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Job quality in call centres: key issues, insights and gaps in the literature

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Abstract

The number of call centres has increased rapidly over the last decade as technological advancements have increased the geographical reach and potential applicability of call centre operations to a wide variety of industries and business functions. These developments have been followed closely by an influx of research on various aspects of call centre operations. Issues associated with job quality have arisen from various call centre studies, often incidentally as researchers examine other facets of call centres and their functioning's. However, there is yet to be a study that deliberately and systematically examines job quality in this context, despite it being widely accepted that job quality is an issue of increasing significance in this sector. This paper takes the first steps towards addressing this deficit by conducting a review of the extant call centre literature, and collecting and reporting on the findings that emerge which can be associated with the concept of job quality. A job characteristics approach is used to evaluate this evidence in relation to specific themes and categories derived through the job quality literature. Important links between the job quality and call centre literatures are highlighted; major issues associated with the quality of call centre work are discussed, and key gaps in the research are revealed. Finally, some direction for future research is proposed, particularly, the need for investigation in to the key determinants of job quality in the call centre context; .an examination of how job quality may be improved; and the impact of key job quality factors on employees and organisations.

Keywords

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Job Quality in Call Centres: Key Issues, Insights and Gaps in the Literature

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ABSTRACT

The number of call centres has increased rapidly over the last decade as technological advancements have increased the geographical reach and potential applicability of call centre operations to a wide variety of industries and business functions. These developments have been followed closely by an influx of research on various aspects of call centre operations. Issues associated with job quality have arisen from various call centre studies, often incidentally as researchers examine other facets of call centres and their functioning's. However, there is yet to be a study that deliberately and systematically examines job quality in this context, despite it being widely accepted that job quality is an issue of increasing significance in this sector. This paper takes the first steps towards addressing this deficit by conducting a review of the extant call centre literature, and collecting and reporting on the findings that emerge which can be associated with the concept of job quality. A job characteristics approach is used to evaluate this evidence in relation to specific themes and categories derived through the job quality literature. Important links between the job quality and call centre literatures are highlighted; major issues associated with the quality of call centre work are discussed, and key gaps in the research are revealed. Finally, some direction for future research is proposed, particularly, the need for investigation in to the key determinants of job quality in the call centre context; .an examination of how job quality may be improved; and the impact of key job quality factors on employees and organisations.

INTRODUCTION

The call centre industry has grown exponentially throughout Australia, Europe and the United States over the past decade, more so than any other industry (URCOT, 2000). The proliferation and expansion of the industry can be associated with developments in information and communication technology which have enhanced the efficiency and cost effectiveness of managing customer relations, and have expanded the applicability of call centres to a wider variety of industries crossing across the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors (ACTU, 2002; Burgess and Connell, 2004; Burgess, Connell, Hannif, 2005). In the midst of this growth has emerged increasing concern about the human resource practices in these workplaces, and the implications these new forms of work organisation have for employees. Although call centres can be extremely diverse in terms of structure, type of service provided and working conditions, recent research on the industry has correlated call centre work with high levels of stress and burnout, stringent systems of monitoring and surveillance, low levels of personal autonomy, poor health and safety outcomes, intensive, unsocial and inflexible working hours, high rates of casualization, and low levels of union representation (URCOT, 2000; ACTU, 2002a; Holman, 2002; Paul and Huws, 2002; Mullholland, 2002; Healy and Bramble, 2003; Hannif and Lamm, 2005). Job quality is therefore an issue of growing significance across the industry.

However, despite this evidence, and a well established body of job quality literature (see Davis and Cherns, 1975; Levine, 1983; Considine and Callus, 2001; Huzzard, 2003; Green, 2005) there has been little deliberate overlap between these two research areas. A major gap is therefore evident in the call centre literature in the way of a systematic examination of job quality and the quality of work life. The first step towards addressing this gap is to tie together findings on job quality that have emerged from the various studies conducted in the call centre industry to identify where the links between the job quality and call centre literatures lie. From here, the most pertinent issues associated with job quality in this sector can be highlighted. This paper follows this process.

The paper will commence with a general definition for the quality of work life. From here the paper will review call centre literature from Europe and more specifically, Australia, to identify key insights, issues and gaps where job quality is concerned. This section will be organised into four major job quality themes and 11-related job quality components which allow links to be drawn between the job quality and call centre literatures. Some direction for future research will also be proposed.

THE QUALITY OF WORK LIFE

The concept quality of work life originated as part of a movement that began in the United States in the 1960's and 1970's; the purpose of which was to initiate dialogue and encourage the theoretical exploration of ways of making the working environment a more humane situation for workers (Davis and Cherns, 1975; Levine, 1983; Considine and Callus, 2001; Huzzard, 2003). Concerns about working conditions were triggered by rapid advancements in technology which saw a greater de-skilling, dehumanization, alienation and objectification of labour under Taylorist and Fordist influences (Davis and Cherns, 1975; Levine, 1983; Huzzard, 2003; Green, 2005). Since this time, there has been an upsurge of research concerned with the quality of work life, from a multitude of disciplines. Naturally, this has resulted in varying perspectives about how to define the concept "quality of working life" and what constitutes a high quality job.

Fundamentally, job quality and "the quality of work life" is comprised by the set of work characteristics which promote the well-being of the worker (Green, 2005). The European Foundation for the Improvement of Working and Living Conditions [EFIWLC] (2003) propose the concept has "its foundations in a multi-dimensional understanding of individual well-being or the good life". These definitions are essentially employee-centered, and focus exclusively on what is beneficial for the worker. It is therefore not surprising that researchers have drawn attention to the importance of examining workers experiences in studies of job quality. For example,

Green (2005) states that employees are in an unrivaled position when understanding the world of work; they are the ones doing the jobs and are therefore able to provide the most reliable information. This paper will therefore gather and report on findings relating to job quality from the wider call centre literature as derived through employee accounts and experiences.

