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Connectedness in work relationships and quality of working life: evidence from Australian call centres

Zeenobiyah Nadiyah Hannif

University of Technology Sydney, zeenie@uow.edu.au

Mario Fernando

University of Wollongong, mariof@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

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Keywords

call, working, quality, work, life, evidence, connectedness, centres, relationships, australian

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**Connectedness in Work Relationships and Quality of Working Life:
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ABSTRACT

Although empirical studies examine how employees perceive their relationships with their co-workers, these studies fail to explain how the quality and strength of co-worker relationships determine the workers' overall quality of working life. Drawing from the growing workplace spirituality literature identifying connectedness at work as a key attribute of strong co-worker relationships and well being, in this paper, we examine the place of connectedness in the quality of co-worker relationships in two Australian call centres. Using the case study approach, we draw similarities and differences between two Australian call centres. Two quite different approaches to people management are found alongside two different outcomes of quality of co-worker relationships and quality of working life.

Keywords: New forms of work organisation, Socialisation, Employment relations, Strategic human resource management

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we examine the role of connectedness in workplace relationships in two Australian call centres, and its influence on Quality of Working Life (QWL). Call centres epitomize the shift towards technology-based work, and have emerged as critical elements of the business cycle of organizations in the new economy. Although these organizations have grown in prominence, the job quality issues that have emerged in the broader Australian socio-economic context, particularly with the transition to the new economy, are also highly relevant to these workplaces (Green, 2006). Two quite different approaches to people management are determined, alongside two very different outcomes where the QWL is concerned. This paper will commence with a review on workplace relationships, drawing on both the call centre and workplace spirituality literatures. Next, an overview of the research methodology will be provided, and this will be followed with an explication of the key findings. Then the paper will discuss the key issues from findings and close with implications and concluding thoughts.

THE LITERATURE

Workplace relationships

To date there has been 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 issues associated with the monotonous and repetitive nature of tasks. Kinnie, Hutchinson and Purcell (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 centers, Banco and RAC suggests that 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 centers, indicates the use of similar initiatives. For instance, Russell (2004) in his survey of four Australian call centers found team-work to be an integral aspect of work organisation in three of the call centers. 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 an example from an Australian call center of how team-formation and cohesion can be used to improve employee power and positioning. 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' (2004:122), highlighting the amount of influence teams potentially have in improving working conditions and employee standing in the workplace. Van den Broek et al (2003) on the other hand argues that teams largely exist as a tool for assuring normative control – the benefits of which are more apparent to management. Furthermore, Knights and McCabe (2006) highlight the diversity and

complexity of team-working and its implications, with staff reactions largely depending on their circumstances.

The issue of workplace relationships has been more rigorously covered in the general QWL literature. Four Australian-based quality of working life studies have highlighted the significance of relationship-based factors in employees' working-life experiences. Ellis and Pompili's study of aged care nurses in 2002 revealed that relationship-based factors played the biggest part in their job satisfaction. Nurses were found to value their interactions with residents and their families, particularly the wisdom they were able to attain from older people, and the depth of the relationships they were able to form with individuals. The informal culture of the working environment was also identified, with workers emphasising the 'non-clinical, home like' environment as a positive aspect of their working lives. Finally, these workers were found to value the team culture and the relationships they were able to form with other carers (Ellis and Pompili, 2002). Roan and Diamond (2003) also confirmed the value placed on work-place relationships by young workers. The young workers, who participated in this study, particularly those from the hospitality industry, indicated that their relationships with co-workers and the 'fun atmosphere' at work played a key role in improving their working experiences. There were similar findings in the comparative study of clerical, sales and service workers and professionals undertaken by Bearfield (2003). The clerical, sales and service workers who responded to this study were more likely to emphasise the importance of their relationships with colleagues in improving the quality of their working lives (44 per cent) than any other measure. The importance of working-relationships is also highlighted in the survey, as reported by Considine and Callus (2001). The survey results showed that 76 per cent of Australian employees were satisfied with the way their colleagues got along with each other at work. From these studies, it appears that Australian workers place great importance on the relationships they have with their co-workers, and that these experiences have a significant influence on the quality of their working lives.

Although these studies highlight how employees perceive their relationships with their co-workers, they fail to explain how the quality or the strength of co-worker relationships determine their overall quality of working life. The growing workplace spirituality literature identifies connectedness at work as a key attribute of strong co-worker relationships.

