

Invisible Labor

Hidden Work in the Contemporary World

EDITED BY

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The Virtual Receptionist with a Human Touch

Opposing Pressures of Digital Automation and Outsourcing in Interactive Services

WINIFRED R. POSTER

The position of a receptionist may seem like a fairly insignificant job. It is generally low skilled, low waged, and monotonous, and it provides mundane services not often regarded as critical to society. However, receptionists are at the juncture of an important struggle for labor in the twenty-first century. It involves a tension among employers over how much humanness and how much physical proximity they want from their workers and what role technology will play in that dynamic. As this chapter will explore, these issues have significant bearing on the visibility of these workers in the future.

Receptionists fall in the category of the service industry, which is generating most new jobs within the formal job sector around the world. From the early 1960s to the late 1990s, the world average of service occupations rose approximately 20 to 50 percent while those in manufacturing fell precipitously. Service jobs, by definition, involve doing something for people rather than making things. A service can also be identified by its nonmaterial outcomes since it does not directly assemble, grow, or extract a product (International Labour Office 2001) or by its relational characteristics since it may provide assistance to customers (MacDonald and Sirianni 1996). *Interactive* services, in particular, are noted for their personal contact with the public.

The receptionist—who greets customers at the front office of a company—epitomizes this personal contact. A major job requirement for a receptionist is literally being the human face of the company. The

receptionist position, as such, may seem a highly unlikely job for employers to eliminate, replace, or contract out. Indeed, although service jobs have largely been protected from economic cycles that have eliminated other kinds of jobs in the last few decades, they are now subject to two forms of pressure—from outsourcing, which sends the work outside the firm, and from automation, which replaces the worker and aspects of the work with technological systems.

The automation of services emerged from the fields of artificial intelligence (AI) and human-computer interaction (HCI). Bridging the gap between academic science and the high-tech industry, designers have aimed to create electronic systems that perform the practical tasks of service workers while seeming to appear human as they do so. Firms started replacing some service workers with these systems in the 1980s (e.g., replacing telephone operators with touch-tone phone menus and bank tellers with ATMs). However, something else also happened in the mid-1990s. Advances in science enabled firms to use AI to make those systems seem humanlike, endowing them with voices, appearances, capacity for chattiness and informal talk, and even emotions (Gustavsson 2005; Kerr 2004). The computer programs were then able to interact with customers.

Scholar Lucy Suchman (2007) notes that it is not coincidental for such humanlike, conversational artifacts to be developed within the contemporary context. In fact, this stream of AI emerged closely in connection with the service economy: “As the robot was to industrial imagery, so the software agent is to the desires and fantasies of the service economy. But rather than machines that can do our heavy lifting for us, the dream now is that every one of us can be . . . commanding a staff of servants that gets to know us intimately, watches out for us, keeps us informed in just the ways that we need . . . and represents us faithfully in our everyday affairs (p. 219).” Accordingly, many of the “social agents” or “chatterbots”¹ developed through HCI have reflected a narrative of algorithmic service, assistance, and deference, especially for intimate and domestic labor (such as robotic nurses, maids, and personal assistants). As I will show, this paradigm has crossed over into office services as well.

Yet attention to the automation of receptionists alone ignores the other crucial trend that has reshaped service labor in the last decade or so: outsourcing. The contracting out, and especially the offshoring, of services began to proliferate around 2000 when information and communications systems took a leap forward. Internet connections, fiber

optic cables, and satellite communications systems all enabled data and voice to be transferred easily and cheaply among firms. Organizations began to send work processes to outside locations, both local and international. South Asia, with its large educated, middle-class, English-speaking population, became a particularly popular destination of service outsourcing for U.S. firms. Eighty percent of Fortune 500 companies now send work abroad, 50 percent to India alone.²

This chapter examines how these two dynamics represent forces that are decomposing the job of the receptionist as well as the live, human, on-site worker who performs it. They pull the tasks of the receptionist outward in two directions, with automation on one side (encouraging employers to move away from the humanness of the worker) and with outsourcing on the other side (encouraging employers to move away from the worker’s physical proximity to the firm). In turn, a whole new set of actors—technology vendors, third-party agencies, and international subcontractors—are fighting a vigorous battle to capture the market for these jobs. This is the story of these various actors and their strategies to reshape interactive service occupations.

The visibility of the worker is a primary motivating factor for the utilization of these strategies. Selectively making the worker visible—or else completely invisible—is at the heart of reconfiguring the labor process of these services. Employers are making conscious decisions about what part of their employees’ humanness they want customers to interact with: corporeal features like the face and voice; spiritual or mental features like the intellect, emotions, and relational capacities; both kinds—or neither. Sometimes these features are selected independently; at other times, they appear in combination. Sometimes they are recorded from live humans; at other times, they are manufactured digitally through algorithmic code.

Documenting the range of forms among virtual receptionists is the task of this study. The analysis is based on sociological research of the customer service industry in South Asia and the United States that I have been conducting for the past decade. What follows is material from virtual receptionist companies and academic organizations (such as their “webinars” or online videos about their products, promotional fliers, and testimonials from customers) as well as material from my case studies of customer-service call centers in India and Pakistan. Themes of gender, sexuality, domesticity, race, and nationhood will be integral elements of this analysis.