The concept quality of work life has been handled and defined with differing levels of complexity. In its simplest form, the concept is seen to be concerned with employees job satisfaction, particularly in relation to how much access is available to tangible aspects of work such as income, and employment benefits (Juuti, 1991; Lau and Bruce 1999). Towards the more complex is to associate the concept with an employees subjective well being. This notion would consider issues such as how secure the employee feels in their job, and how safe they feel in terms of occupational health and safety This approach accepts that the quality of work life involves both the tangible and intangible aspects of individuals' working-life experiences; and acknowledges that the quality of work life extends beyond organisational boundaries. (Zapf, 1984, Sirgy, Efraty, Siegel, and Lee, 2001; Considine and Callus, 2001). However, the quality of work life is most widely accepted at its most complex definitional form, where it is considered a dynamic, multi-dimensional construct that incorporates any number of measures relating to employment quality (Levine, 1983; Carayon, 1997; Prujit, 2002; EFILC, 2003). Although this definition does little to minimize ambiguity, its broad nature recognizes the intricacies and complexities surrounding employment quality, accepts that quality in employment is essentially relative, and puts forth the quality of work life as a notion that needs to be examined in relation to job characteristics, individual circumstances and the wider labour market. This is the definition that is adopted in this review.

The terms job quality and quality of work life are often transposable in the literature given that both are concerned with the attributes comprising a job, and the well-being of employees in relation to these job characteristics. The approaches used to examine job quality and the quality of work life are also often the same. The terms will therefore be used interchangeably for the purposes of this review.

CALL CENTRES AND JOB QUALITY: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

While the call centre literature has drawn attention to issues relating to job quality, this is has often been incidental, and a result of investigation of various other aspects of call centres, in particular, the application of the labour processes perspective. For instance, Knights and McCabe (1998) provide an account of the employment experiences of workers employed in a British call centre undergoing a business process re-engineering (BPR) regime, and Russell (2002) uses a labour process perspective to investigate employee responses to the culture of employee management in an Australian call centre. Taylor and Bain (1999) and Russell (2004) on the other hand use a Foucauldian electronic panopticon perspective to analyse the labour process and employment relationship in call centres.

Furthermore, where job quality has been investigated in call centres, the focus has been placed on specific aspects of call centre work. For instance, researchers have been particularly keen to examine stress and burnout in these new organisational forms, and in doing so, have highlighted the implications of roles stress on employee performance and satisfaction (see de Ruyter, Wetzels and Feinberg, 2001), the influence of work relationships

on emotional exhaustion and employee withdrawal (Deery, Iverson & Walsh, 2002), and more generally, the burnout experiences of call centre employees (Healy and Bramble, 2003). Given the large proportion of women employed in call centres, it is not surprising that the issue of gender has also made in onto the research agenda. The most notable contributions have been by Belt (2002) who has examined the career intentions and outcomes of women in British and Irish call centres, and Mullholland (2002) who has investigated gender dynamics in relation to emotional labour and team-working. Other specific areas of call centre research include employee responses to monitoring and surveillance (see Barnes, 2004) and team-working (see Townsend, 2004).

In short, although there has been an upsurge of call centre research over the past five years, there is little in the way of research that systematically examines call centre work from a job quality approach. There is also yet to be a study that comprehensively ties together the available call centre research to identify the most pertinent job quality issues. The following review aims to minimise this gap by taking the first step, which is to collect and present key findings relating to job quality from the wider call centre literature in order to highlight major concerns, and more importantly, key areas where further research into job quality is needed. To facilitate this process, the review has been organised into four major themes and 11 job quality related factors (see Table 1).

These originally took form as an exhaustive list of job related factors which were determined through an in-depth review of the job quality literature and the frameworks that have been previously used to examine job quality in different sectors, industries and countries. A review of the call centre literature followed, paying specific attention to issues identified in the literature as having a significant bearing on job quality in call centre workplaces. The issues identified in the call centre literature were then cross checked with the factors derived from the quality of work life research to identify common job quality factors. Finally, the eleven components were organized into four key themes as illustrated in Table 1.

While the review is structured according to this framework, it is acknowledged that it is difficult to completely separate these job quality components because of the significant overlaps that exist between the various themes and factors. Isolating these themes and factors, although done somewhat tentatively, was necessary to give some order to the voluminous findings that emerged through investigation of the literature. It was also key to establishing linkages between the two bodies of research.

Table 1. Job Quality Themes and Components for the Call Centre Context

Job Functions	Work Organisation	Workplace Relationships/ Initiatives	Protective Mechanisms
The nature of work	Income	Relationships with co-workers	Occupational health and safety
Identification with work	Working Hours/ Work-life balance	Managerial Style	Unionisation
		Monitoring and Surveillance	
	Employment Status	Training and development opportunities	

1. Job Functions

Nature of work

Researchers suggest that work design can vary significantly between call centres, depending on the specific organisations' objectives. For instance, those organisations that compete on service quality are more likely to design tasks to maximise employee discretion and individual autonomy, in order to allow more individualised service (Bain, Bunzel, Mulvey, Hyman and Taylor, 2000; Hutchinson, Purcell and Kinnie, 2000a; Deery and Kinnie, 2002). This is most typical amongst organisations that operate under what Batt and Moynihan (2002) describe as the professional service models. The services provided in these organsiations tend to be highly specialised and professional, requiring a blend of highly general skills obtained through formal education, and firm specific skills (ibid). Turnover in these workplaces tend to be lower than average for call centres given the high levels of employee empowerment (Evenson, Harker and Frei, 1999).

