

PERCEPTIONS OF WORKING LIFE IN CALL CENTRES

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ABSTRACT

Call centres have emerged as an organisational phenomenon within a relatively short space of time. As a consequence of their rapid development, call centres have provided a rich topic for emerging academic investigation of the human element of the working environment.

This paper presents a review of a range of articles commenting on the Taylorist heritage of call centres, and the emotional stresses imposed by a highly structured and monitored environment. Workers are at once cast as members of 'teams', structural elements of call centre organisations, and simultaneously expected to work largely in isolation from their colleagues with a minimum of social support. Where appropriate, reference is made to noteworthy supplementary sources which provide a prescient insight into the conditions which give rise to the concept of 'emotional labour'. The distinguishing thread uniting the segments of this review is the impact of the routine work and the highly monitored nature of the environment.

INTRODUCTION

The working conditions which pervade call centres have largely emerged from the combination of existing elements of technology in a unique form to fashion a highly monitored environment in which workers are organised into 'teams', as structural elements of an organisation, yet toil away largely alone, often despite the close physical proximity of their similarly isolated colleagues.

This article explores perceptions of call centres as expressed by a selection of researchers who have contemplated both the diversity and routine conformity which characterises the working life of the typical call centre worker. This review is far from a comprehensive summary of all published work on the topic of call centres; rather it contains an indication of the analysis of the human element in its engagement with a highly structured, emotionally demanding workplace.

The first section reviews the impact of scientific management principles which identify call centres as a contemporary bastion of Taylorism. The creation of a highly structured and monitored workplace is claimed to induce high stress levels for employees. Conditions in call centres for workers have been variously likened to a prison environment and to the excesses of Ford's production line. Although these views are actively refuted by some authors, call centres have earned a generally unenviable reputation in an industrial relations context.

Through an analysis of the emotional dimension of the work in call centres, the second section of this review considers the contact dimension of the relationship between the agent and the caller/customer.

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The final cluster of topics focuses on leadership and human resources issues related to call centres.

STRESS AND TAYLORISM IN CALL CENTRES

Call centres have been identified as a stressful place to work (Ferne & Metcalf 1998b; Knights & McCabe 1998; Mulholland 2002; Peaucelle 2000; Ruyter, Wetzels & Feinberg 2001), a condition Peaucelle ascribes to the pervasive role played by computer information technology. 'Moreover, computers, which are meant to help them do the work more efficiently are also extremely merciless monitoring tools' (Peaucelle 2000, p. 461) Further, he has also recognised the impact that Taylorian principles, applied at an extreme level, have on working conditions generally, and industry staff turnover rates specifically.

'Conditions prevailing in this situation resemble those of Taylorian workshops, where work rates are close to the maximum that workers can manage. There are very few breaks in between different tasks and the deadlines create a high level of tension. Operators consequently respond to these hard working conditions with very high turnover rates and social movements.' (Peaucelle 2000: 461)

Callaghan argues that Taylorism, particularly as applied to white collar work in an 'industrial office' context as postulated by Leffingwell and Galloway in the early years of the twentieth century, has found a place in the 'modern' organisation represented by call centres (Callaghan 2002).

Stress in call centres, and variations on this theme, represent a common subject assessed by many authors on call centre topics, particularly in the UK. In this respect, opinions are also divided on the degree to which call centres represent a source of 'evil' in society. At one end of the spectrum, the most caustic vilification of call centres is displayed in Ferne and Metcalf's (1998b) paper which posits the view that call centres embody the most extreme and negative features of modern workplaces (Ferne & Metcalf 1998b). In extending Peaucelle's (2000) reference to Taylorism, images such as: 'the "tyranny of the assembly line" is but a Sunday school picnic compared with the control that management can exercise in computer telephony' and, '...describe call centres either as the new sweatshops or dark satanic mills' are conjured up in explicit condemnation of these workplaces (Ferne & Metcalf 1998a). Ferne and Metcalf's vitriol also draws upon metaphors from the farmyard likening call centres to 'battery farms,' and offices where 'individuals sit in tiny pig pens' (Ferne & Metcalf 1998b: 2). The most acerbic criticism, however, is reserved for the exertion of management power through monitoring of call centre activities. Here Ferne and Metcalf invoke analogies to incarceration and omniscient scrutiny.