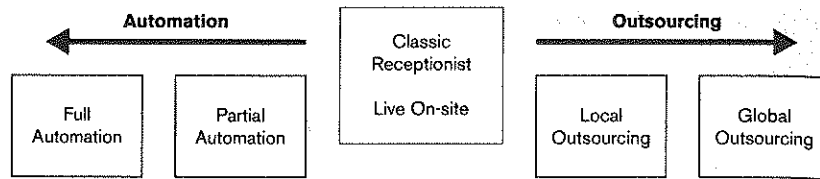


FIGURE 5.1. Spectrum of virtual receptionist business strategies.

LIVE, ROBOTIC, REMOTE: THE AUTOMATION-OUTSOURCING SPECTRUM

As I began to research this phenomenon, I discovered a range of different types of workers—all called *virtual receptionists*, *secretaries*, or *assistants*. They all do things like greet guests and transfer them to employee offices. However, their duties lie on a spectrum of business strategies that extend outward in two directions (see figure 5.1).

In the center is the classic receptionist. There are more than 1 million of these employees in the United States (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, quoted in National Receptionists Association 2013). The National Receptionists Association includes a range of job titles in its community: “Front Desk Clerk, Operator, Host/Hostess, Information Desk personnel, Maître [d’], and many more.” It describes the job in the following way: “Receptionists are the ‘front line’ personnel in the business setting. They are the first person[s] a client has contact with and the interaction very often sets the tone of the business transaction to follow. Their interpersonal skills, telephone etiquette and communication skills are a very important element in greeting clients, responding to inquiries and representing the company.”

In her duties as “frontline personnel,” a receptionist has a more important role than a secretary, who sits in the “back” office, does: “A receptionist fields initial company contact and takes [control] of the communication channels with each call during the day. A secretary’s role is different because [he] report[s] to someone else in the company and [is] not the initial contact. In fact, most times the receptionist takes the secretary’s calls first.” This job description represents the traditional mid-twentieth-century model of labor—live and on-site. The job is full-time (with employee benefits such as health care) and relatively stable, with predictable hours, schedules, locations, provisions of living wage, and long-term security. The new virtual receptionist jobs will typically not have these features.

The old-fashioned receptionist job is being pulled in two directions. On one side is automation. It involves strategies designed by technology vendors, and then purchased by firms, to replace human receptionists completely with automated workers. As one moves outward to the left on the continuum, these virtual workers (or software programs) are increasingly more technological and sophisticated. On the other side of the classic human receptionist is outsourcing. It involves strategies to move the job outside the firm to third-party firms and other locations. Therefore, as one moves outward on the right side of the spectrum, the jobs are further distanced from the original employer—geographically but also economically and socially. As we move through examples of virtual receptionists on each side of this spectrum, we will see how their visibility varies to employers, consumers, other workers, and the public.

THE AUTOMATED RECEPTIONISTS

We begin by meeting the *automated* virtual receptionists who are replacing the traditional human ones. With Alice, Ava, and Marve, we see how firms are trying to capture human qualities and insert them into computerized systems. Basic models incorporate some “real” human elements such as a picture, voice recording, or video of an actual person, whereas more advanced models create humanlike features entirely with code.

Partial Automation

Alice. One of the simpler technological models is Alice. Alice is a flat-screen receptionist designed by WinTech corporation (see figure 5.2). She appears as a face on a computer monitor. She uses motion detection to determine when a customer approaches, plays a prerecorded video welcome message, and notifies a staff member when a client has arrived.

She can be found in many places in an office. She may be sitting on the front desk (literally “on” it, not behind it). She may be hung on the wall. She may be lodged in a kiosk. What’s curious about these images created by vendor WinTech is that they repeatedly feature a chair next to Alice—one that is always empty. This image reminds us that the human worker is absent, invisible. It is also curious that within the kiosks Alice’s “body” may be branded with consumer advertising like Coca-Cola displays. This use follows a trend of employees consuming the identities of the firms for which they work as well as those of other corporations (see chapter 13).



FIGURE 5.2. Alice, the flatscreen receptionist. Reproduced by permission from Wintech LLC. © 2015 by Wintech LLC.

Indeed, even though she is entirely electronic and just a box, Alice is anthropomorphized and gendered.³ Her *name*, for instance, is feminine. It stands for “A Live Interactive Customer Experience.”

Ava. A more sophisticated version of the automated receptionist is Ava, a hologram from Airus Media (see figure 5.3). Through this technology the company gives Ava additional human features to present to the public. She talks to customers as a standing, life-size image. She detects customers with the use of electronic motion systems and, like Alice, plays a greeting, but Ava presents herself in *full-body* form.