Alternatively, those organisations with the goal of minimising costs and maximising volume and capacity emphasise service standardisation, hence, turning the work into a series of "repetitive, routinised and highly scripted tasks" (Deery and Kinnie, 2002: 4).   Batt and Moynihan (2002) notes that while manufacturing organisations have gradually moved away from the Taylorist influenced production-line approach, service industries have readily embraced these models as part of their cost saving initiatives. From the managerial perspective, the oversimplification of tasks, the utilisation of fixed design specifications, and the standardisation of production processes have been seen to ensure a higher degree of consistency in service delivery and reduced production costs (Batt, 2002; Deery and Kinnie, 2002; Houlihan, 2002). The impact on employees, is however, less encouraging. The literature suggests these systems of work design have minimised the amount of mental stimulation employees are able to gain from the work. Narrowly defined work functions, and the low status attached to call centre roles leave employees with little decision-making discretion and autonomy (Paul and Huws, 2000; Holman, 2002; Houlihan, 2002). The use of standardised scripts, for instance, minimizes employee input, and diminishes the amount of creativity that can be exerted on the job. The work is hence, highly predictable and unchallenging (Bain et al, 2000; Hutchinson et al, 2000a; Kinnie, Hutchinson, and Purcell, 2000; Paul and Huws, 2000; Richardson, Belt and Marshall, 2000; Holman, 2002).

Call centres that operate under these models are also limited in the amount of job variety they are able to offer their workers. It is hence, typical for employees in these workplaces to deal with the same types of calls on a continuous basis, without the opportunity to perform other, more mentally stimulating tasks (Hutchinson, Purcell and Kinnie, 2000; Holman, 2002). This has concerned a number of researchers, more so given the health and safety implications that can be linked to these repetitive work processes (Paul and Huws, 2000; Batt and Moynihan, 2002). Emotional stress and burnout are identified as common side effects of employment, particularly where operational efficiency is emphasised as the primary organisational goal (Richardson et al, 2000; Holman, 2002; Houlihan, 2002; Deery, Iverson, and Walsh, 2002).   Stress can also be a result of conflicting demands in the workplace. The expectations of the organisation, particularly statistical targets, may clash with customer expectations and the call centre agents tendency to provide quality services. de Ruyter, Wetzels and Feinberg (2001) describe these conflicting demands as role stress, and note that this is more likely to occur when employees experience limited competence empowerment and autonomy.

The low skill levels required and the oversimplified and vastly unvarying nature of tasks in many of these workplaces have also been identified as issues of concern, because of the limitations these place on skill development. Work processes in call centres based on the mass production model are essentially deskilling, giving employees little opportunity to expand their capabilities and skills base. Career development is hence, largely hindered given the lack of transferable skills attained through these workplaces (Richardson et al, 2000; Deery and Kinnie, 2002).

The repetitive and restrictive nature of work functions in many call centres have led a number of researchers to liken work organisation in these workplaces to 'battery farming', and 'modern day Taylorism' (see Taylor and Bain, 1999; Bain et al, 2000; Gilmore and Moreland, 2000; Richardson et al, 2000; Bagnara and Marti, 2001; Batt and Moynihan, 2002; Deery and Kinnie, 2002). Gilmore and Moreland (2000: 4) suggest this is because many call centres are predicated on "a hierarchical, mechanistic, bureaucratic, top-down approach to management". Given the parallels with scientific management, the implications are also predictable. Unsurmountable levels of employee dissatisfaction, and dwindling levels of employee morale are typical of employment in this sector (Gilmore and Moreland, 2000; Hutchinson et al, 2000; Batt and Moynihan, 2002; Deery and Kinnie, 2002; Holman, 2002).

Identification with the Work
The high rates of absenteeism and turnover that characterise the call centre industry are well documented in the literature. In Australia, national call-centre turnover is placed at 18 per cent, although turnover rates in the major cities - Sydney and Melbourne, are placed as high as 30 to 40 per cent; well above the average for typical office-type workplaces (Kinnie et al, 2000). This compares poorly with most other countries, and falls particularly short of US best practice attrition rates (Technical Assistance Research Program [TARP] 1997; ACTU, 2003).

 Research indicates that the emerging pattern of dissatisfaction amongst employees from this industry can be linked with how employees perceive their employment in the call centre context. (Richardson et al, 2000; URCOT, 2000; Wallace, Eagleson and Waldersee, 2000; Batt and Moynihan, 2002; Deery and Kinnie, 2002; Houlihan, 2002; Paul and Huws, 2002). Researchers (e.g. Richardson et al, 2000; URCOT, 2000) suggest that call centre employees often feel undervalued because of the low status image attached to their occupations. Employees in the URCOT (2000) report stated they felt society had little understanding of their responsibilities, and failed to appreciate or recognise the interpersonal, communication and relational skills associated with call

centre work. These perceptions essentially worked to demoralise workers, and diminish their attachment to their occupations.

Watson et al's (2000) study on the commitment levels of front-line call centre workers in two medium-sized call centres in Scotland also confirmed a lack of employee identification with call centre employment. The study suggested that for the majority of workers, the occupation itself was not seen as being part of any career strategy. On the contrary, most of the employees were driven to seek employment in the call centre context by financial hardship and other non-work factors. There was hence, little personal identification with call centre work, and little employee attachment to the call centre industry itself. A study on the Australian call centre context by URCOT (2000), however, revealed that call centres had a comparatively strong identification with the call centre industry. There was, nevertheless, a far greater sense of identification with the industry as a whole rather than with any individual employer.