Call centres are therefore the archetypal organization to represent Foucault's (1977) application of Bentham's Panopticon to the workplace. "All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell... a worker... They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualised and constantly visible... Visibility is a trap... Each individual is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the side walls prevent him from coming

into contact with his companions. He is seen but does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication... this invisibility is the guarantee of order... there are no disorders, no theft, no coalitions, none of those distractions that slow down the rate of work, make it less perfect... power should be visible and unverifiable.” In call centres the agents are constantly visible and the supervisor’s power has indeed by “rendered perfect”—via the computer monitoring screen—and therefore “its actual use unnecessary” (Ferne & Metcalf 1998b: 8/9).

This article represents a surprisingly bitter indictment of call centres, particularly as the expressed intent of the paper was to collect data on the compensation systems employed by firms in UK call centres. Without doubt, Ferne and Metcalf’s perspective has attracted support from some authors, however, it also has its critics, even amongst those who maintain their own, less than flattering, commentary on this ‘new’ category of organisation.

The most vociferous amongst the critics are Bain and Taylor (2000) who roundly deride the perspective stated by Ferne and Metcalf.

‘Ferne and Metcalf’s influence, sustained by both articles and press releases, has persisted. This article builds on earlier work by seeking to present a throughgoing critique of the positions put forward by Ferne and Metcalf. We believe that there is powerful justification for adopting an explicitly polemical approach, principally because, in securing extensive publicity for their perspectives, these authors have gained a wider audience for a mistaken representation of essential characteristics of the call centre. Not only have they erected a simplistic and false model which ignores the complexities of the employment relationship and the labour process, they have committed an equally serious error in underestimating, even eliminating, the potential for, and actuality of worker resistance... it is clear that the kind of surveillance Ferne and Metcalf associate with the panopticon simply does not exist... A careful reading of Ferne and Metcalf’s research findings demonstrates profound flaws in the argument that the electronic panopticon has perfected supervisory power’ (Bain & Taylor 2000: 3 & 6).

Even Ferne and Metcalf’s previously mentioned reference to the ‘tyranny of the assembly line’ is categorically dismissed by Bain and Taylor as being ‘quite outlandish, abandoning any sense of historical accuracy...It is absurd to compare conditions in even the most oppressive and target-driven call centres in the 1990s with those on the early assembly lines’ (Bain & Taylor 2000: 7).

It would be incorrect to interpret the robust vigour of Bain and Taylor’s criticism of Ferne and Metcalf’s position as unqualified support for working conditions within call centres. They are amongst a group of authors who adopt a patently pluralist Industrial Relations (IR) perspective in providing extensive analysis of the internal dynamics of working conditions, the activities of trade unions in call centres and the emotional commitment workers make to their contact with callers. They attribute the

difficulties the trade union movement in the United Kingdom has experienced in recruiting members from within the call centre industry, at least in part, to the belief by call centre workers that they have more control over their conditions of employment than Fernie and Metcalf give them credit for (Bain 2002; Bain & Taylor 2002; Baldry, Bain & Taylor 1998; Taylor & Bain 1999; Taylor et al. 2002).

Emotional labour

Emotional labour is a term first posited by Hochschild (1983) to describe the experience of airline cabin crew who are required to suppress their own emotional reactions in daily work situations in order to project a friendly and confident manner to others. The term has been extended to apply in a broader range of contexts where there is a personal investment of emotions by an individual into their work. It has achieved currency in a call centre context where call centre workers may find it necessary to express empathy with customers experiencing difficult circumstances, and the concomitant requirement to separate their own reactions to the caller in the exchange (Barrell 2000; Callaghan 2002; Houlihan 2001; Knights & McCabe 1998; Mulholland 2002; Taylor & Bain 1999; Taylor et al. 2002).

Call centre workers encounter an additional stressor in the conduct of contact with others via the anonymous medium of the telephone. As well as carrying the burden of emotional labour, call centre workers communicate without complete access to the myriad of cues which inform face-to-face conversation. In the case of the call centre worker, the 'others' immediately present are most often co-workers engaged in similar activity, but not direct participants in the conversation. The non-verbal component of the communication taking place occurs in an environment remote from the intended recipients, in a context unrelated by proximity, but united by common purpose in the call centre.

