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Trade Union Joining: Perceptions from Call Centre Employees

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the
requirement for the award of the degree

Master of Industrial Relations – Research

from

University of Wollongong

by

Bernadine Yvonne Marie Cantrick-Brooks

B.Com (Mgmt), Grad. Cert. in Bus. (HRM)

School of Management and Marketing

2005

CERTIFICATION

I, Bernadine Yvonne Marie Cantrick-Brooks, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Industrial Relations – Research, in the School of Management and Marketing, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research has resulted in subsequent conference papers and journal publications as listed below:

“An exploratory study of perceptions of Australian trade unions by call centre staff using Means End Chain Analysis”, 2nd Call Centre Research Conference, Monash University, August 2004

Cantrick-Brooks, B. (2004), ‘Perceptions of Australian Trade Unions by Call Centre Staff: An Exploratory Study Using Means End Chain Analysis’, *International Employment Relations Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp133-152.

Hannif, Z., Mathews, P., and Cantrick-Brooks, B., "Call Centres: Where to next?" Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management, Canberra, December, 2005.

Cantrick-Brooks, B., Mathews, P., and Hannif, Z., (2005), *Call Centres: Where to next?* ESC Working Paper No 2005/12, University of Newcastle.

Shareia, B.F., Parasuraman, B. & Cantrick-Brooks, B. (2005) Qualitative Case Study Research in Africa and Asia: Challenges and Prospects, Proceedings of the 3rd International Qualitative Research Convention 2005,(IQRC2005) (CD publication), 21 – 23rd August, 2005 in Johor Bahru, Malaysia.

Bernadine Yvonne Marie Cantrick-Brooks
24 March 2005

Abstract

Declining trade union density in Australia and overseas has been an issue of concern to the trade union movement and some industrial relations researchers. Many reasons have been proposed for this decline at both the macro and micro level, including changes in the structure of the economic base in Australia from manufacturing to services, and an increasingly hostile environment for unions. These issues are explored in a broad survey of the literature on declining union density.

Drawing on the author's experience in the call centre industry, the thesis uses a marketing research technique to investigate perceptions about unions held by call centre employees. Recruiting members in call centres has proved challenging due to factors such as geographical location of some call centres, anti-union management and a high level of non standard employment in call centres and an increasing tendency to individualism.

Viewing the problem from a consumer behaviour perspective, the first issue was to find out what perceptions are held about unions by call centre staff and the second, how do these perceptions influence the union joining decision?

Primary research using marketing research tools, Laddering and Means End Chain Analysis, provide a qualitative perspective on the decision making process and the perceptions of unions which underlie the union joining decision. Laddering is the interview technique associated with Means End Chain Analysis. It was developed to

elicit the data needed to be analysed using Means End Chain and develop the Hierarchical Value Map.

The Hierarchical Value Map indicated the links between the perceived attributes of unions: *Powerful, Resources, Troublemaker, Costly* and *Outmoded* and how these were linked to perceived consequences through to the goals or values held by the respondents of: *Security, Social Value/Self Esteem, Achievement* and *Belonging*.

Factors which were found to affect perceptions were first, whether the respondent was viewing the union joining decision from a collective or individualist perspective, and second, whether they were taking an instrumental, ideological or normative approach to union joining.

The use of cross discipline research methods offers further potential for research into trade union density.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the following people for their contribution to the research study and the production of this thesis. Very rarely is a thesis produced in isolation and without coffee.

To start with I would like to thank the people who gave up their time to be interviewed: Gail Drummond, Irene Moggan and the call centre respondents.

A heartfelt thank you goes to my supervisors: Associate Professor Ray Markey for getting me started, Dr Terri Mylett for keeping me going and Associate Professor Diana Kelly for bringing me home.

Other people without whom this thesis would not have been possible include: Associate Professor Margaret Craig-Lees and her family, Dr Pamela Mathews and Wendy Oxley.

Special thanks go to my coffee buddies Venkat Yanamandram and Janette Rowland and their families.

Thank you Eduardo Elkins, Michael Elkins and James (ACTU Member Connect) for research assistance as well as my research buddies; Balakrishnan Parasuraman and Zeenobiyah Hannif.

Thank you to: Rosemary Cooper, David Aylward, Robert Hood, Associate Professor Helen Hasan, Elias Kyriazis, Dr Gary Nobel, Professor John Rossiter, Associate Professor Paul Couchman, Helen Fletcher, Alison Hill, Greg Kerr and Priscilla Kendall.

A special thanks to Laszlo Abel for computer assistance, and Kija with whom I had many a chat at 7am.

Finally I would to thank my son Adam for believing in me, and my husband David.

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List of Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACA	Australian Communications Association
ACD	Automatic Call Distribution
ACIRRT	Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training
ACTU	Australian Council of Trade Unions
ASU	Australian Services Union
AWA	Australian Workplace Awards
CCR	Call Centre Research
CEPU	Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union
CPSU	Community and Public Sector Union
CSR	Customer Service Representative
CTI	Computer and Telephony Integration
FSU	Finance Sector Union
HR	Human Resources
HREA	Health and Research Employees Association
HRM	Human Resources Management
HVM	Hierarchical value Map
ILO	International Labour Organisation
KPI	Key Performance Indicators
MEAA	Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance
MECA	Means End Chain Analysis
NSW ADB	New South Wales Anti-discrimination Board
NUW	National Union of Workers
OHS	Occupational Health and Safety
SLA	Service Level Agreement
URCOT	Union Research Centre on Organisation and Technology

Chapter One – Introduction

Context

Call centres are an emerging ‘industry’¹ in Australia and throughout the world. As such they have been well researched over the last two decades. This research has included a focus on work practices and industrial relations within call centres, and the examination of issues considered to be detrimental to workers such as excessive monitoring and surveillance, lack of training and career progression and the use of casual workers. The nature of these issues has attracted the attention of trade unions, which over the past decade have seen a pattern of declining density both in Australia and overseas. From the trade unions’ perspective the emergent call centre industry provides an opportunity to gain new members, due to both its rapid growth, and the negative image of call centres portrayed in the media and early research findings.

With this objective in mind, trade unions have focused on recruitment of new members within the call centre industry. These recruitment programs have had varied results. However, overall they have not been successful in reducing the rate of decline in union membership. Considerable emphasis has been placed on the development of recruitment programs and debate surrounds the most appropriate approach to be adopted: a servicing or

¹ Call centres are not an ‘industry’ as such but represent a way of delivering a range of services. However, evidence of a call centre industry is widely recognized by commentators (Belt, Richardson and Webster 2002:21).

an organising approach. Questions have also been asked about workers' attitudes to trade unions in Australia and, why workers do not join trade unions.

In Australia it has been found that although attitudes to unions have become more positive, workers are still not joining unions in sufficient numbers to prevent the rapidly declining density issue. Reasons for this have been put down to apathy or indifference by the workers toward the unions and unionism.

It is an apparent paradox that workers are both more positive about unions and yet apathetic or indifferent toward union joining. So if workers are more positive about unions then why are they not joining them? What are the perceptions² that workers hold toward unions that allow them to be more positive but not want to join?

Research problem

The research problem is to investigate the union joining behaviour of call centre staff by examining the perceptions held by call centre staff towards unions, and the extent to which those perceptions influence their decision whether or not to join a trade union. Two research questions emerge from this problem.

1. What perceptions do call centre staff hold about unions?

² Kotler, Brown, Adam and Armstrong (2004:249) describe perception as “the process by which people select, organize and interpret information to form a meaningful picture of the world.”

2. How do those perceptions influence their decision whether or not to join a trade union?

Justification for the research

This research is important as it serves to fill a gap in the knowledge and understanding of employee decisions regarding union membership. There are three areas in which this study can contribute to existing knowledge.

1. adding to the body of research that examines the declining density of trade unions in Australia,
2. extending the body of research on the call centre industry and
3. exploring the use and application of research tools developed within another discipline – namely marketing.

Research contributing to the knowledge about the reasons for declining density in the trade union movement is important, relevant and timely. In their struggle for survival, the trade union movement has turned toward the rapidly growing service industry for new members, a significant segment of which are call centres employees. In their quest for increased union membership among call centre employees gaining a greater understanding of how call centre employees view unions, and what influences their decisions regarding union membership is crucial.

The importance of research into issues related to an emergent and rapidly growing call centre industry has been demonstrated by the plethora of both empirical and theoretical research in recent years. There have been calls for more research into the call centre

industry in order to better understand the nature of call centres and the impact upon the employees operating within them. This study explores an aspect of call centre employment that has not previously been examined, and adds to the broader picture of call centre employment being constructed through research.

A further element of this study, which contributes to the development of research itself, is the choice of research method and tools. The use of a research method from a different discipline, namely marketing, to investigate issues in another discipline contributes to the wider body of knowledge by providing an alternative framework through which data may be gathered and analysed. This reframing may provide a deeper level of understanding of the issue examined - declining density faced by Australian trade unions - because it approaches the question of 'why' from a different perspective. The use of alternative epistemological assumptions, in addition to those normally used to investigate the issue, provides new perspectives to both asking and answering the questions. Previous research into the issues of union joining in Australia, have relied heavily on a positivist epistemology whilst this study utilises a constructivist/interpretive epistemology.

Apart from the contributions to research outlined above, this study also has the potential to be of practical benefit to the trade union movement. The examination of union joining within call centres from another perspective, using different underlying assumptions, as well as a novel research design, provides more comprehensive information, which trade unions can utilise to further address the issue of declining density.

Methodology

The nature of the research questions and the data sought indicates that a qualitative research method, informed by a constructivist/interpretive epistemology (further discussed in Chapter Three) is the most appropriate approach to adopt. The qualitative method offers the best means by which to elicit information to directly address the research questions and objectives. However, the traditional qualitative methods used in management, organisational behaviour, human resource management, and industrial relations research were not seen to adequately meet the requirements of this research question. Therefore, it was necessary to look to another discipline area for an alternative, more appropriately focused research method. More specifically the qualitative method applied in this study is drawn from the consumer behaviour branch of the marketing discipline.

Means End Chain Analysis (MECA) – is a method widely used for the examination of consumer decision making related to products and services (explained in further detail in Chapter Three). While it has not been used to address an industrial relations issue previously, it offers a great degree of insight into the problem, and thereby proves a valid tool for this type of examination. MECA analysis is supported by Laddering – an interviewing technique that limits the affect of interviewer bias and seeks a deeper level of response from participants. The Laddering interview technique contributes significantly to the identification of participant perceptions by taking the respondent past their initial response to an issue or questions and encouraging them to reveal deeper levels of perceptions involved in their decision making process. It is this deep level of analysis that

provides the biggest contribution to answering the research questions and contributing to the existing literature. The nature and process of how laddering is carried out and how the technique limits interviewer bias is further discussed in Chapter Three.

One of the key benefits of this type of analysis is that there is little re-interpretation of the respondents' views, as it is their words that are used to present findings, not those of the interviewer. When a large number of respondents are used there is some integration of terms in the aggregation process. However, this is minimised as much as possible in order to portray the respondent perception, not the researcher's interpretation of the respondents' perception.

Once the information had been collected and transcribed it is collated using the Means End Chain approach, Means End Chain Analysis is used to highlight the individual decision making process by identifying the three levels of response: (1) perceived attributes, (2) consequences flowing from those attributes, and (3) how the consequences relate to the respondents' values or goals in life. These responses are used to create an aggregated visual representation of the links in the respondents' decision making process known as a Hierarchical Value Map. How this is carried out will be fully discussed in Chapter Three. In this study, the decision of call centre staff whether or not to join a trade union is depicted (see Chapter Four). The map demonstrates the process of the decision starting with the respondents' identification of perceived attributes of trade unions at the bottom level. Perceived consequences and benefits flowing from those attributes were then identified in a

chain leading up to their stated values. An example of both a sample chain and the hierarchical value map for this study is located in Chapter Three.

Sample

This study is focused on the union joining behaviour of call centre staff. Therefore all respondents were drawn from call centres. However, it should be noted that call centres are not homogeneous. There are several broad classifications of call centres, including:

- low end directory type services where the customer service representatives offer a perfunctory service in a very short time with little variation in call type. A directory service would be an example.
- the middle classification centres where the call centre operates in response to customer account enquiries or conducting sales calls where the call times are longer and the skill level of the operator higher. An example would be a finance company dealing with credit card enquiries or a mobile phone service provider.
- top end services such as the technological help desk type call centre where the operator may be on the phone helping a client for a long time and is required to have a high degree of skill in interpreting the problem as well as delivering a possibly complex solution. An example may be a computer company providing technical help to business clients.

The respondents in this study were drawn from 4 private sector call centres in the telecommunications and finance areas. The call centres were similar in terms of the work practices (targets, length of time spent on calls, team based), nature of the calls (i.e. inbound and account enquiry type) and these call centres fall within the second category of medium skill requirements and customer account/sales type enquires. The author had previously worked in all of the call centres and had first hand knowledge of the work practices and structure of the call centres. A detailed summary of respondent characteristics is also provided in Chapter 4.

Outline of the thesis

This chapter has introduced the nature of the research problem, and briefly outlined the significance of the topic, and the methodology adopted. Chapter Two presents an overview of the literature germane to union joining behaviours of call centre employees. The literature review begins with a discussion of the Australian social/economic/political environment in which both call centres and trade unions operate.

This is followed by an examination of the literature available on trade unions. Issues associated with union responses to call centres, problems of declining density, trade union recruitment strategies, and the reasons for trade union joining by employees. The chapter then moves onto an examination of the context or environment in which call centres have emerged. This incorporates an outline of historical development of call centres as a response to the shift towards a service based economy. This is followed by a brief

discussion of current call centre industry size and growth and issues that have been researched, including work organisation – structure and workflows, the labour market relating to call centres, monitoring and surveillance, human resource management (HRM), and outsourcing.

The discussion then outlines what issues unions have identified within the call centres industry and the role of unions in call centres. The chapter concludes with an identification of a gap in the literature in which this study can be situated.

Chapter Three presents the methodology employed in this study. It initially outlines the epistemological assumptions underlying the research – (constructionism/interpretivist) and explains why these are appropriate for this study. The next section discusses the use of qualitative research methods and their appropriateness for this research study. The final section describes and examines the validity of the Laddering interview technique and Means End Chain Analysis as the proposed method of data collection and analysis for this study.

Chapter Four describes the process of data collection, and contains some descriptive information about the respondents. This is followed by an examination of the data that was collected and analysed. The visual output of the data analysis is shown as a Hierarchical Value Map and there is discussion on how this may be interpreted.

The results of the data analysis are presented in Chapter Five. Each of the issues identified in Chapter Four is discussed and the implications of the findings considered. This is followed by a discussion of implications that arise from viewing the problem of union joining by call centre staff from a different disciplinary perspective, i.e. marketing rather than industrial relations.

Chapter Six provides an overview of the research study, an evaluation on whether using a different disciplinary research tool has provided a contribution to existing knowledge, and highlights significant results. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research arising from this study.

Limitations

There may be many factors influencing call centre staff decisions about whether or not to join trade unions. Therefore, the decision itself may be viewed from many perspectives. These perspectives range from the macro influences of the environment through to micro influences relating to personal factors. The context in which the decision is made, i.e. the macro factors will be discussed; however it is the examination of perceptions of respondents and how these influence the decision making process that will be the focus of this study. In other words, will examining the union joining decision of call centre staff using a different research tool bring a new perspective to understanding the union joining decision, and can this contribute to the existing body of knowledge about union joining?

A further limitation is associated with secondary data used in this research. Due to the emergent nature of the industry the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has not yet developed a separate classification for the call centre as an industry. Therefore, the figures for industries such as finance, telecommunications, and government (to name just a few) which utilise call centres are not broken down to indicate the proportion of employees engaged in call centre activities.

It may be seen by some scholars that the size and nature of the sample are limitations on the findings of the thesis. The relatively small size of the sample is discussed in Chapter Four and similarly the fact that the respondents are from four different call centres rather than the same enterprise or workplace could limit the effectiveness of the findings of the thesis. However, as previously discussed there are similarities between the call centres regarding the work organisation and structure therefore the differences in the workplace context may perhaps be not as important as the nature and organisation of the work to this type of study.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the research presented in the following chapters. In it the research problem was introduced along with the research questions. The justification for the research was discussed, the underpinning epistemology and methodology were briefly outlined, the overall thesis outline was previewed and limitations identified.

From this foundation, the thesis will provide a more detailed account of the areas discussed above. The next chapter discusses the literature relating to call centres, trade unions and the union joining decision.

Chapter Two - Literature on Call Centres and Unions

Introduction and Context

The objective of this chapter is to critically analyse the published literature covering the relevant topics of trade union joining both in the call centre industry and generally to identify gaps in which this research study may be located. In seeking to understand individual behaviour such as the decision whether or not to join a trade union by call centre staff, it may be necessary to view the wider context in which that decision is made. Fay (1996: 50) states that: “individuals are what they are because of the social whole to which they belong; the result is that the individual can only be understood by placing him or her in a social context.”

The chapter will first examine the social/economic and political environment in Australia to provide a social context for the later discussion of union joining by call centre staff. Second, trade unions in Australia will be discussed and the union joining decision made by call centre staff will be examined. The next section will outline significant changes in Australia since the 1950s from which the call centre industry has emerged and how this development has attracted the attention of trade unions in their efforts to recruit members. This will be followed by a discussion of reasons why trade unions are seeking to gain members from the call centre industry, and further research relating to this topic will be considered.

Australian social/economic/political environment

From the 1950s onwards Australia's economic, social and political environment has undergone significant changes (Fagan and Webber 1994). In the early 1980s in response to a 'downturn' in the Australian economy, restructuring became the focus and this was seen as a panacea. Fagan and Webber (1994: 49) outline four types of restructuring that took place: the movement of financial capital between sectors, high levels of foreign investment and Australian investment overseas, increased employer focus on cost reduction, and pressure on government to redesign regulations and policies. As Fagan and Webber (1994: 49) state these "four kinds of restructuring – sectoral, geographical, productive and regulatory – reflect Australia's changing links with the more integrated global economy."

These social, economic and political changes have altered the composition of Australian industry. An example of this is the decrease of employment in the manufacturing sector and the concomitant increase in the service sector (Cully 2002; Heaton and Oslington 2002). Fagan and Webber (1994) relate this change to the growth of 'giant company conglomerates', as a response the rapid movement of financial capital between sectors of the economy. This factor, as well as the quest by company's for ever increasing profits through increased efficiency, has led to the productive restructuring that in turn has led to the development of a call centre industry, and the contemporary employment relationship (Fagan and Webber 1994). This move from a manufacturing base to a service economy has been cited as one of the reasons for the decrease in full time work as the service sector "traditionally utilizes part-time employment" (Gallagher, Tansky et al. 1997: 328). "More

that three quarters of Australian employees now work in service industries of one type or another” (Cully 2002: 141).

Trade Unions in Australia

Trade unions

This section will investigate union density, reasons for decline, public perceptions and attitudes, trade union approaches to recruitment and reasons for union joining.

‘At a time of rapid change in the workplace employees need unions more than ever. Unions deliver better wages, safer workplaces and more secure jobs.’ –Greg Combet, Assistant Secretary, ACTU 1999.