2. Work Organisation

Income

Despite wage rates varying considerably between call centres, workers often

express dissatisfaction with the relatively low pay levels offered across the industry (Richardson, 1998; Kinnie et al, 2000; Paul and Huws, 2002). Those employed on non-standard working arrangements in particular, often find they are paid less for carrying out the same tasks as permanent, full-time staff. These workers are also often paid minimum wages, and denied the right to wage increases because of their non-standard employment status (Paul and Huws, 2002; Hannif and Lamm, 2005).

The unregulated nature of the Australian call centre industry, particularly the outsourced market, has meant that Australian call centre employees generally experience lower wage rates than those in most countries that offer similar standards of infrastructure and political stability (ACTU, 2002 - see Table 2 below). The lack of regulation in this sector has also been rendered the cause of significant wage discrepancies between call centre workplaces. In an effort to reduce wage discrepancies, the ACTU Call Centre Unions Groups has included base-line salary ranges in the minimum standards code they have proposed for the call centre sector. The ACTU argues that appropriate minimum wages are necessary to ensure the long-term sustainability of the Australian call centre industry (see ACTU, 2002; ACTU, 2002a).

Table 2. Average Wage Rates of Call Centre Employees in 9 countries

Country	Average Salary PA 1998 (US$)
Tokyo	$ 32
Taiwan	$ 28
US	$ 26
Hong Kong	$ 24
Singapore	$ 22
Ireland	$ 20
UK	$ 19
Australia	$ 17
NZ	$ 15

ACTU (2002a)

Working Hours/ Work-Life balance

There has been growing concern in the literature about the working time arrangements evident in call centre workplaces, with researchers suggesting that employment in this context is increasingly being associated with extended, unsocial working hours, and inflexible shifts systems and leave arrangements (see Richardson and Marshall, 1999; Kinnie et al, 2000; Richardson et al, 2000; URCOT, 2000; Watson, Bunzel, Lockyer, and Scholarios, 2000; Mulholland, 2002; Paul and Huws, 2002). The quest for organisational flexibility in this sector has led to a shift away from the traditional 9am-to-5pm, 5-days a week employment structure, a reduction of the working week to 35 hours and extension of opening hours in order to hire a higher proportion of non-standard workers (Watson et al 2000; Hutchinson, Purcell, and Kinnie, 2000a). For instance, the TARP study conducted in 1997 suggested that 30 per cent of Australian call centres operated seven days a week, and 9 per cent operated 24 hours per day.

The high use of non-standard employment forms, and the loosening of the employment relationship across the sector has led some researchers to conclude that precariousness is becoming a defining aspect of employment in these workplaces (Watson et al, 2000; Paul and Huws, 2002; Shire, Holtgrewe, and Kerst, 2002). Paul and Huws (2002) state that non-standard workers are regularly called on to work shifts at short notice, and sometimes, for short periods of time. For those hired on a temporary or casual basis, there is little guarantee of employment, making working times and weekly earnings highly unpredictable (ibid). This, however, does not hold for all call centres. For instance, a study of six American call centres by Frenkel, Tam, Korzynski, and Shire (1998) revealed employees were very satisfied with their job security; a level of confidence that could be associated with the recent expansion of the call centre industry, and the knowledge of employment opportunities existing elsewhere in the industry.

There are also questions regarding whether call centre employees are able to achieve an adequate balance between their work and non-work lives. The literature indicates that unsociable hours are often a job requirement in this industry, and have the most negative impacts on women, particularly those with domestic responsibilities (Richardson et al, 2000; URCOT, 2000; Belt, 2002; Paul and Huws, 2002). Compensatory remuneration, in the form of overtime payments are, however, uncommon in these workplaces (URCOT, 2000; Paul and Huws, 2002). A study conducted by URCOT (2000) suggested widespread dissatisfaction amongst call centre employees at their exclusion from overtime payments. Dissatisfaction also stretched to the inflexible nature of working and leave arrangements, with employees stating they encountered difficulties even when attempting to access sick leave.

Employment Status

Although there is little in the form of literature that examines the specific employment forms offered in call centre organisations, there is growing evidence to suggest the use of non-standard workers has increased widely across call centre workplaces (see Richardson and Marshall, 1999; Hutchinson et al, 2000; URCOT, 2000; Watson et al, 2000; ACA, 2002; Paul and Huws, 2002; ACA, 2003; Hannif and Lamm, 2004; Russell, 2004). Watson et al (2000) suggest call centres epitomise the shift towards the loosening of employer-employee relationships. In the endeavor to achieve maximum organisational flexibility, call centres have shifted away from the standard full-time form of employment, diminishing the amount of mutual loyalty and commitment traditionally held by the two parties. There is also evidence to indicate that while non-standard arrangements may offer some employees much needed flexibility, they can also detriment employees in numerous ways. Hannif and Lamm (2004) in their investigation of non-standard employment practices in two New Zealand call centres noted the associations that could be drawn between casual and part-time employment in these workplaces, and lower rates of pay, less access to employment benefits and entitlements, fewer opportunities for training and development, and higher exposure to occupational health and safety risks. Indeed, similar research is necessary in the Australian call centre context to determine whether these employees experience lower job quality than those in more stable and secure employment forms.

3.   Workplace Relationships/ Initiatives

Relationships with co-workers

There is little research that examines the relationships between employees in call centre workplaces. There is, however, a growing body of call centre literature that examines how employers have introduced 'fun' in to the call centre work culture to deal with some of the negativities associated with the monotonous and repetitive nature of tasks. Kinnie et al (2000) suggest these measures have been brought in by management as a means of meeting the somewhat paradoxical goals of efficiency and high quality service. Team formation, for example, is a widely used strategy within call centre workplaces to improve cohesion between workers, and increase employee commitment and productivity (Kinnie et al, 2000; Russell, 2004; Townsend, 2004).