Connectedness at Work

Recent contributions to management and specifically to workplace spirituality literature by an impressively expanding group of researchers focus on the influence of connectedness at the workplace (Smith and Rayment, 2007; Fernando, 2007; Fernando and Jackson, 2006; Dent, Higgins and Wharff, 2005; Kriger and Seng, 2005; Whittington, Pitts, Kageler and Goodwin, 2005).

Spirituality is an inherent characteristic of all humans, which encompasses the sacredness of everything, is nondenominational, broadly inclusive and embracing everyone, and involves experiencing or achieving a godlike self through connection (Smith and Rayment, 2007; Dent et al, 2005; Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003; Mitroff and Denton, 1999). Some identify workplace spirituality with religion (Kriger and Seng, 2005) while others view spirituality as being unconnected to religion. Both streams of literature indicate the dominance of connectedness as a key construct of workplace spirituality. As outlined by Fernando (2007: 107-108), interfaith studies of spirituality conducted in diverse cultures, on various participants and in different fields such as nursing, theology and psychology have found that connection is a common and central concept in the conceptualisation of spirituality (Burkhart, 2001; Newberg, D'Aquili and Rause, 2001; Rose, 2001; Piedmont and Leach, 2002). For example, Piedmont and Leach (2002) argue a case for the existence of a human drive to create a unified cosmological picture. Although diverse in its expression, it 'does represent a singular, pan cultural motivational construct that can be assessed scientifically' (Piedmont and Leach, 2002:1899). Consequently, this paper is based on the premise of a universal human need to connect. It explores the quality of co-worker relationships in an industry mostly infamous for its lack of quality work relations.

METHODOLOGY

Research took place in two call centres, one public and one private sector referred to in this paper as GovtCo and SalesCo respectively. GovtCo is located in Newcastle, a regional city on the east coast of Australia while SalesCo is located in Melbourne, Australia. Although these organisations are not intended to represent the total population in their respective sectors, it was considered important to examine both sectors as there are significant differences in working conditions between the two (see ACA, 2004; Burgess, Connell and Hannif, 2005).

The profiles of the two call centres are presented in Table 1. With 226 seats, GovtCo, based in Newcastle, has been operating for 13 years. In terms of call centre type, GovtCo largely operates as an in-house call centre dedicated to the servicing of three specific Government funded programs which operate as separate business lines. Some 98 per cent of the work is inbound – customer service being the primary function. Around 49 per cent of the Customer Service Operators (CSOs) in GovtCo are members of the Community and Public Sector Union. In GovtCo, turnover relating to those employees leaving the organization altogether is only five per cent. This figure rises to 10 per cent when considering the number that move out of the call centre and into other areas of the organization's network. SalesCo, located in Melbourne, has been in operation for 14 years, and with 1400 call centre seats is a very large call centre by industry standards. It has managed to maintain economies of scale whilst operating wholly as an outsourcer, providing a variety of fixed term and ongoing services to the 50 plus clients they service at any given time. This call centre involves a balance of inbound and outbound calls. There is no union presence on site, which is typical of the majority of call centres in the Australian market. Turnover in SalesCo is recorded at less than ten per cent, and is mostly associated with students pursuing overseas travel. Exit interviews indicate that CSO's rarely turnover to join other call centres.

THE FINDINGS

Importance of quality co-worker relationships

All the CSOs interviewed from GovtCo stated their relationships with their work colleagues were one of the more important determinants of the quality of their work lives. Nine of the 18 CSOs also identified their relationships with their co-workers as one of the three things they liked most about their work. CSOs indicated that because most of the work was done over the phone, there was very little interaction with co-workers during the shift. However, being able to have lunch with someone they got along with, or being able to be seated alongside them during the shift made it easier for them to go to work, and deal with the frustrations encountered in the call centre environment. CSOs highlighted the value of being able to share their work related problems with their co-workers, being able to 'vent' with people who can also relate to the stress and frustrations, and having a shoulder for support. Six of the 18 CSOs suggested they would be less inclined to come to work everyday if they

did not have good co-workers alongside them. 28 per cent of CSOs also highlighted their work in the call centre as a social experience. These CSOs suggested that some of their closest friends were the people they worked with, and attributed much of their social lives to their employment in the call centre.