Ava is a projection of a live human onto a two-dimensional screen cut to the shape of her body. With three-dimensional digital enhancements, we see the speaking and moving Ava in front of us. She wears professional-looking attire (i.e., black pants, buttoned-down blue shirt). However, her dialogue and intonation in the promotional video from Airus Media (2011) are sexually suggestive. Here’s what Ava tells potential “employers” on the Web site:

My name is Ava, the new virtual assistant that everyone is talking about. You’re right: I’m really not here. But I do look pretty good, don’t I? I am the latest and greatest in public guidance and advertising. I never take a break, don’t charge overtime, hardly ever take sick leave, and I don’t need a back-



FIGURE 5.3. Ava, the hologram receptionist. Reproduced by permission from Scott Beale / Laughing Squid. © 2012 by Scott Beale / Laughing Squid.

ground check. I’m so versatile I can be used for just about anything. I can say what you want, dress the way you want, and be just about anything you want me to be. I can advertise your products, promote your facility, and guide your customers. I am so helpful I can even provide instructions and give directions. Even better, it won’t be long ’til I can answer questions. How cool is that? I am very cost-effective. I will save you time and money.

Ava saves employers from all the hassles of dealing with live employees—wages, absences, laziness, crime—and gives them new

control over her other attributes: her body (dress) and talk (conversation). At the moment, her conversations are one-way. However, Airus Media promises that voice-recognition software will soon enable two-way conversations with the public. Then Ava will be able to serve as a classic front-desk receptionist.

Full Automation

Marve. Marve is the next stage of automation in human-computer interaction—an entirely computerized avatar. He is an experimental virtual receptionist at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte (Babu et al. 2006). Scientists there are equipping Marve with *emotions*. Through this technology virtual secretaries will be able to appear even more life-like to the customer by communicating interactively and with feeling.

Marve can perform the routine receptionist tasks: he takes messages, delivers information, and more for the computer science laboratory. In addition, though, he “interact[s with visitors] using a combination of spoken natural language [and] non-verbal cues . . . that include maintaining appropriate eye contact, facial expressions, and gestures” (Babu et al. 2006: 170). He is programmed to engage in conversation and be social. He makes small talk, chats about the weather and movies, and tells 150 “knock-knock” jokes. In the process, he smiles, laughs, and waves his hands.

Curiously, in the picture provided by the researchers, Marve has the appropriate secretarial props in the background. Even though he is not real, he has a desk, a computer, and pictures of his family. In this way, he has the persona and inhabits the physical environment of a real receptionist. Marve is also marked with specific bodily features as a proxy human: he is male and appears to be white. One wonders, incidentally, if this gender selection was intentional by the designers in order to separate and highlight Marve’s emotional qualities. If Marve were female, she would likely be sexualized like Alice and Ava (either by the designers or by the customers), a feature that would in turn overpower or subsume her emotionality.

Marve is a prime example of how software designers are thinking very deliberately about ways to automate not only the *technical functions* of the receptionist (i.e., performing a job’s practical tasks) but also the *feeling work* (Hochschild 2003) that receptionists do in their interactions with the public (i.e., making people feel comfortable, discussing friendly topics that have nothing to do with their job, and

conveying through subtle visual and corporeal cues that they care about customers).

With Alice, Ava, and Marve, we see the corporate and engineering strategy of replacing live workers with computerized models. Sometimes these models incorporate attributes of the human worker, but underneath, the core platform is algorithmic and digital. The design of this new generation of automated virtual receptionists is being done largely by computer scientists in universities and technical researchers in private firms. What they are moving toward is the digital manufacture of sociability, emotions, and humanlike interactional behaviors.

THE REMOTE RECEPTIONISTS

The other trend in virtual receptionists is outsourcing. Unlike the automated personas discussed above, these are live humans. However, they are not on-site like the traditional receptionists. Instead, they are *remote* virtual receptionists sent outside the firm. This movement happens in two ways: through nearby (local) outsourcing and through offshore (international) outsourcing. As the jobs lie further toward the right on the diagram (see figure 5.1), the workers move geographically and structurally further away from the firm that employs them. Ruby and the At-Home Moms represent local outsourcing options. Margaret and GetFriday Teams represent global outsourcing options. As we will see, these strategies use technology, but in a different way than the cases above. Rather than relying on artificial intelligence, they use communication networks to facilitate interpersonal connection within the context of dispersion.

Local Outsourcing

Ruby. One example of a locally outsourced employee is Ruby, from Ruby Receptionists. She works in an office near, or at least in the same country (the United States) as, that of her client (or boss). Rather than sitting in the front office, she works in a separate location off-site. There, she sits with other virtual receptionists, each working for a distinct boss someplace else.

They represent a pool of workers who are readily available and on call but not physically present in the client’s building. For employers, local outsourcing saves money. Centralizing the receptionists in one place makes it more efficient for the outsourcing firm to manage the labor process.

Employers get a variety of “human” qualities with Ruby. First, even though Ruby is off-site, she brings the human back to the office through her *voice*. Office staff and customers can hear her as a live worker communicating over the phone. This may sound like an obvious or trivial thing for a receptionist to do, but Ruby Receptionists knows that clients are considering the alternative of using an automated receptionist, so they amp up this human feature in their advertising and promotions. The company Web site boasts how Ruby will do things like *live* phone answering, *live* call transferring, and *customized* call handling (Ruby Receptionists 2013). These are activities that a human can perform better than a machine can.

