it can be difficult and slow to reference. If a worker wants to refresh his memory on a small point embedded in a 15 minute video, this can sometimes be more difficult than skimming a printed document.

Phase Relevance - Managing and Hiring. Screen capture training is relevant during the management phase as one tool used to create operations documentation. It often represents the most effective way of conveying the details of computer based tasks, especially repetitive tasks.

Another application is in the hiring phase. When a candidate is asked to create a screen capture video of a certain process, the resulting video can provide insight into how the candidate would approach tasks if hired.

Google Chat and Skype

Real time communication is one of the barriers to productivity when interacting with remote workers. A number of free services, such as Skype and Google chat (also called talk, or hangouts) allow for real time communication with workers. Both of the services mentioned provide apps for mobile and tablet use. Skype also provides a screen sharing mechanism which serves the same purpose as the TechSmith tools, but during a real time interaction.

There are also drawbacks to using real-time communication tools. Text chat using a keyboard can be very slow. This is even more true when using a mobile platform. Audio

and video chat is not always reliable, and the quality depends heavily on network and computer performance. Many of the much hyped features fail to deliver, such as Skype's screen sharing. Performance and reliability make it risky to depend on. At times, poor performance can even impact clarity, thereby increasing worker confusion.

Phase Relevance - Managing, Training and Hiring. Real time communication is relevant to every phase currently under consideration. However, it provides the greatest benefit during the training and managing phases. For managing and training, a quick voice call can clarify an assignment or task with less ambiguity than other communication formats.

Timezones

Timezones for outsourced workers can represent a tricky problem to solve. Real time communication can be hit and miss and other messages, including email, can have a round trip of days, rather than hours. This is most critical when considering workers that will interact with clients. Many clients have become very sensitive to delay in response time and timezone differences can severely aggravate this issue.

Culturally there are some factors that come in to play, such as the prevalence of US based call centers in some countries and populations of workers that are in the habit of managing sleep cycles to match the USA. In the Philippines, for example, the English they speak is closest to American English. As a result there are many American companies that have established call centers there to leverage the inexpensive workforce. They require their workers to work shifts that correspond with the American work day. It is possible to find many workers that have worked at these call centers and, as a result, are happy to work schedules that correlate with US timezones.

Challenges to Effective Communication

Typical workplace communication is peppered with non-work related, social conversation. Downtime from work related tasks and relationship building are an expected

part of daily interactions. These types of spontaneous communications haven't emerged among outsourced workers, either from employer to worker or between peer workers.

There are some subtle concepts that might easily be communicated relatively fast in an face to face setting. These can often be challenging to communicate electronically, in spite of all the technologies and tools that are available. Some concepts simply don't accommodate an electronic format, such as cultural concepts that should drive decision making. Even with a common language, important cultural and social touch points are missing.

Timezone delays can impede progress and decrease productivity. As a worker becomes more established, the impact related to timezone differences for normal daily work diminishes.

Conclusion

Three core phases of communication related to the employment life cycle of outsourced workers has been analyzed. These phases include hiring, training and managing workers. Central to the discussion of these phases is the concept of process development, whereby the standard operating procedures of a company are discovered, refined and codified. Each of the three phases informs and directs process development in a feedback loop relationship.

Outsourcing services, such as oDesk, provide tools to facilitate most of the hiring process, some of the managing process and very little, if any, of the training process. The worker profile is the most useful to the hiring process. In the profile, a worker can sell himself by providing information, portfolio items, etc. Past employers can give worthwhile critiques of workers across a variety of categories, including communication, quality and timeliness.

The train and manage phases are best accomplished by way of resources external to oDesk. This study reviewed the Process Manager in conjunction with an intranet to

capture processes and guide the worker through the completion of the process. Any updates to processes or operating materials was immediately available to all workers.

A sub-theme of management touched on the management of workers who interface with clients on behalf of their employers. These interactions were managed by a helpdesk system. Through the helpdesk, clients had a single, consistent interface to request support. Internally, the helpdesk facilitated support interactions, peer interactions, training and eventually captured much of that in a reusable format.

Modern technology provides for a more productive remote workforce than any time in history. However, it falls short when it comes to subtle, cultural and social communication, leaving some important concepts without adequate coverage. Despite the pitfalls, the low cost and abundance of foreign workers available on oDesk (and other similar sites) enables some business models that previously were not possible.

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