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Nicaragua is fast emerging as a successful near-shore location for contact centers, especially teleservices firms that provide a full array of business process outsourcing services.

The country has a large and available workforce. It has approximately 5.9 million inhabitants and while the unemployment rate is 3.9 per cent, its underemployment level is over 45 percent, reports the CIA Factbook: one of the highest in the region.

Nicaragua is in the central time zone, enabling easier integrated contact handling with other North American contact centers and offices. It is just a quick two-and-a-half hour flight from the Texas. Major airlines have daily direct flights from Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, and Atlanta.

Nicaragua also have highly developed communications infrastructure, which was completely transformed in the late 1990's. According to ProNicaragua, an organization that creates awareness about the nation, the telecommunication sector is fully privatized and is considered to be one of the most modern, constant, and reliable in Central America. Global direct access is possible through via two fiber optic submarine cables, and reliable multinational carriers have competitive services and rates. There are fiber optics and digital switching, metropolitan area fiber networks, and international private leasing circuits.

One of the BPO teleservices firms that have set up and have been successful in Nicaragua is eTelecare. It opened the doors on its center in the vicinity of Managua, the capital and largest city in December, 2008, employing over 500 people delivering bilingual customer care, sales, and technical support services to customers of its Fortune 500 client base.

The firm cited Nicaragua's nearshore proximity, time zones, liberalized, high-growth economy, strong U.S. and Canadian cultural affinity, robust telecommunications infrastructure, and large pool of skilled multilingual workers. Despite the large group of young, intelligent workers,

Nicaragua's emerging economy is only partly creating the new jobs needed to meet the needs of the population. Nicaragua is the second poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere with a per capita income level of approximately U.S. \$1,000.

This situation creates a society that is eager for work, says eTelecare (News - Alert), and contact center positions present the perfect opportunity for these talented people. As the industry is just beginning to take root in the country, this is the ideal time it says for companies to hire the most qualified candidates. With the proper training and development, these young individuals it says possess the skills needed to become high quality agents.

"Nicaragua in particular has a growing, largely untapped supply of skilled residents available at rates that are competitive with those of other Central American countries such as Costa Rica and Panama," said eTelecare CEO and President John Harris. "As is our strategy globally, we hire only the best-of-the-best, and our new center near Managua allows us to deliver high-quality, multichannel contact center services to our clients for years to come."

eTelecare and its clientele have been pleased with how Nicaragua has been working out. The firm pointed to strong cultural affinity with the U.S. and the strong language skills of its workforce.

The Nicaraguan people it says have had more experience with U.S. culture than what is typical in Central America. Therefore they have a highly integrated sense of both Nicaraguan and American culture. This blending of two cultures occurred because of the political unrest that the Nicaraguan people experienced during the 1980s, which forced upwards of 400,000 people to flee their homes and move to the United States or Canada.

While there they attended public schools and were immersed in American (and Canadian) cultures and the English language. They participated in school sports activities and leagues, and entered the workforce. Many people held jobs in customer service or sales, giving them first hand experience relating to American and Canadian customers. When Nicaragua's political situation stabilized in the late 1990s, many missed their homeland, and over 150,000 returned to share a wealth of knowledge of the English language and culture with the family and friends they left.

Deyanira Blandon, the Managua center's HR director, says that approximately 80 percent of the agents working there have lived in the United States for some period of time, and many still have family members living in the U.S. or Canada. Deyanira decided to stay in Nicaragua with her father throughout the 1980s; the rest of her family still lives in Las Vegas.

One agent, Maria, who was only seven years old at the time, recalls her family leaving together, and living in Florida for approximately eight years. While she returned to Nicaragua her brother decided to stay and now resides in Houston.

"Nicaragua is my country, and I felt an obligation to come back and know my country," Maria said.

Because of the years of exposure to American culture, today many young Nicaraguans have the same hobbies and watch many of the same popular television shows that the average U.S. college student watches. Maria listed "The Bachelor" as one of her personal favorites, while several others enjoy watching sports channels such as ESPN (News - Alert). Sports are another area common interest. Nicaraguans watch and play baseball, soccer and American football, and are familiar with U.S. sports traditions such as the Super Bowl and March Madness.

"The American way of life has certainly influenced many Nicaraguan people," said Valeria Bautista, eTelecare's Managua site support manager, who used to live in Michigan. "The clothing, food, hobbies, and the desire to improve oneself is always present in the average Nicaraguan."

The cultural affinity is only one part of Nicaragua's story. Language skills and education represent others. eTelecare reports that an estimated 10 percent of Nicaragua's economically active population speaks fluent English. These people are mainly concentrated in Managua. Further, both English and Spanish accents are soft and neutral, making Nicaragua an excellent location from which to service English and Spanish-speaking customers.

The country has many colleges, trade schools, and language institutes that teach in both English and Spanish. Nicaragua's educational system has over 116,000 students who study in 48 universities, including one accredited English language university, five bilingual programs, and 30 English language institutes. In addition, the secondary education system graduates over 12,000 fluent, bilingual speakers annually, which is increasing each year.

eTelecare's Managua staff say that in recent years there has been greater focus on English skills in Nicaragua that they think is a positive step that will give the students greater job opportunities in the future. One staffer said that approximately 25 percent of their fellow employees at eTelecare held college degrees, and all had finished high school.

"Though Nicaragua has been somewhat late to jump on the BPO bandwagon, the time has never been better to consider the country an ideal near shore destination," eTelecare said. "Despite a turbulent past, Nicaragua is one of the safest countries in Central America, with a democratically elected government that is eager to bring outsourcing to the country to create the 65,000 jobs annually that are needed to boost the economy. Companies can take advantage of highly skilled, low cost labor, a convenient near shore location, and a modern telecommunications infrastructure.

"While customers benefit because they can avoid the frustrations of language and cultural differences that often occur when dealing with offshore destinations such as India. The time is right, and the people are ready for BPO in Nicaragua."

<http://callcenterinfo.tmcnet.com/Analysis/articles/58323-nicaragua-emerging-economy-ideal-bpo-destination.htm>