A main selling point for the company is how Ruby can do what the automated receptionists cannot. The company’s founder says that “in a desert of impersonal customer service and robotic answering machines . . . business owners and callers alike [are] longing for a personal connection. . . . An impersonal answering service or recorded menu won’t do. With Ruby, you don’t just get a receptionist. You get an exceptional one” (Ruby Receptionists 2013).

Second, they get emotion and enthusiasm: “Ruby is the smart and cheerful team of virtual receptionists trained to make a difference in your day. From our studio . . . , we handle your calls with care. We deliver the perfect mix of friendliness, charm, can-do attitude, and professionalism” (Ruby Receptionists 2013). Ruby sells human spirit. The Web site personalizes the workers on almost every page—for example, by posting individual biographies and photos of the employees. These workers not only look animated; they are downright effervescent (see figure 5.4). In the banner on the site’s home page, workers are practically dancing out of their seats. The firm overadvertises the humanness of its workers to contrast them with the robotic offerings of its competitors.

Third, with Ruby, employers receive mental creativity and responsiveness from their receptionists. The Web site lists human “intelligence”—literally—as a quality of their employees: “Intelligent receptionists can distinguish between different types of calls (new clients, current clients, urgent calls, etc.) and handle them according to your instructions” (Ruby Receptionists 2013).

Perhaps most important is the fourth aspect of humanness that Ruby provides. With her voice, Ruby performs crucial relational services for firms: “A phone call is often the first interaction people have with your company. . . . Ruby’s cheerful live virtual receptionists *create meaningful connections* with your callers and add sparkle to your image. . . . We



FIGURE 5.4. Ruby, the locally outsourced receptionist. Reproduced by permission from Ruby Receptionists. © 2015 by Ruby Receptionists.

designed Ruby to be tailored to your company and make the most out of interactions. *Ruby does more than answer your phone; we cultivate relationships*” (Ruby Receptionists 2013; italics added). Ruby appeals to customers through the social and interactive elements of their conversations. In fact, the virtual receptionist’s voice can raise the status of the firm. It enables an organization to “*sound like a Fortune 500 company*” (Davinci Virtual Office Space and Solutions 2013; italics added).

Thus, local outsourcing firms remove the worker from the workplace but still recapture a range of human capacities through the employee’s voice—intelligence, spirit, professionalism, and the capacity to create relationships with customers, clients, and staff.

Work-at-Home Moms. There are other options for the local outsourcing of receptionists. One strategy is to bypass the business office altogether and send the work to the employee *at her own house*. Structurally, this action moves the receptionist further from the employer and out of the market sphere altogether. This outsourcing dynamic crosses the boundary from the public to the private.

The advancement and proliferation of information technology have been crucial for this dynamic. With the spread of communications and computer equipment to the mass consumer market, people now have access to the tools for setting up commerce in their homes: a telephone, computer, and Internet connection. These employees do the same tasks

as the local-outsourcing employees (like Ruby) and provide the same voice-based receptionist work—only from their houses.

Many firms have emerged in this market as intermediaries to coordinate and take advantage of the at-home receptionists. Among the larger ones, LiveOps claims to have twenty thousand employees; Convergys has employees in forty-eight states. Also known as a form of *crowdsourcing*, this employment trend incorporates the public into the labor economy through networked technology (see chapter 4). By contracting with Web sites like LiveOps and Convergys, employers recruit a “crowd” of employees whom they will likely never see—in this case because those workers are in their own homes. Crowdsourced labor is known to pay less than on-site labor as whole or full-time jobs are broken down into tiny parts (e.g., single phone calls from customers).

LiveOps states on its Web site that it is “revolutionizing the world of work” by “creating a world without boundaries”: “With no constraints on where or when to work, independent agents can work out of their homes or offices and provide call center services to hundreds of well-known clients. . . . LiveOps opens the door to a meaningful work opportunity by providing *the chance to work on your own terms*” (LiveOps 2013; italics added). Benefits for the employee notwithstanding, what these companies are also doing is transferring the infrastructure of work—including the cost—to the employee’s home.

This form of local outsourcing is very much predicated on gender, like those previously discussed, but in a different way. At-home receptionist agencies market this employment opportunity to potential workers by utilizing images of motherhood and domesticity. A popular Web site promoting these jobs features a woman wearing a call-center headset—and holding a baby (Kwika.org 2013). Although these outsourcing firms may not specifically mention gender in their ads, they are heavily targeting women for recruitment.

These Web sites highlight not only motherhood but also women’s broader roles as care workers for a variety of family members. On the testimonials page of LiveOps (2013), employees say: “First and foremost, I love working from home so I can be with my little guy. I take care of my elderly father. LiveOps gives me the ability to care for him and also help with our family finances. If I were to work for a brick and mortar company, I would have to look for a nursing facility for him. Being an independent contractor means more to me [than] I can express. This has been a lifesaver for me.” This form of work is significant as it represents a merging of paid labor as a receptionist with wom-

en’s other unpaid job as home care worker. In this way, such firms are facilitating the integration of two forms of invisible labor. They are coattailing crowdsourced labor onto domestic labor, taking advantage of women’s roles in one to facilitate the other.

By doing work at home, this locally outsourced receptionist becomes physically invisible—out of sight to the employer and the public. Firms selectively retain the detectable humanness of the worker, however, through the sound of her voice.