Similarly, all the CSOs interviewed from SalesCo also highlighted their relationships with their work colleagues as one of the more important determinants of the quality of their work lives. Relationships with co-workers was the most highly cited answer to the question 'name the three things you liked most about your work' with all 26 CSOs identifying it as either number one or two on their list. CSOs in SalesCo identified the same benefits of having positive relations with co-workers as those identified in GovtCo. However, they also identified the strong link that existed between positive co-worker relations and overall job performance. CSOs from SalesCo suggested they had developed strong relationships with their co-workers. Overall relations between CSOs in the call centre were described as being very positive, both within and between campaigns. CSOs indicated there was very little friction in the call centre, which was largely due to the fact that everyone was treated with respect, and treated equally.

Teamwork

Given the use of team work in these call centres, this topic was also examined to ascertain the relationship with the QWL. All the GovtCo CSOs interviewed except one stated that while the work itself really did not require team work, work teams were very important to them as they provided a supportive environment in the call centre. Here work teams were described by CSOs as existing at two levels. Firstly, as formal teams defined by the business line; and secondly, those teams that developed informally – and were comprised of those individuals *within* business lines who were seated immediately next to one another. 33 per cent of CSOs stated being part of a larger business line team made it easier for them to achieve individual goals. These CSOs stated that team meetings were particularly useful as a place to share and discuss issues. On the downside, they noted that team meetings were not held frequently enough (held once a month) particularly given that these meetings were often the only opportunity that many CSOs had to make contact with those members of their business line who were not seated directly next to them.

CSOs stated that their informal within-business line teams had a comparatively more positive impact on the quality of their work lives as these teams were far more personal and intimate. Many CSOs described these teams as their good friends who generally made it more enjoyable to come to work and made them feel like they 'had a place'. CSOs stated these teams mitigated the feeling of isolation that was often experienced when being on the phone all the time. CSOs stated they were able to 'vent' with their team members, and seek help and support when necessary. CSOs also noted the importance of teams when in training. They stated that coming through training as a group provided a good way of bonding with co-workers, and ensured that people didn't feel like they were on their own – something that was considered important particularly in a call centre environment. They also noted it was helpful to be able to make friends during training as it was difficult to make friends once CSOs were on the phones. The support of team mates was also considered invaluable during the initial three month probation period which was described by all CSOs as a 'high pressure' and 'high stress' time. CSOs noted that while these teams were split up once probation ended, many people continued to make contact.

Although CSOs were encouraged to be sociable during the training and probation stage, they indicated that this changed once employed. Team work, particularly on an informal level was not actively encouraged. CSOs largely worked independently, and were discouraged from speaking to or seeking assistance and advice from their co-workers as it may reflect negatively on their statistics. Special systems were set up that dictated that all questions and queries were directed to technical support officers within the call centre.

In SalesCo, CSOs noted that while most of the work was done over the phones they relied on the support and encouragement of their team members throughout the day. Unlike GovtCo, CSOs in SalesCo were able to openly interact with co-workers if they experienced problems or wished to discuss any issues. CSOs also stated that they were able to 'have a little bit of fun between the calls' as long as they were not 'loud or obnoxious'. CSOs and team leaders also described the concept of 'chairs in', whereby any CSR can call their colleagues together to share an idea or problem. This not only encourages communication between CSOs, but also facilitates the transfer of knowledge. 67 per cent of CSOs in SalesCo also highlighted the increased motivation they gained through their team.

These CSOs felt a strong sense of 'team spirit' and openly related their own performance to the performance of the team. All 26 CSOs confirmed that team work was strongly encouraged in the call centre, and was considered a high priority. Instead of a Human Resources Management unit the organisation had a Team Development unit run by the Team Development Manager and six co-ordinators who were responsible for developing and implementing strategies for team development.

Management of co-worker relations

There was a mixed response to how GovtCo managed co-worker relations in the call centre. Some of the CSOs noted that the organisation had a well-being committee, a charity committee and a social club on the work site that was involved in organising team building events and social functions such as after work drinks, trivia nights, the annual Christmas party, raffles and other events throughout the year. They did however acknowledge that this was more of a CSO led initiative. 39 per cent of the CSOs had a very positive view on these activities, and indicated they were actively involved in these. On the other hand, 33 per cent noted that these events were difficult to attend because they were sometimes unaffordable or not organised at a suitable time. 22 per cent of CSOs also drew attention to the fact that these events were largely only attended by CSOs; team leaders rarely attended, and managers never attended.