Case study research conducted by Kinnie et al (2000) on two UK based call centres, Banco and RAC suggests team bonding activities are encouraged through social events, and 'fun' activities such as spot prizes and raffles; initiatives which can be associated with improvements in employee morale and satisfaction, lower turnover rates, and higher quality customer service. Research conducted on Australia-based call centres, indicates the use of similar initiatives. For instance, Russell (2004) in his survey of four Australian call centres found team-work to be an integral aspect of work organisation in three of the call centres. Team building activities (such as team prizes for achieving performance goals, and participation in national call centre competitions and initiatives) were common in these workplaces, and were partly indicative of the high commitment/ high performance goals of the organisation.

Townsend (2004) on the other hand, derives from an Australian call center an example of how team-formation and cohesion can be used to improve employee power and positioning. The teams involved in this study were found to use their cohesion as a means of manipulating and resisting managerial prerogative, by essentially rejecting team leaders, and calling on the union to intervene when attempts were made by management to break down the cohesiveness of the group. Townsend notes that throughout the duration of the study, this team faced ongoing attacks from management, and each time responded in "an active and disciplined manner" (p.122), highlighting the amount of influence teams potentially have in improving working conditions and employee standing in the workplace.

Managerial Style

Although managerial styles and strategies can vary significantly between different call centres, there is strong evidence to suggest that employees are increasingly turning away from call centres because of the lack of people management skills in these workplaces (URCOT, 2000; Wallace et al, 2000; Houlihan, 2002). Wallace et al (2000) suggest that many call centres have assumed what they term as a 'sacrificial human resources strategy', a strategy that is based on a deliberate "misalignment between task demands and employee intrinsic motivation" (p.178). In short, management ensures efficiency and quality service are concurrently delivered by selecting employees based on their personal intrinsic motivation to deliver quality services to the customer. Furthermore, the costs of people management and employee development are minimised as there is little organisational investment in improving levels of morale and commitment. Employee-related consequences such as stress and burnout, are hence accepted, and tolerated. Houlihan (2002) suggests this specific organisational strategy echoes a 'containment' model of low-discretion, high commitment (LDHC) management, which relies on control and compliance to achieve the overriding goals of productivity and efficiency.

Houlinhan (2002) also offers three alternative models of call centre management to typify the broad range of managerial strategies used in these workplaces. Each of these models propose a different perspective on workforce management, and thus, will result in different job quality outcomes.

The 'alleviation' model of LDHC management is conducive to managing turnover and maintaining staff support in organisations orientated towards high volume, low cost production (Houlihan, 2002). This model maintains a coercive, task-focussed approach, however, attempts to mitigate the effects of excessively routinized work, and restore employee morale through considerable investment in support facilities, and commitment inducing initiatives (such as child care support and facilitating a 'fun' culture in the workplace). Tightly prescribed procedures do, however, continue to remain in these workplaces, leaving employees with very little discretion (ibid).

The third alternative is the 'structured employee development' LDHC model, where routinized work is accompanied with measures to support employees and minimize uncertainty, such as team-working and supportive supervisory techniques (Batt and Moynihan, 2002; Houlihan, 2002). Nevertheless, this strategy is also highly control orientated, utilising hard human resource management techniques, and relying heavily on agency staff. According to Houlihan (2002) this managerial strategy is most suitable for organisations pursuing maximum flexibility and responsiveness to market pressures.

The final LDHC managerial approach is that of 'involvement', a strategy most common in 'service quality' focussed call centres (Houlihan, 2002). Batt and Moynihan (2002) indicate that this strategy is that of high professionalism, where work design is comprehensive and characterised by high levels of complexity and employees are given significant discretion and autonomy. Typically associated with higher-scale, knowledge based call centres, this model facilitates ongoing support and development of initiatives that preserve the status of employees as knowledge-workers (Batt and Moynihan, 2002; Houlihan. 2002).

Monitoring & Surveillance

Given the diversity of the call centre context, the amount of monitoring and control experienced by employees varies significantly between call centre workplaces (Bain et al, 2000; Gilmore and Moreland, 2000; Deery and Kinnie, 2002; Houlihan, 2002). Again, this is largely determined by the specific business objectives guiding the organisations practices. The extant literature suggests that at one extreme, calls are relatively simple, and responses can thus be scripted, and standardised. Relatively tight statistical monitoring systems prevail in these workplaces in order to maximise the number of calls that can be serviced (Bain et al, 2000; Deery and Kinnie, 2002). At the other extreme, are call centres which focus on the quality of service delivery. Given the focus on individualised service, temporal measures are less significant than the relational aspects of the call (Bain et al, 2000; Gilmore and Moreland, 2000).

The rigid, and sometimes, excessive systems of monitoring used in call centre workplaces have led Taylor and Bain (1999) to describe work organisation in these organisations as 'an assembly line in the head'. As Hutchinson et al (2000a) elaborates, tight performance measures and individual targets give employees very little autonomy in determining when and how to take calls. Indeed, research indicates that call centre workers frequently have their performance monitored, through both quantitative and qualitative methods. In terms of quantitative systems, statistical progress reports are regularly produced, reflecting employees' performances on the basis of a number of temporal measures, including speed of response, time spent servicing each call, technical accuracy and adherence to scripting, and the average rate of call abandonment. These statistical measures are often displayed where they can be viewed and judged by all workers (Gilmore and Moreland, 2000), and those employees not keeping up statistically are often singled out, placing additional pressure on call centre employees to meet organisational expectations (Healy and Bramble, 2003).