Significantly, the Work-at-Home companies make a deliberate point of distinguishing themselves from the next case of outsourcing—the off-shore receptionists. These firms are very clear to emphasize their localness and their geographical grounding. Some, like LiveOps, are explicitly nationalistic. On the first page of its Web site, LiveOps (2013) describes the basics of its service: “LiveOps was founded on the idea that we wanted people to be able to work out of their homes in the U.S. and that we could provide not only a great work opportunity . . . but also a great customer experience for our clients. Years ago, many companies saw the quality of their customers’ experience worsen when they offshored their call center jobs overseas. A lot of those companies have decided to bring those services back to workers in the U.S. and have partnered with LiveOps to handle their calls.” LiveOps’s narrative suggests a double meaning of the term *home* as a location for virtual assistant work. Along with the literal sense of the house, it provides a figurative reference to the nation as home. By promoting this antiforeignness rhetoric, LiveOps places itself in opposition to the global outsourcing industry discussed next.

Global Outsourcing

A second kind of outsourcing is international. Firms in the United States and other parts of the Global North employ remote receptionists overseas. This practice sends the receptionist job further from the original employer, sometimes halfway around the world. The services that these receptionists provide can be more elaborate than those discussed above, however. Let us start with Margaret.

Margaret (Mussarat). Margaret,⁴ like the Work-at-Home Moms, is a live human. But she is distinct in outsourcing in that she recaptures the *body* of the receptionist for employers. Moreover, she does so while sitting at a firm called The Resource Group—in Pakistan. She sits at a desk



FIGURE 5.5. The globally outsourced receptionist. Reproduced by permission from Jessica Tefft. Reproduced by Ann Manwill. Original photo, *Virtual Secretary*, © 2005 by Jessica Tefft.

in Karachi with a video camera pointed at her. Her image is projected to an office in Washington, DC, where a flat screen monitor hangs on the wall of the lobby and a speaker plays her voice (see figure 5.5). There, her bosses, coworkers, and customers in the United States can both see and hear her, treating her as a participant in the firm's daily routines.

Margaret brings personal attention back to the job. First, she does the interactional work with customers and clients. She answers incoming phone calls that are transferred from Washington, DC, via satellite to her desk. She greets people as they enter the office. She directs customers to the coffee room to wait for their meetings. She buzzes in the delivery person through the front door. She can order a cab for a customer or client.

Second, she does personal work for her boss and the staff, attending to their daily routine needs in the office. She orders lunch for meetings from local restaurants. She sits in on meetings to record the minutes. She makes travel arrangements for executives and manages their schedules. She meets with individuals, special interest groups, and others on behalf of executives, committees, and boards of directors.

Margaret is on call for her bosses in the United States. They can interact with her at any time. In these ways, she provides the "office

wife" services for the firm that Rosabeth Kanter (1993) discusses in her classic book on corporations—but now from eight thousand miles away. Being able to see Margaret is a big part of what employers are paying for in this day and age.

Let us talk about her name, though—which is in fact not Margaret. It is Mussarat. Even though customers can "see" her, she is told to convey subtly that she is actually in the United States. She does this by changing her name but also by altering her accent (toward American English) and by sitting in front of a theatrical set designed and propped with objects to signify American culture. Behind her, the scene looks like it is in the United States.

Clients pay for Margaret's visibility (often a more high-end service for executives). This case involves not just a gendering of the body, as with the automated receptionists. It also involves a nationalizing of identity, physique, and space.

The GetFriday Team. A more widespread trend of international outsourcing involves another type of virtual receptionist: the virtual assistant "team." In this case, the employees are again live and located overseas, but now they are minimally visible, and at times completely invisible, to the "boss."

This model has arisen in conjunction with the "business process outsourcing" industry in India. This group of more than 2 million employees performs a large range of back-office tasks for Global North firms. Outsourcing firms divide the work processes into voice and nonvoice functions—or, in other words, call centers and data centers. One provides the phone labor of customer service; the other provides clerical and organizational labor.

An example of the latter is GetFriday. It is a company based in Bangalore, India, that provides firms or individuals with virtual assistants. GetFriday has a very different structure for its workforce than does Margaret's company. Instead of employing a single receptionist, customers hire a whole team, most of whom they never see.

The employer is assigned a "primary assistant" with whom he communicates. However, the actual work is then handed off to a "leader," who then parcels out individual tasks to members of a wider "team." When the team has finished, they send the work back up the chain to the primary assistant for transmission to the U.S. employer. Thus, twenty different people may be working behind that one personal assistant. All of this labor is therefore literally invisible to the employer.

Indeed, in the visual image of this scenario on the GetFriday Web site, the employer is represented as a figure sitting at a desk. Her hand is outstretched, and like a puppeteer, she controls strings to a number of tiny workers. They are all in front of computer terminals and located underneath the desk. Supporting them from below is the team leader, who holds them up with a hand over his head.