The demands of communication in a situation where the call centre worker presents a scripted message to callers are particularly evident in outbound call centres and, although there is an obvious requirement to engage with the caller at various points, there is a compelling need for the call centre worker to make their monologue plausible. In this respect, the outbound call centre worker experiences a repetition of the stress radio announcers typically encounter when presenting scripted information. Goffman describes their situation in the following terms:

First, with some systematic exceptions, announcers give the impression that they have a personal belief in what they are saying. The way in which commercials are announced provides the most obvious example...Second, if aloud reading is involved, the fact that it is will be somehow downplayed, rendering it easy for the audience to fall into feeling that fresh talk is occurring (Goffman 1981: 237-8).

Tension can also be generated for the outbound call centre worker when, monitored for performance by the very tools they employ to make calls, the worker is constrained in the duration of the call by management scrutiny, and curtailed in the range of topics able to be included in the contact with the customer by a structured script which, by coincidence, reveals much more about the customer through automatic provision of database statistics, than the customer is ever designed or permitted to know about their attendant. To differing extents, the call centre worker

and the customer both feel isolated from the normal communication cue. Ultimately this can result in both parties to the communication transaction feeling dissatisfied. While this situation is frustrating enough for the customer, in the case of the call centre worker, the sensation is repeated with each call made during the worker's shift.

Mulholland (2000) concentrates on the issue of gender in assessing the extent to which emotional labour impacts on the ability of agents to establish and develop supportive team relationships in a call centre environment. The author also discusses the competing pressures with which call centre management contend: that of performance monitoring and the nurturing of a supportive, team-based call centre culture. Houlihan (2001) provides a perspective derived from the study of management in Irish call centres. She considers the role of managers within the context of the competing pressures that exist in call centres, described by her as: '...centralised, concentrated, routinised tele-based operations particularly associated with the reengineering of services, communications and sales channels' (Houlihan 2001: 209). Houlihan adds her voice to those of Bain and Taylor in suggesting that:

A further difficulty with the critical literature is that its contribution has been largely side-tracked by the monitoring and surveillance issue and addressing and identifying evidence of resistance to reject the "totality of control" argument. This rhetoric stems from the metaphorical associations with "big brother", the Panopticon etc., yet researcher after researcher has demonstrated that for call centre agents, monitoring is not a primary source of concern' (Houlihan 2001: 209).

Houlihan's point is significant in that it implies that the cause of call centre worker dissatisfaction lies in the main part with the highly structured nature of the rostered work arrangements which are, in turn, scrutinised via the monitoring facility of the workers' very tools.

A variation to the management focus in call centres is provided by Gilmore who compares the influence of 'production-line' and 'empowered' approaches to management on call centre workers (Gilmore 2001). Gilmore's examination again exposes the fundamental dichotomy which exists in call centres to scrutiny; that is the apparent opportunity cost between outright productivity on the one hand and customer/caller satisfaction and service quality on the other, as calculated by a range of tangible and intangible measurements.

Human resources in call centres

The final cluster of topics considered, while embracing associated issues in its compass, is essentially grouped around the theme of Human Resources (HR). Steering a more moderate course between the sometimes caustic debates surrounding monitoring and surveillance, imposed/induced stress and IR, Kinnie and his colleagues, (Kinnie, Nick 2000; Kinnie, Nick, Hutchinson & Purcell 2000; Kinnie, Nick, Purcell & Hutchinson 2000a; Kinnie, Nick, Purcell & Hutchinson n.d.; Hutchinson 2001) discuss the 'best fit' between business strategy and employment practices in call centres. Kinnie also categorises the HR approaches taken in call centres into three types: 'Low commitment, little flexibility' which offer sales focused, highly scripted, simple task focused jobs, most likely to be automated by voice recognition systems; 'Some commitment, little flexibility' characterised by

multi-skilled call centre agents, some training, basic employee involvement, job security for permanent staff and limited career structure; 'High commitment, high flexibility' provides an environment of limited use of scripting, less focus on performance measurement, personal relationships with customers, performance pay and high employee involvement (Kinnie, Nick 2000: 35).