Thirty nine per cent of CSOs drew attention to the amount of segregation that existed between the three business lines. These CSOs indicated that while most CSOs knew and got along with CSOs within their business lines, this was not the case between business lines. One stated that despite having worked in the call centre for five years, she only knew about 25 per cent of the people who worked there. Three CSOs also noted the segregation between older and younger CSOs. All the team leaders stated that while the job itself was not conducive to team-work, team work was of high importance; particularly as a means of ensuring performance goals were reached. Team leaders suggested they personally promoted team work as they were judged on the performance of their team. They also stated that individuals were more likely to focus on their performance if they were judged as a team.

CSOs within SalesCo described the call centre as having a very social and up beat atmosphere and spoke of regular get-togethers (e.g. Friday night drinks at the pub) and various events

throughout the year such as family park days, concerts, competitions, mid year and end of year parties, and team dinners. Working parties comprising CSO's and team leaders were put together to organise these events, although all costs were covered by the organisation. These events were attended by CSO's, Team Leaders and Senior Management, including the CEO who would use the events to get acquainted with staff. In SalesCo, CSOs, team leaders and managers stated the organisational culture was based on the three 'F's': Fun, Focus and Fulfilment, and ensuring employees felt good about work. The role that team-relationships played in ensuring this was the case was stressed.

DISCUSSION

The co-worker relationships of CSOs were one of the more important determinants of the QWL in the two call centres. Co-worker relationships were examined in relation to team-work, given that work organisation in both call centres were centred on work-teams, and CSOs' social relationships emerged as an important aspect of these teams. In GovtCo, the work was designed so that there was no inter-dependency between CSOs in relation to the job tasks, and thus, no reliance on team work where the functions of the job were concerned. This appears to be a common finding where call centres are concerned (see Frenkel, Tam, Korzynski and Shire, 1998; Paul and Huws, 2002; Townsend, Barnes and Van den Broek, 2006). Frenkel et al (1998) note that being in a team has no effect on the nature of the work itself as the work design in call centres continues to consist of highly individualised exchanges between CSOs and their customers/ contacts. The question therefore remains: why then did this organisation continue to deploy work teams? The findings from this study suggest work teams were utilised as a means of maintaining structural control. Structural control in this case refers to the use of team structures as a means of organising the work environment into smaller, and thus, more easily manageable and controllable units. Work teams also allow the break down of the larger organisational goals into smaller more specific team-based goals. Although these goals are team-based, these are largely achieved through a focus on and control over individual performance.

Furthermore, these formal work teams were not used by this organisation as a means of facilitating social relations between co-workers in the workplace. CSOs were not permitted to interact with team members during phone-time; interaction could only occur during their break periods and

once a month during team meetings. This however, did not prevent CSOs interacting whilst out of ear-shot of team leaders. This led to the natural development of 'informal work teams' which emerged as a utility of the spatial proximity of workstations, and as 'sub-teams' within the tightly controlled work-teams. These informal teams were identified by CSOs as being an invaluable network of social support, particularly when dealing with difficult calls. They provided CSOs an opportunity to 'vent' and release the stress associated with the work. These informal group cultures that were formed autonomously by CSOs represented an important subtext to the formal rules and regulations that governed the workplace. Furthermore, they provided CSOs with validation and recognition in their working lives (see Roy, 1952 in Russell, 2004). Despite the positive impact that these informal teams had on employee well being, the organisation deliberately split these groups up as a means of realising further control. This was a confirmation of Parker and Slaughter's (1988: 44 in Townsend et al, 2006) depiction of the team phenomenon, which was described as a concept that was used to sever the cohesion and teamwork 'of natural work groups that develop on the shop-floor by trying – usually unsuccessfully – to channel that sentiment into formal, highly controlled, company-designed team structures'. In GovtCo, the tightly controlled formal work teams that were imposed on CSOs, and the deliberate break down of the solidarity that was achieved through informal groups restricted the social connectedness that CSOs desired in order to combat the monotony, stress and isolation experienced on the job on a day-to-day basis. This represented a major hindrance to job quality, and created further distance between CSOs and their team leaders and managers.