Organisations also exercise control over how employees present themselves to customers over the phone. This entails the use of qualitative measures, which involves the remote monitoring of calls either in real time while calls are in the process of being serviced, or through an assessment of voice-recordings at managements' discretion (Hutchinson et al, 2000a; URCOT, 2000; Batt and Moynihan, 2002; Deery and Kinnie, 2002; Holman, 2002; Houlihan, 2002; Mulholland, 2002; Healy and Bramble, 2003). As Deery and Kinnie (2002: 6) suggest, employees, particularly in service-focussed call centres, are expected to "display emotions that help create a desired 'state of mind' in the customer". Employees' 'soft' skills and 'emotive' responses are hence, often monitored and scrutinised during this process.

The implications of these systems of monitoring and control on employee wellbeing are also well documented in the literature. Specifically, employees have been found to perceive the use of intensive control measures and rigid surveillance systems as oppressive and emotionally demanding (Richardson et al, 2000; URCOT, 2000; Bagnara and Marti, 2001; Holman, 2002; Bain and Taylor, 2002; Healy and Bramble, 2003). For instance, one study conducted by Healy and Bramble (2003) showed that employees felt they were under constant pressure to increase the rate of their performance in order to maintain their statistics at satisfactory levels, and avoid being singled out. Employees' concerns about always being under the watchful eye of 'big brother' hence, severely inhibited them in terms of what they could do with their time. Holman's (2002) study also highlighted the adverse effects of excessive monitoring on employees, suggesting high levels of monitoring and low levels of job control can be positively correlated with anxiety, depression and diminished job satisfaction.

In contrast, a study by Barnes (2004) found that despite the increased stress brought about by monitoring measures, these tools were perceived as acceptable by over 70 per cent of those surveyed. Where statistics portrayed positive performance, employees welcomed the feedback and sometimes, used their statistics as a bargaining tool against management. Employees surveyed in this study were also found to exploit the technologies used for monitoring, in order to gain control over performance statistics, and surveillance mechanisms. Diary keeping for predicting the timing of silent monitoring was one strategy used by individual employees, to undermine employer control over work processes. Research by Callaghan and Thompson (2001) also found that employees manipulated monitoring tools, often regulating their own behaviour whenever they were aware they were being monitored.

In short, intensive, systematic monitoring is significant to work organisation in call centres at both the quantitative and qualitative ends of the spectrum (Bain and Taylor, 2002). While some studies further add to the mounting evidence that associates lack of individual control over work processes with the high rates of turnover and absenteeism in these environments (see Richardson and Marshall, 1999; Gilmore and Moreland, 2000; URCOT, 2000; Wallace et al, 2000; Deery and Kinnie 2002; Paul and Huws, 2002; Holman, 2002) other studies are highlighting how employees are able to manipulate control tools for their own advantage (see Callaghan and Thompson, 2001; Barnes, 2004).

Training and Career Development Opportunities

Employment in the call centre industry is often associated with limited and inadequate opportunities for training and career development (Crome, 1998; Richardson et al, 2000; URCOT, 2000; Bagnara and Marti, 2001; Deery and Kinnie, 2002; Paul and Huws, 2002). As Crome (1998: 137) explains, training is considered 'nice to have' rather than a 'must have' in many of these workplaces, given the low training budgets dedicated by organisations to training initiatives, and the high churn rates that characterise the industry. In many cases, training is considered futile because of the simple and highly structured nature of the tasks performed in call centres. Organisational investment in training and skill development is thus, limited, preventing workers from acquiring additional skills, and causing many workers to leave the industry altogether. In actual fact, the

process operates as a spiral, with turnover and related cost pressures encouraging employers to minimise the complexity of tasks, which diminishes the need for training investment, hence, triggering further movement out of the industry (Crome, 1998; Paul and Huws, 2002).

Organisational structure has also influenced training and career development opportunities in this industry. Richardson and Marshall (1999) indicate that training and career prospects are limited in call centres because many have flat management and hierarchical structures, limiting the prospect of vertical career advancement. URCOT (2000) attributes this partly to recent restructuring, stating the loss of middle management has largely diminished employee status and responsibility. With no room for upward movement, and training rendered unnecessary, the only chance workers have for development and advancement is again, 'through the door' (Watson et al, 2000; Paul and Huws, 2002).

Deery and Kinnie (2002) state call centres have been referred to as 'female ghettos', because of the high proportion of females employed across this industry, and the limited opportunities they have available to them for skill and career development. Efforts have, however, been made by researchers to contest this image. Hunt (2004) for instance, argues that women in New Zealand call centres experience work differently given the relatively smaller size of call centres, the tight labour market conditions, and the role of the Employment Relations Act and anti-discriminatory policies. She also argues that call centres have the potential to provide women with useful product or company knowledge and skills, which can prove valuable in gaining promotion to internal or external managerial roles.

The argument has also been challenged by Belt (2002) based on a study conducted on 11 call centre organisations in the United Kingdom and Ireland. The women in this study were well represented in team leader and management positions, and thus, had good opportunities for advancement. Nevertheless, those women with domestic responsibilities did appear to struggle more than single women, occupying the lower rungs of the career ladder, and less likely than the other group to progress to managerial roles. Interestingly the study also found that a high proportion of the female workforce in these call centres had no interest in progressing given their current social situations, and thus, had made a conscious choice not to attempt to move up the career ladder. Furthermore, the case studies organisations were found to exploit these dynamics, by deliberately enlisting employees that fit this profile; older women with domestic/ caring responsibilities, and younger women with children.

