

WNS Global Services:

RISING ABOVE THE MUMBAI DOWNPOUR

The WNS Story

We were truly tested on 26th July, 2005 and the week that followed, as a BPO Operation, as managers and as human beings, when Mumbai saw more rain than many other places see in a year. While what happened in our narrow context is trivial at a time when basic survival was an issue for many people, it is still worth talking about and celebrating some achievements.

At WNS, we faced two challenges that sometimes had elements that worked against each other. First, we had to ensure the safety and well-being of our team. Second, we had to ensure that we keep our operations running since our clients, many oceans apart depended on us. And we came out of the ordeal looking pretty good with every single client being largely unaffected and in many cases astonished by how well we managed to keep things going in very adverse circumstances.

Many things worked well for us and some did not and we think that our experiences and learning are worth sharing.

WHAT WORKED WELL

1. **Implementing a dual site strategy:** Almost all our key clients had their teams split into two sites in two different cities. Pune back up helped immensely in making up for the Mumbai shortfall.
2. **Establishing a Crisis Management Command Center:** This is the first time we had to activate our "NASA type" Command Center where we had dedicated people following up on weather, transport conditions, guest house/hotel availability, etc. Our Corporate Office and Board Room served as the Command Center. All senior members of our team met at the Command Center every 2-3 hours, took responsibility for specific actions and reported back on successes and issues. The fact that every available senior person in the company was physically there at our Mumbai site for 48 hours in a stretch made a huge difference.
3. **Benefiting from PEOPLE commitment at all levels:** As you might well understand, we had to optimize between what is best for our team and what is best for our clients. Issues like possibly shutting the office, level of intensity we show to push people to work longer hours or show up for work, how we communicate ambiguity on our status internally and externally were debated extensively. I was extremely proud to see people at all levels expressing opinions freely. While the senior team (including me) was being cautious, people from operations in Mumbai and Pune passionately defended their ability to keep going and that's what they did! Some associates and managers worked for 24-36 hours in a stretch, and they were self-motivated. Our Food vendor supplied freshly cooked food every 3 hours for 36 hours in a stretch and for hundreds of people.

4. **Prioritization of effort by process:** Our Risk Management and Operations teams were able to very rapidly identify the processes that needed to be treated as top priority and where taking some backlog and clearing later was fine. We were able to dynamically plan resource needs by process, communicate with clients and make informed decisions about what to prioritize and what to ignore in the short term. Needless to say, all backlogs were cleared within 1-2 days of the situation coming back to normal.
5. **Constant communication:** We used the PA system in Mumbai every 2-3 hours to appraise people about the weather conditions outside, availability of key essentials (e.g. food), appreciate all the efforts and send key messages on what we need to do next (e.g. about the next shift). We also spoke regularly to our back-up teams in Pune and pushed for higher productivity. We communicated constantly and transparently with every client with every communication involving a senior person from WNS. Every internal and external communication was discussed at the Command Center.
6. **Managing availability of key essentials:** Our Facilities team, food and transport vendors showed amazing commitment. While many of our cars were stuck in the rains, we were able to marshall back-ups for pick-ups and drop-offs closer to our site. Our food vendor (fortunately and not by design was located close to our office) was able to maintain constant supply of food. We were also able to rapidly augment the availability of mattresses, sheets, toothbrushes, shaving kits, etc. as we had to make sure that people staying back got a chance to sleep and freshen up.
7. **(Gently) persuading people to come back to work:** Interestingly, our challenges on getting people to work were greater after the second (mini) storm on Sunday (July 31st) even though the roads in most areas in Mumbai were clear. We had a well-rehearsed script we used in making phone calls and sending SMS to our associates asking them to come to work while being very sensitive to their personal situations.
8. **Creating opportunities for releasing tension:** On the night of the “Floody Tuesday” (July 26th), we had impromptu Karaoke and singing in the cafeteria and people were in turns encouraged to take breaks and spend time there.
9. **Hotline Numbers:** We made announcements through television and radio about the hotline numbers at WNS incase anyone wanted to reach us.
10. **Delivering on our Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR):** We are now ensuring that all our team members that had their houses and belongings affected by the storm are reasonably supported through the funding we have ear-marked for our CSR program.

LESSONS LEARNT

There were also a few things we could have done better and this crisis like anything else taught us some new lessons.

1. **Greater multi-vendor coverage:** Our Purchasing Policy of concentrating on a few mobile and wireline telecom vendors back-fired a little bit since both our preferred vendors were down a lot. On Tuesday, we were also a bit late on getting alternative transport arranged. We did much better later.

2. **Single-site strategy in ramp up stage:** Some of our clients have insisted on sticking to one site till their program reached critical mass, often against our advice. They had to arrange for back-ups at their home sites in US/UK. Interestingly, we went through more tension on sustaining a 25 FTE pilot with no back up anywhere than some of our 1000+ FTE clients with dual-site execution. A key learning: back up every mission critical process no matter how small it is somewhere, either in a second site in India or at the home base.
3. **Activating a help desk for family and friends:** We were a bit late and initially disorganized about keeping worried families and friends informed. The local telephone lines being down did not help either. This was rectified later.
4. **Water leakage:** While our site did remarkably well in holding up, there were some anxious moments. We were able to spot some leakage on time and use sponges, paper and cloth towels to contain it. We need some proactive methods to test our site before the next monsoons.
5. **Contact with civic/government authorities:** Our teams were independently assessing road conditions and weather conditions and this information was used by the Command Center to make decisions. While this effort worked well, we would have preferred to connect better and faster with the civic/government authorities to get a view on external conditions.
6. **DVD collection:** Well, the karaoke ran out of steam. Watching more TV got tiring. We needed more DVDs, we are augmenting our collection now.

In summary, this was our most difficult week but also one that I am particularly proud of how our team rose to the occasion. And I am sure that are other similar stories in our industry and outside, which we would love to hear, learn from and share within WNS.

The Indian BPO industry is often criticized on many grounds. On being simultaneously customer-focused, people-centric and cool-headed in a crisis, I think we are right up there with any industry anywhere in the world. Our civic authorities and many domestic industries can learn a lot from us, and especially the very passionate, strong-willed and determined group of young people who work in our industry who proved that nothing will stop them from getting the job done.

(Neeraj Bhargava)
CEO - WNS Group

WNS Global Services manages and operates business processes for leading global organisations. We custom design, implement and operate over 200 processes, many of them end-to-end, working as an extension of the client's enterprise. We have a proven track record of building profits for our clients using our expertise in industries such as travel, insurance and health care. Our strong and experienced leadership team is complemented by over 7,500 professionals working on a world class 4000 workstation infrastructure. We are passionate about building a market leading company highly valued by our customers, associates, business partners, investors and communities. Contact WNS via the web at www.wnsgs.com