Conversely, team work was emphasised as an important aspect of the job functions in SalesCo. Work teams were used as a means of facilitating problem-solving and knowledge sharing between colleagues. Teams were also used successfully as a means of motivating CSOs to attain team-targets through focusing on their individual performances. CSOs exhibited a strong sense of loyalty to their team leaders and team members, and could be seen to internalise the impact their performance had on the team output. The use of work teams as a means of gaining team loyalty has been discussed by Townsend et al, and rendered an exploitative tool that is most successful in organisations that 'engender a collectivist approach towards the goals of the team and hence, the organisation' (2006: 6). Van den Broek et al (2004) also highlighted the use of teams as a tool used

by organisations to gain normative control, and suggested the benefits of these are more apparent to management. The findings from this study however challenged these conclusions.

Although work teams did assist in clearly defining expectations regarding work standards, they also facilitated friendships that SalesCo CSOs valued more than any other aspect of work. Furthermore, these work teams also facilitated knowledge sharing between CSOs which helped improve the job functions and assisted in skill development. As Belt, Richardson and Webster (2002) also determined through their research, the development of a 'team spirit' and sense of collectivism achieved through team working was instrumental in creating a committed and motivated work force. Teams were used as a means of facilitating positive and collaborative social relations between CSOs, and were viewed as a social network; the primary objective of which was to support team members in their day-to-day activities. These relationships represented the greatest source of satisfaction for CSOs, and were thus the most important determinant of the quality of working life in this case study. Drawing further symmetry with Belt et al's (2002) findings was the discovery that interactions between CSOs were actively encouraged by the organisation through the deliberate recruitment of 'sociable' individuals, and the organising and funding of regular team based activities. Combined with the development of a supportive coaching culture, these factors formed the basis of why CSOs most enjoyed working in the call centre, and why they continued to work there. Cross, Barry and Garavan (2006) encountered similar results in their empirical case study research into the psychological contract of CSOs. Here, satisfaction for most of the CSOs also came first and foremost, from supportive colleagues. As was the case in this study, those in Cross et al's (2006) research referred to the friendliness of other CSOs as a source of contentment that contributed significantly to their overall well being and satisfaction with the job.

The stark contrast between the GovtCo and SalesCo employee's experience of workplace relationships have several implications for organization and management theory and practice. We noted earlier that the need for connectedness is a universal human need. In this context, the findings of this study highlight the difference in the QWL experiences of GovtCo and SalesCo employees. We propose that the accommodation of the need to connect at SalesCo is a significant contributor to stronger work relationships and consequently, the positive QWL experiences of its employees. On the

other hand, we propose that the promotion of work teams to merely facilitate greater control at GovtCo does not generate stronger work relationships and positive QWL experiences. Thus, there appears to be a need for greater accommodation of the human need for connectedness in the call center industry.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The notion of connectedness at the workplace level opens up numerous doors of inquiry, particularly in the call centers context where the work is typically highly individualised and isolating. Whether HR practices are at the high or low end of the scale, it is clearly evident from these examples and the call centre research, that those HR practices will influence worker reactions in relation to levels of commitment, satisfaction, stress, trust, security, stability, turnover and absence rates. A major barrier against the implementation of measures aimed at increasing employee morale however, is the lack of organisational commitment to such initiatives. More specifically, call centre managers often feel they have little control over market pressures, and thus, feel they have little power in controlling retention problems. As a result, they express a 'take it or leave it' approach to the absence of commitment inducing initiatives.

The notion of social 'connectedness' represents a potentially useful avenue for exploring the nature of work organization, and the implications represented for employee wellbeing in call centre workplaces. Whilst this study provides an exploratory glimpse into issues of connectedness in two call centers, more questions are raised than are answered. In particular, this study raises the need for research that identifies organizational attributes that promote or hinder connectedness in call centres, and in particular, the impact of connectedness on employee satisfaction, morale, and the quality of work life. The relevance of this research is also applicable to a broader range of workplaces and occupations. In this context, cross-cultural studies may provide an insight into the value of connectedness across different cultural organizational settings, while industry specific studies may reveal particular themes that are associated within similar work settings.

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Table 1: Call Centre Type and Location

	GovtCo	SalesCo
Location	Newcastle	Melbourne
Sector/ industry	Public/ Government Services	Private/ Outsourcer
Type	In-house/capacity as outsourcer	Outsourcer
Size	226 seats	1400 seats
Age	13 years	14 years
Types of calls	Inbound & Outbound	Inbound & Outbound
Union presence	49 per cent unionised	No presence on site
Turnover	Under 10 per cent	Under 10 per cent
Call Centre operators	18	26
Supervisory staff	6	8
Managers	3	4