The degree to which these features of call centres can be generalised throughout an industry, across national borders, between organisations and from workplace to workplace has not yet been fully assessed, however, a limited scale, multi-national study, prepared by academics from Australia, Hong Kong, England and Japan, has been published (Frenkel et al. 1998). In this study, general findings on the extent to which bureaucracy pervades the call centre environment obtained by comparing working conditions between call centres in selected countries, derived from qualitative research conducted in call centres located in USA, Australia and Japan, with a more extensive survey of 'customer service representatives' (Frenkel et al. 1998).

This paper has focused on work, employment and control relations among customer service representatives in call centres...the images of these kinds of workers vary from the deeply pessimistic (the de-skilled, wired worker) to the strongly optimistic (the empowered, semi-professional). We found that neither was a fair representation and that a complex hybrid form of work organization existed which provided for both routinized and customized responses, in effect giving CSRs limited discretion (Frenkel et al. 1998: 975).

Each of the broad themes identified in the above discussion as representative of the research effort focused on call centres emanating from various regions of the world is generally reflected in the efforts of Australian authors. Wallace (2000) and her associates expose the recruitment, selection and termination strategies employed in some Australian outbound call centres to scrutiny and conclude that deliberate decisions have been made to 'burn out' call centre agents, through the provision of a target-centred, task-focused, sales-oriented environment, in order to achieve a high staff turnover, thus ensuring a free flow of fresh 'talent' and enthusiasm through the organisation on the call centre floor. Wallace also talks of the high stress levels induced through these management practices (Wallace, Eagleson & Waldersee 2000).

More recently, Wallace and Eagleson (2004) have proposed that computer technology, by virtue of frequency of use, and proximity to the call centre agent, has developed to such an extent that it provides a substitute for leadership in call centres. Wallace and Eagleson claim that many of the monitoring functions commonly associated with supervision are provided by the technology call centre agents employ on the job, thus reducing the need for this level of organisational hierarchy. The authors also found that in isolation from supportive leadership, close monitoring of call centre agents performance can have a negative influence on workers' 'Intention to Turnover' or seek work elsewhere (Wallace & Eagleson 2004).

Still considering HR issues, Holland explores the tension created when the dichotomous perspectives of HR (unitarist, management) and IR (pluralist, trade union) are encountered in an Australian call centre environment (Holland 2001).

Holland also recognises the pressure applied to trade unions in their attempts to represent workers in the call centre industry by organisations prepared to relocate to other regions within Australia and to 'outsource' call centre business off-shore (Holland 2001; Kinnie, Nick, Purcell & Hutchinson 2000b).

CONCLUSION

This review has explored of three distinct, but inter-related, perceptions of call centres. In the first instance, call centres are viewed as the contemporary legacy of Taylorist principles of scientific management. Some have invoked images of the harsh working conditions experienced on the assembly lines of the early twentieth century and compared call centre workers to prisoners. Others have decried such observations as excessive, even ludicrous, claiming that, while being subject to highly structured and monitored environment, call centre workers retain a significant degree of control over their working lives.

Call centres have not only been found to be stressful places of employment, but the work itself is considered to put a significant demand upon the agent's ability to subjugate and control their own emotional responses during telephone contact with customers. Emotional labour in a call centre context is facilitated by computer technology in a workplace where the call centre agent is isolated by the structured nature of their work the immediate virtual proximity of their callers. Comparisons were also made with airline cabin crew interacting with passengers on the one hand and with radio announcers reading scripted advertisements on another.

The collection of perceptions of working life in call centres attended to the human resources viewpoint which encompassed aspects leadership and management, or substitutes for it, for the call centre agent.

This review has selected perspectives which significantly impact on the working life of call centre agents. Much more could be written about the specific dynamics of group activity with which agents seem universally engaged. The perceptions of working life in call centres gained from the items considered here is that a range of views exist from the reasonable to the damnable. One uniting thread, however, appears to be the view that call centre work has a reputation for being routine and highly monitored.

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