4. Protective Mechanisms

Occupational Health and Safety

The issue of stress and burnout is widely documented in the call centre literature, and is considered a critical aspect of employment in this industry (see ACA, 1998; Richardson and Marshall, 1999; Kinnie et al, 2000; Richardson et al, 2000; URCOT, 2000; Wallace et al, 2000; Bagnara and Marti, 2001; Batt and Moynihan, 2002; Deery and Kinnie 2002; Holman, 2002; Mulholland, 2002; Paul and Huws, 2002; Shire et al, 2002; Healy and Bramble, 2003). A study on 433 Australian call centre employees by ACA (1998) indicated that a quarter of workers experienced high levels of stress on the job; something they had not experienced prior to working within the call centre industry. The extant literature attributes these levels of stress to a number of factors, including the exceedingly intensive and emotionally demanding nature of the work, and the high levels of monitoring and control that employees have to endure on a day-to-day basis.

Call centre work is often target-focussed, where non-fulfilment often leads to disciplinary action (Bain and Taylor, 2002; Shire et al, 2002). In order to avoid being isolated, workers have to be highly performance driven, and constantly work towards meeting statistical goals (ACA, 1998; Richardson and Marshall, 1999; URCOT, 2000; Paul and Huws, 2002). According to URCOT (2000) these demands can create a great deal of stress for employees, particularly when statistical targets are unrealistic or unreasonable. The unpredictable nature of call traffic with job cycle peaks and fluctuations, also contributes to stress by creating uncertainty for workers (ACA, 1998; Batt and Moynihan, 2002).

Extensive systems of monitoring can also be associated with stress and burnout in call centres (Richardson and Marshall, 1999; URCOT, 2000; Bagnara and Marti, 2001; Paul and Huws, 2002; Healy and Bramble, 2003). Employees are aware that they are under constant management surveillance and performance monitoring, and this creates greater pressure for workers to perform. There is also evidence of monitoring being used as a tool to intimidate and demean staff; the monitoring of toilet breaks, and private calls are two prime examples (see URCOT, 2000). Systematic and often rigorous monitoring mechanisms have been strongly associated with turnover in this industry.

Work in the call centre environment can also be very emotionally demanding, particularly given that employees are often expected to deal with abuse and harassment from customers (Crome, 1998; Richardson and Marshall, 1999, Wallace, et al, 2000; Bagnara and Marti, 2001; Deery and Kinnie, 2002; Paul and Huws, 2002). According to Crome (1998) customer frustration is becoming a more common phenomenon in the industry, and is often associated with organisations' promises of fast and efficient services, which are not always possible to deliver. Being on the frontline, call centre workers are required to deal with emotionally demanding scenarios on their own, often with little or no time to recuperate because of the constant pressure to continue taking and/or making calls. The URCOT (2000) study indicates that uneducated callers can have similar effects, creating a significant amount of anger and frustration for employees trying to maintain their performance targets. This issue is also relevant for offshore call centres where CSR's often experience language problems (Taylor and Bain, 2004).

Employees working in the call centre environment are largely isolated from their co-workers during shifts, given that the primary interaction is between employees and the organisations customers. Thus, another cause of call centre workplace stress can be associated with what ACA (1998: 6) describes as the "inconvenience of being literally wired to the desk". The stress of having minimal social interaction is exacerbated by further expectations on employees to remain seated and attached to telephony and computer equipment for what can be extended periods of time (ACA, 1998; URCOT, 2000; Paul and Huws, 2002). This aspect of employment can cause significant emotional and physical strain.

Physical strain is associated with the multiple demands placed on workers at any given time. Not only are employees required to remain seated during shifts, they are also expected to make and/or receive calls while simultaneously reading scripts and/or entering data into manual or computerised systems. All this while being under constant surveillance, and under continuous pressure to achieve performance statistics. The restrictive and repetitive nature of these tasks and the simultaneous use of multiple call centre technologies represent a number of hazards for employees'. These include eye sight problems/computer vision, occupation overuse syndrome/repetitive strain, acoustic shock/hearing problems, occupational voice loss, sleeplessness, back/postural problems and headaches (Richardson, 1998; URCOT, 2000; Paul and Huws, 2002). The URCOT (2000) report suggests that physical discomforts, including neck and back stiffness persist despite the use of ergonomically designed equipment in the workplace. This is evidence that the very nature of call centre work is strongly predisposed to physical stress. Employees, however, drew attention to the value of regular breaks in minimising these effects.

While there is some research that highlights the health and safety implications of working in call centres, an area that remains under-researched is how health and safety is actually managed in these workplaces. Hannif and Lamm (2005) have taken some steps to investigate health and safety management in New Zealand call centres, arguing that issues relating to stress and fatigue are often completely excluded from organisational policies and procedures, and lack of legislative compliance is particularly evident in the case of casual and part-time workers. Further research is however needed to determine the impact health and safety management policies and practices have on job quality.

Unionisation

Union representation can play an important role in improving the quality of working life for call centre workers (Frenkel et al, 1998; Paul and Huws, 2002). The amount of union protection extended to employees, however, varies considerably based on the size and structure of any given call centre. The highest rates of unionisation are evident in in-house or public sector call centres, which incidentally also have lower turnover rates (ACTU, 2002; Paul and Huws, 2002; Burgess and Winsen, 2004).

