

# The Readiness And Preparedness Of The City Of Malolos, Bulacan In Developing IT-BPO Industry

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## Abstract:

Technological breakthroughs and shifting company requirements fuel the constant evolution of the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry. It helps businesses to focus on core skills and hand off tasks to outside service providers. The study's objective is to assess the City of Malolos, Bulacan's capacity to develop an IT hub that could cater to IT-BPO-related investments. The study employed a triangulation method, specifically gathering primary data through in-depth interviews and secondary data from identified offices. Results revealed that the lack of space for the development of IT-BPO hubs in the city was the main problem. Furthermore, while Malolos has an advantage in the availability of skilled workforce, the city's proximity to Manila makes it hard for investors to choose its location. The study then proposed a roadmap to aid the City of Malolos, Bulacan for the IT-BPO Hub development in the city.

**Keywords:** development, business process outsourcing, technology, skills, investment

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## 1) INTRODUCTION:

Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) is a game-changing tactic for businesses worldwide where organizations transfer non-core functions to specialized external service providers. This collaboration allows firms to concentrate on their core skills and competencies while handing off tasks and leveraging resources and capabilities to outside service providers. Following Hill (2024), with the help of BPOs, businesses can efficiently devote resources and expertise towards areas that enhance competitive advantage. This shows that BPO enhances competitive advantage, provides access to new technologies, transforms fixed costs into variable costs, and offers operational flexibility. By fostering relationships with external partners, businesses can mitigate risks, save costs, and promote innovation, ultimately leading to improved customer service quality. With this, the BPO market is projected to grow significantly, reaching USD 4.1 trillion in revenue by 2025, with an annual growth rate of 4.56% expected until 2029. The United States is anticipated to generate revenue at USD 152.80 billion, while India and the Philippines remain key players due to their highly skilled IT workforce (Bohne, 2023).

In the Philippines, the BPO industry started in the early 1990s. The industry is supported by the government since it attracts foreign investment, contributes to the economic growth of the country, and generates employment for the people. According to the IT and Business Process Association of the Philippines (IBPAP) (as cited by Culvera, 2022), the Philippines' business process outsourcing sector has expanded rapidly in recent years and is expected to account for 7.5% of the country's Gross Domestic Product in 2021. Moreover, the BPO industry accounts for 65.2% of the total office spaces in Metro Manila as of 2022. Since the industry offers flexible working hours to the employees and generates income faster than the other industries, it has risen and become in demand in the Philippine market. Furthermore, the Philippine BPO industry is projected to reach a valuation of around USD 35 billion by the end of 2024. This plays a significant role in the country's economy and job market (Hernandez, 2024). The Philippines' adaptation to advancements in technology and evolving client needs combined with the Filipinos' strong English language skills, cultural flexibility, and competitive labor costs makes this possible.

Technological breakthroughs and shifting company requirements fuel the constant evolution of the BPO industry. Furthermore, it forms a crucial aspect of any corporate environment and provides various advantages to enterprises of all kinds, which are needed in every city. In Bulacan, former Governor

Alvarado, in 2012, stated that the Bulacan Information Communication Technology (ICT) Council needs to intensify the promotion of the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry in the province since the majority of the BPO employees working in Metro Manila are coming from the province. In addition, according to the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) Undersecretary Dela Pena, the province of Bulacan is included in the top 10 next-wave cities by the Business Processing Association of the Philippines

(Provincial Information Technology Office, 2012).

As of 2022, eight (8) BPO companies exist in Bulacan. Yet, most of these companies are still in the process of rising, and job hunters still prefer to look for BPO companies in Metro Manila. Bulacan, having three (3) large universities, produces thousands of graduates every year, and most of the fresh graduates acquire their first work at BPO companies located in Metro Manila. In addition, the interplay between the BPO and innovation of an area is gaining attention, combined with partnerships that could promote collaborative innovation. Hereby, the study's main objective is to assess the capacity of the City of Malolos to host an IT hub that will cater to IT-BPO-related investments and increase the employment growth of BPO companies located in Bulacan. Specifically, the study will discuss business climate, financial attractiveness, labor, infrastructure, social impact, environmental impact, and issues preventing IT-BPO industry development in the city.

The study was anchored to the Endogenous Growth Theory developed by Paul Romer in 1980s, which posits that internal factors such as human capital, innovation, and knowledge are the primary drivers of economic growth and critical components of achieving sustainable economic advancement (Moffitt, 2024). The development of the IT-BPO Hub relies heavily on the accumulation of knowledge and technology integration. By efficiently positioning these factors, the City of Malolos can attract foreign investments and stimulate growth in the industry. This interplay contributes not only to the growth of the IT-BPO sector but also has broader implications for sustainable economic development.