With this structure, employers can “buy” much more from a single virtual assistant. The list of tasks from which to choose is long (GetFriday 2011). Some tasks are traditional for the receptionist or front-office staff, like customer relations, appointments and follow-up, secretarial work, and travel arrangements. Others are more back-office, like purchasing, organizing, and accounting. Still others are typical for the office wife, such as home assistance and personal chores. These are all the stuff of a classic receptionist, but now that single job is broken down into a multitude of parts that are purchasable individually from a menu. There is less personal contact but far more productivity.

In addition, employers get something else from international outsourcing—*temporal arbitrage* (Nadeem 2011). Shehzad Nadeem defines this term as “the exploitation of time discrepancies between geographical labor markets to make a profit” (p. 60). It happens in two ways at firms like GetFriday.

First, international outsourcing extends the workday. Because the Indian time zone is more or less twelve hours offset from that of the United States—with directly opposite daylight hours—employees can work during their employer’s nighttime, producing results overnight. Written work requested at the end of one business day will be completed by the start of business the next morning.

Second, international outsourcing offers continuous live service. With the proliferation of the workforce into rotating shifts, the labor process can operate nonstop. Thus, unlike the labor of the on-site receptionist—or even that of the employees at local outsourcing firms in the United States, who work an eight-hour day and a five-days-a-week shift—the team’s labor is continuous. Employers are literally getting more productivity out of the “worker(s)” or the wages they are paying.

The sacrifice, of course, is contact with a live person. This not the video receptionist like Margaret. In fact, communication—even with the primary assistant—is much more limited. A client will contact the receptionist through *written* forms of electronic communication: text, chat, e-mail, and fax (and on occasion, by phone). Therefore, this recep-

tionist, lacking a voice or body, displays the least visible human qualities of all the cases discussed.

Never fear, though. These outsourcing firms ensure that they will provide a “human touch”—even if they are not even talking to you, much less showing their faces. The GetFriday (2011) slogan is “Access to EVERYONE’S SKILLS . . . and the PERSONAL TOUCH of one assistant.” Moreover, the company can provide this personal touch globally: “Think of us as a regular assistant who is sitting in the next room. Anything that you would ask that assistant to do, we could probably handle. Except that the next room is in another country, so we can’t handle anything physical. We can’t get you your daily cup of coffee, but we might be able to get someone else to deliver it to you” (GetFriday 2011). The image of the assistant (and his country) “in the next room” is meant to conjure the feeling of proximity and mask the reality of distance. To create a likeness of the traditional receptionist who is sitting in the front office, GetFriday aims to collapse geography through personal attention and individualized service.

DISCUSSION

There are benefits of adaptability and flexibility in these new forms of labor. With the virtual receptionist, employers and employees can overcome space and distance. These groups can coordinate work across geography and public/private spheres. In the process, as Convergys (2013) points out, this industry opens up employment opportunities for workers who may otherwise have difficulty with mobility and joining the labor market—like female, disabled, and rural workers. For consumers, too, there are advantages to automating services: the convenience of banking through automated teller machines at all hours and in many locations.

Hidden and Not-So-Hidden Costs

Still, there are many costs of virtualization and globalization in receptionist work. Some are overt. On the automation side of the spectrum (see figure 5.1), there is the loss of jobs. Digitizing work may replace employees and eliminate some occupations altogether. We see this trend with cases like Alice, Ava, and Marve. They are especially associated with simple service tasks and interactions: greeting customers, directing them to spaces in the building, providing information, and so on.

Ironically though, while Barbara Garson (1988) lamented the dismissal of whole legions of secretarial staff due to computerization of information tasks in the 1980s (and, moreover, predicted its continuation and expansion), we see a different and perhaps reverse pattern in the 2010s. These legions of workers are reappearing and/or being reconstituted through outsourcing locally and globally. We see this development through the cases of Ruby, Margaret, and the GetFriday Team. It suggests that there is a limit to what employers are willing to automate within interactive services. At least for now, they are retaining those workers through strategies of globalization and communication technologies.

The cost of outsourcing, on the other side of the spectrum (see figure 5.1), is a degradation of wages. Outsourcing may be favorable for retaining and even preserving the humanness of the worker but not necessarily for the quality of the work that is retained. Indeed, wages decrease as the distance widens between the receptionist and the firm for which she works. According to one estimate by VPI VirtualSource (2013), the live on-site receptionist earns on average \$27 an hour, whereas the work-at-home employee earns \$23 an hour, and the off-shore employee earns \$13 an hour. Although these figures for live workers may be overinflated (to make VPI's digital worker sound cheaper at \$9 an hour), the comparison is warranted in its basic point: all the other options cost the employer less than the live on-site worker does. Whatever the reasons for this disparity, one implication is apparent: when employers do not see the worker or have him nearby, they are likely to pay less for that labor.

Of course, wages for virtual receptionists vary, depending on the particular firm and the context. Some companies, like Convergys, offer full-time, well-paying, at-home jobs and a variety of benefits (including health, retirement, and college tuition). Likewise, jobs sent to India may pay more than other comparable jobs in that labor market. However, these wages are still a mere fraction of those in the United States—sometimes as little as one-tenth. Thus, going overseas further drives down wages in the outsourcing process.