Trade union membership is declining in many countries and has been the subject of various research projects (Waddington and Whitston 1997; Peetz 1998; Taylor and Bain 2001; Callus and Lansbury 2002; Crosby 2002; Burgess, Mitchell et al. 2003; Cooper 2003; Murphy 2003). Union density which is defined as the proportion of employees belonging to a trade union (Keenoy and Kelly 1998; Peetz 1998), has been declining steadily for the last few decades.

Previously, Australia had the highest trade union density in the world (Peetz, 1998:1). Buchanan, Cole and Briggs (2003: 124) state that in Australia “in 2000 there were 757,800 fewer union members than in 1990 ...and...union density fell by 16 percentage points”. When looking at the figures published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) it can be seen that from 2000 to 2001 there was a slight growth in union membership from

1,901,700 to 1,902,700 giving unions some cause for optimism. However, membership declined again in 2002 to 1,833,700. There was again another slight rise in 2003 to 1,866,700, but, overall unions lost a further 35,000 members between 2000 and 2003 (ABS 2004: 37). For trade unions and their peak body the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), the declining union density raises serious questions about what is driving this decline. Analysis of where membership has been gained and lost must be discussed.

Figure 1 indicates that trade union density has declined most steeply in manufacturing. This is reflective of the move away from manufacturing, toward services industries. Industries that have gained membership in the period from 2000 to 2003, have been electricity, gas and water, construction, retail, transport and storage, government, administration and defence, and personal and other services with education holding steady for 2001, 2002 and 2003.

Figure 1

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004, Employee Earnings, Benefits and Trade Union Membership, 6310.0, Australia

A = Agriculture, forestry and fishing	I = Transport and storage
B = Mining	J = Communication services
C = Manufacturing	K = Finance and insurance
D = Electricity, gas and water supply	L = Property and business services
E = Construction	M = Government administration and defence
F = Wholesale trade	N = Education
G = Retail trade	O = Health and community services
H = Accommodation, cafes and restaurants	P = Cultural and recreational services
	Q = Personal and other services

Trade union density has declined most rapidly in the private sector (Morehead, Steele et al. 1997), and the composition of union membership has changed with more women joining unions than men (ABS 2004). There remain a lot of non trade union members in the workforce, which leads to the questions: where are they and why are they not joining trade unions? Buchanan et al. (2003: 125) state that 1.5 million non trade union members are located in heartland industries. Included in their list of heartland industries are the finance, banking and related services industry and the telecommunications industry, both of which are heavy users of call centres. This makes these areas of interest to trade unions wanting to increase membership. Holland (2001: 1) states:

Call centres are seen as particularly suited to unionisation, as they employ a high concentration of staff in one location and generally have a poor reputation in the area of work terms and conditions.

The relatively new call centre industry provides both an opportunity for trade unions in the face of declining trade union density (Peetz 1998), to recruit new members and, a challenge to access the employees in order to attempt recruitment. Holland (2001: 1) states that:

many of these call centres have been developed as Greenfield site operations with practices underpinned by sophisticated human resource management strategies which have the potential to negate the role of trade unions in these workplaces.

Peetz (1998:1-2) identifies three factors that he argues are central to the Australian union density decline in the past twenty years. These are:

A substantial amount of structural change in the labour market, ... second and critical factor, ... an institutional break or 'paradigm shift' in the factors determining union membership, ...third, ... is the failure of some unions to provide the infrastructure or act with sufficient vigour for cohesion to prevent employer strategies from leading to a decline in union reach and membership.

He argues that declining membership "is a function of an array of interacting forces operating at the level of the individual, the workplace, at the enterprise and the national and international economy" (Peetz 1998: 2). Furthermore, if this trend continues, "declining union density may raise major problems of legitimacy for the union movement as a whole" (Peetz 1998: 1). This issue of trade union legitimacy is also raised by Buchanan, Cole and Briggs (2003), Crosby (2002), Murphy (2003), and Shore and Newton (1997).

Peetz's (1998: 3) research at the micro employee level is concerned with "employee propensity to join and remain in unions (the demand for union services)." By contrast this thesis examines employee perceptions of trade unions and how these perceptions are used in the union joining decision. So although looking at only the individual's perceptions, other factors may (to the extent that they are known by the employee, or that the employee is subject to the effects of them) affect behaviour and their perceptions regarding union joining. Peetz (1998: 2) states that: "Apathy towards union-related matters also has an effect on union membership." Apathy or indifference has also been identified by Bearfield (2003) as a reason why employees do not join unions. From a consumer behaviour or marketing perspective, it is important to understand what underlies apathy or indifference in consumer decision-making. An examination of attitudes is a beginning.

Peetz (1998) uses surveys to ascertain attitudes of union members to unions, indicating that attributes such as: security offered by unions, insurance, legal representation, assistance and advice as being reasons people joined unions. Protection and Insurance was given as the most common reasons for union joining. He indicates this is consistent with research from several other researchers. This current research study will add to the research by Peetz in the micro level analysis in that it takes the attributes stated by respondents and explicitly links them to perceived consequences and how these relate to values held by the respondents.

Peetz (1998: 3) argues that: “in the end, it is the actions and responses of unions that determine the effect that change in the industrial relations system has upon union membership.” For example unions that have developed a high degree of trust with members tend to be those that have maintained membership levels in the face of an overall decline (Taylor and Bain 1999). In this research it is the translation of the actions and responses of unions (by the employees they are trying to reach) into attributes, consequences and alignment with personal values that determines employee union joining behaviour.

Buchanan et al. (2003: 124) state that “one of the major challenges for the future is to successfully organize and mobilize middle and low skill service workers” but they also state that unions need to first consolidate their ‘heartland’ industries (those with more than 40 per cent union density) and use these as a strong base for union legitimacy and “to reach

into non-traditional areas of employment” (p.126) such as call centres. Those unions that seem to be holding onto members and able to recruit new ones generally appear to be those that are proactive and responsive to members concerns. The question that trade unions need to examine is: why do people join unions?

Trade Union Joining

The question of why people join trade unions is not easily answered and as has been shown in the previous section, there are many factors to consider. This question has become important for trade unions in Australia due to the steadily declining density. The question is the one that drives this research.

The call centre industry could be referred to as a ‘new frontier’ of employment as it exists within different traditional industries and has been emerging as a new form of work. As previously noted in Chapter One even the term call centre ‘industry’, has not yet been fully accepted. The ABS does not at this time have an industry classification for ‘call centre’.

With call centres one of the growing areas of employment in Australia they provide an opportunity for trade unions to recruit new members. In 2002 the call centre industry employed up to 160,000 staff in up to 4000 call centres (ACTU 2002). However call centres generally have proved difficult to recruit from due to issues relating to access (both to the workplace and within the workplace) and the nature of the work organisation, that is, people starting at different times (Interview Irene Moggan 17/02/04). This issue of access

is one that has been identified in literature relating to employer opposition to union recognition in the UK (Gall 2003).

As previously mentioned, David Peetz (Peetz 1998) has conducted perhaps the most wide-ranging quantitative examination of the nature and causes of trade union decline in Australia. He identifies factors that influence the situation such as:

- structure of the economy and the labour market;
- relations between unions and employees;
- ideological dispositions towards unionism;
- the behaviour of management towards employees and unions;
- the role of the state; and the
- political and industrial strategies of unions. (1998: 1-2)

Other researchers appear to agree with Peetz on some or all of these significant factors as underlying the decline of trade union density (Griffin 1999). ACTU secretary Greg Combet also identified these factors as important (Murphy 2003). While still falling within the factors outlined Peetz, Easson puts more emphasis on the fact that trade unions are not homogeneous and the:

pluralism between and within different unions should not be ignored. Unions have different traditions, ideologies, practices, structures, membership participation and relations with employers (Easson 1994: 154).

Peetz (1998) argues that all the factors operating at the three levels of the individual, the workplace, and the enterprise within the national and international economy underlie declining trade union membership. Nevertheless causes of trade union decline are complex.

For example, a study by van Rij and Daalder (1997) in the Netherlands showed no direct effect between structural changes and membership joining although they felt an indirect effect may still exist. In other words, they found that macro determinants are relatively unimportant in determining unionisation decisions as compared with micro-level attitudinal and social correlates. Griffin and Svenson (1999: 31) state that:

this is likely to apply also in countries such as Australia which have undergone considerable decentralisation of industrial relations, and a substantial reduction in the incidence of compulsory unionism.

Apart from survival financially, declining membership raises questions about trade union legitimacy arising from a reduced membership base (Shore and Newton 1997; Peetz 1998; Crosby 2002; Murphy 2003) and this also affects their power. For these reasons, the ACTU and its affiliate unions have been seeking to address the issue of declining density by developing a co-ordinated approach to recruitment of new members and the retention of existing members. Since the mid 1990s, the ACTU and affiliated unions have been trying to reverse falling density by adopting an approach to membership known as the Organising Model. Prior to this time a Servicing Model was the overall approach. Both of these will be discussed and compared.

Servicing Model

The initial approach primarily used by trade unions (prior to 1994), in their interactions with members was that of a servicing approach. Banks and Metzgar suggest this was “based on a transactional relationship where union officials delivered a service and in exchange, union members paid their dues” (cited in Cooper 2003: 2). The Servicing Model

takes a 'third party' approach to the employment relationship whereby the union intervenes to help members, relies heavily on employer co-operation for access and employee information, and relies on full time union officials to solve member problems and recruit new members (Griffin and Moors 2002). This servicing approach was labour and cost intensive and in the face of declining density, became unsustainable (ACTU 1999; Cooper 2003). During the period from 1983-1993 some unions were amalgamated and a lot of the focus of unions was on industrial bargaining at the macro level which had little effect on the declining membership (Easson 1994).

A hostile legal climate in the 1990s has also caused problems for unions attempting to address the issues of declining membership (Gahan 1997), or as Easson (1994: 11) states: "over the last decade the trade union movement has been engaged in a number of traumatic battles". An example of this is the Federal Government's encouragement of "new operations to employ workers on AWAs [Australian Workplace Awards] and to aggressively challenge union members to abandon collective bargaining for individual contracts" (Gorman 2004). More recently in a front page newspaper article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, titled 'Unions on death row, says minister' the Australian Workplace Relations Minister, Kevin Andrews has stated that "unions would be finished in 15 years" if they did not agree to government strategies to increase AWAs and that AWAs would be "forcefully" introduced into the public sector, "a traditional union heartland". Statements such as these highlight the hostile environment in Australia faced by unions (Garnaut and O'Malley 2005).

In the face of continuing action by the government to reduce the power of the unions the ACTU as the peak council for unions has attempted to guide its member unions to increase membership. To do this the ACTU has provided strategic assistance in the form of recruitment strategies and training. However the ACTU itself could not build membership for the unions, this was a responsibility to be undertaken by the individual unions. (Cooper 2000). After the 1983-1993 amalgamations of unions and focus on the macro level bargaining, the ACTU began advocating unions refocusing on members and by 1995 the Organising Model was the new focus.

Organising Model

With the Organising Model the focus is on the members rather than union officials (paid or unpaid), undertaking most workplace activities (ACTU 1999). The underlying premise is that if members are actively involved in the union and taking responsibility for the activities they will be more committed and actively recruit their workmates (Easson 1994). The Servicing Model tends to address issues on an individual level where one person may complain to the union and the organiser will attempt to solve the problem (Griffin and Moors 2002) while with the Organising Model the focus is on getting employees to work together to resolve their issues collectively. This is carried out by training the members (as delegates) to undertake more activities. It was considered an optimal solution to problems related to declining density such as unions having reducing resources (financial and labour). This solution was based on programs run in America to increase union membership. A delegation from the ACTU went over to America to study the methods

used there and based on their findings develop a suitable model for Australian unions (ACTU 1999). In order to promote this 'organising culture' the ACTU developed an initiative named 'Organising Works' in 1994 (Griffin and Moors 2002; Holland and Hanley 2002) the main objective of which was to develop a "recruitment culture within unions to supersede the traditional servicing model" (Holland and Hanley 2002: 7).

The ACTU offered new organisers a nine month traineeship to learn skills associated with developing and empowering workplace delegates to resolve issues and recruit new members, with assistance from the union (Cooper 2003). This is in comparison with the Servicing Model where the union acts in an intervention capacity as a 'third party' and members were not expected to be active in the union, the organising model puts the responsibility back to the workplace delegates and the members themselves (Griffin and Moors 2002). On a broader scale the ACTU hoped, through the use of the organising model, to change the culture of Australian trade unions in an attempt to introduce innovation in their recruitment strategies (Crosby 2002; Holland and Hanley 2002; Cooper 2003). Peetz (1998: 141) states that "at the heart of union success or failure is their strategies towards their members" and "active, representational unionism may be an inoculation against de-unionisation and a strong barrier to union collapse". If unions are to prevent their 'collapse', then innovative and successful recruitment strategies would appear to be imperative for Australian unions to survive. A base for creating innovative and successful strategies would have to be a thorough understanding of how unions are perceived by the employees they are trying to recruit.

In successful campaigns, organised by graduates of the 'Organising Works' program, such as the one carried out at Star City Casino, 630 new members were gained and in another campaign run by the NSW Health and Research Employees Association (HREA) membership increased from 15 per cent to 80 per cent (Crosby 2002: 11-12). That the new focus on recruitment through organising has been to some extent successful, is reflected in the figures above that show a slight increase in membership as previously discussed, in the years 2000-2001 and 2003 since the introduction of the Organising Model.

From examination of elements of successful campaigns it appears that a combination of the Servicing Model as well as the Organising Model has been used. It has been stated that the optimal strategy would in fact contain elements of both and this is suggested by both researchers and the ACTU (Crosby 2002; Holland and Hanley 2002; ACTU 2003). As noted above the Servicing Model tends to address issues on an individual level whereas with the Organising Model the focus is on the collective level. In using a combination of models the ACTU is attempting to recruit new members by addressing both individual and collective issues (ACTU 1999).

Collective versus individual union joining

Research carried out into why employees join unions can often be separated into those examining the union joining decision from an individual perspective or those who join for collective reasons (Waddington and Whitston 1997). The International Labour Organisation (ILO) committee stated that it believed the 1996 *Workplace Relations Act*

may be in breach of freedom of association conventions due to the primacy given to individual over collective relations (Cully 2000). Traditionally unions have relied on a collective attitude of workers for support. If this collective attitude is giving way to a more individual perspective of labour relations, how will this impact trade union membership?

Netherlands researchers van Rij and Daalder (1997) have investigated patterns behind trade union joining decisions. Trade unions in the Netherlands, similar to those in Australia have been experiencing declining density for some time. van Rij and Daalder state that research into density has previously focussed on the structural determinants of the problem, whereas sociological and psychological studies have shown the importance of personal factors related to the individual at the workplace level (such as occupation, attitudes and values), which affect membership decisions. In research carried out in the United States, O'Bannon (2001) investigates the potential impacts of backgrounds of certain groups of the population on workplace experience and relationships. The two groups he examined were 'Baby Boomers' born 1946-1964 and 'Generations Xers' born 1961-1981.

O'Bannon's research indicates that while the baby boomers come into the workplace with values relating to collectivism, the generation 'Xers' bring a culture of individualism. He states that baby boomers "generally focus on the big picture as opposed to the individual parts. Terminal values such as a sense of accomplishment and social recognition, rank high with this group" and compares this with the generation 'Xers' who "bring a conflicting philosophy to the workplace: that of an individual contributor" (pp 98-100). This also relates to the "new individualism" identified by Waddington and Whitson (1997: 516)

which suggests union density decline is another factor that indicates an “attitude shift among workers towards more unitary conceptions of society”. Along with this approach they suggest that as well as a more individual attitude to trade union membership employees are exhibiting consumerist behaviour. That is seeing themselves as consumers of a product with regard to trade unions. If this is the case then using a research methodology based on consumer behaviour that focuses on the individual union joining decision would appear appropriate.

The collective and individual aspects of union joining can be further broken down into instrumental, ideological and normative with ideological and normative motives representing a collective alignment and instrumental an individual one (Waddington and Whitston 1997). In the literature these three terms are sometimes given different labels however the basic definition is similar: (1) egocentric or instrumental motives: employees join because they believe that they will benefit personally; (2) sociocentric or ideological motives: employees join for reasons based on social and political beliefs and collective interests; (3) social control or normative motives: employees join because of ‘pressure’ of social groups they belong to (Newton and McFarlane-Shore 1992; Fullagar, Slick et al. 1997; van Rij and Daalder 1997; Griffin and Svensen 1999). Griffin and Svensen (1999: 34) relate the study of the three motives to Australia saying that for their research they used “a general expectation that union members in Australia join unions for the same reasons as found in other countries, that is, for a combination of instrumental, ideological and normative reasons”.

Fullagar et al (1997) use Hofstede's (1981) cultural dimensions of Individualism-Collectivism and Power-Distance in their research to explain the difference between people joining unions for instrumental or ideological reasons. They were attempting to discover whether specific cultural beliefs are more predictive of specific attitudes to unions such as instrumentality and ideology. Sverke and Sjöberg (1997: 234) state that "unions require solidarity and an ideology, that is, a collective identity, to express the interests of their members". In other words they need people motivated by both instrumentality and ideology for a union to work, and both of these are influenced to some degree by the subjective norm (or normative motives) of the employee. Applying labels to human behaviour can be problematic as it assumes a specific 'general' behaviour that can appear to limit the extent of behaviour available to groups of people being labelled to those described. This limitation is acknowledged however the labels instrumental, ideological and normative were chosen as those used by most researchers in this area. Each of these three motives (instrumental, ideological and normative) will be examined with regard to the literature, starting with egocentric or instrumental motives.

Instrumental motives

Instrumental motives are the individual motives. Instrumental motives are the ones that will generate a cognitive cost-benefit type analysis for the employee with regard to their decision making (van Rij and Daalder 1997). In other words employees will only join a union "because they believe that they will benefit personally" (van Rij and Daalder 1997:

238). This type of behaviour is sometimes known as “calculative or utilitarian”(Newton and McFarlane-Shore 1992; Fullagar, Slick et al. 1997:3).

An example of an attempt by trade unions in the UK to address this issue is through the provision of extra services. These services such as union credit cards, insurance, travel and shopping discounts etc, were designed to “appeal to a potential members self-interest” (Waddington and Whitston 1997:517). The unions felt it would be easier to appeal to this self-interest than to try and promote the collective benefits of union membership. However in their survey of new union members in the UK they found that the members rated these ‘value added’ services very low when compared with the two top issues of: support if I had a problem at work (Number 1, 72.1 % of respondents) and improved pay and conditions (Number 2, 36.4% of respondents) (Waddington and Whitston 1997: 521).

In this current study one of the respondents specifically mentioned the provision of extra services. In her words:

I guess there are all these little added extras that they are offering members now. which are quite good. It’s not the reason I joined the union and I would still join the union even if they did not have them (Interview – Christine).

Kelloway, Barling and Cantano (1997:227) state that while instrumentality is a predictor of unionisation, general union attitudes related to ideology and normative motives (discussed next) “play a gate keeping role in the unionisation process”. The term (Griffin and Svenson 1999) ‘gatekeeper’ is used as a euphemism for a perceptual filter “through which union experiences are interpreted” (Kelloway, Barling et al. 1997: 229). People join unions for many reasons. (Griffin and Svenson 1999) conclude that the level of instrumentality is

the best indicator of union joining. However once an employee is a member of a union it is the ideological motive that keeps them participating in union activities (Kelloway, Barling et al. 1997).