## **2) REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE:**

The IT-BPO industry has emerged as a key driver of economic growth in many countries, particularly developing nations (Robles, 2024). By integrating information technology with business process outsourcing, this sector enhances efficiency, improves customer service, and reduces operational costs. The rising adoption of digital technologies and the increasing demand for outsourcing services across various industries are projected to fuel substantial growth within the IT-BPO sector.

Several countries, such as India and the Philippines, have established themselves as global leaders in IT-BPO (Mitra, 2013). These nations possess a skilled workforce, strong language proficiency, and cost-effectiveness, attracting major companies seeking outsourcing solutions. The availability of a large pool of educated professionals has been instrumental in this success. Moreover, government support and favorable policies play a crucial role in fostering a conducive environment for the growth of the IT-BPO sector.

However, the continued growth and sustainability of the IT-BPO sector in the Philippines face several challenges. A significant concern is the inadequacy of infrastructure, which hinders productivity and efficiency (Derweesh, 2017). As highlighted by Fast Solutions (2024), investing in transportation and communication systems is essential to improve connectivity and reduce business operational costs. Without addressing these infrastructural weaknesses, the Philippine IT-BPO sector will struggle to remain competitive on a global scale.

Another critical challenge is the need for continuous workforce development. The rapid evolution of technology necessitates a workforce that is skilled and adaptable to new tools and processes. While the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) has implemented programs to align educational curricula with industry demands, increased collaboration between educational institutions and IT-BPO companies is vital to ensure that graduates possess the necessary skills for success in this competitive environment (CHED, 2024).

Furthermore, the Philippine economy faces challenges related to regulatory frameworks. Although laws like the Philippine Economic Zone Authority (PEZA) Law and the CREATE Law aim to create a favorable business climate by offering tax incentives and other benefits, bureaucratic hurdles and inefficiencies in government processes can still pose challenges for investors and entrepreneurs in the IT-BPO sector (Tulio, 2024).

### **3) METHODOLOGY:**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The study intended to determine the potential of the province of Bulacan, specifically the City of Malolos, in developing its IT-BPO industry. The presence of IT-BPO hub in a city offers several benefits such as economic growth, wherein the IT-BPO hub can stimulate the city's economy by creating jobs and attracting investments; innovation and collaboration, wherein having IT-BPO hub can encourage collaboration between businesses, academic institutions, and the local government units, leading to innovation; and infrastructure development, wherein the growth of IT-BPO in the city will lead to improvements in infrastructure, transportation, telecommunications, which can also benefit other sectors. With this, the study employed the triangulation method. Cohen and Crabtree [2008] defined triangulation as involving multiple data sources to produce understanding regarding the phenomenon being studied. In this way, the study can examine the consistency of the data and analyze and compare data and results.

#### **3.2 Data Gathering Procedure**

Primary data were gathered through in-depth interviews involving adequate representatives from the offices of the local government of Malolos, the Department of Information and Communication Technology, and the IT and Business Process Association of the Philippines. Furthermore, secondary data regarding the status of the growth rate, the projected status of the growth rate, and the forecasted market revenue growth rate were gathered from the office of the IT and Business Process Association of the Philippines. As for the social impact data, the Human Resource Office of the BPO company, Coverdesk, located in the City of Malolos, Bulacan, was also interviewed regarding the nature of work, salary and bonuses, and health incentives of the BPO employees. Lastly, data on the available information technology courses were collected from the colleges and universities in the City of Malolos, Bulacan, to check the status of education and graduates employed in the BPO sector.

#### **3.3 Data Analysis**

The interview transcript was subjected to thematic analysis to determine the representative responses' dominant themes. Braun and Clarke [2006] defined thematic analysis as fundamental in qualitative research as it could identify, analyze, and interpret patterns or themes within the collected data. Since the study involved interviews in gathering primary data regarding the status of IT-BPO development in the City, thematic analysis was fit for data analysis. Moreover, through the course of interviews, the researchers were also able to gather secondary data regarding the City's growth rate. The secondary data collected were then analyzed together with the interview responses to give a further explanation on the results.

### **4) RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:**

#### **4.1 Economic Impact**

##### ***4.1.1 Business Climate***

Business climate refers to the characteristics of the state, precisely economic policies that affect the growth and development of businesses in an area (Neumark and Muz, 2016). In the Philippines, business process outsourcing is increasing the positive business climate as it is considered a primary industry driving growth. Meanwhile, the prestigious Presidential Recognition for Outstanding Development Partner for Northern Luzon in the Improving Business Climate Category was achieved by the provincial government of Bulacan together with the Provincial Cooperative and Enterprise Development Office (PCDEO). This was made possible due to the sustainable and notable development programs in relation to the city's micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) (Balbin, 2024).

