

Serving God by serving man

Sujatha Raju, Director of SAI SEVA, a BPO with a vision. SAI SEVA's revolutionary business model of simultaneously providing employment to the needy by moving jobs done in cities to villages and thereby offering lowered costs to the clients was conceived by Sujatha. In an interview with i4d, she talks about the SAI SEVA initiatives and their future plans



What prompted you to start the rural BPO initiative?

SAI SEVA was inspired by the life and teachings of Bhagwan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. Baba often quotes, 'Maanav Seva is Maadhav Seva' - Service to Man is Service to God, and 'Grama Seva is Rama Seva' - Service to the village is service rendered to God. The promoter group of SAI SEVA comprises of students of the Sri Sathya Sai University and devotees of Sri Sathya Sai Baba. Being in the BPO field for over two decades, we felt that there was an enormous opportunity to take the BPO revolution to the village level, thereby also enabling us to provide sustained employment opportunities to the unemployed village youth. SAI SEVA is therefore not merely a business for us, it is also our way of fulfilling our commitments to society.

In which village is SAI SEVA's rural BPO located?

SAI SEVA's first centre was setup in August 2006 in Puttaparthi, Anantapur District, Andhra Pradesh.

As a rural BPO, how is SAI SEVA BPO different from others in the field? Does SAI SEVA also provide training programmes to youth to enhance their essential skills?

At SAI SEVA, we have attempted to faithfully replicate our city-based BPO setups. Every aspect of the operation - infrastructure,

processes, scalability, training and controls - are as per the expectations from any professional BPO setup elsewhere. We have also taken care not to disturb the village culture - for example, we do not have night shifts and we also encourage employees to work in flexible shifts to accommodate their participation in the family business, like farming or weaving.

Our conviction in a centralised setup with around 100-200 seats/centre arises from the fact that it facilitates handling large volumes of transactions for larger clients (like banks/telecom/insurance companies). Several other considerations like frequent product update training, control of sensitive information, etc. can be better supported in this model. Every centre would be an independent, self-sustaining entity.

We have realized that considerable time has to be invested on the rural youth to make them employable in BPOs. We take them through a structured training program in English, basics of computers and data capture skills before we hire them.

Did you face any problems while starting your BPO service? Could you tell us about the barriers you came across and how you overcame them?

We've encountered several challenges in the two years that we have been in operation. Things that we take for granted in urban employees like language skills, professional etiquette, exposure to a working environment, etc. are to be taught from naught. The lead time for these youngsters to be productive on the job is therefore considerably longer. Nevertheless, their commitment levels and the eagerness to learn compensates for this investment.

However, the larger barrier which is no doubt faced by all Rural BPOs in the country is the lack of belief in the concept among the corporate business houses. The sales cycle for us is quite long, and many of them fail midway.

SAI SEVA is however very fortunate to partner with BASIX and HDFC Bank, who have both shown tremendous confidence in our ability to manage their processes.

What are your plans for the future? Do you plan to scale up/expand your rural BPO operations to other parts of the country?

SAI SEVA's vision is to have a presence in each and every state in the country. Before we do that, we want the Puttaparthi centre to be a centre of excellence among all Rural BPOs. Towards that, we are currently working on getting our processes ISO certified. We hope to extend our operations to Tamil Nadu this year. ■