Ideological motives

Ideological motives tend to be collective in nature. Fullagar refers to the ideologue and states that to the ideologue unions are “positive social, organisational and political institutions rather than instruments for maximising individual self interest” (Fullagar, Slick et al. 1997: 264). Newton and McFarlane-Shore (1992: 251-256) state that ideological motives for joining unions are an indication of “the extent to which members identify with and internalise the goals and beliefs of the union” and that “ideological involvements are related to a number of behaviours, but these behaviours are long-term and independent of rewards and punishments”. This is different to the instrumental motives that tend to be reward based and short term (Kelloway, Barling et al. 1997).

Where different categories of unionism are identified i.e., Business unionism (typical in the US) and Social movement or political unionism (unions that offer more than just workplace solutions) ideological motives for joining tend to be associated with Social movement unionism (Fullagar, Slick et al. 1997), as the involvement with the union is moral rather than calculative, as in Instrumentality. Research carried out in Australia states that employee ideological attitudes to unions are improving, i.e. becoming more positive, however membership is not increasing concurrently (Peetz 1998; Bearfield 2003). While

there is a certain amount of consensus about the general nature of instrumentality and ideology, normative motives for unions joining have not received the same amount of attention.

Normative motives

Normative motives for union joining relate to social pressure from family, friends and workmates, and media influence. Blackwood, Lafferty, Duck and Terry (2003: 489) identify these as: family background, workplace social identity, social networks in the workplace and extent of social approval from managers and colleagues". They do not however discuss the influence of media on normative motives while Dufty (1981) believes that mass media can play a moderating influencing role on normative motives and discusses the debate surrounding the effectiveness of mass media in establishing rather than reflecting public opinion.

While most researchers (as discussed above) ascribe a fairly high level of influence to instrumental and ideological motives for union joining there appears to be some debate among researchers as to the level of normative influence on the union joining decision (Dufty 1981; Newton and McFarlane-Shore 1992; Kelloway, Barling et al. 1997; Griffin and Svensen 1999). Some researchers such as Peetz (1998) do not mention the normative aspects of motives at all. There is a belief that attitudes toward unions (and politics) are formed prior to the work experience and later experience of unions during work experience adds to the perceptions forming that attitude (Dufty 1981).

For unions to be successful in recruiting new members they need individual employees to make the decision whether to join. In order to achieve this, it is important to understand what influences the decision making process, and motivates the employee to join a union. This section has discussed the collective versus the individual perspective of union joining, and then explored beyond these perspectives into the ideological, instrumental and normative aspects of the union joining decision.

Call Centres: Historical development and characteristics

Russell (2002: 468) states “Examination of call centre work has the potential to shed further light on what is unique (and what isn’t) in the contemporary employment relationship.” A large amount of the literature on call centre work is from other countries (United Kingdom, United States of America, Germany, Japan) with Australian research still only relatively new. Most of the Australian research and publications relating to the call centre industry has been from the 1990s to date. This is because call centres as an industry are a relatively recent phenomenon in Australia. The use of the term industry to describe call centres en masse could be considered contentious due to the nature of call centres being situated within many other industries, for example finance, communications, hospitality, manufacturing and education to name a few. However the term has been adopted by the ACTU (2002) and other researchers (URCOT 2000; Belt, Richardson et al. 2002) and therefore will be used in this study. The URCOT (2000:1) study which examined the call centre industry found that call centre employees identified it as an industry as well:

There appears to be a reasonably strong identity connected with employment in the call centre industry. A majority of participants felt a stronger sense of belonging to a 'call centre industry' rather than to their individual employer, even when this was a particular company and not a contracting call centre.

The evolution of the call centre industry "began in the 1980s with the development of airline reservations and directory assistance services" (Wallace and Hetherington 2003). From those early beginnings call centres emerged and developed in response to the demands for greater efficiency, improved service and cost reduction (Korczynski 2002) and in relation to improved information and communications technology (Grimshaw, Cooke et al. 2002). However while promising business advantages there are also risks of counterproductive outcomes to the advent of call centres (Houlihan 2000). Some of these risks are associated with the negative images of call centres relating to excessive monitoring and surveillance, lack of career progression due to flat organisational structures, and stress due to conflicting goals, for example attempting to provide excellent customer service while meeting acceptable call time limits (Knights and McCabe 1998). These negative images of call centres have attracted the attention of trade unions and contributed to their targeting this industry for recruitment of members, as will be discussed in more depth later on.

With call centres, companies are able to centralise and rationalise customer service work processes using the technological advancements that allow computer and telephony interaction (Deery and Kinnie 2002). Call centres which are now used by most industries, some Universities, and the ACTU, may comprise anywhere from a few workers to hundreds of staff and are considered one of the fastest growing areas of employment in

recent times (Bain, Watson et al. 2002; Weinkopf 2002; Burgess and Connell 2004; Marshall 2004). Any person, who has dialled Telstra directory enquires, made a purchase or carried out a banking transaction by telephone, will probably have been speaking to a call centre employee. Houlihan (2000: 228) states that “Customers have adapted relatively quickly to this way of transaction for reasons including accessibility, increased consumer sophistication and widespread time poverty”. This adaptation of customers to the call centre phenomena appears to have encouraged the growth of this industry.

It is estimated that the call centre industry in Australia currently employs approximately between 80,000 - 160,000 staff in around 2000 - 4000 call centres. In 1999, call centre jobs accounted for almost one half of new private sector employment and it is estimated that the Australian call centre industry is worth more than \$1.8 billion. (ACTU 2002:1)

Figures taken from Australian Communications Association (ACA) research (cited in Wallace and Hetherington 2003: 2) report that in 2002 the Australian call centre industry was worth \$A9.7 billion, this figure consisting of wages, salaries, training, technology and other costs. They go on to state that: “In 2002, an estimated 220,000 people are employed in the Australian call centre industry.” This is an increase of 60,000 employees from the 1999 figures quoted in the ACTU (2002) report. These ACA figures are substantially higher than the estimates quoted in 1999 by the ACTU. This difference may be an indication of the exponential growth of the industry between 1999 and 2002. The level of growth in the call centre industry “can be attributed to the fact that over 80% of Australians use call centres to conduct personal transactions on a regular basis and that two thirds of Australian business transactions are conducted via the telephone” CCR 1999, (cited in URCOT 2000: 4).

In a report of recruitment (Walters 2003) taken from eighty seven (87) call centre companies in Australia, covering six thousand, eight hundred and thirty four (6834) employees, there appears to be a distinct trend toward recruiting more part time employees with both full time and casual/temporary/contract employee recruitment numbers down from September 2002 to September 2003. However, casual, temporary and contract employee recruitment rose from 39 per cent in September 2002 to a high of 59 per cent in June 2003 and then fell to 47 per cent in September 2003. This high employment of non standard workers, especially in the call centre industry has been a matter of concern to trade unions and will be discussed in more depth further on.

It is noteworthy that in the areas of casual, temporary and contract employment, while at a high point in June 2003, it had begun to decline by September 2003 and this may indicate a potential decrease in the future in the number of casual, temporary and contract employees being sought by the call centre industry.

Table 1: Percentage change in call centre employment 2002-2003

	Sept 2002	Sept 2003	% change
Full time	52%	33%	19 ↓
Part time	9%	20%	11 ↑
Casual/Temp/Contract	39%	47%	8 ↑

In a broader sense this follows the trends of organisations in many countries which have increased the number of ‘contingent’ or temporary employees as a means of gaining

“greater flexibility in the scheduling and utilization of human resources” (Gallagher, Tansky et al. 1997: 327) which is an inherent feature in the development of the call centre industry.

Differences and similarities of call centres

Call centres are not all the same, with sizes ranging from small with less than 20 staff to large, with numbers of staff exceeding 100 (URCOT 2000). The work may be organised around inbound or outbound calls and these may range from short, low skill directory enquires to long and complex issues such as explaining home loans. Call centre staff, usually referred to as Customer Service Representatives (CSRs) answer (inbound) or make (outbound) telephone calls. Whilst talking on a call the CSR also uses a computer to access or record information (Taylor, Mulvey et al. 2002). Taylor and Bain (2002: 2) use the definition: “a dedicated operation in which computer-utilizing employees receive inbound – or make outbound – telephone calls, with those calls processed by an ACD system.”

“The work of the customer service representative (CSR) is often tightly scripted, repetitive, mentally and physically demanding and stressful” (Kinnie, Hutchinson et al. 2000: 968). How tightly scripted, repetitive and stressful the work is depends on the type of call centre and the outcomes required. For example a call centre dealing with knowledge intensive technological customer support may have different outcomes regarding targets and time spent on call than a call centre where the staff are providing routine information to customers (Shah and Bandi 2003)

While there may be diversity in outcomes of call centre operations, the basic processes in call centres are similar. Processes such as monitoring and surveillance, targets that necessitate a balance between time management of calls and providing good levels of customer service, training and career progression appear common factors of call centre work (URCOT 2000; ACTU 2002; Taylor, Mulvey et al. 2002).

Issues that have been researched

Initially research has focused on topics such as monitoring and surveillance as well as HRM strategies relating to hiring practices and work practices. Taylor and Bain (1999) state that this is probably due to the ‘newsworthiness’ of these issues. Images such as ‘new sweatshops’ (Ferne and Metcalf 1998), ‘dark satanic mills’ from the serial Management Services (1997), ‘battery farming’, ‘verbal labour’ (Sturdy and Fleming 2003:762) ‘sacrificial HRM’ (Wallace, Eagleson et al. 2000:32) and from Taylor and Bain (1999:101) ‘an assembly line in the head’ tend to capture attention.

Work organisation in call centres along with monitoring and surveillance, which will be discussed later, are the most commonly researched topics. That call centres are a new form of work organisation – albeit an amalgam of previous types and structures, appears of most interest to researchers (McKinlay and Taylor 1996; Frenkel, Tam et al. 1998; Weinkopf 2002). As noted above, media images convey certain stereotypes of work organisation in which employees are exploited, excessively controlled, and harshly used. And yet some

researchers come away with optimistic views of the work organisation in call centres (Frenkel, Korczynski et al. 1999) and others have mixed views (Taylor, Mulvey et al. 2002; Van den Broek 2002).

The style of work organisation in call centres has developed with the availability of new technologies such as Computer/Telephone Integration (CTI) services known as Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) systems, and telecommunications advances. As many researchers point out call centres are not generic or homogeneous, although there are commonalities that are used in defining an operation as a call centre (Frenkel, Korczynski et al. 1999; Taylor and Bain 1999).

In later research into call centres Frenkel et al., (1999) examine call centres in terms of work flows and define workflows as:

structured set of tasks (work) leading to a specified output (defined to include services) oriented toward a particular market, acknowledging that workplaces often embrace multiple forms of work organization (Frenkel et al., 1999: 36).

Taylor et al (2002) also use workflows as a unit of analysis rather than the call centre as a unit for the same reason as Frenkel et al (1999), that is, recognition that call centres are not homogeneous. However in their study they conclude: “that routinization, repetitiveness and a general absence of employee control are the dominant, although not universal, features of work organization” (Taylor, Mulvey et al. 2002: 4). By analysing work flows, researchers attempt to gain a clearer picture of the relationships between the workers and the work environment. This relationship can be examined by identifying the labour market in relation to call centres.

The call centre industry has grown rapidly in Australia as well as in other countries, providing job growth in many forms: full time, part time, casual, and temporary provided through external employment agencies. So far, no standard labour market statistic has been developed specifically for the call centre industry. However, Taylor et al. (2003: 435) state:

It is now widely acknowledged that the spectacular growth of call centres, since the early 1990s, represents one of the most significant developments in the changing structure of service employment in North America, Western Europe and Australasia.

Two trends identified by Burgess et al. (2003) - growth in contingent or flexible employment arrangements, and fragmentation of working hours – are both well-documented features of the call centre industry (Taylor and Bain 1999; Whitehead 1999; Kinnie, Hutchinson et al. 2000; Markey, Hodgkinson et al. 2001; Belt 2002; Mulholland 2002; Rose 2002; van den Broek 2004). The flexible employment arrangements and fragmented working hours are both outcomes of a push to provide more customer service, for example call centres are open up to 24 hours a day in an attempt to avoid the high costs of overtime and penalty rates.

These working arrangements have attracted criticism from researchers who believe that this type of work organisation “represents some of the more negative trends associated with the growth of non-standard work” (Hunt 2004: 139). These trends can include low wage rates, intensified labour processes, unsocial hours, coercive management, and high staff turnover (Felstead, Jewson et al. 2003). One implication of such arrangements is a lack of employee

participation by those not in full time employment (Markey, Hodgkinson et al. 2001). The last point particularly, provides an opportunity for trade unions to address the issue, if they could induce sufficient numbers of call centre staff to join.

Feminisation of employment is particularly noticeable in the call centre industry. As stated by Hunt (2004: 139) “call centres have gained a reputation for employing a largely feminised work force”. One reason put forward for the high number of women in the call centre industry is that women generally have the skills needed for this type of work. (Belt, Richardson et al. 2002: 21)

Discussion on whether or not it is true that all women fit these stereotypes, or that men may not have these qualities, or whether this is an example of hegemonic masculinity³ at work, is outside the scope of this study. That these skills are sought in the call centre industry is also verified when examining the recruitment information for Australia (Walters 2003). The recruitment index highlights that in a list of skills including: customer service techniques, written communication skills, sales/ telemarketing, verbal communication, and computer/ technical skills, customer service techniques was the most sought after skill with verbal communication also high on the list

The trend of: “inexorable expansion in the numbers and share of service work” identified by Burgess et al. (2003) is both a reason for and a further development of the call centre

³ For further discussion of hegemonic masculinity see Lupton (2000)

industry in that one of the main drivers pushing the trend towards call centres was increased customer service, the other being cost savings through efficiency increases (Gallagher, Tansky et al. 1997). Although it could be argued that the order of the two drivers discussed above should be reversed. Monitoring and surveillance of employees is used in the call centre industry to ensure that both customer service levels and cost efficiencies are met.

Many researchers deal with the issue of monitoring and surveillance in call centres (Ferne and Metcalf 1998; Sewell 1998; Bain and Taylor 2000; URCOT 2000; Baldry 2002; Taylor, Mulvey et al. 2002; Van den Broek 2002). It is a topical issue and one of relevance to trade unions in relation to the protection of their members from undue pressure and stress that may result from these workplace practices.

Frenkel (1998) and Ferny and Metcalf, (1998) state that resistance to monitoring and surveillance as a form of control is absent in call centres while Taylor and Bain (2001) and van den Broek (2002) found instances of resistance in their research. Resistance to work practices in call centres where it is identified is dealt with by either team leaders or if of a more serious nature the human resources (HR) department.

Wallace et al (2000) discuss 'sacrificial' HR practices where call centres had a specific policy to hire good CSRs, and once they were 'burnt out', replace them. Using sacrificial HR strategies in the workplace appears short sighted and in the long run very expensive in terms of corporate culture and customer satisfaction. Another issue related to the sacrificial HR strategy is that the use of this strategy required a "large labour pool and a strong

external market” (Wallace, Eagleson et al. 2000: 15). However it appears the labour pool for call centres may be shrinking (Walters 2003).

The latest Walters (2003) recruitment index indicates that call centres are finding it increasingly harder to recruit good staff. This may be a result of CSRs being ‘burnt’ by the aforementioned ‘sacrificial’ HR practices. Another form of a sacrificial HR practice has been the previously discussed increasing use of casual and agency supplied staff in call centres. According to the URCOT study:

Much of the controversy about call centres has derived from the people management practices adopted within the centres [and] there is a pattern of employee dissatisfaction emerging which is reflected in the high turnover of staff.

These people management practices are one of the reasons unions view the call centre industry as new areas for member recruitment. HRM has not replaced unions as an alternative to employee representation and Bray, Waring, Macdonald and Le Queux (2001) claim this has caused a ‘representational gap’ in Australia.

The use of outsourcing and ‘greenfield’ sites is also a problem for unions trying to recruit and represent employees in the call centre industry. Greenfield sites are where an operation is taken out of the existing company offices and moved to a different location, or when developing a new business unit such as a call centre the company may decide to use a different location for a variety of reasons. These reasons may include trade union avoidance, economic incentives provided by the area of location, and cost reduction via lower wages costs.

Richardson and Gillespie (2003: 87) state “Call centres permit the ‘back-officing’ of customer-focused, ‘front-office’ activities, and as a result are leading to much greater degrees of service mobility”. This greater degree of mobility facilitates the relocation of call centres to rural areas, and this relocation is a policy assisted by the government that is keen to establish businesses in regional areas affected by high unemployment.

Adelstein (2000:1) discusses the factors involved in relocating call centres to regional centres and states that “call center location studies indicate that establishing call centers in regional centers can solve the high unemployment of rural areas and revitalize the economies of country towns”. She goes on to also look at the downside of this issue by examining stress, dissatisfaction and turnover in the context of longer-term effects of greenfield sites. From the trade union’s point of view, outsourcing usually means a loss of jobs when company employees are displaced due to outsourcing the call centre function to another company (ACTU 1997).

Call centres: Issues for the Trade Union Movement

In 2001 the ACTU (2002) estimates that around 15 to 20 per cent of the approximately 200,000 call centre staff were unionised. Negative images of call centres have attracted the interest of unions and some of the research is now being focused on the interaction between call centres and unions. Taylor and Bain (2002: 25) in the UK have explored this relationship and state the:

future success of trade unions in call centres will depend in no small measure on their ability to contest and redefine the frontiers of control on terms desired by their members.

The term 'frontiers of control' is from a study by Goodrich (cited in Taylor and Bain 2001:25) and refers to the borderline between management and worker control. More specifically it: "referred to the inroads made by workers at that time into the decision-making prerogatives asserted by management."

Taylor and Bain (2001:43) believe that unions have a significant role to play in call centres in challenging these 'frontiers of control' set by management and state:

Trade unions, we argue, are the only means through which any real democratisation of the call centre can emerge, but their role remains neglected, and their influence underestimated, in the literature.

The ACTU (2002) believe that this is true for Australia also and discuss this issue in their document: *On the Line - The Future of Australia's Call Centre Industry*. In this document the ACTU examines the call centre industry and identifies areas of concern for unions as well as opportunities for recruitment.

Another issue for trade unions trying to recruit members from call centres may be the perceptions held about the trade unions by the front line call centre staff (the CSRs). This thesis seeks to add to the literature on the relationship between the call centre industry and trade unions from the perspective of the perceptions of trade unions held by some CSRs and how these affect the call centre employees' union joining decision. Australian research

into call centres and unions has been carried out examining several aspects. One aspect is call centre managements attitudes to trade unions.

Todd, Eveline, Still and Skene (2003:1) have looked at Australian call centre managements' attitudes and responses to trade unions in Australia from three perspectives of their tolerance to trade unions – 'exclude, tolerate or embrace'. In this case study of Western Australian call centres the authors found:

a bipolar pattern of responses by call centre managers to a union presence in the workplaces with eight accepting the unions right to act within their call centre and conversely eight opposing union involvement (Todd et. al. 2003: 162).