During the inquiry about the business climate for IT-BPO development of City of Malolos from the Central Luzon Office of the Department of Information and Communications Technology, it was revealed that the City Government of Malolos heads the ICT Council. Based on an interview with the city administrator Hon. Joel S. Eugenio, it was confirmed that the council had initially convened with the intention to kickstart the activities towards ICT development in City of Malolos. It was agreed that there should be cooperation among stakeholders to push the development of an IT Hub in City of Malolos. The memorandum of agreement among the stakeholders has yet to be signed, the agreement will be formalized upon the next convention, though the schedule of the convention has not been determined yet.

##### ***4.1.2 Financial Attractiveness***

Financial attractiveness is perceived as the capacity of the city to attract investors through its available resources and current advantage (Snieska and Zykiene, 2015). The ability to attract investors is important as it creates job, increases employment, income levels, and well-being. The Philippines continue to enhance its financial attractiveness and stimulate economic growth despite global economic challenges. In 2022, the country was able to achieve a GDP of 7.6% and maintained its good credit rating amid debt and inflation. Unfortunately, foreign direct investment experienced a significant decline of 23% to \$9.2 billion, greatly affecting the ICT and manufacturing sectors [International Trade Administration 2024]. Recently, the Malolos Investment Conference and Global Tech Roadshow, organized by GeiserMaclang Communications, Inc. in partnership with Digital Pilipinas and the International Digital Economies Association, aimed to position City of Malolos as a center for technological innovation while honoring its cultural heritage. The event featured discussions on the influence of e-wallets, delivery services, and e-commerce on small and medium enterprises (SMEs), focusing on cashless transactions and cybersecurity (Baldueza, 2024).

In terms of the IT-BPO development, according to an interview with representatives from the Board of Investments (BOI), the IT-BPO is one of the fastest growing industries in this country at 8.8% revenue growth rate. The industry earned 35.5% revenue this 2023, which constitute 8.1% of the total GDP for 2023. An IT BPO investment provides high potential for high revenue, which adds up to the attractiveness of the sector. However, as of March 2023, there are only two (2) IT-BPO activities in the City of Malolos, which is a far-cry compared to the potential, recognized by the IBPAP of the city to house an IT-BPO Hub. To boost the IT-BPO activities in Malolos, there are key areas identified by IBPAP, to which each LGUs can improve on. Based on the working partnership between DICT and IBPAP, a four-point scorecard was identified to measure the status as digital cities with potential to grow its IT-BPO sector. The four factors given focus by the scorecard are talent, availability, infrastructure, cost-effectiveness, and business environment. Business environment accounts for the availability of PEZA IT Econozones, presence of ICT Council in the LGU, scope of the IT-BPM industry's footprint, security issues, and vulnerability to natural disturbances.

#### **4.1.3 Labor**

For Labor, the stake of City of Malolos as a Digital City is partly reliant on its talent availability. Although there are only a few IT-BPO firms in Malolos, its potential to provide an ample workforce to support the growing sector is better than that of other high-performing Digital Cities. Based on the data gathered by IBPAP shows that the city can produce 8,000 graduates annually. In addition, LGUs near Malolos can annually produce 22,000 graduates. In 2018 alone, the city recorded 27,000 senior high and 8,300 technical vocational graduates. Regarding graduates from IT-BPO-related programs in City of Malolos and nearby LGUs within a 25 km radius, there are 3,646 engineering graduates, 8,278 graduates from business and finance programs, 3,462 graduates from IT-related courses, and 913 graduates with degrees in social sciences.

#### **4.1.4 Infrastructure**

For the infrastructure criterion, the scorecard focuses on the expansion of commercial real estate, the accessibility of the LGU by means of air, land, and sea, quality of road networks, infrastructure on power and telecommunications. Other support infrastructures are also considered in this criterion, such as shopping malls and health facilities. According to the Office of the City Administrator of Malolos, one of the main areas that needs attention in pursuit of the ICT development in the City of Malolos is infrastructure. Aside from the City's adjacency to the National Capital Region and Clark City, the presence of vertical housing and hotels to attract investors still needs to be developed. When it comes to infrastructure to house IT-BPO firms, the Office of the City Administrator revealed a project currently in development near the City Government Office and the Bulacan State University, Main Campus, that will serve as an IT-BPO Center. The lack of an IT-BPO hub is the main infrastructure problem identified in the previous studies of IBPAP about the potential of City of Malolos as a Digital City. With the current development of the IT-BPO hub in the city, there are less problems that the ICT Council of Malolos can further enhance to help realize the potential of Malolos as a Digital City.

