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Accents of Africa: A New Outsourcing Frontier

By MARC LACEY

AIROBI, Kenya, Jan. 30 - Susan Mina, a Kenyan who has never stepped foot out of Africa, speaks English like the haughtiest of Britons. She can also put on a fair imitation of an American accent by swallowing all her words. Still, every once in a while, some Swahili slips out of her and that is not at all helpful as she tries to enhance Africa's role in the global explosion of outsourcing.

It happened the other day when she was trying to get a British man to sign up for a new cellular telephone service. He was in his home, minding his own business. She sat near the Nairobi airport, doing her business as a sales agent for KenCall, Kenya's first international call center. The man's accent - she pegged it as Irish - was unintelligible to her. "Pole sana?" she blurted out, which is what one says in Swahili instead of "Huh?"

Controlling one's Swahili is just one of the challenges that Kenyans are facing as they play catch-up in an industry that India and other countries have turned into major job generators.

Kenya's regular phone lines are so abysmal that the founders of KenCall had to go through the cumbersome process of getting government approval to use a costly satellite hookup. Even more dollars were burned on an elaborate generator system aimed at keeping KenCall's computer screens running during Nairobi's frequent power failures.

"Africa needs to raise its game," said Russell Southwood, who publishes an online newsletter on telecommunications in Africa at balancingact-africa.com. "It needs to show the world that it can do more than pick minerals out of the ground and grow fruits and vegetables."

KenCall is now up and running, and eager to lure business from Western companies that want cheap labor - but educated cheap labor like Ms. Mina, who has a university degree but earns less than \$5,000 a year, not as much as a fast-food cashier would make in the United States.

Although just a tiny entrant in the call-center market, KenCall has enough clients to keep 200 telephone operators busy. Some of the Kenyan sales agents dial up Britons and urge

them to save money on their cellular phones. Others dial up Americans and ask if they are interested in refinancing their home mortgages. Without knowing it, some Americans even dial up Kenya, responding to advertisements offering low-income grants or job assistance.

After looking on for years as Asia cashed in on the outsourcing boom, Africa is now aggressively seeking its piece of the action.

Datamonitor, a consulting firm that follows outsourcing, estimates that there are 54,000 call-center jobs in the most advanced countries in Africa, out of a total of 6 million such jobs worldwide. But the 54,000 figure only includes South Africa and the countries of North Africa, not emerging call centers in places like Ghana and Kenya.

"There's a lot of potential in Africa," said Peter Ryan, an analyst at Datamonitor. "India, the Philippines and Canada are relatively mature, and that means wages and real estate are higher. So companies are asking, 'Are there other locations?'"

South Africa is far ahead of the rest of the continent, with an estimated 500 call centers employing about 31,000 people. South Africa boasts that the accents of its workers are neutral enough to fool English speakers everywhere. It also has the same time zones as parts of Europe, making doing business easier.

Ghana, which makes similar claims about its population's understandable English, has lured [Affiliated Computer Services Inc.](#), an outsourcing company based in Dallas that employs about 2,000 Ghanaians to process health forms for [Aetna](#) and other insurers.

With vast populations of French speakers, Africa is working to claim that part of the market as well. French-language call centers are operating in Morocco, Senegal, Tunisia and Madagascar, all of them dialing up Parisians and pretending to be just down the "rue."

"They say, 'You have a charming accent,'" Fanta Diop, a supervisor at a call center in Dakar, the Senegalese capital, told Reuters recently. "They never guess it's black Africa."

Much of the outsourcing in Africa is focused on telemarketing, which is less profitable than processing medical forms or acting as the customer service department of an overseas corporation. But making cold calls is considered an entree to the highly competitive industry.

"The market for this is huge," said Nicholas A. Nesbitt, the chief executive of KenCall, which he founded with his younger brother, Eric, and his brother-in-law, Steve Liggins, a retired banker. "It's not possible to put a figure on it. Any job that is being done that doesn't require face-to-face contact can be outsourced. And why not to Kenya?"

Kenya's political transition in December 2002 prompted KenCall's founders to return from overseas and invest in the country. The new government has had a rocky start in fighting corruption and creating new jobs - its two main campaign promises. But Mr. Nesbitt said

he was able to set up the call center without doling out any bribes - "not even so much as a cup of coffee," he said.

Not only does the country offer an advantage that stems from its tepid economic growth over the years, its people have what Mr. Nesbitt calls a "pleasant Anglicized accent." Many of its college graduates are unemployed or underemployed, and are eager to dial around the world for a paycheck that would be considered meager in the United States - about \$4,500 a year, including performance bonuses. That income is well above that of the average person in Kenya, where subsistence farming is the most popular job. Still, it only provides for a rather no-frills life in the costly capital.

Ms. Mina, one of KenCall's top sellers, graduated from a local university in 2002 but searched in vain for a job. "I have so many friends who did not go to university and they are driving big cars," she said. "It's been so frustrating."

One of her colleagues, Brian Mawanda, became so used to rejection in his job search that he believes the experience is helping him deal with all those people he calls who are not interested in what he is selling.

"I've had so many doors slammed in my face," said Mr. Mawanda, who graduated from college in 2001 with degrees in business administration and communications. "Now, the worst someone can do is insult me and hang up."

Some of KenCall's agents must change their names on the job, trading Wanjira for Wendy, for instance. And they receive nonstop feedback from supervisors on their accents, their sales pitches and their ability to think on their feet.

One frequent issue is the Kenyan habit of letting out a little grunt when someone else is talking, which is supposed to reassure speakers that their words are being heard. Some agents grow alarmed if the person on the other end of the line is quiet and ask with alarm: "Hello? Hello? Are you there?"

Some call-center workers have traveled the world, picking up their accents in the process. For others, KenCall is their virtual travel. Ms. Mina, for instance, visualizes herself sitting in the living rooms of the foreigners she is talking to on the phone.

And even without leaving Nairobi, she and other agents are learning about cultural differences. Britons, the agents say, are far more likely to chat extensively with a telemarketer even if they have no interest in the product. Americans are a different story. They are abrupt, the Kenyans say.

All the dialers, even those who have honed their accents to perfection, are inevitably asked where they are calling from. Usually, the agents say no more than that they are calling on behalf of a company based in, say, York. But that does not fool some people, who often receive calls from India and other parts of the world.

When KenCall's agents do fess up that they are in Africa, there is inevitably a pause at the other end of the line. And then the reaction comes. It could be an anti-African slur. It could be just silence and the slamming down of the phone. But every once in a while, there are prospective buyers who have vacationed in Kenya and a rehash begins of the wonderful time they had.

That is when Ms. Mina's heart starts beating fast. She plays along, does a bit of tourism promotion for her country and then, ever so gently, steers the conversation back to the product at hand. "I still remember when one man who I talked to for so long finally said, 'Sign me up,' " she said with a smile.

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