Other costs of virtualization and globalization are more hidden. For instance, there is a consistent gendering of this labor, in which women workers and femininity are devalued and taken advantage of. In the automation cases, the human features inserted within the digital systems and avatars are highly sexualized more often than not (Gustavsson 2005; Weber 2008). Even when the receptionist is just a computer screen, the figure typically displays gendered tendencies to please and

serve: feminine names and symbols, eroticized bodies and voices, and deferential language and speech.

Gender is also very integral to the other process in this analysis: outsourcing. Interestingly, relative to the automation narratives, there is *less* sexualization in the corporate rhetoric of outsourcing. The gendering comes in other ways, however. In cases like Ruby's, the worker is not necessarily deferential but rather full of cheerfulness and energy. She offers female-endowed emotional and relational services. And in the case of the At-Home-Moms, the gendering is in imageries and legacies of domesticity. Women's historical responsibilities of caring for family members, old and young, become convenient justifications for transferring the receptionist's work to the home—where these workers already are and where they can double up on paid and unpaid labor.

These features are racialized and nationalized as well. They are “whitened” and “Americanized” in many capacities. Automated receptionists are often designed and presented with white skin and Anglo/Euro facial features. Similarly, the outsourced receptionists undergo aspects of *national identity management* (Poster 2007), altering their accents, their names, and the visual settings of their workspaces to reflect “American” markers. As I have argued elsewhere (Poster 2007), employers institute this process of national identity management (to varying degrees and with varying success) in order to reduce communication troubles across borders, to mask the location of the work, and to hide the process of outsourcing itself. Many insightful books have since reflected on the role of nation in mediating the labor process of Indian call centers (Aneesh 2015; Mirchandani 2012; Nadeem 2011). (For reviews, see Poster 2012; Poster and Yolmo 2016.)

Levels of Invisibility

There are many levels of invisibility embedded in this process. First is the *worker himself*. Sometimes the employee is completely hidden or displaced. At other times, employers are breaking down the live, on-site, whole-person receptionist into parts and taking her out of the workplace. Then, in a seemingly reverse activity, they are recreating these parts digitally or else recapturing them from other locations and reinserting them back into the office. Through technology and outsourcing, the worker as a human is being employed—and presented to the consumer—*selectively*: for the voice and relational capacity, for the body on display, and for the words delivered electronically.

Second, the *labor process* of the virtual receptionist is becoming invisible or at least fragmented. Whether the job involves talking on the phone or doing organizational tasks, the work is reduced to its tiniest elements. We see this process in particular with the cases of GetFriday and the virtual assistant teams. Employers are not hiring the labor of a whole person or whole job anymore. They are hiring a set of “to-dos,” picking and choosing particular tasks from a list.

Fragmentation is also evident in wages. Phone work is increasingly paid not by the call, by the day, or even by the hour—but by the *minute*. It is advertised and billed to potential employers in a plan comprised of “minute” levels. Davinci Virtual Office Space and Solutions (2013) announces on its Web site that “live answering minutes will be calculated in *one second increments*, helping you to make the most of your 100 minute plan” (*italics added*). Industry experts and scholars are referring to this process as “micro labor” (Irani 2012). This term describes how, with networked technology platforms, work is fractionalized and labor is hired on a single-task basis. Along those lines, here we see how the wage is miniaturized as well.

The consequence is an obscuring and masking of the extent of human labor behind the wage. GetFriday (2011) says: “If the task takes 8 man-hours, you will be billed for 8 man-hours, regardless of how many assistants have worked on your task.” In classical labor terms, the *man-hour* has referred to the amount of work that an average worker could perform in an hour. Yet in the case of outsourcing, it has little to do with the actual “men” or women who are performing the labor. The multitudes of workers who physically undertake and complete the task are not represented in the billing. They become invisible within the accounting process that tabulates the profits of their labor.

Third, the *workplace* of the virtual receptionist is becoming invisible. In the age of the virtual office, the space of employment is dematerializing and dispersing. This phenomenon is happening in both practical and symbolic ways.

Materially, the physical office space—the infrastructure—is being transferred to new locations. We have examined multiple destinations for the new virtual office. One is the offshore site. Outsource2India (2012) says on its Web site: “Outsourcing to a live virtual receptionist will save you not only the cost of having to hire a full time receptionist but will also save you the space of allotting an extra desk for an actual employee.” Firms are motivated to move operations overseas for cost savings not only on wages but also on chairs, tables, walls, and office

space. Escaping the financial burden and accountability for the physical upkeep of the building is part of the incentive for creating the virtual office and virtual jobs.

The office is moving to a second place as well—workers’ homes—as in the case of the At-Home receptionists. It may seem like an easy thing for an employee to do, at least in the rhetoric of the outsourcing firms: all an employee needs is a cell phone. But that statement is not necessarily true. Being a home-based virtual receptionist requires a large and expensive technological investment, the burden of which is on the worker. He needs a computer, a headset, an Internet connection, specialized software to log in the results of the call, and much more. Dematerializing the workspace for the employer (both the outsourcing company and the company that purchases its services) means rematerializing it for the worker.