### **4.2 Social Impact**

#### **4.2.1 Health**

As Business Process Outsourcing operates in the Philippines, they provide services to other companies, specifically customer service, technical support, back-office processing, and graphic design, to name a few. Most of the time, the work schedule differs as their clients are from a different timeline. Based on the data gathered, each employee has basic pay, allowance, and government-mandated benefits such as SSS,

Pag-Ibig, and PhilHealth. Under the Employees Compensation Program (ECP) of the Department of Labor and Employment, it is a must that a company provides a package of benefits to all workers and/or their beneficiaries in the event of a work-related sickness, injury, disability, or death (Curada et al., 2023). Employees are entitled to a Health Maintenance Organization (HMO) card as early as the first month (30 days) of tenure. Upon regularization, employees are entitled to add one beneficiary to their HMO covered by the company. If, in any case, the employee wants to add another dependent, the employee will pay for the premium, but the company will process the requirements.

Furthermore, as for the salary and bonuses of BPO employees, based on the data gathered, salary depends on the position, which can be determined based on their experiences and qualifications. The company also follows the government-mandated amount of wages. Regarding bonuses, the 13th-month pay mandated by the government is also followed. All employees are also entitled to a monthly rice allowance. Aside from this, they also give birthday first-year and fifth-year incentives, all in monetary form. Special bonuses include RAB (Reliability Adherence Bonus) for onsite employees. This is a form of motivation bonus since they are working onsite. It will only be given to employees who have no tardiness records. On the other hand, off-site employees enjoy internet and electricity allowance and office equipment such as laptops, headphones, speakers, etc. Lastly, the company also allows its clients to give bonuses to their employees in the form of cash or food.

#### **4.2.2 Education**

With a wide range of job options that suit various interests and skill sets, the IT-BPO industry has grown to become a global powerhouse. The growing need for economical, effective corporate operations and technological improvements has propelled this sector's rapid growth. Individuals may specialize in fields that match their interests and skill sets due to the various specializations available. Some examples are software development, which specializes in developing software applications; network engineers who design, implement, and maintain computer networks; systems administration who are in charge of managing and maintaining the IT infrastructure, including servers, databases, and operating systems, and customer service representative who handles customer inquiries, complaints, and requests.

On the other hand, known for its rich history and cultural heritage, Malolos, the capital of Bulacan, has also established itself as the center of learning and intellectual development in the province. It has long been recognized as a premier educational hub in the province and region, home to several well-known universities. Among the universities and colleges located in Bulacan are Bulacan State University (BulSU), Centro Escolar University (CEU), La Consolacion University of the Philippines (LCUP), Bulacan Polytechnic College (BPC), STI College, and AMA Computer College.

These universities offer diverse academic programs and opportunities for students seeking quality higher education. With the IT-BPO industry, these universities offer courses needed in the IT-BPO industry workforce, such as BS Computer Science, BS Information Technology, BS Computer Engineering, BS Accounting Information Science, and BS Computer Technology. Therefore, the available education in the city plays a significant role in producing highly skilled professionals who can also work in the town with an IT-BPO industry and contribute to the overall progress of the province as universities play a pivotal role within their local communities. Multiple studies have found a correlation between the presence of a university in a large town or city and socio-economic development in the local area. According to Guo (2024), they are critical drivers of social, technological, and economic innovation, as universities play a crucial role in bridging the gap between the academe and industry by offering internships and organizing job placement programs.

#### **4.2 Environmental Impact**

According to the Barangay Boundary Index Mapping (BBIM) study conducted in 2014–2015 by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources–Land Management Bureau (DENR–LMB), the total land area of the City of Malolos is 7,105.16 hectares. The service and industrial sectors power the city. The industrial sector comprises producing things, including manufacturing, developing waterworks systems, producing electricity, producing gas and steam, mining and quarrying minerals, and building leads in numbers at 87%. However, the service sector holds the largest share of the economy in terms of yearly gross receipts at 69%, which is comprised of real estate, finance, insurance, retail, and wholesale and retail trading; transportation, storage, and communication; and personal, social, and communal services. Meanwhile, livestock, forestry, fisheries, and agriculture are all part of the agriculture sector.