Research carried out in the UK by Gall (2003) also found a range of employer attitudes to trade unions. However Gall's research also identified specific actions designed to exclude unions in the workplace or prevent union recognition. Employer actions ranged from preventing union access to quite aggressive actions of dismissing employees found to be involved in union activities, and managers handing out union resignation forms to employees (Gall 2003: 87).

Unions in call centres

In discussing unionisation of call centres in Britain, Gall, Bain, Gilbert, Mulvey and Taylor (2001:1) state:

Call centres have a relatively low level of union density, recognition and workplace organisation". [They go on to identify factors such as] "composition of the workforce (often young, female and transient), the nature of the work (white collar and relatively low skilled), the management control strategies deployed and the special location.

In Australia the ACTU (2002) has set up a Call Centre Unions group to co-ordinate unions involved in trying to recruit in call centres and those fighting for increased rights for call centre employees. Unions involved in this group are: Australian Services Union (ASU), the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU), the Finance Sector Union (FSU), the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) and the National Union of Workers (NUW). As part of the Call Centre unions group the ACTU has set up an information service called Call Central, which aims to be a focal point for both unions and call centre employees. The stated goal of the Call Central Campaign is:

to mobilise commitment from call centres, the industry and governments to the principles of quality employment opportunities for Australians and a high standard of customer service for consumers. (Tkalcevic 2002)

The Call Centre Unions Group have also developed a Call Centre Charter and a Call Centre Minimum Standards Code which they hope to use to encourage employers and governments to ensure the certain standards for call centre employees are met. A copy of both is available on the ACTU website: (<http://actu.labor.net.au>).

One of the major achievements for the Call Central campaign was the Telecommunication Services Industry Award 2002; a contract call centre award negotiated by the CPSU and covering at least 25 call centres.

Research Needs

Unions believe they can play a role in improving working conditions and prospects for staff working in call centres and have targeted call centres for recruitment of new members (ACTU 2002). That recruitment has met with varying degrees of success which may be related to many issues. One of the issues is the nature of the union joining decision by employees and what influences that decision. Australian studies have indicated that some employees' decision not to join unions has been related to apathy or indifference to unions, while at the same time these studies have indicated a growing positive attitude to trade unions (Peetz 1998; Bearfield 2003).

Is the apathy or indifference suggested by Bearfield (2003) and Peetz (1998) an accurate reflection of the individual decision not to join trade unions or are there other factors underlying this perceived indifference? Many of the previous studies have relied substantially on quantitative survey with some qualitative methods used to inform the survey design (Peetz 1998; Gahan and Bell 1999; URCOT 2000; Bearfield 2003). These large surveys are valuable for gaining an overview of a situation or issue. Often this type of research design is used in industrial relations and other disciplines due to time or financial constraints. However a different type of research design may reveal a greater depth of information, such as examining what may underlie the apparent indifference to union joining and therefore provide a contribution to literature in this area. The objective of this study is to go beyond the surface, examining perceptions, motives and influences that may affect the union joining decision by call centre staff.

Conclusion

This chapter has first examined the literature outlining the evolution of call centres, the nature of call centres, and why trade unions have found call centres to be attractive as sources of new membership in the face of declining union density. The chapter has also examined in a general sense, the reasons why trade union density is declining. This is particularly important as call centres may provide unions with a fertile ground for increasing union membership, which is why they have been targeted by the ACTU for recruitment of new members. However, several things need to be considered when looking at why levels of union membership have declined and what this means for unions looking to recruit new members in call centres. Some findings have indicated that non union membership is related to inertia, apathy or indifference.

Is it apathy or indifference of employees to decision making regarding trade union membership? Or is non union joining causally related to a shift toward consumer attitudes – where trade union membership is seen as just another product or service. Literature pertaining to motives for decision making generally and regarding unions was also examined.

The next chapter will outline a research method that may be useful in examining the issue of union joining from a consumer behaviour perspective; in order to try to understand the

motives and perceptions that call centre staff bring to the decision whether or not to join a union.

CHAPTER THREE - Methodology

Introduction

The objective of this chapter is to discuss the methodology underpinning this study, briefly examine the discussion relating to qualitative versus quantitative research, to discuss multidisciplinary research projects and to examine both Means End Chain Analysis (MECA) and its associated interview technique of Laddering.

The issue explored in this research is the decision making by call centre staff on whether or not to join a trade union, and the ways in which their perceptions of trade unions inform their decision. The previous chapter examined the literature pertaining to the environment in which that decision is made. This was carried out by first, examining the call centre industry in which the respondents work, and second why that industry has been targeted by trade unions for recruitment in the face of declining trade union density. The chapter then discussed instrumental, ideological and normative motivating influences on decision-making. Finally the contribution of this study to the existing literature was discussed. It was proposed that using a different research design may yield answers to the apparent contradiction posed when despite increasingly positive attitudes towards unions as identified by Bearfield (2003) and Peetz (1998) union density continues to decline.

This chapter will discuss where this research study is situated as regards assumptions relating to methodology. Also discussed will be the use of a qualitative research approach

and some of the arguments related to qualitative research. Finally the discussion will focus on the methodology of Means End Chain Analysis and its associated technique of 'Laddering' as a way of exploring the issue outlined above in regard to union joining.

Theoretical Perspective

The epistemological basis of this research is constructivist/interpretive. This is taken from the 3 epistemological bases discussed in Crotty (1998), objectivism, constructionism and subjectivism. Crotty situates interpretism within the overall constructivist approach. Mertens (1998) however, places constructivism and interpretism together as one of 3 main paradigms, the others being positivist/post positivism, and emancipatory, while authors such as Chua (1986) classify research epistemologies into positivist, interpretive and critical.

Each of the above authors however appear to agree that interpretive research does not predefine variables. Instead interpretive research focuses on the complexity of human sense making of the situation (Kaplan and Maxwell 1994) and it attempts to understand phenomena through the meanings that people assign to them. The constructionist/interpretist perspective is used in many disciplines when a deeper understanding of how people construct and relate to their environment is required. An example of this is from the discipline of financial accounting which is traditionally a positivist discipline. Authors such as Hines (1998) use a constructivist epistemology to explain how the practice of accounting is related to the construction or interpretation of

accounting by practitioners and consumers. In other words she uses this alternate perspective of accounting to provide a deeper insight into the discipline. It is in the same way, that this study uses a multidisciplinary approach to provide a deeper understanding of a previously researched issue. The combination of the different discipline (marketing), with its differing epistemological assumptions will provide a reframing effect of the union joining issue being researched.

It is in this basis of interpretive research that this research will be situated. A constructivist outlook and an interpretist methodology offer the opportunity to explore call centre staff perceptions of unions and how they fit with the construction of their reality as it applied to the employment relationship. In other words the ways they interpret their information about unions, and the concomitant affect on their perceptions of unions. This in turn may shed some light on the underlying factors relating to the union joining decision of the respondents.

Constructivism based on Crotty's (1998) interpretation, unlike subjectivism or objectivism, seeks to understand the relationship between the subject (in this case call centre staff) and the object (trade unions). This relationship is formed by the construction of the subjects' perception of the object's usefulness in terms of helping the subject move from where they perceive they are now to where they want to be in the future (goals and related values).

Previous studies examine the relationship between unions and employees in terms of the employees' attitudes to unions. This study seeks to understand the underlying perceptions

upon which that relationship has developed and how those perceptions inform the union joining decision. This is undertaken by viewing the process of interpretation and construction, carried out by the call centre staff using Means End Chain Analysis. This study was conducted in order to examine whether there were some 'hidden' or non-conscious factors that related to purely individual motives underlying the relationship between unions and employees. The analysis may therefore go some way to adding another level of interpretation to the finding of inertia or indifference regarding union joining (Peetz 1998; Bearfield 2003).

Qualitative Research

Most research relating to call centres, trade unions and union joining carried is quantitative, survey based, with some qualitative (interviews). Why people join unions has been asked frequently in recent years, particularly in light of the declining union density of the last few decades. The research issue of what factors underlie the decision to join or not join a union by call centre staff needs to be addressed. In order to address this issue a methodology is required that allows the researcher to go beyond the surface and view the decision making process by looking at perceptions. One of the ways to do this is to look at the associations the respondent makes in their mind about the object of the decision: in this case Unions. A qualitative methodology provides the most appropriate means by which this can be carried out with validity.

Qualitative research is generally acknowledged to be subjective, although it has been argued that all research, both qualitative and quantitative has elements of subjectivity

(Wainwright 1997; Breuer, Mruck et al. 2002). In this study subjectivity arises in several areas. First the CSRs perception of unions is subjective. Second, the researcher's interpretation of the transcripts is subjective. No matter how hard one might try to be objective a different person may identify differing aspects of a transcript as being more important depending on their own perspective of the topic. This may be more of an issue where the researcher is trying to prove a hypothesis or make a current theory fit. Third, the act of interviewing respondents and the process of being interviewed will affect the respondent dependent on who the interviewer is, the relationship of interviewer to respondent and prior knowledge of the interviewer that allows the respondent to 'shortcut' some answers, i.e. not have to explain certain points.

An example of this last point is that due to the researchers previous work experience in call centres, respondents indicated they felt more comfortable discussing the topic and were able to dispense with technical explanations of work practices. This meant the respondent was able to begin the process of focusing on their underlying thoughts about the subject fairly quickly.

Qualitative research is aimed at collecting 'rich' data to analyse. The data collected by using the 'Laddering' technique considers the respondents' own point of view rather than that of the researcher. In fact due to having worked in some of the companies discussed and with the respondents, the researcher found that their recollection of specific events were different to those of the researcher. However since it is their perspective of the situation that informs the process of ascribing attributes and consequences to unions and

union joining, then the fact that the researcher viewed incidences from a different perspective (or truth) was irrelevant to the research.

Qualitative research was chosen over quantitative research because this data is not being collected to be used for prediction or control. Another important reason for using qualitative methods is because this study is concerned with understanding rather than measuring. There is no positivist assumption of objectivity, it is understood that there will be some subjectivity in the research process and the interaction between researcher and subject will reflect this.

‘Qualitative research can be characterised as the attempt to obtain an in-depth understanding of the meanings and 'definitions of the situation' presented by informants, rather than the production of a quantitative 'measurement' of their characteristics or behaviour’ Wainwright (Gutman 1982).

For this research study this ‘in-depth understanding of the meanings and definitions of the situation presented by the informants’ is important to meet the objective of pulling apart the union joining decision and investigating the perceptions held by respondents. This is the reason that a qualitative method; MECA (Reynolds and Gutman 1988), was used for the data collection and analysis of information from the call centre staff.

Methodology is defined by Kelly (1999:5) in three different ways:

- as a critical study of method,
- the underlying logic of theory and methods

- a set of methods, given coherence through a shared frame of reference.

and although she states it is not the most correct definition of the three, for this research methodology will be defined as “a set of methods, given coherence through a shared frame of reference.” The set of methods used for this qualitative research is MECA and Laddering.

MECA which is a form of discourse analysis, uses an in-depth unstructured interview technique known as ‘Laddering’ (Reynolds and Gutman 1988) and will be discussed in more depth later on in this chapter. All primary data collection for this study is qualitative. Other qualitative methods of enquiry such as Ethnography (Byrne 2001) were evaluated in terms of validity for this particular study, however MECA provided the best method by which to obtain results that would answer the research questions.

Initially ethnography was considered as a method for this study due to the researchers work experience in several call centres. Ethnography is described as

“a qualitative research method that is used by anthropologists to describe a culture. Ethnographic research, therefore, attempts to fully describe a variety of aspects and norms of a cultural group to embrace understanding of the people being studied” (Byrne 2001: 82).

The most common tools of the ethnographer are observation and interaction with the group being studied (Wainwright 1997). This current study is not looking at culture as a focus

and observation as a tool would not provide the data needed to answer the research questions; therefore ethnography was discarded as a suitable method.

Criticisms of Qualitative research

So far the discussion has been focused on the use of qualitative research, without directly addressing the criticisms of the methodology as an alternative to quantitative research. Some of the criticisms of qualitative research from the perspective of the quantitative researcher focus on the assumptions that; objectivity cannot be maintained between the researcher and the object of the research, (Aronowitz and Ausch 2000), that there is no relationship between the object of the research and its environment (Grbich 1999), and that the object being studied has no ‘agency’ (no free will). This is important to quantitative researchers when using the results for predictability and control. Other criticisms include: qualitative research is subjective and therefore there is a danger it may simply repeat cultural prejudices (Mruck and Breuer 2003), trivial, useless data may be collected, and that because of the often close interaction between researcher and subject there is a greater chance for bias in the results(Burns and Bush 2000).

However as Breuer, et al (2002: 1) state: “studies in a variety of fields, including the history, philosophy, sociology, and psychology of science turned up a lot of evidence supporting the contention that personal, social, and local factors influence the research process and its results” therefore to take a quantitative approach and ignore these influences

is to provide a person with only a fraction of the information available. The danger of this is where the information may be used for decision-making. For both breadth and depth of useful information both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies are often used together. This multi-method approach can be the result of interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary research, such as that used in this study.

Multi-disciplinary research

Crittenden (1998) states that multidisciplinary teams using multidisciplinary methods can produce a higher quality of research and that a trend in the literature toward using more multi-method research and multi-disciplinary teams can be seen. They suggest the basis of this appears to be a need for research that is explanatory and ‘rich’ as well as research that takes into account historical significance or context. Using an approach to research that involves more than one discipline “involves shifting the focus of analysis” to gain a different picture than previously available (Grimshaw, Cooke et al. 2002:189).

The current study applies, a multidisciplinary approach using the qualitative method of MECA. This is a method developed primarily from consumer behaviour, within the marketing discipline.

From a marketing standpoint, consumer behaviour is about human responses in a commercial world: how and why people buy and use products, how they react to promotional tools, and what underlying mechanisms operate to help and hinder consumption (East 1997: 3)

Whilst some may argue that industrial relations is not about a commercial world, and that trade unions are not a product, there is merit in examining an issue from a different perspective.

Concepts from the discipline of marketing have been used previously to examine the industrial relations issue of unions' effectiveness (Gahan and Bell 1999), although not to examine specifically the union joining decision. In this thesis it is not just one concept, that of a customer orientation, that is used from marketing. It is a set of methods developed specifically to examine the perceptions and decision making behaviour of consumers. In this case, employees and their union joining decision.

This exploratory study is in part a test of whether or not using such a cross disciplinary approach will provide useful data that will add to or extend the existing research relating to the issue of trade union joining by call centre staff. There appeared to be a gap in the literature on this subject that was not explained by the research methods in use. As previously discussed, research shows clearly that attitudes toward trade unions have been increasingly favourable however union density continues to decline (Peetz 1998; URCOT 2000; Bearfield 2003). In other words, while people believe that unions are good for Australia and workers, they do not seem to be joining unions. This apparent paradox provides a fertile ground for research and one way to examine the issue is to look at workers perceptions of trade unions and examine the decision making process using Means End Chain Analysis.

Means End Chain Analysis

This study examines perceptions as they relate to decision making, by using the qualitative research tool MECA (Gutman 1982). This tool was designed and used in the consumer behaviour area of the marketing discipline. The first objective is to identify the attributes a person (decision maker) assigns to an object (in the case of this study, unions). Attributes can be concrete or abstract (Gutman and Miaoulis 2003). Concrete attributes may be physical factors such as size, colour or with a product taste, texture, etc. In this study we are looking for abstract attributes. Abstract attributes are more subjective in nature and are perceived by the consumer rather than a tangible aspect that can be observed by everyone. In other words the abstract attributes exist only in the minds of the consumer and may be different for other consumers. An important aspect of MECA is that there is no attempt to reinterpret the information supplied by the respondents. The value from a marketing perspective is that the respondents own words are used, therefore advertising material designed from the data is thought to more accurately reflect the market (Grunert and Grunert 1995).

When MECA is used for marketing of products there is an earlier step called ‘triadic sorting’ that allows the researcher to narrow down the choice of products for the respondents. In this research we are not using products, we are examining a service and call centre workers do not normally have a choice of which union to join. The appropriate union is dependant on the type of industry in which the call centre is situated. Occasionally more than one union may be available, however, this research is not testing choice between

unions, it is concerned with an examination of the decision making process related to whether or not to join a union.

The next level of analysis after identification of attributes is to determine what consequences or benefits the person assigns to the attributes and third, how do these consequences/ benefits relate to the values that person holds. In other words identify the steps of the decision making process by examining the relationship of perceptions to goal attainment or values held by the workers. Research previously carried out into how values affect decision making was conducted by Rokeach (1968) and loosely forms the basis of the MECA model (Gutman 1982). Values are also acknowledged to influence attitudes and behaviours by O'Bannon (2001) in his research into the group of the population known as "Generation Xers".⁴

Each representation of the linked attribute, consequence and value is called a *chain*. For each respondent there may be several chains flowing from the attributes. For each respondent the group of chains form a map showing the linkages from *attribute*, through *consequence* up to *value* as well as any linkages where a consequence leads to another consequence flowing from a different chain.

These individual maps are aggregated into a large map called a Hierarchical Value Map (HVM). Gengler, Klenosky and Mulvey (1995:245) describe the hierarchical value map as

⁴ It is acknowledged that most, but not all of the respondents for this study are classed as Generation X. See Table 2, p.86.

presenting: “a graphical representation of a set of means-end chains which can be thought of as an aggregate cognitive structure map”. In other words it shows the decision making process of the respondent in relation to the particular product or service. The use of graphical representation is popular in marketing both in research and the practice of marketing (1981: 5; Gengler, Klenosky et al. 1995). As stated by Lefferts (1981: 5) “Descriptions, trends, relationships, and comparisons can be made more apparent and less time is required to present and comprehend information when graphic methods are employed.” The HVM is an aggregated representation of the MECA data. However the terms shown in the HVM are the actual terms used by respondents. This is done to ensure the HVM accurately reflects the respondent’s perceptions (Grunert and Grunert 1995).

Limitations of MECA

All methodologies have limitations, and a critique of MECA can be found in Rossiter and Percy (2001). Rossiter and Percy argue that there are methodological problems with MECA. Their main argument is in the aggregation process of developing the HVM. They argue that an aggregated chain depicted in the HVM may not represent any one individual chain and therefore loses validity. This is a very important point for marketing if an advertiser were to rely on just the HVM instead of also looking at the underlying data. It is for this reason that in this study the HVM is presented as a visual image of the aggregate data and findings are based on the individual chains and statements taken directly from the transcripts, as well as the HVM. A second factor is that in building an HVM with only ten respondents, the aggregation process is less than with data from many respondents. Therefore the HVM that has been constructed from this research more accurately reflects

the individual thought processes than would one built from sixty respondents, and with a greater degree of aggregation.

MECA has been used by marketing researchers, to study a variety of consumer products. These range from everyday household items found in a supermarket to mobile phones (Walker and Olson 1991; Heitmann, Prykop et al. 2004). MECA has also been used to examine the decision making of college students regarding which institution they chose to study at (Gutman and Miaoulis 2003). This is the closest use of MECA to the current study as it is examining the decision making process regarding a service rather than a product. However, MECA has not previously been used to investigate an industrial relations issue such as examining perceptions held about unions and the resultant union joining decision. The questioning technique used to elicit the information required to view the decision making process is laddering.

