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## Call center expands in Charleston market

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As wages rise and good employees become hard to find in India and the Philippines, many call center companies are beginning to bring jobs back to the United States.

"The press has had a field day talking about the expansion (of jobs) happening (in India and the Philippines) and the contraction happening here," Vikas Kapoor, CEO of New York-based iQor Inc., a call center company.

Charleston is becoming one of the places within U.S. borders providing a viable opportunity for call centers.

"This is a booming place because of the well-trained people and the cost of living here," said Melissa Kovacevic, owner of CommPlan Call Center Consulting and membership chairwoman for the Greater Charleston Call Center Alliance.

Three years ago, Kapoor stopped following the low-cost geographic hunt and began seeking a different quarry—regional areas selected for expert knowledge.

Kapoor said keeping jobs in America is simply following good business sense.

"Cost arbitrage is yesterday's game," Kapoor said.

India and the Philippines are among the 19 iQor call center locations, along with other locations across the United States and Canada.

Cost arbitrage doesn't work because once a cheap-labor locale is found, call center companies jump to hire in that location, which raises wages and negates the initial cost-cutting, Kapoor said.

On July 18, iQor held a grand open-

ing for its newly expanded North Charleston location. iQor moved into the region seven years ago and was formerly located on Mall Drive.

The new center, located on Dorchester Road, has been named the Center of Excellence.

Calls requiring sophisticated interaction are more suited for a call center within the United States, Kapoor said.

Kovacevic agrees.

"The folks in India, while they can often speak in English, are not speaking the English we are speaking in

full capacity within five years," an iQor spokeswoman said in a written statement.

On average, call centers pay employees \$10 to \$11 an hour plus sales bonuses, and they pay managers around \$55,000, Kovacevic said.

"It is going to continue to be a challenge (to find employees)," she said. "How are they going to get really good, qualified people?"

In India, some call centers are experiencing difficulty finding employees, she added.

Within the first three to four months of employment, call center employees are in the most danger of quitting, and some companies can see a turnover rate of 40% to 50%, Kovacevic said.

iQor uses an employee-referral program to attract potential staff. This has become a popular way for many call centers in the area to find qualified personnel, Kovacevic said.

Another new option for call centers to recruit employees is to create remote call center agents who can work from their homes, she said.

This method opens the employment field to stay-at-home parents or to those who do not own a vehicle.

The company has the technical capability to implement the remote call centers and the company is looking into the process. However, the company has not made any decision regarding hiring remote agents.

Soon-to-be college graduates also offer a good employee base. Although some call centers reach out to soon-to-be college graduates, many ignore this employee market, Kovacevic said. ■

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Owner of CommPlan Call Center Consulting and membership chairwoman for the Greater Charleston Call Center Alliance

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America," Kovacevic said.

The United States and the Charleston region provide "better service at reasonable cost" for complicated interactions, Kapoor said.

"(But) certain types of calls should be handled in the Philippines or India," he added.

The new 42,000-square-foot building can accommodate more than 800 employees. Currently, iQor employs 400 people and has plans to hire another 50 to 75. iQor joins many other Charleston regional call centers in the hunt for personnel.

"We are planning on a steady growth rate every single year and hope to be at