The National Spatial Strategy (NSS) of the Philippines identifies the City of Malolos as one of the possible regional centers. Its marketplaces are sufficiently large to accommodate a variety of services and investments and have the closest connections to major cities, which can serve as hubs for tourism,

international gateways, and regional administrative headquarters. The Information Technology and Business Process Association of the Philippines (IBPAP), Leechu Property Consultants (LPC), and the Department of Science and Technology Information and Communication Technology Office (DOST-ICTO) have all ranked the city as one of the best places for the local and global IT-BPM sector. This indicates that Malolos has the right people, infrastructure, prices, and business climate for IT-BPM.

As of December 2015, the total agricultural land area in the City of Malolos was 2,810.91 hectares, a decrease of 25.12 percent from the 2008 figure. The reduction in agricultural land is ascribed to conversion, particularly for residential and commercial use. The Local Government Code of 1991, also known as Republic Act 7160, mandates that Local Government Units (LGUs) maintain their ongoing preparation of comprehensive land use plans implemented through zoning ordinances. These plans serve as the primary and predominant foundation for the future use of land resources.

A study of the City of Malolos's local economic structure shows that the tertiary, or service, sector—which includes trading; transportation, storage, and communication; finance, insurance, real estate, and business services; and community, social, and personal services—is on the rise. The city decided to seek more commercialization as one of its development alternatives due to the substantial degree of urban activities and services it offers. As a component of the Malolos-Meycauayan Urban Growth Corridor, which promotes investments and infrastructure development, this alternative also aligns with the City of Malolos' functional role in Bulacan's development framework. It is also the city's response to being named one of the best places in the world to do business process management (BPM) and information technology locally and globally.

## 5) CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

Business Process Outsourcing companies play a crucial role in today's global economy. These organizations specialize in handling specific business functions, such as customer service, data entry, and technical support, allowing companies to focus on their core operations. By outsourcing these functions, businesses can reduce costs, increase efficiency, and enhance service quality. This specialization enables BPO firms to develop expertise in their areas, benefiting their industries and contributing to a more competitive marketplace. One significant benefit of BPO companies is their contribution to job creation and economic growth. To take advantage of this benefit, the City of Malolos, Bulacan, must efficiently use its workforce and infrastructure. In terms of workforce, to be able to generate thousands of jobs providing employment opportunities to the community and its nearby locale, skills training and development offered in the city's top universities must be well implemented and supported to produce skilled graduates and equip students with valuable expertise that could enhance prospects and contribute to the industry. The local government unit's role is to build infrastructures to attract investors to open BPO companies in the city. However, with these advantages, the city also has disadvantages in developing the IT-BPO industry. Since the City of Malolos is located in Bulacan, its proximity to Manila, the capital of the Philippines, is only nearby. This affects the decision of the investors to place their business in Manila as many industries are also located in the city. Moreover, it was also found that even with the capacity of the city to host an IT-BPO Hub, its ICT council was not active enough to develop the city's capacity to establish an IT-BPO Hub. Hereby, it is recommended that the members of the ICT council of the City of Malolos once again liven the plans and proposals for implementing the IT-BPO Hub in the city as it has the capacity, workforce, and good environment.

With the findings gathered, the study proposed this roadmap to aid the ICT Council of the City of Malolos, Bulacan, reinstating the IT-BPO Hub development in the city.



*Figure 1. Proposed IT-BPO Roadmap in the City of Malolos, Bulacan*

First, the Talent Development and Upskilling process involves equipping employees with new skills or enhancing their existing skills to meet the demands of the IT-BPO industry. This includes training in emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, data analytics, and cybersecurity. To implement this, the government of Malolos should partner with the universities in the city to facilitate seminars, training, and short courses to enhance students' skills. Second, in terms of Infrastructure and Connectivity, a robust infrastructure that includes reliable power supply, good transportation, and telecommunications, specifically fast internet connection, forms the backbone of IT-BPO operations. In addition, modern office spaces equipped with the latest technology can foster a conducive environment for productivity and innovation. Third, Investment Promotion and Facilitation focuses on attracting foreign and domestic investments while creating a conducive environment for business operations in the city. To implement this, the marketing efforts of the local government unit must highlight the unique advantages of investing in the IT-BPO sector in the town and explicitly showcase the availability of a skilled workforce, cost-effective services, and robust infrastructure. Lastly, Enabling Environment and Support Services includes government policies that promote investment, tax incentives, and the establishment of technology parks in the city that could provide necessary facilities and resources for the IT Hub. Additionally, access to funding through government grants or partnerships with financial institutions enables BPO firms to invest in technology and expand their services, ensuring competitiveness in the market.

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**7) Data Availability:** The data that supported the findings of the study were based on interview responses gathered and secondary data from the local offices of Malolos, Bulacan

**8) Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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