Laddering

Laddering as an in-depth interview technique is designed to take the respondent to higher 'levels of abstraction' thereby delving beyond the surface thinking into aspects that only become apparent when deeply thought about (Reynolds and Gutman 1988). Therefore the interviews are of one to one and a half hours duration. In-depth interviews are used to provide 'rich data'.

The interviews are unstructured in order to attempt to access subconscious cognitive attitudes about unions that the subject may not have been aware they held (Grunert and Grunert 1995; Malhotra, Hall et al. 2002). Unstructured interviews allow both the researcher and subject to reflect on the process, while involved in it. In an ethnographic sense the interviewer will be classed as ‘one of them’ due to previous and known shared experiences in the work environment (Breuer, Mruck et al. 2002). This means there will be a high level of trust between them. Being both of the same gender and similar perceived status also creates a relationship that will impact the research process (Lupton 2000). Although not the same gender as all the respondents, due to previous work experience in the industry the author was seen by the respondents as having similar status and shared understanding.

Data Collection Issues

Issues that the researcher needed to be aware of during the data gathering, was first, for the researcher to minimize input that distracts from the subject ‘telling their story’ and second, an attempt by the researcher to not introduce bias whilst maintaining a conversational flow. Interviews were recorded as well as notes taken, and a journal kept by the researcher during the data collection phase.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the use of a research design based on a constructivist/interpretist epistemology and an interpretist theoretical perspective. This chapter has also discussed how the use of qualitative research in the form of unstructured interviews is more appropriate than quantitative research such as that previously used by most researchers on trade union joining. The chapter included discussion relating to the use of a multidisciplinary perspective to reframe the union joining decision of call centre staff. Discussion then focussed on whether MECA was a suitable tool for a study such as this that was concerned with examining the decision making process to discover specific personal perspectives influencing the decision. Finally issues relating to the use of laddering as an interview technique were discussed.

The following chapter will discuss the collection of the data; the analysis using means end chain and the results gained.

Chapter Four - Data Collection and Analysis

Introduction

The objective of this chapter is to examine the data collection and analysis process. The following chapter will discuss the results and the implications. As discussed in the previous chapter, MECA was chosen as an appropriate design due to its potential ability to go beyond the everyday thoughts or reasons for union joining behaviour and explore the 'non-conscious' linking of consequences (or benefits) of union joining behaviour to the respondents' values about life in general (Gutman 1982). The following in-depth look at respondents' thoughts is gained through the laddering interview technique and the Means End Chain Analysis, discussed in Chapter Three.

This chapter will discuss the data collection and analysis processes resulting from using laddering as the interview technique and MECA for the analysis. Limitations of the applicability of the MECA approach and the associated laddering interview technique to this type of research will also be discussed. Chapter Five will discuss the findings of Chapter Four within the context of the literature.

Data Collection

Data was collected from a number of sources. Secondary data was collected from academic journals, union and call centre management websites, e-magazines, newspaper

articles and specifically commissioned reports. Primary data was collected through interviews with customer service representatives (CSRs) from the call centre industry. Call centre staff were chosen because of the focus by trade unions on recruiting from this emergent industry. Call centres are a rapidly growing industry and a lot of early research into call centre focused on the negative aspects of work practices and this had led to trade unions targeting this industry in an attempt to recruit new members. Recruitment attempts in the call centre industry have not been as successful as unions had hoped and therefore research examining the perceptions held by CSRs and their decision making process will assist unions in understanding this target group.

Respondents

CSRs were chosen because in a preliminary interview with a team leader she stated that once she became part of management it was clearly 'indicated' to her that it would not be appropriate for a manager to be a member of a union (Interview Louise, July 2003). This issue was also identified by the New South Wales Anti-discrimination Board (NSW ADB) cited in Peetz (1998). The NSW ADB found that some companies refused to allow some supervisors to remain in a union. By limiting the respondents to CSRs this aspect of 'if management, then no union' is removed. A future research opportunity would be to interview Team Leaders and compare their perceptions with those of front line staff to see if there are any differences.

The respondents were found via contacts in the call centre industry gained when working at various call centres. Although no formal sampling methods were employed there was an attempt to select respondents that were representative of the employees in call centres such

as those used for this research. For this reason the interviewees were from each gender, ranged from young males and females new to the call centre industry to older people and those who had been in the job for a while. Some were part time and some full time and some were employed as casuals through an agency. The table below shows some ‘non-identifying’ demographics of the respondents.⁵

Table 2: Respondent demographics

Age	Gender	Time in call centre	Industry	Union member	Education	Full time/ Part time
21	M	2 yr	Telecommunications	No	VCE	FT
23	F	4.5yr	Fin/Tele	No	TAFE	FT*
29	M	5 yr	Finance	No	Post grad	FT
26	M	.5yr	Finance	No	Undergrad	Casual
39	F	15 yr	Finance	Yes	YR 11	PT
35	F	13 yr	Finance	No	B.A.	FT
50	F	5.5yr	Finance	Yes	Post Grad	PT
32	F	12 yr	Finance	No	Yr 12	PT
27	M	6 yr	Finance	No	Yr 12	FT
23	F	1 yr	Finance	No	Undergrad	Casual

* Respondent was a Casual worker in the Finance call centre previously.

The respondents were drawn from four different companies within the Telecommunications and Finance areas: high users of call centres. For larger studies the Government sector is usually added to the Telecommunications and Finance Sectors. These three sectors are considered most representational of the larger call centre industry and are the ones most

⁵ To meet human ethics requirements, privacy of respondents has been upheld by avoiding personal identifiers and by the use of pseudonyms chosen by the respondents.

commonly studied in Australia (Deery, Iverson et al. 2002; Todd, Eveline et al. 2003; Cutcher 2004; van den Broek 2004). All respondents interviewed had similar work practices and targets as regards Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) such as time management of calls, work time and working in a team environment. A further discussion relating to similarities and differences in call centres and the operations of them is located in Chapter Two.

The respondents were contacted via email and phone calls and asked if they would like to participate in the research. These initial respondents then referred other people who either contacted the researcher directly or the researcher was given their contact details after they had agreed to do the research.

All respondents were aware of the researcher's previous experience in the call centre industry and possibly for this reason there were more people volunteering to do the research than required. During the interviews the respondents would make a point about a specific issue and then rather than explain it just say "you know what I'm talking about". This meant that interviews were not interrupted by respondents having to give detailed, technical explanations.

After an email discussion with Dr Gutman, who proposed and developed MECA, it was decided to use ten interviews. Dr Gutman felt that that amount was appropriate for exploratory research. Other researchers have used as few as six interviews (van Rekom 1997) for MECA. However, Dr Gutman felt that with any number less than ten it may be

difficult to extract enough data to provide results that can be validly used. In further proposed research on this topic Dr Gutman has suggested conducting about twenty-forty interviews would be more appropriate particularly if the research were used as a basis for a marketing campaign (Pers. Comm. Dr Gutman 02/12/03). MECA is normally used for marketing purposes. As previously discussed, this use of MECA to investigate an industrial relations issue is unique.

Prior to the interviews, respondents were given an information sheet, as well as a consent form to sign. The information sheet and consent form were developed for Ethics approval and gave respondents information about the study whilst attempting to reduce any influence as regards specific data sought (see Appendix I, II, III). Interviews were carried out in respondents' homes where possible, the researchers office at University or in a café. It was important to try to conduct interviews in a non-threatening environment away from the work place and with as few distractions as possible.

Interviews

As previously discussed, the laddering interview technique used required unstructured in depth interviews. These interviews lasted approximately one hour with the respondent as relaxed as possible and able to speak without constant interruption and distraction. Providing an atmosphere for the interview that is more relaxed may facilitate automatic retrieval of information (Grunert and Grunert 1995). The provision of the relaxing atmosphere is important for respondents to gain an inward focus to elicit 'non conscious' thoughts and higher levels of 'abstraction' required for analysis using the means end chain model (Reynolds and Gutman 1988).

Interviews were audio taped for greater accuracy, with a few hand written notes taken during the interviews to remind the researcher of items brought up by the respondent that required further exploration. As indicated by Gutman (1982) and Grunert and Grunert (1995), MECA relies on using the respondents own words as much as possible for accuracy rather than a possibly spurious interpretation of them by the researcher who may have preconceived ideas that will unconsciously bias the data. One of the ways to attempt to reduce researcher bias at the analysis stage as well as to provide full context in which the statements are made is to tape the interviews (Grunert and Grunert 1995). It would be impossible not to have some perceptual bias as it is still the researcher who is selecting which statements to use for analysis. However this should be minimised wherever possible by using the transcripts to check that any interpretation is consistent with the context in which the statement is made. This would be more difficult where the interviews were not taped.

Copies of the transcripts were sent to respondents so they could check them for accuracy and ensure no identifying information was contained in them. With this type of research trust is a significant issue as respondents are being asked to examine beliefs and values that they often were not aware they had. After the interviews several of the respondents stated that they had not been aware they had held those ideas or beliefs until the words were out of their mouths. This is consistent with findings by Grunert and Grunert (1995: 215) in their evaluation of laddering and MECA who stated that respondents told them “the laddering task made them think of connections they had never thought about before.”

Sample Interview

Following is a sample of one of the interviews between the interviewer (I) and the respondent (R) indicating the laddering technique that was used. Initially open ended questions are used to elicit respondent perceptions of the product or service, in this case unions.

I. Tell me what you know about unions?

R. They're in place in the workforce to assist employees when there's problems throughout their working environment.

I. What sort of problems?

R. If they feel they're not being paid correctly, if there's discrimination, any issues really. Basically any issues that they can assist the staff with.

I. So, what else do you know about unions? I'd just like you to think about it and tell me everything you can possibly think of about unions.

R. In a working environment, apart from the work, from the pay charter and everything like that, as a guide so that the employees can feel comfortable that they can actually go to someone else, that aren't specified part of their business.

R. Personally, myself I feel that having the use of a union is a good thing for a business. But it's also a good thing that you're not obliged to join. I think that it's up to the individual to decide if it's what they want, if they want to sacrifice part of their wage each fortnight to assist the union, or if they really want to, or not be with the union at all basically.

While the respondent is talking the interviewer takes note of perceived attributes. Attributes can be divided into concrete or abstract and as previously explained in Chapter Three. Unions are a service rather than a tangible product so it is abstract attributes being used in this research. Gutman and Miaoulis (2003: 107) state " abstract attributes are more subjective in nature... [they] are more in the way of perceptions that exist only in the minds of those who perceive the [service].

Once the respondent has run out of things to say about the topic, the interviewer will go back to the attributes and start the laddering process by asking the two questions: what does this (particular attribute) mean to you or why is this (particular attribute) important to you. Here the researcher is attempting to discover perceived consequences or benefits that may flow from the identified attributes. Earlier this respondent said that unions cost you money. Now the interviewer will attempt to discover what further perceived consequences apart from the stated sacrifice that the respondent believes are related to the costly attribute. The costly attribute was derived from the respondent perception that you

have to sacrifice your money to be in a union, and further comments that imply that state union membership is expensive.

I. You said earlier that unions can cost you money (sacrifice part of your wage to be a member) what does that mean to you?

R. What that means to me is that if you're paying for, I mean I know it's only maybe \$2, 3 dollars every fortnight, whatever, but if you're not getting what you're paying for, that's how I say it's expensive because you could use that money elsewhere.

I. Why is that important to you, that using the money elsewhere if it's not working for you there. Why is that important to you?

R. Everyone works for money. If you see that money that you could have used elsewhere. I just feel like, every cent to me makes a difference. So, if it's in my pocket I'd rather it be in my pocket. If it's going to someone else, and it's not doing anything for me, well there you go.

At this point the interviewer should have continued with the 'why is that important to you' and 'what does that mean for you' line of questioning until the respondent identified a perceived value or goal. In research carried out by Gutman and Miaoulis (Gutman and Miaoulis 2003) using students as interviewers, the authors acknowledged laddering could

be difficult for inexperienced researchers to use and developed a more structured form of laddering whereby respondents were given the attributes. From this basis the interviewers then only had to elicit the consequences and subsequent values.

Once the respondent has identified a value or goal then the interviewer goes back to another perceived attribute and starts the laddering process again.

I. You also mentioned that unions can provide assistance. What does that mean to you?

R. Assistance in the sense of... OK, just say that there's a work issue. For example, staff harassment and you're not comfortable actually approaching your team leader or your manager. You'd rather actually go through out-sources so that it's kept private and confidential. So, being out of the union, especially if the union is out-sourced, so that it's nothing to do with the work and everything is kept private, people probably feel a little more comfortable by doing that.

I. Why is that privacy issue important to you generally?

R. Privacy is a very major issue with me. I feel everyone has the right to privacy. If they've ... you should only be able to give out the information that you want to give out. Like, everywhere they're doing this privacy acts, it's a big thing. So I believe that each individual should also have that privacy.

I. What would it mean to you having that sort of privacy?

R. Security ... within yourself. Confident, that that person isn't going to go blabbing and telling the world about your issues. Just, I think you feel more comfortable knowing that you can tell someone and you know that's it's not going to go all around the office, basically.

*In this section of the interview the respondent mentioned a value/goal of **security**⁶, which indicates the end of the chain. As previously explained the chain starts with a perceived attribute at the bottom flows through consequences or benefits up to a value or goal at the top. The top of the 'ladder' in the laddering technique is to identify the value. Once this is achieved it is back to the next attribute to begin up the ladder again.*

I. Another aspect that you mentioned about unions is that they fight for you. Why is that important to you?

R. For example, if it's to do with unfair hours, or they want to change your hours. And there's a group of you that want to ... you know you talk to your other colleagues and they actually also say that the hours, they want set hours. People want set hours and other people want flexible hours. And the work employment wants to make it

⁶ Security is one of the values identified by Rokeach (1968)

all ... give everyone whatever they want and not be fair. Well, if there's a group of you there's a stronger feel, like everyone's going to fight for you. If there's one person and there's 20 people, well they're going to listen to 20 people more than they're going to listen to 1 person. So, that's what I mean about the fight.

I. Why is that important to you, that people band together like that?

R. I just think that when people band together they listen to you more. You're heard more.

I. Why is it important, as in generally for you, you personally, why is it important to be heard?

R. Well, if you keep your mouth shut and you're at work and you see that there's something not right, or your hours are being changed or whatever it may be and you keep your mouth shut, you're just going to dwell on it and dwell on it. So, it's important within myself ... relieves the stress basically. It makes me feel more comfortable to come to work when I know that I can come to work and do the hours that I want to do, and feel comfortable about doing it. So that's what makes it

I. And comfort, generally to you, what does that mean?

R. Comfort to me? How do I define comfort, what in the workplace?

I. Just generally within you, what does comfort normally mean to you?

R. Being away with the family. Comfort to me is letting go. Letting go and just, you know, you've got heaps of things to do and then you feel, nup I can't do, I haven't got the strength to do it. To me that's comfort, because I can let go and not do it.

This was the end of the laddering part of the interview. Again the interviewer could have continued with the questioning to go beyond the identified benefit of comfort, however was inexperienced. In this case the benefit of comfort was considered to be similar to the benefit identified by other respondents as *better lifestyle*. The reason for this was the respondent stated that comfort meant spending time with family. The benefit of better lifestyle had been linked to both *security* and *social value* by other respondents.

Once the laddering part of the interview was completed some general unstructured open ended question were asked relating specifically to any issues the respondent had had or had knowledge of that involved unions. Finally the respondents were asked some demographic questions which were used to construct Table 2.

Data Analysis

The first step in the analysis process involved transcribing the interviews from the tapes to a hard copy. The first few were typed by the researcher then because of time constraints the rest were sent to a typist, with all transcripts being rechecked for accuracy.

The next step was to analyse the transcripts for statements about unions. At this point there was no attempt to categorize the statements, although there was some examination of them for emergent themes. For each transcript there was approximately one page of statements relating to their perceptions of unions (sample sheet in Appendix IV). The statements were then examined to elicit commonly identified attributes that could be used as the basis for the HVM's and a definition of trade unions.

Charts were then made up using the five most commonly identified attributes of unions. The number of attributes identified was more than five across all the transcripts however the five chosen were those identified by most of the respondents. With MECA there is no set amount of attributes one can use. It is dependent on the number and frequency of attributes identified by respondents.

The five attributes of unions that emerged from the data were:

- Powerful
- Resources

- Troublemakers
- Costly
- Outmoded

The five attributes were chosen from an initial list of twelve abstract attributes that respondents identified. As discussed in Chapter 4 abstract attributes are intangible attributes perceived by consumers as belonging to a product or service. Many of their attributes from the original list were very similar, such as: unions provide information and unions provide resources therefore these two were put together under *Resources*. Other negative attributes such as ‘unions on the way out’ or ‘unions are seen as unfashionable’ were added with the *Outmoded* attribute. Attributes such as *Powerful*, *Resources* and *Troublemaker* were the most commonly identified attributes with eight or more of the ten respondents identifying them. *Costly* and *Outmoded* were identified by more than four of the ten respondents.

Other descriptive terms that were given by respondents were used to construct a definition of trade unions reflecting the respondent words. This definition was: ‘*Trade unions: Organised collectives that represent workers.*’ The terms organised collectives and represent workers were used by most respondents in their description of trade unions. All ten respondents identified *organised collective* and nine directly identified *represents workers*.

Once the attributes were identified the respondent statements that related to consequences and benefits of each attribute were divided in to positive or negative and placed under the

attribute they related to. The next step was to go back to the original transcripts and identify individual 'chains' flowing from the attributes identified, leading to consequences, benefits and finally to values. In the interviews the respondents did not always clearly go from attribute to consequence to value. Sometimes they would go from an attribute to a consequence then to a value and back to a consequence or go from attribute to consequences at several levels and later in the interview identify a value related to an earlier consequence. This is consistent with the findings of the evaluation of laddering and MECA by Grunert and Grunert (1995).

Originally it was envisioned that the first interviews would be transcribed and analysed prior to the rest of the interviews being carried out. This was because the researcher had not used laddering or MECA before and wanted to be certain of using it correctly in order to elicit the information needed to build the HVM. It was not possible to transcribe the initial interviews for many months, by which time all the interviews had been completed. Not being able to transcribe and analyse some interviews prior to the rest being carried out did not show up as a problem in the early stages of analysis. However once the process of trying to construct the individual chains from the transcripts began it became clear that not following the correct questioning technique for laddering resulted in some weakness in the data from which the chains were constructed for some of the respondents.

This issue has highlighted the importance of following the laddering questioning technique where the data is used for a specific purpose such as MECA. The main problem was that without using the continual questioning 'what does this mean to you?' and 'why is this

important to you?’ it was difficult to move the respondent ‘up the ladder of abstraction’ to get to their values. So from these transcripts, attributes were identified as well as the linking consequences and benefits, but in some cases it was difficult to draw the respondents deeper into how these related to their values. This incomplete process resulted in problems developing chains through from attribute, consequence to value using respondents own words with no interpretation on the researcher’s part. Where interpretation was necessary it was carried out by collecting all statements relating to the attribute, consequence or value in question, from all the transcripts then finding the collective meaning. Because it is very important in MECA that the meaning assigned to a term is consistent with the meaning of the respondent, the researcher will go back to the transcripts to examine the context of the statement to elicit additional information. This is a step advised by Grunert and Grunert (1995) in their evaluation of laddering and MECA as a consumer research tool. In this case, the advice of a senior academic who teaches MECA was also sought to corroborate the interpretation of the researcher.⁷

Once the individual chains had been developed the next step was to compile the HVM. This was an aggregate of attributes, consequences and values from the ten respondents’ individual chains showing the common links leading from attributes through consequences to values. For advertising purposes an HVM may also show the strength of the links (i.e. how many respondents identified that particular link) in order to build a media advertising campaign that directly links to the respondents values (Reynolds and Byrd Craddock 1988).