A survey of registered collective agreements for Australian call centres by Burgess and Winsen (2004) found in-house call centres agreements generally contained standardised employment conditions, set systems for pay adjustments and stronger union presence. Agreements for outsourced providers, on the other hand, not only had inferior working conditions, and lower rates of pay, but were also less likely to be unionised (Burgess and Winsen, 2004). A likely explanation for low union representation in outsourced providers is the large number of workers employed on temporary or casual contracts (ACTU, 2002). The use of non-standard employment forms is due to the vulnerability of these call centres to changes in the marketplace, and the need to maximise the flexibility of labour utilisation (Hannif and Lamm, 2005). Despite high rates of turnover emphasising the lack of employment protection extended to workers in outsourced call centres, Paul and Huws (2002) suggest that the overall quality of work in these workplaces is largely dependant on the specific job design.

At one extreme, outsourced call centres are highly specialised organisations that design their business objectives to enhance employee creativity, by emphasising individual autonomy (Paul and Huws, 2002). Despite being largely non-unionised, these workplaces offer superior working conditions, and are characterised by high levels of employee satisfaction and low turnover. At the other extreme are those call centres that are involved in low profit activities, and hence, emphasise cost minimisation and efficiency as the key business objectives (ibid). These workplaces rely heavily on highly disposable workforces in order to avoid investing in employee-related initiatives. Unionisation in these contexts is very uncommon, reflected in sub-standard wages and working conditions, and high churn rates (ACTU, 2002; Paul and Huws, 2002).. It is this latter group that is the source of most concern.

There has also been some concern expressed about the low levels of unionisation that characterise the Australia call centre market as a whole. Although employment growth in call centres over the past decade has surpassed growth levels in every other sector, the proportion of call centre workers directly represented by a union is relatively low at 16 per cent (URCOT, 2000; ACA, 2004). This is despite Australian unions actively attempting to address their declining membership numbers through the recruitment of call centres workers (ACTU, 2003). Young people and those in lower-end call centres in particular, continue to be under-represented because of their lack of knowledge about the role unions play in improving working conditions. Researchers have therefore encouraged unions to extend coverage across the sector, particularly where lower-scale call centres are involved (Frenkel et al, 1998; Paul and Huws, 2002).

The ACTU Call Centre Unions Group have been vigorous on this front, actively campaigning to improve employment conditions by introducing a minimum standards code for the call centre sector (ACTU, 2002a). The group - made up of five trade unions (namely the Australian Services Union, the Community and Public Sector Union, the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union, the Finance Sector Union and the National Union of Workers) have actively worked together to develop an industry standard for general workplace conditions including training, and performance appraisals, breaks, pay rates, leave, non-standard work arrangements, dispute resolution, and freedom of association, and non-traditional industrial relations issues such as call monitoring and call volumes (ACTU, 2002a).

SUMMARY AND DIRECTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

From the above review, it is clear that the issue of job quality is certainly one of significance when considering the future growth and sustainability of the call centre industry. Although the job quality findings are arranged according to major job quality themes and factors, the evidence collected reflects the relationships that exist between the various aspects of the call centre working environment. For instance, the level of monitoring and surveillance in a workplace will depend on the nature of the work conducted, and the managerial strategy utilized in any given call centre. This in turn may influence health and safety outcomes, and the level of union involvement. The final job quality outcome is thus a product of the complex interactions that occur between the various facets of the call centre working environment. This is an approach that is yet to be taken in relation to the call centre sector. Much of the evidence available on job quality is informed by studies that have investigated individual aspects of the working environment such as team work (see Townsend, 2004). While these studies are often conducted in significant depth, it is difficult to obtain a complete picture of job quality in this sector without detailed analysis of other aspects of the work environment.

The literature also suggests that while call centre work may often be associated with deficient work conditions, certain aspects of the work environment may act to counter the overall effects. For example, while the call handling process may be monotonous and repetitive, the work environment may encourage support and team-work (Mulholland, 2002; Townsend, 2004; Kinnie et al, 2000). Furthermore, career development opportunities may be off-set by the amount of flexibility offered in the shifts (Belt, 2002). These factors may represent a positive experience for workers and improve perceptions of job quality in an overall sense.

Again, without a comprehensive investigation of the various aspects of the call centre work environment, it is difficult to know what the key determinants of job quality are and what impact they have on employees. A qualitative case study methodology utilizing a job characteristics approach would be conducive to addressing these gaps. This method consists of identifying the key elements that contribute to job quality and examining these elements against specific jobs (Burgess, 2003). A framework consisting of major job quality themes and related components like that used to organize this review could facilitate this process. Green (2005:1) states: "For understanding the world of work, these informants are in an unrivaled position: they are the ones doing and experiencing the work, and for many aspects of work no other observers can generate more reliable

information".   Unconstrained feedback from employees would therefore be key to understanding job quality, and narrowing this research gap.

The review also highlights the diversity that exists in the call centre industry in terms of working conditions. While employees in some organisations experience a great deal of autonomy, and support, others are subject to high levels of control and quite 'sacrificial' people management strategies. As the bulk of the call centre research suggests, working conditions and job quality can vary based on a number of key factors including sector, industry, the services provided, the size of the call centre centre, whether the call centre is inhouse or outsourced, the level of technology, call centre location, and unionisation (Paul and Huws, 2002; URCOT, 2002; Burgess and Connell, 2004; Paulet, 2004; Russell, 2004). While there has been research conducted on the different call centre managerial strategies (see Houlinhan, 2002; Wallace et al, 2000) there is still much to be learnt about how job quality is influenced in the process. In particular, what are the possible constraints and motivations that lead a business to adopt any given strategy, and what influence do job quality factors have on the organisation?. From this, one may be able to derive how job quality may potentially be improved for call centre employees.   Again, a qualitative case study approach will allow depth in analysis and the capture of important context relevant data critical to understanding employer's positions.

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