The workplace is being reconstituted symbolically as a result. With virtualization, the corporation itself is under threat of becoming invisible. The tasks of the receptionist in maintaining the integrity of the virtual office are crucial here. Given that there may be no actual firm, the receptionist must take on and uphold the identity of the entire organization. Ruby Receptionists’ (2013) Web site proclaims: “Ruby’s team of professionals can act as the ‘glue’ that holds your virtual operation together. Callers think we work in your office—even if you don’t have one!” As the only point of contact with the public, Ruby’s voice represents the firm and rematerializes it as a tangible entity.

In turn, new tasks are being generated for the virtual receptionist—tasks involving deception. We see this with Ruby, who disguises her own location in several ways. She hides from customers the fact that she is physically outside the firm. She also uses specialized technology to keep up the façade that she knows where her bosses are and how clients can reach them, even though they may never be on the premises. Thus, along with displaying pleasing emotions and managing the firm’s relations with the public, virtual receptionists perform “corporate” identity management. As an added dimension, offshore receptionists like Margaret perform similar tasks transnationally, combining this corporate identity management with national identity management.

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Employers are increasingly choosing between two alternatives to the live on-site worker: automation and outsourcing. The receptionist job in particular reveals how employers are searching for ways to remove workers, even those who are supposed to be the “face” of the firm.

Aside from the employers, other groups have important roles in this process. Third-party outsourcers and technology vendors are setting the parameters of the platforms, sites, and locations where work can be performed. Striking is the similarity across these virtual receptionist firms—regardless of their position on the spectrum—in the rhetoric they use to vilify the nonvirtual (i.e., human) workers. Sometimes it is about their laziness (taking breaks), sometimes their bodies are weak (getting sick), sometimes it is because they ask for money (raises, overtime, benefits), and sometimes they are just plain irritating: they spend too much time gathering in the parking lot, says Wintech (2012), creator of Alice. Regardless of the alternative labor they are providing, these firms have similar reasons for why humans are basically distasteful.

Negotiating visibility is integral to the process of constructing the virtual receptionist. A spectrum of automation–outsourcing strategies that employers are using illustrates this dynamic (see figure 5.1). At the outer ends of the spectrum, employers are making workers completely invisible. In the automation case, they are getting rid of workers entirely (e.g., the empty chair in the Alice advertisements). In the global outsourcing case, they are shielding workers from view (e.g., the hidden workforce underneath the GetFriday team desk). In the middle range of the spectrum, employers are selecting aspects of the worker to be visible to the customer (and the public). Depending on their business needs, employers use different strategies to determine how much humanness a job needs and which kinds of humanness should be on display. Sometimes it is the employee’s voice, sometimes just the face, sometimes the full figure.

Thus, invisibility of labor serves the outsourcing and automation processes well. Through this strategy, a range of actors in the labor process—firms, technology vendors, and outsourcing middlemen—reduce the size of the workforce, the scope of the tasks for a single job, and the infrastructural supports and wages.

The question for future research is whether, by looking at these alternatives to the traditional receptionist job, we are getting a glimpse of a wider trend. These same forces may well be spreading across other service jobs at all occupational levels. There is evidence of automation creeping into lower-skilled jobs like hospital orderlies and hotel bellhops (Miller 2014), midlevel jobs like police officers (McDuffee 2014), and high-skilled professional jobs like doctors, architects, and lawyers (Meltzer 2014).

Yet critics argue that this same alarm has been sounded with every stage of newly introduced technology and that at each point in time, pro-

fessionals have adapted (Pasquale 2014). Many jobs involve certain kinds of “social intelligence” that cannot be extracted from the human employee. Recently, there are even trends of employers returning to humans after they have tried out various kinds of automated workers. This has happened in industries of travel, home services, and shopping, where consumers have responded with information overload (Manjoo 2015). These consumers are resisting the “work transfer” (Glazer 1993) of tasks once done by employees, especially those of sifting through massive amounts of data, and instead urging firms to rehire skilled employees.

Furthermore, the stability of human labor may be embedded in the peculiar dynamics of the service economy and its “needs.” Suchman (2007) astutely notes that the development of the middle class (in many countries) has been predicated on expansions in both service classes of live workers and service classes of digital workers. They do not appear to be mutually exclusive. Thus, as I have argued in this chapter, the future will undoubtedly involve an interplay—and tension—among employer strategies with live on-site workers, remote workers, and digitized workers.

NOTES

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1. *Bot* is short for *robot*, referring to software programs that perform automated tasks. A subset of these bots is “embodied agents,” which have visual bodies within their digital platforms in order to serve as a graphical front end for the computer systems behind them. They are often represented as cartoons or avatars for customer service Web sites, and as “chatterbots” they are equipped with conversational skills to appear more natural to customers.

2. See Poster and Yolmo (2016) for a lengthier discussion of globalization and outsourcing.

3. *Alice* is a popular name for automated assistants. Lucy Suchman (2007) describes how the winner of the Loebner prize for “most human computer” in 2004 was also an “Alice” (Artificial Linguistic Internet Computer Entity). Her

"body" was a vacuum cleaner, keeping constant with the theme of feminine domesticity that we will see throughout this chapter.

4. Margaret is a composite of several accounts of the video receptionist from my research, including those whom I interviewed and those described in the scholarly literature and news (Kalita 2005; Weightman 2011).

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