⁷ Associate Professor Margaret Craig-Lees who was at University of New South Wales at the time.

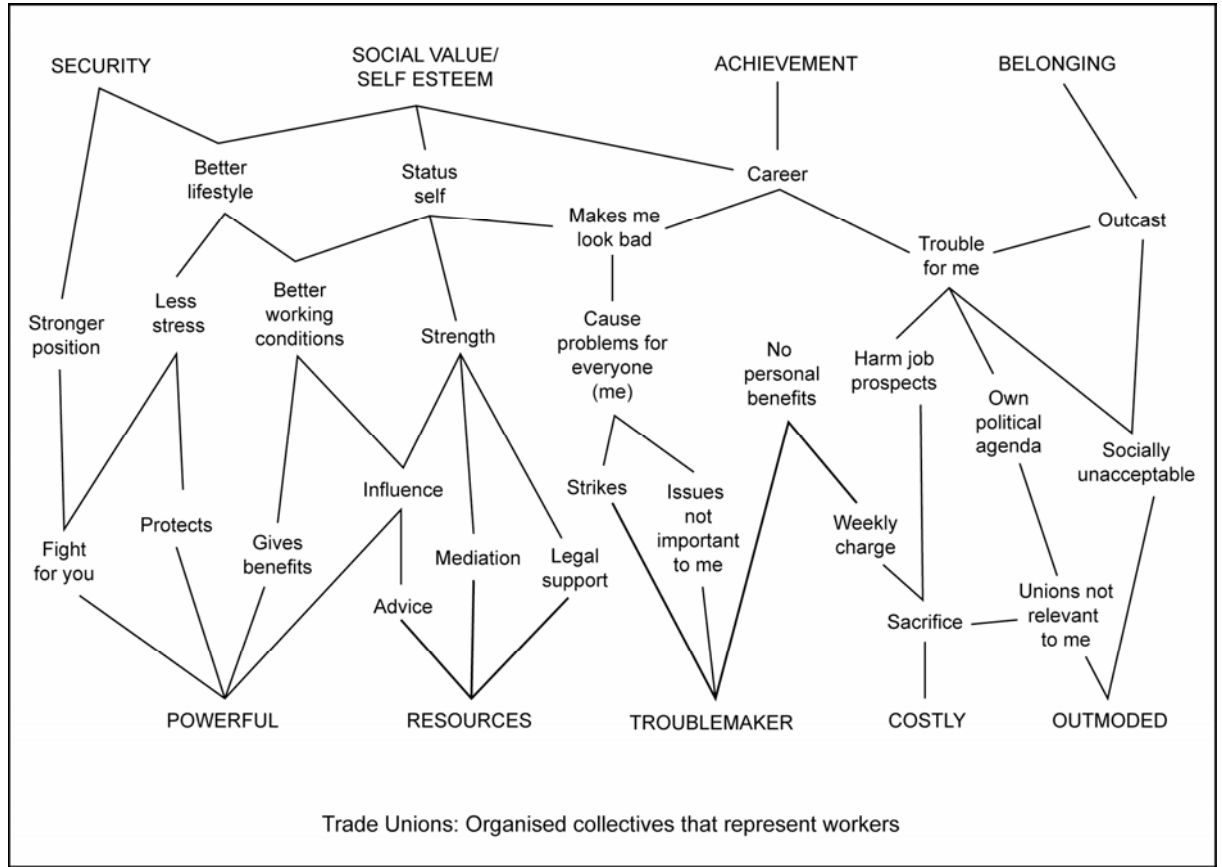
Using the attributes, consequences and values that have the strongest links to develop and design the advertising message carries this out. For this thesis however, the intention is not to build a marketing campaign, it is to examine the perceptions held by call centre staff toward trade unions and how this might affect their decision making in regard to union joining. The value of the HVM is in providing a graphical representation of the aggregate data showing the linkages from the bottom level of attributes, through the middle levels of consequences/benefits through to the top level of values (or goals).

Results

Interpreting the HVM

The HVM is a graphical illustration of the aggregated data, which highlights the paths (chains) created that link attributes, consequences and values.

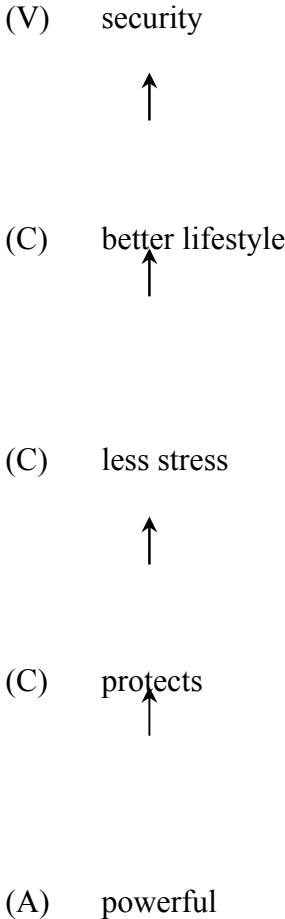
Figure 3 Hierarchical Value Map



By examining this HVM the attributes of: *Powerful*, *Resources*, *Troublemaker*, *Costly* and *Outmoded* can be seen along the bottom row. These are followed by consequences/benefits in the next rows and the top row is the connecting values/goals: *Security*, *Social Value/Self Esteem*, *Achievement* and *Belonging*. Therefore respondents felt that unions as *organised collectives that represent workers* were *powerful*. A consequence/benefit of being *powerful* meant that unions would *fight for you*. This was important for respondents because they were then in a *stronger position* and this led to the value or goal of *security*. Also flowing from the *powerful* attribute and the *fight for you* benefit is that this means *less stress* for the respondent and therefore leads to a *better lifestyle* and *security* or *social*

value/self-esteem. An example of a sample chain from the HVM is shown in Figure 4. This chain follows the attribute of *powerful* through the consequence of unions *protect* people which has the consequence (benefit) of *less stress* for people, which leads to the benefit of *better lifestyle* and up to the values or goals of *security* and *social value/ self esteem*.

Figure 4 Sample Chain



By following another chain from the *troublemaker* attribute we can see the perception that unions are *troublemakers* who *strike* and *cause problems for everyone/me* therefore *makes me look bad* and this may have consequences for my *career* and thereby my *achievement* or my *social value/self esteem*. These findings demonstrate how the use of an in-depth technique such as MECA can highlight the steps a persons thoughts go through in making a decision whether or not to join a union, as well as why they might decide not to join a union whilst believing that unions are generally good for workers.

When the HVM is constructed the attributes are place so as to avoid consequences flowing across the chains otherwise the map becomes unreadable (Gutman 1982; Gutman 1991). In this case this was the reasoning behind the placing of the attributes. It wasn't until the attributes had been placed and the links put in that it was noticed that the HVM appeared to go from positive attributes on the left to negative attributes on the right. The respondents were not academics, therefore the terms they used were simply used to describe their perception, however for an academic some of these terms may have meanings beyond that intended by the respondents which may 'colour' their interpretation.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the data collection and analysis process. It began with the identification of respondents through to the collection using laddering, and analysis of the data using MECA. From this analysis an aggregate HVM had been developed which gives a visual representation of the analysed data. The HVM provides a clear identification of the

chains in the decision making process as indicated by the respondents, and the linkages from the attributes, through the perceived consequences and how these link to the values or goals they hold in regards to their lives. This is an indication of the respondents' perceptions, not necessarily an accepted 'truth'. As can be seen from the results, MECA provides a richer view of the perceptions of the respondents and the links between those perceptions, consequences flowing from them and how they link to values. Breaking down the decision making process in this way contributes to the information available on the union joining decision.

For this group of respondents the union joining decision has been made based on their perceptions of unions and their beliefs as to whether joining a union will help them achieve their goals or relate to the values they hold. How this process is carried out has been shown as the identification of attributes and the consequences perceived to flow from the attributes. These consequences are then linked to the values held or goals of the respondent. If it is perceived that the consequences will help attain the goals or values then a decision will be made to join the union. If the perception is formed that the attributes, consequences are detrimental to the attainment of the goals or values then a decision will be made not to join a union.

Examination of the HVM has indicated the perceptions of this group of respondents and how they have linked attributes, consequences and values, thereby identifying their decision making process. The following chapter will discuss in more depth the results with

reference to the literature review in Chapter Two. Implications that arise from the findings will be examined as they relate to the research issue of union joining by call centre staff.

Chapter Five - Discussion and Implications

Introduction

The objectives of this chapter are to discuss the results of the data collection and analysis in relation to the research questions and to find out where a contribution can be made to the existing knowledge, as well as identify any implications.

The research problem was to investigate underlying perceptions held about trade unions by call centre staff and how those perceptions related to their union joining decision making. The two research questions were: what perceptions do call centre staff hold about unions and how do those perceptions influence their decision whether or not to join a trade union?

Using a laddering interview technique and analysis with means end chain highlights both the perceptions CSRs hold about unions and how they use these perceptions to make a decision regarding whether or not to join a trade union. From the analysis of the respondent interviews using MECA we can see the decision making process from the initial identification of attributes through consequences and benefits and on to values. The results evident in the HVM strongly suggest that rather than apathy or indifference, as indicated in both the Bearfield (2003) study and Peetz (1998), there was a calculated decision made based on the perceptions of unions held by call centre staff and the perceived consequences or benefits of what being a union member meant for them. This demonstrates that using the qualitative tools of MECA and its associated interview technique of 'laddering' has

provided a deeper analysis of the decision making processes than when a more positivist or quantitative methodology is employed.

This chapter will first discuss the findings in relation to the issues identified in the literature review in chapter two and then examine the implications. Issues discussed will include the emergent and rapidly growing call centre industry as fertile ground for trade union recruitment of new members and whether characteristics of the call centre industry affect the union joining decision of CSRs within it. Other issues discussed include the effect of causes relating to declining trade union density on the perceptions of unions by CSRs, and the motives for union joining. Following from the discussion section, the implications of this research for trade unions will be addressed.

Discussion

This study has used a marketing research tool MECA to examine an industrial relations issue. The research questions to be answered were:

1. What perceptions do call centre staff hold about unions?
2. How do those perceptions influence their decision whether or not to join a trade union?

Previous research in the area of union joining decisions has highlighted that many factors are related to the decision whether or not to join a trade unions. Peetz (1998) has examined the broader issue of the decline in trade union density and includes some discussion of the decision whether or not to join a trade union. Peetz's data, from a large quantitative survey, provides a broad picture of some of the reasons for non union membership among employees. While this is important as an overview, unions need more specific information relating to the decision making process. Examining the decision making process with MECA and laddering contributes to the general knowledge of unions joining as well as providing unions with specific information from which to develop strategies.

Using MECA allows the development of a graphical representation of the perceptions of employees and how they use the perceptions for formulating their union joining decision. First there is their perception about the attributes that unions have; second their perceptions about the consequences or benefits' flowing from those attributes and third their perceptions about how those consequences and benefits relate to values or goals held by them. Each of these links from attribute, through consequence to value is called a chain. A sample chain was shown in Figure 4 along with a more thorough explanation of the process.

The individual chains are aggregated into a Hierarchical Value Map (HVM) which is the output from MECA. The hierarchical value map as an aggregate of the individual chains, gives the visual representation of the links in the minds of the respondents between their

perceived attributes for unions, their perceived consequences of those attributes, and the values to which they link those consequences. When the data was being collected, it appeared that respondents held the view that unions were good for people but not for them personally. At first these opinions appeared contradictory. If unions are good for people, how could they not be good for the individual?

The apparent contradiction in the opinions expressed by the respondents relate to their perception of unions. From where did this group of Customer Service Representatives (CSRs) get their perceptions of unions? An examination of the overall environment in which the respondents live and work as discussed in Chapter Two, reveals two environmental contexts that may broadly contribute to call centre staff perceptions about unions. One is the call centre industry in which they work and second is the socio-political environment in which they live.

Call centres

Call centre work has developed due to several aspects such as increased need for efficiency, increased focus on customer service and new technologies based on computer/telephone interaction (CTI). The twin aspirations of increased efficiency and increased customer service have seen the grouping of employees involved in aspects of customer service into one location, and the addition of new CTI technologies has meant that the service these

employees provide can be monitored, and workflows structured to further increase efficiencies.

The demand from the labour market has been for people skilled in computer use, able to use a telephone and with strong customer service skills. These customer service skills are broken down into specific Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). KPIs can measure parameters like: length of call, quantity of calls taken in a specific period, how long is taken on breaks, quality of information provided, problem solving ability and quality of interpersonal interaction with customer. The quest for efficiency also meant that a lot of call centre work is carried out by part time and temporary/agency staff.

The main labour market for the call centre industry was drawn from women and students. These two groups appeared to accept the part time and temporary nature of the work due to family or studying commitments. As discussed previously, women were also felt to be particularly suited to the type of call centre work that involved listening, empathy and problem solving skills. These two groups were also felt to be suitable due to the lack of career opportunities in the call centre industry. In other words call centre work was not viewed as a long term career but more a temporary solution while the employee had other priorities such as studying or raising a family. This was stated by several respondents who cited it as a reason that they had not joined a union. There appeared to be a perception that unions were for full time employees or people who had already decided their career path.

Heavy monitoring and surveillance, competing and divergent performance indicators relating to providing high levels of customer service while meeting limits of time of calls, and lack of career opportunity have begun to be a feature of the call centre industry. These issues have been acknowledged by respondents however, some felt that the union would not be interested in helping them because there were not a lot of union members in that workplace. This will be discussed further in relation to the perception of unions as powerful.

Unions

As an emergent industry call centres have been of considerable interest to researchers and there have been concerns raised in the media and research literature regarding work practices in some call centres. These concerns, as well as the rapid growth of this industry, have led to unions identifying it was a potential source of new members. The declining density of unions in Australia, as well as the shrinking public sector, formerly a fertile ground for union membership, is driving the unions to look to new areas and industries for members.

One of the factors which have been put forward by a number of researchers as a contributory factor in declining union density has been a hostile federal government. The government has a clearly stated agenda to reduce collective bargaining in Australia through the promotion of AWAs. A goal as well as a method of facilitating this is to reduce union power in the workplace by working with employers in an effort to exclude unions.

Encouraged by the government some companies have attempted to limit union access to the businesses through strategies such as operating greenfield sites, intimidating employees known to be involved in union activities and letting it be known that unions are not popular at that worksite. A second strategy by the government to reduce the influence of unions in the workplace and society as a whole has been the promotion of negative publicity regarding unions as troublemakers and outdated organisations.

These environments are the ones in which the call centre staff are forming their perceptions of unions and using those perceptions to make a decision whether or not to join a trade union. So how do these issues affect call centre staff perceptions of unions and their concomitant union joining decision?

Perceptions

Perceptions, as noted in Chapter One are what people use to make sense of the world around them. Chapter Four discussed some of the perceptions that call centre staff hold about trade unions. How these perceptions developed and how they may be used in the union joining decision will be highlighted in this section of the discussion.

Taking a broad view of the data, using a thematic approach, allows some themes to emerge regarding perceptions that supplement the HVM. In other words, while the HVM shows the links in the decision making process, a thematic approach indicates some reasons for the perceptions that make up these links.

Collectivism vs Individualism

An example is the theme of individualism versus collectivism, (Gall, Bain et al. 2001; Taylor and Bain 2002; Furåker and Berglund 2004) which can be applied to the apparent contradictory responses from respondents. An examination of the HVM shows that the attributes of *powerful* and *resources* and their related consequences and values could be explained using a collectivist or ideological perspective, while the *trouble maker*, *costly* and *outmoded* attributes related to more individual or instrumental consequences and values or goals. The collective/individual aspect of perceptions of unions has been discussed in the literature in relation to union joining by young people. Authors such as Furåker and Berglund (2004) and Waddington and Kerr (2002), believe that young people may have a negative attitude toward collectivism and that they may have individualistic attitudes to union joining because they believe their jobs are unstable or temporary. An example of this from a respondent aged 21 and employed full time in a call centre is:

“I haven’t bothered to take that extra step to actually join the union, to participate in it because I’m kind of in a transfer position at the moment and I don’t see my job as being my future.” (Interview ‘Luke’)

The collective versus individual theme was also highlighted by a number of respondents with comments such as:

“I guess it’s almost a sort of philosophical perspective, you either tend towards being an individualist or you tend towards being a collectivist and I think I do tend

towards being a collectivist and I see trade unionism for Australia as being part of that collectivist tradition. I think I'm ideologically quite well disposed to trade unions" (Interview 'Christine')

or:

"I think a union is a more powerful force than just the individual." (Interview 'Luke').

Later in the interview he goes on to say:

"It's probably a selfish thing really, it's kind of like, I'm not going to be here much longer, the union isn't going to do much for me, why should I put in a contribution."

Instrumental

This last comment indicates an individual or instrumental approach to union joining. It appears the collectivist views operate like an umbrella, the very general perceptions about unions that form the overview of the role of unions in society. When it comes down to joining the unions however the view for some becomes very personal and individual, resulting in an instrumental view that takes into account a cost benefit analysis. An example of this from respondents is:

"I've taken a sort of strategic view that the cost of joining the union, not just the direct financial cost but the possible impact that would have on your future career opportunities outweighs the benefit of winning a small short term battle." (Interview 'Ricardo')

"What that means to me is that if you're paying for, I mean I know it's only maybe \$2, \$3 dollars every fortnight, whatever, but if you're not getting what you're paying for, that's how I say it's expensive because you could use that money elsewhere." (Interview 'Gina')

Ideological

The two different perspectives of ideological versus instrumental, can be summed up in this statement by a respondent who believes that while unions are good for people (ideological) she is not a member because she is not getting personal (instrumental) benefits:

“To be honest I’ve been within the union, and I’ve also been out of the union, so I’ve seen the two things. When I was with the union, I thought, you know everyone’s got to be within the union, because you know they’re there to help you blah blah. But I didn’t need the union at that time, I didn’t feel that they were actually giving me that assistance, so that’s why I decided not to be with the union any more and I’m doing all right without being in the union.” (Interview ‘Gina’)

These perspectives of ideological vs. instrumental are related to the motives for union joining researched by many authors (Newton and McFarlane-Shore 1992; Fullagar, Slick et al. 1997; van Rij and Daalder 1997; Griffin and Svensen 1999) and discussed in Chapter Two. The third motive for union-joining behaviour identified by these authors is: normative.

Normative

Normative motives as previously discussed relate to social control or referent groups such as colleagues, employers, media, family and friends etc (Dufty 1981; Newton and McFarlane-Shore 1992; Kelloway, Barling et al. 1997; Griffin and Svensen 1999; Blackwood, Lafferty et al. 2003). Dufty (1981) argues that the media play a very minor moderating role in influencing perceptions of trade unions and that personal networks play the largest role. However twenty four years on from Duffy’s research, employees have been

subjected to increased amounts of negative media about unions. A lot of this negative media has been initiated by the Australian government. For the last few years Australia has had a Liberal Federal government not well disposed towards unions, which has created a hostile environment for unions (Gahan 1997; Wilson 2004). This hostile environment, as previously discussed, is one in which the Government views unions as troublemakers and an unnecessary encumbrance on businesses seeking to improve competitive advantage. Most respondents also identified this attribute of *troublemaker* or felt that unions are seen as a 'bad' thing:

“Unions usually are found and in past have been associated very negatively, [and] seen as troublemakers” (Interview ‘Shan’)

“They’re often portrayed as the bad guys. They cause a lot of the problems as far as the employers are concerned.” (Interview ‘Anne’)

Some respondents directly identified media as a source of information regarding unions.

“if I was to hear about unions on TV... it would always be portrayed as being trouble as its like, oh you don’t want to be involved with this they just cause too many problems, they cause people to strike.” (Interview ‘Linda’)

Other normative influences identified in the literature are family, friends and colleagues (Dufty 1981; Newton and McFarlane-Shore 1992; Kelloway, Barling et al. 1997; Griffin 1999). The influence of colleagues as regards union joining did not appear to be particularly evident in this research study. Two respondents indicated they had union delegates at work however, had not been approached by the delegates to join. The impact of a ‘pro-union environment’, that is one where the union is visible and promoted by workplace delegates, is believed to be a positive influence on the union joining decision

(van Rij and Daalder 1997). Van Rij and Daalder's findings indicated it was important that workplace delegates interacted with, supported and educated their fellow employees.

In relation to the current study, three of the respondents (not union delegates) had suggested to other workmates that they contact a union for specific issues, and in two cases the outcome was favourable. However, neither of these respondents subsequently joined the union. Where there were workplace union delegates, respondents indicated they were unsure who they were or what union they represented. An example of this was from Luke who said "It's almost sort of like a myth really, that guy that's in our team that might be the union rep."

Apart from the influence of media and the workplace, another normative influence is family. The influence of family on perceptions of unions can be seen in several of the interviews. These two examples highlight family influence both for and against unions.

"Both of my parents were union members. My father was a very strong union member so I suppose I have come up through a tradition of being in a union."
(Interview 'Christine')

"Unions weren't seen in a very good light, in the house that we were brought up in."
(Interview 'Shan')

Christine is a strong union supporter and Shan does not believe unions are necessary in most workplaces. Both Christine and Shan appeared to hold views reflective of their family's stance on unions and seemed aware of that influence. While Christine views union membership as a form of insurance policy, Shan has the view that generally unionists

are *troublemakers* and 'bums'. Somewhere in between these two extremes, one of family influence strongly in favour of unions and one in which unions are relegated to the category of *troublemakers*, are the majority of respondents who do not appear to be influenced by family on the topic of unions and appear to be taking an instrumental view of union joining. However in other cases, respondents were not a member of a union even though other family members were.

“My Dad I know was always involved in unions when he was working and my Mum is involved in her union for the sector she works in. ... I'm not actually a member of my union.” (Interview 'Luke')

“My dad and my sister pay the union; my brother pays the union and my mum..... actually, when I worked, I don't think I was a member as well. I didn't pay for it.” (Interview 'Sonia')

“When my father was working at BHP he was a member of the union. He just paid his membership and that was it. That was the extent to his relationship with them. [I've] never been in a union” (Interview 'Smiley')

In the above situations the respondents also indicated that they knew little of how a union worked. It may be that although family members were also union members, unions were not particularly discussed in the home. It is clear that just having family members as union members is not enough to influence an employee to join a union themselves.

The above discussion looks at the influences of instrumental, ideological and normative perspectives on union decision making and how these are related to the respondents' comments. The following discussion identifies perceptions held about unions by the respondents. The value of MECA and laddering as research tools is that the respondent's

own words are used with no attempt on the researchers' part to reinterpret the information. This is especially true where a small group of respondents is used. The five attributes identified by respondents were *powerful*, *resources*, *trouble maker*, *costly* and *outmoded*.

Powerful

“I think a union is a more powerful, or is supposed to be, and has been in the past, it is supposed to be a more powerful sort of force than just the individual.” (Interview – Luke)

It is in this sense that respondents identified the power of the union. That is the respondents perceived that unions were powerful and a consequence of this was that they could fight for you, that there was strength in numbers. Many respondents used the terms with *fight for you* and *protects* with others indicating that unions *give benefits*. Benefits were identified as value added services such as shopping discounts and car and house insurance.

That unions were powerful and could fight for you by providing strength in numbers was also related by a couple of respondents to the aspect of unions as an Insurance policy. This was highlighted by Gina:

“If there's one person and there's 20 people, well they're going to listen to 20 people more than they're going to listen to 1 person. So, that's what I mean about the fight.” (Interview – Gina)

Even though respondents held these perceptions of unions as providing this 'back up' which put them in a *stronger position*, many were not members

Respondents indicated that it was important to them to feel significant, especially in a workplace situation where they were open to ‘exploitation’ from the employer. In some cases when respondents had contacted unions to seek their help they were told that the union could only help if they (the respondent) were able to get some people to join. When a union organiser was questioned regarding this situation, she explained that with the Organising Model of recruiting the employees were encouraged to group together and use the union as a resource to help solve the problem (Interview Irene Moggan 17/02/04). This is in contrast to the Servicing Model where the union would intervene on the employee’s behalf if they were a member.

These perceptions regarding unions as powerful through strength in numbers, are related to a collectivist perspective. However it is doubtful that many of the respondents would class themselves as collectivists. There appears to be a perception that this is what unions do and they will always be there to *fight for you* and *protect* you whether or not anyone joins them. This is related to ‘union free riding’ where employees who are not members of a union still get the benefits of union action (Blumenfeld, Higgins et al. 2004). Christine highlighted the ‘free riding problem for unions with an example:

I went to a meeting with the union and people who were up in arms about this particular situation and it’s quite astonishing that people wanted the union to do things but are not prepared to join. I mean you can’t expect for someone to pay for you to build a new house if your house burns down if you are not a member of that insurance [company] but people seem to have this idea that the unions are some sort of government body that is supposed to help them and they don’t realize that it is actually the workers themselves that make the union. (Interview ‘Christine’)

Resources

That unions provided resources and information was clearly identified by most respondents. The respondents' perception was that unions had access to more resources and knowledge; especially legal resources and knowledge regarding workplace rights and that they could provide mediation with employers. This perception regarding the mediation role of unions relates to the Servicing role more than the Organising Model. With the Organising model employees would be instructed on how to carry out their own negotiations. However, for people like Christine who feel unable to undertake direct negotiation with an employer, the Servicing model would work better:

“I think someone who is professionally concerned with workplace issues would do it better than I could.” (Interview – Christine)

The ACTU has actively encouraged this perception of unions as providers of resources and advice with the provision of and promotion of its telephone help line ‘Member Connect’ (ACTU 2003). This service is provided through the use of a call centre.

Respondents believed that the provision of resources and services put them in a position of *strength* and gave them more *influence* when dealing with employers. A further perceived consequence of these was *better working conditions*, leading to *better lifestyle* and *security* as well as increased *self status* leading to more *social value* or *self esteem*.

The perception that unions provide resources appears to be linked to a more individualist perspective. Although the value of *security* was one that was linked to the *powerful* chains reflecting a more collectivist outlook, the *resources* chains also linked to the more individual values of *social value* and *self esteem*.

Troublemaker

Self esteem is also one of the values linked to via consequences to the *troublemaker* attribute. All of the respondents indicated that unions were perceived as troublemakers. Most commonly this was related to the perception of unions causing or participating in *strikes* which respondents felt *caused problems for everyone* or themselves and would *make them look bad* if they were involved in a union. This led to perceptions of possible damage to their career which was linked to both achievement and *social value* or *self esteem*. *Makes me look bad* was also linked to *status of self* and then to *social value/self esteem*.

This appeared to be a big issue in deciding not to join a union, and appeared based on normative influence of media and family. The perception that joining a union may make the respondent a target for employers is part of the instrumental approach to decision making where a decision is based on individual rather than collective motives. In other words, whilst unions may be great as a *powerful* collective force that may *fight for you* and *protect you*, they are also seen as *trouble makers* who *cause strikes* and if I join I will also be seen as a *trouble maker* which may hinder my *career* progression and my sense of *achievement, social value* and *self esteem*.

“if someone is part of a union in practice there is a higher chance of their being seen as a troublemaker, someone who is not a commercial team player and I think there is the risk that a consequence of managements believing that management would be less likely to promote someone whose in a union.” (Interview – Ricardo)

Looked at from this perspective union joining can appear very *costly*.

Costly

There appeared to be two aspects to the costly attribute: one was that there was a financial sacrifice related to the fees or weekly charge, the other was that there was a sacrifice of job prospects.

“I’ve taken a sort of strategic view that the cost of joining the union, not just the direct financial cost but the possible impact that would have on your future career opportunities outweighs the benefit of winning a small short term battle.” (Interview – Ricardo)

Even Christine who is a member of a union identified the financial cost of membership “we all feel that we would like to do something else with that \$20”, however for her this was outweighed by her ideological stance on union membership, “I think I’m ideologically quite well disposed to trade unions”.

Outmoded

From the HVM (Figure 3), the attribute of *outmoded* with the consequence that unions lacked relevance can be seen.

Historically they've been important in Australia, but I see unions as out of touch and irrelevant in today's society to a large extent. (Interview 'Smiley')

I definitely think they are on the way out. (Interview 'Shan')

The issue of relevance is an important one given the prevailing individualistic attitude of the majority of the respondents in regards to their union joining decision, as well as media statements by the government, previously discussed, claiming that unions are 'on death row'. Consequences that respondents identified with the *outmoded* attribute were *unions not relevant to me*. This issue of relevance is related to the individualistic attitude in that some respondents felt they did not need the type of representation offered by the union and that they were capable of fighting their own battles.

I don't need the union to stand for my rights you know, I can look after myself, so I didn't see it as relevant to me. (Interview 'Smiley')

I have never had to rely on solidarity with other people in order to help me through a difficult situation. (Interview 'Ricardo')

They also felt they may be better off not involving the union because of issues related to unions being *socially unacceptable* or unions picking up an issue and using it as a platform to follow their (unions) *own political agenda*. As these consequences are related to the

values of *belonging* and *achievement* respondents felt that these values may be compromised, or as goals, harder to achieve if they were to join a union.

These perceptions come from a wide variety of sources. As previously discussed there are the media, family, friends and colleagues, as normative influences. There are also the personal experiences of the respondents. These experiences range from direct involvement with unions to indirect consequences of union activity. For an example of indirect experiences, a number of respondents described being affected by transport strikes. They appeared ambivalent about the unions in regard to the issue of strikes. Whilst they felt annoyed at having their travel disrupted, and thought the unions could try to find a better way of dealing with the matter, they also understood that some times a strike was the only way to get employers to listen, and to protect the rights of workers.

This legitimacy of union action, which was discussed in Chapter Three, can be seen in the HVM with the consequences of unions *fight for you, protect, give benefits and better working conditions*. Each of these are seen as good benefits of union membership, against the negative consequences of *cause problems for everyone (me), harms job prospects and union pursues issues not important to me*. Again this highlights the apparently contradictory nature of the perceptions of unions held by this group of respondents within the call centre industry.

Knowledge of trade unions

The call centre industry is not homogenous as discussed in Chapter Two. However some of the similar work practices that define the industry for example: monitoring every aspect of the working day and strict targets relating to length of calls, also lead to industrial relations issues relating to the need for worker protection. Respondents in this study have also identified these issues, however they do not appear to have confidence the union can be effective in resolving them. This is partly to do with a lack of knowledge about unions.

The URCOT (2000: 15) study found that their respondents whilst generally understanding the role of unions “made it clear that they were unaware of how their union was specifically helping them”. This finding is similar to the current study where respondents indicated that they had little knowledge of what unions did or even which union covered their workplace. Several also indicated they would like more information about unions, however felt that management may not approve:

The culture of the place is not anti-union but union stuff does not seem appropriate there. That’s not how they resolve situations in that call centre. (Interview ‘Christine’)

I think they should make themselves [unions] a bit more known. Maybe it’s because companies tend to make their employees feel that unions aren’t something they desire or want you to be a part of even though they say it’s okay. You know it’s a free will of choice that if you want to do it you can. It really doesn’t become a free will when you feel that what they are really saying is that you join one and then we’ll be looking out for you because you’ll be the kind of person that will cause problems. (Interview ‘Linda’)

We haven't had any interference by the union. That is because our employer has expressed how she feels about the union and that she wants less involvement by the union. (Interview 'Sonia')

The following respondent identifies her perception of the difference in relation to unions from one job in a supermarket to employment within a call centre:

We had this daily interaction with the union [in the supermarket] and we knew that they were there and we knew what they were doing. We had a lot more information about what was going on with the company as a whole because the top employers were aware of the fact the union was there and they were very physically present, which is totally different to my white-collar experience in the call centre. It was like [the unions were] totally non-existent. (Interview 'Anne')

Anne was not a union member at her call centre workplace and felt that while part of the reason may be the lack of union presence, she believed there was also no need for her to join as the management were able to deal with her issues in a timely and helpful manner. Both respondents from that workplace and this researcher's own experiences in that company confirm that the management were particularly responsive to employee issues, (this is also indicative of an instrumental approach to union joining). As can be seen from the previously discussed literature, not only is it relatively unusual for call centre management to be employee focussed, often they can be aggressively anti-union (Gall 2003; 2003).

The issue of lack of information and union presence, and the resultant lack of interaction, in workplaces has been identified as a problem for unions trying to organise recruitment campaigns. Part of the blame for this issue relating to trade union presence at the workplace has been laid at the feet of management felt to be hostile to unions in the

workplace, however Australian research conducted by Todd et al. (2003) identified ambivalence toward unions by some Australian call centre managers. In other words not all call centre managers were against unions in their workplace. Respondents who worked in one of the financial sector companies indicated that the management gave the union access to the email system to email members, as well as space on the notice board for union related notices. At the same time, these same respondents stated a perception that management might penalise them if they were union members. This perception of management attitude toward unions was also identified by another respondent from another financial sector company: “the company is not overly fond of encouraging people to become part of a union” (Interview –Shan).

Whether these perceptions are right or wrong is not relevant in the use of MECA as the objective is to identify them (not to judge them) and to examine their influence in the union joining decision making process. Perceptions such as these identified by the respondents and how their relationship of them to the decision making process, raise implications for the unions in trying to recruit from call centres.

Implications for Trade Unions

“Marketing is about individual people who make individual purchasing decisions” (Rix 2001). To unions, call centre employees represent a ‘target market’.⁸ From a marketing

⁸ Target Market – a set of buyers sharing common needs or characteristics that the company decided to serve (Kotler, Brown, Adam, Armstrong 2004: 866)

perspective, an instrumental approach to union joining by employees is a natural one; therefore trade unions wanting to recruit new members need to be prepared to address the instrumental aspect of the union joining decision. This is not to say the collective aspect should be ignored. Generally, while the respondents felt that unions were a 'good thing' overall for workers, they felt that for them as individuals the unions had no relevance. It appears that few are making the connection that if they do not support the union individually there will be no union to act collectively for the 'good of all'.

This implies the unions need to educate employees and make them aware of trade union usefulness from both individual and collective perspectives. Although the ACTU have also identified this as an issue it appears to be something unions are struggling to facilitate. One of the methods unions have employed to address the education issue is to provide websites containing useful information and relevant issues. The ACTU has also provided their own call centre, called Member Connect to answer enquiries about union related matters (ACTU 2003).

Another way is for the union organisers to use every opportunity to speak with call centre employees. One method was to share a cigarette with employees outside the building whilst the employees were on their break (Interview – Irene Moggan). This provided an opportunity to chat to employees in a relaxed informal setting. Another organiser spent time in the local pub chatting to call centre staff prior to beginning a recruitment campaign (Interview – Gail Drummond, 17/02/04). This meant the organiser could ascertain the

issues that were important to this group whilst discussing (educating) the call centre staff on how the union could assist them to solve the issues.

Kelloway et al. (1997: 226) have indicated the need for two main ingredients necessary for successful recruiting: one, there must be some dissatisfaction with their employment situation and two, 'they must hold the perception that the union would be instrumental' in helping them resolve the issue. In their findings they conclude that the unions need to display both an ability to recognise and deal successfully with specific workplace issues as well as improving perceptions generally. In the case of unions in Australia and up against a hostile government it is even more important for unions to address the perceptions of those people to seek as members. This involves not only targeting the employees but also those that provide normative influences to that group.

In an interview for Workers Online Peter Garrett stated:

...a union is sort of seen as an old fashioned kind of thing and we live in an age of marketing and the way things are dressed up are incredibly important. Whether we like it or not that's quite often how the public sees it and I guess there are some issues there about actually getting a message out and communications and marketing. (O'Regan 2004)

The 'old fashioned kind of thing' perception relates to lack of knowledge about unions. Unions may appear old fashioned, out of date or *outmoded* to employees who have little concept of how a union is relevant to them personally. This is especially true of employees making the union joining decision from an instrumental perspective. One of the respondents to this study stated that 'unions support was seen as unfashionable' (Interview

– Christine). To help people work out how unions can help them they first need education that will provide information from which they can then make a more informed decision about joining. This type of education is being attempted by unions providing information through the internet and setting up websites.

This however in marketing terms is passive media as the employees need to know to go to the website and seek out the information. The unions need to be more aggressive to match the campaign being mounted by the government in the media. Looking at the HVM provides clues as to how a media campaign can be organised to address the concerns of the workers. Perhaps some form of ‘extinct species’ media campaign outlining what workers lose collectively and individually, by not having unions to represent them, may alert employees to the need for the type of protection unions can provide. A campaign such as this would also serve the purpose of educating employees on how the union is useful to them personally and as part of the workforce, thereby addressing both collective and individual perceptions.

From this research it is clear that call centre employees believe unions have power (powerful) and can fight for you, protect and give benefits. Just taking these attributes and consequences, a campaign could be developed that emphasises these perceptions and links them to providing a stronger position for employees, as well as providing security. Reflecting their own beliefs to the employee means working with their own perceptions. In marketing the most powerful campaigns are those that can link product concepts to those perceptions already held about the product by the consumers.

Addressing both the collective and the individual issues at a higher level would then supplement the more individual ‘grass roots’ work of the organisers and workplace delegates. Using the information gained from the laddering interviews and MECA it should be possible to directly target issues identified by the respondents and design media campaigns that link their perceptions to their values as well as highlighting how those values are similar to those espoused by trade unions. The unions need to re-establish credibility with the public or at least the members of the public within the workforce whom they seek to recruit.

The issue of credibility is important because it is not only non-union employees that may hold negative views of trade unions but existing members may also hold similar views. As previously discussed, some disenfranchised union members may hold negative views that they may frequently discuss. Advertising is not just about selling a product. Sometimes advertising is about reinforcing a previous decision to purchase a product or service. In this context some advertising needs to be aimed at positive reinforcement; that is, ensuring existing members feel good about their union membership.

This outcome cannot be achieved by advertising alone and marketing is more about meeting consumers needs and wants rather than trying to sell a product no one may want.

When you’ve got a brand that’s based on a service, not a physical product, it is even more important to understand exactly what it is that the consumers need and want from that brand... and what’s happening, what’s changing in the marketplace.

This quote was from Colin Jevons a senior lecturer in marketing at Monash University discussing marketing of the Australian Labour Party (ALP) on the Radio National Media Report (Keenoy and Kelly 1998). In the context of this study, the unions need to research what the consumers want from the union, what their needs are that relate to what unions are able to provide, and what aspects of the 'marketplace', in this case the work/socio/political environment, are changing and how provision of the service is affected by these environments. This study has made a start by showing how using a research tool from a different discipline has highlighted perceptions important to employees in their union joining decision making.

For a marketing campaign such as this to be successful it must incorporate market research of customers' wants and needs and the current environment as it relates to the product or service. Once the marketing intelligence, that is, the collection of information on the environment and the market research from consumers is completed, a campaign incorporating both promotion of the unions and personal selling, via delegates and organisers can be developed. One very important aspect that needs to be researched before attempting any media campaign is examining how important is media in developing or influencing perceptions. As has been previously discussed there is some debate as to the amount of influence the media has on public opinion especially with regard to unions.

Aligned with a media campaign, using aspects of personal selling such as is used in both the organising and servicing models is important in this situation. The use of a combination of these two models of recruitment has been used in previous successful call centre

campaigns (Interview - Gail Drummond). Using elements of both the servicing model and the organising model addresses instrumental, ideological and normative aspects of union joining. Again the unions would be tapping into issues identified both in this study and by other researchers relating to motives for union joining. Again the unions would be tapping into issues identified both in this study and by other researchers relating to motives for union joining. In 2002 CPSU organiser Gail Drummond and other CPSU staff went to Moe to recruit call centre employees from the Telstra call centre. Their campaign was successful and they signed over 200 new members. This study can be used to evaluate that campaign. First both collective and individual issues were addressed.

Collective issues were addressed by organisers seeking alliances with the local community and discussion highlighting that by working together, issues that were raised could be resolved. Organisers identified leaders, and encouraged them to form groups who could be taught how to negotiate on their own behalf with the support of the union. Potential members were reminded of the benefits of union memberships such as protection, having a stronger position with the union behind them, providing advice and strength in numbers once more people joined.

Individual issues were addressed by spending time with potential members in their homes to identify specific issues and discuss how the CPSU was planning to assist employees. Also highlighted for the employees were the specific advantages of union membership in terms of better working conditions.

Gail Drummond spent time in Moe before the main campaign getting to know the workers and becoming familiar with their work issues. In marketing this is known as profiling the target market (Kotler, Brown et al. 2004). From the union organisers point of view this provided an opportunity to identify what perceptions the employees had about both the employers and the unions, so the union could address those during the recruitment campaign (the Blitz).

Due to previous experience in the call centre industry, Gail was able to identify with the employees and was accepted by them as a knowledgeable and credible source of advice, with the power of the union behind her. Where she identified perceptions of unions as trouble makers she was able to demonstrate that the union was there to provide assistance to the employees and not to cause trouble or simply follow their own (the union) agenda. By getting the community involved the CPSU was able to show the employees that it was socially acceptable to be a union member and that the union was a powerful and relevant force.

In the three years since the campaign the CPSU has increased membership in Moe which they believe is due to a combination of the original successful campaign and their ability to demonstrate the benefits of collective action (CPSU 2005).

Inherent in any marketing campaign is recognition of the perceptions of the consumers and addressing those perceptions that are used in the decision making process.

“Modern trade unionism was born out of the sometimes bitter economic struggles between workers and employers in the nineteenth century. Despite various onslaughts from both the State and employers, unions managed to survive until they were finally legalized in the 1870s.” (ACTU 2002)

There is a strong perception that unions are only about struggle and survival. For example, the chain in the HVM that starts at the attribute of *troublemaker* and the consequence of *strikes, cause problems for everyone (me)* demonstrates this perception by respondents that unions struggle, the result of which is *cause problems* which may make respondents *look bad*, eventually affect their *career* prospects and finally their sense of *achievement*. In this current environment (hostile Liberal Government controlling the senate) unions need to understand what it is the workers need from them and also importantly, listen to workers about the way they would like workplace issues addressed. Respondents in this research have indicated they believe it is not always appropriate to take a confrontational approach to a workplace issue. They also believed they did need some form of representation however, preferred that the representation was carried out in a more consultative fashion, i.e. working with employers to resolve issues. This issue was also identified in the URCOT (2000: 16) report into call centres:

There were groups that expressed concern over union tactics when dealing with management. It was felt that the union should work with management with regard to employee welfare rather than pointing the finger and ‘turning the place upside down’.

If unions were to pursue a more consultative role it may have a positive impact on employer as well as employee perceptions of unions. This approach has been attempted by the ACTU when they developed the Call Centre Charter (ACTU 1999). More research

needs to be carried out into how well this was received by call centre employers and what impact (if any) it had on those setting up call centres.

An inherent point of conflict between marketers and other areas of a company is that while marketers are attempting to align the product or service with the needs and the wants of the consumer, this may conflict with the goals of other departments. For example, where a consumer may want a specific attribute included in a product, this may not be possible from an engineering point of view, or feasible from a financial point of view. This is also an issue for trade unions who do not have access to unlimited resources, nor sometimes the marketing expertise to develop an integrated marketing campaign. Marketing campaigns should be based on a cost benefit analysis carried out by unions, similar to the one carried out by some employees in making the union joining decision. In order for unions to develop a cost benefit analysis some fundamental questions need to be addressed. How would success be measured, for a campaign that addresses actual membership recruitment as well as perceptual issues relating to unions in general and education about unions? Would a peak union body such as the ACTU, or individual unions be better to carry out this type of campaign and what resources are available to fund it? Finally, how would one guarantee that the union or peak union body paying for this campaign was getting value for their dollar?

Conclusion

This study provides an answer to the research questions: what perceptions do call centre staff hold about unions? And how do those perceptions influence their decision making with regard to union joining? After examining the decision making process it appears, for this group of respondents, there was a calculated response based on an instrumental approach to union membership. While there is no intention to try to extrapolate these results into the wider population of call centre staff, there is an implication that the perceptions held by call centre staff about unions, influences their decision-making. Further implications arising directly from this exploratory research are that; the perceived attributes, consequences/benefits and values that the front line call centre staff interviewed, identified as belonging to unions, provide a much more detailed picture of their thought processes and therefore another aspect of their decision making process when it comes to joining unions.

Using MECA to evaluate a union recruitment campaign highlights how useful this tool is for unions, who need rich detail about the 'target market' in order to address their issues regarding union membership and provide education to them. The results also have implications for unions regarding the debate about which model they should be using to assist in the recruitment of new members, the Organising model or the Servicing model. The results indicate that for the majority of this group of respondents there is a tendency toward individualism that would appear to indicate they would respond better to a servicing model type of approach. However for the respondents who felt union joining was related to

collectivism, an organising approach may work better. The *Unions @ Work* report suggests a combination of the two approaches. This is a method Gail Drummond has used to achieve success recruiting in the call centre industry.

A further implication is that unions may need to think about some strategies that address the perception of them held by non-union, and in some cases existing union members in call centres. This is linked to the need for unions to conduct more education of employees about what unions actually do, and what benefits flow from those activities. The ACTU is attempting to address this with online information at their website, *Call Central* and the centralised telephone information service, *Member Connect*. Further education may be needed through the media, as respondents have indicated that the media is a common source of information about unions.

The results gained from using MECA can also be used in designing large quantitative surveys that are targeted specifically to an issue such as union joining by call centre staff. Results from a survey based on the means end chain approach may provide further in-depth information relating to the union joining decision and alert unions to other issues employees in this industry may have regarding unions.

These implications need to be investigated further using MECA techniques with a much larger group of respondents if results are to be useful for unions attempting to recruit in this portion of the working population.

Chapter Six - Conclusion

Overview

In the face of declining trade union density, the ACTU has identified the emergent call centre industry as a target market. In Chapter One a review of the literature indicates the call centre industry appears fertile ground for the recruitment of new members due to a perception in the media of poor working conditions, excessive monitoring and surveillance and lack of training and career advancement. Respondents in this study also felt that unions could provide protection for them and fight for them. However, as was shown in the findings of other studies of employee attitudes to unions, having a positive attitude toward unions does not mean employees will join one. So far however, with the exception of a few well designed and implemented campaigns by experienced union organisers, the call centre industry generally has not responded well to efforts by the ACTU and relevant unions to recruit new members from within its ranks, and union density continues to decline.

Many reasons for the trade union density decline in Australia have been put forward in the literature ranging from macro issues of industrial restructuring, hostile legal environment to unions from government and management, changing labour markets etc., to micro issues relating to the employees as individuals. The literature discusses individual union joining decisions and what might underlie a decision to join or not join a union. Several Australian studies find that although employee attitudes toward unions are becoming more positive, inertia or indifference is causing them to not join unions. Are employees indifferent to

unions, or do they make a specific decision not to join based on their perceptions of the attributes and concomitant consequences, and how these relate to their values or goals?

Methodology

This research study used a marketing research tool to identify the perceptions held by call centre staff and examine how these influence their union joining decision making process. How respondent perceptions of trade unions play a role in their decision whether or not to join a trade union has been shown in the Hierarchical Value Map. A research tool was required that would allow the researcher to pull apart the decision making process and examine the perceptions this group of respondents held about unions. A constructivist epistemology offered the best way of carrying this out using a qualitative research tool from the discipline of marketing. Examining an industrial relations issue from the perspective of marketing and using the assumptions of marketing creates a unique research study that has not been attempted previously.

The discipline of marketing is one which is basically concerned with consumer decision making about products and services, and how to use that information to communicate the benefits of those products and services to consumers via a marketing campaign. Chapter Three discusses the methodology of the study as well as the justification for the use of qualitative research methods and the associated limitations, as well as criticisms of MECA. The consumer behaviour research tool of Means End Chain Analysis was chosen because in-depth data was required to answer the research question, and also for its ability to gain

perceptions held to be 'non-conscious'. MECA and its associated interviewing technique of laddering provided a picture of the perceptions of trade union attributes held by the respondents and the consequences respondents perceived flowed from those attributes. Finally MECA highlighted the links from perceived attribute, through consequence to goals or values. This identified not only what perceptions are held about unions but also the way in which those perceptions influence respondent decision making regarding trade union membership. Using MECA provided rich data from which discussion and implications were able to be developed.

Significant Results

Analysis of the data using the MECA technique elicited a Hierarchical Value Map that outlined the several levels of the decision making process. While most respondents indicated they knew little about unions, it can be seen in the HVM that they held quite definite perceptions about attributes associated with unions and how they linked to perceived consequences/benefits and values/goals.

Using the perceptions from this study and evaluating a successful union recruitment campaign highlighted how perceptions were addressed by the campaigners in a way that brought about a positive response. This positive response in the form of a decision by call centre staff to joining the union in turn indicates that the more information that is available to unions the better chance they have of achieving a successful outcome.

Overall the HVM demonstrated a dichotomy of responses that indicated that respondents felt that unions were a good thing for people but not for them personally. There was an exception of one respondent who was a very loyal union member. The rest however appeared to be taking both a collective and individual approach in their perceptions of unions. Negative perceptions were highlighted that showed that respondents believed joining a union may harm their job or career prospects as well as affect their values or goals of social value, self esteem, achievement or belonging. Unions were perceived as not relevant in today's society, but respondents also indicated they did not know what unions did, and they would like more education.

In Chapter Five the implications of this research were outlined and it was suggested that unions need to address both individual and collective aspects of the perceptions held by call centre staff and demonstrate for that target market that while they are a collective organisation, they also have instrumental benefits for individuals. Some suggestions have been provided on how trade unions might go about this, through providing more information through relevant advertising campaigns and by following the example of previous successful campaigns.

Overall even allowing for limitations of the Means End Chain technique, using a cross disciplinary approach to the issue has provided a deeper understanding and additional insights. The insights show that the research findings of earlier studies can be examined in greater depth using a different approach and thereby add to existing knowledge in a specific area.

Once evaluated from a new perspective the decision to join or not to join a union appears to be a calculated response with respondents making the union joining decision based on their perceptions. These perceptions relate to abstract attributes attached to unions, consequences and benefits flowing from those attributes and how these related to the values or goals in life. A rudimentary type of cost benefit analysis has been carried out by respondents with the benefits of unions as a collective designed to represent their rights weighed up against the cost to their values or goals in life. For most of the respondents, based on their perceptions, the decision has been made not to join a union.

Future Research

For further research in this area, both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies could be used to test hypotheses developed from information gained in this exploratory study. The qualitative data collected from using MECA and the laddering technique would be used to inform the design of the quantitative data collection and provide a deeper or richer data than can sometimes be available from a more positivist quantitative methodology. The use of a quantitative survey means a wider reach of participants than is available using the time intensive MECA, and allows for replication of the study in both other industries and in call centres in other countries, such as the New Zealand call centre industry for example.

The use of MECA has provided a different perspective for the issue of union joining by call centre staff. It has highlighted perceptions that are held by this group of employees and how those perceptions influence their decision making regarding trade unions. Some findings from previous studies into the call centre industry have been confirmed and other new findings have emerged. That more research is needed into both the call centre industry and the issue of declining union density has been highlighted by many researchers. This thesis while adding to the literature available also concludes that further more directed research is needed.

Interviews

Gail Drummond ACTU 17 July 2004
Irene Moggan CPSU 17 February 2004

NB: Call centre staff respondents chose pseudonyms to ensure anonymity

‘Ricardo’ CSR 21 February 2004
‘Shan’ CSR 12 July 2003
‘Smiley’ CSR 16 December 2003
‘Luke’ CSR 15 July 2003
‘Anne’ CSR 11 July 2003
‘Christine’ CSR 07 July 2003
‘Linda’ CSR 04 July 2003
‘Brad’ CSR 21 February 2004
‘Sonia’ CSR 12 December 2003
‘Gina’ CSR 15 July 2003

Personal Communications (email)

Dr Jonathon Gutman 02 December 2003, 23 July 2004.

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Appendix I:

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG
INFORMATION SHEET
Front Line Call Centre Staff and Unions
Bernadine Cantrick-Brooks

The purpose of this information sheet is to inform you about the Front Line Staff and Unions research project conducted by myself as part of a Masters degree in industrial relations supervised by Associate Professor Ray Markey (Department of Marketing, Management and Employee Relations) University of Wollongong.

The research project is looking at what front line call centre staff think about unions, and union officials perceptions and experiences in the call centre industry. If you consent to participate in this research, your involvement is as a union official representing your union.

The interview will last for a period of around 1 hour and I will be using unstructured and some structured questioning. You may withdraw your participation at any time. The interview will be tape recorded only if you give your permission, and this permission may be withdrawn at any time, and the tape recording and any notes and transcripts will be returned to you.

Following the interview, you will be supplied a copy of notes and edited transcripts from the interview to provide you with an opportunity for you to check these for accuracy, provide further clarification if necessary and to notify Bernadine Cantrick-Brooks of any limitations on the use of the information you have provided. Any information you identify as 'confidential' will not be published nor related to any other person including managers, other employees, union delegates nor union officials. Any information you identify as 'ID concealed' will be used for publication with the source concealed. All references to you, your workplace and to anyone associated with your workplace will be concealed through use of pseudonyms.

Before the interview commences you will be requested to sign a form indicating your consent to participate in the research entitled Front Line Call Centre Staff and Unions conducted by Bernadine Cantrick-Brooks.

The data collected from your participation will be used for a thesis, conference papers and journal publications, however the tapes will only be used for transcribing purposes and will only be used by myself.

If you have any enquiries about the research, you can contact Bernadine Cantrick-Brooks (phone 0403165885), Associate Professor Ray Markey (02 4221 3734 or if you have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, you can contact the Complaints Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee, University of Wollongong on 02 4221 4557.

Bernadine Cantrick-Brooks 0403165885

Appendix II:

**UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG
CONSENT FORM
Front Line Call Centre Staff and Unions
Bernadine Cantrick-Brooks**

I have been given information about Front line staff and Unions research project and discussed the project with Bernadine Cantrick-Brooks who is conducting this research as part of a Masters degree in industrial relations supervised by Associate Professor Ray Markey (Department of Marketing, Management and Employee Relations) and Dr Terri Mylett (Department of Marketing, Management and Employee Relations) University of Wollongong.

If I consent to participate in this research, my involvement is as an individual and is not associated with my employment duties. I understand that, if I consent, I will be interviewed for a period of around 1 hour. I may withdraw my participation at any time. The interview will be tape recorded only if I give my permission, and this permission may be withdrawn at any time, and the tape recording and any notes and transcripts will be returned to me.

Following the interview, I will be supplied a copy of notes and edited transcripts from the interview and I may check these for accuracy, provide further clarification if necessary and notify Bernadine Cantrick-Brooks of any limitations on the use of the information I have provided. Any information I identify as 'confidential' will not be published nor related to any other person including managers, other employees, union delegates nor union officials. Any information I identify as 'ID concealed' will be used for publication with the source concealed but not related to any other person including managers, other employees, union delegates nor union officials. All references to myself, my workplace and to anyone associated with my workplace will be concealed through use of pseudonyms.

If I have any enquiries about the research, I can contact Bernadine Cantrick-Brooks (phone 0403165885), Dr Terri Mylett (phone 02 4221 4080) or Associate Professor Ray Markey (02 4221 3734 or if I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact the Complaints Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee, University of Wollongong on 02 4221 4557.

By signing below I am indicating my consent to participate in the research entitled Front Line Call Centre Staff and Union conducted by Bernadine Cantrick-Brooks as it has been described to me in the information sheet and in discussion with Bernadine Cantrick-Brooks. I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for a thesis, conference papers and journal publications, and I consent for it to be used in that manner. I have retained a signed copy of this form.

Signed
.....
Name (please print)
.....

Date
...../...../.....

Appendix IV:

Sample Transcript Notes

Ricardo

I have limited experience with unions

I have had meetings with union reps

I am not a member of my union

My workplace works closely with the union

- the union is allowed to use the internal email
- reps are allowed to write on lunchroom whiteboard

Unions are a powerful group

I have never needed a union

Unions provide solidarity

Unions provide access to information

Unions provide legal services

At a time of crisis I would need a union

There is always the risk of needing a union

Unions provide leverage in bargaining

Regarding union membership I have done a crude cost benefit analysis

There are two costs to joining a union

- financial cost
- negative cost to career prospects

Possible impact of joining a union on your future career opportunities outweighs the benefit of winning a small short-term battle

Union members seen as troublemakers

Unions support employee in seeking redress for discriminatory practices

Unions are powerful

Unions can pose a threat to management when supported by sufficient staff members

The threat union's pose can be used as a bargaining tool by unions

I don't have a moral objection to unions

In the media conservative politicians have disparaged union

There has been a lot of media coverage about wanting to dilute union power

I don't think images of union violence in the media has affected my perceptions

I do not think unions are inherently violent

In a situation of discrimination it is important to have a unified force behind you

Unions can provide a sense of community

Age: 29

Male

12 years in workforce

5 years at call centre

Education: Studying post grad

Union member: no

Ever been approached: yes

F/T

Finance