Monitoring And Surveillance In Call Centres: Some Responses From Australian Workers

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Abstract

The call centre industry has grown rapidly both in Australia and overseas. Research on the industry has been wide-ranging, with one strand of the research involving a reassessment of labour process debates about managerial control and employee resistance. This reassessment has been partially sparked by the distinct technological features of call centre operations. Technical systems in call centres automatically distribute calls, and management have acquired an increased capability to measure and monitor employee performance and behaviour. These advances have led some scholars to argue that new heightened forms of control have emerged within the call centre industry. This article examines the extent and nature of monitoring in the call centres of two large telecommunications firms and analyses the way customer service representatives (CSRs) responded to such conditions. The article questions whether increased monitoring and surveillance, characteristic of the industry, can be conceptualised as a new form of totalising labour control. It suggests that control has not proved to be complete. As in other workplaces, workers have been able to undertake a variety of actions that attempt to restore a sense of power over their work conditions.

The Australian Call Centre Industry

Australian call centres currently number around 4,000, in industries such as banking, public utilities, airlines, information technology, and telecommunications. Of the 200,000 employees in the call centre industry, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) estimates that around 15 to 20 per cent are unionised. Unionised call centres are generally located in the public or ex-public sector such as the airlines, while employees in other industries including telecommunications and banking are considerably less unionised. The contract call centres have proven to be the most difficult to organise (Interview ACTU Organiser, 2001).

Australian call centres vary widely in terms of size, industry location, labour market and the types of the labour-management policies and practices they implement. However, there are common areas of concern for operators and observers of the industry. Issues such as employee burnout, turnover and absenteeism have become closely associated with the industry. Average turnover rates in the industry are around 22 per cent per annum but can go up to 75 per cent. Turnover is highest in Sydney and Melbourne, leading some organisations to move to regional areas where wages are lower and turnover less prevalent (Call Centre Research, 1999, 57; ACA Research, 2000, 2001).

Another feature of the industry is the heavy use of employee monitoring. Some employees are now forming 'Big Brother' committees in response to increased managerial monitoring, and the mainstream media have also picked up the issue (Frenkel & Donoghue, 1996: 13). One newspaper article on Tellcorp details how a central computer was equipped to monitor how employees spend every second of their day. The author describes how the technology monitored:

> the precise time the employee took to complete each "wrap up" (the administrative work relating to an inquiry); how long each employee took for each meal break; how long it took when someone stopped work to go to the toilet. Every week, the computer generates a printout that ranks and charts each work team's relative performance. Management benchmarks the data against the world's best practice to drive a speed-up in the response rates for telephone inquiries. (Long, 1996, 16)

For telephone operators the jobs most likely to be monitored include average time per call, measured by automated call distribution (ACD) systems. For customer service representatives (CSRs) they include time per customer, number and type of transaction measured by call distribution systems and computer tabulation. As the following excerpt from an International Labour Organisation (ILO) Report indicates, the telephone industry provides some graphic illustrations of the way computers can be used to measure and direct employee output:

> A typical operator handles more than 1,100 calls in a seven-and-a-half-hour shift. The operator has absolutely no control over when the next call will be routed to her. A central computer determines if the operator receives three calls in a row or 300 in a row. The operator is required to complete each call in about 30 seconds or less. If the operator fails to handle her calls within the prescribed 30-second average work time (AWT), then the operator can be disciplined or dismissed. The emphasis on qualitative measurement places operators in the anxiety-producing dilemma of having to choose between performing their duties in a manner that satisfies the needs of the public or attaining the average work time dictated by the company computer. (ILO, 1993: 329)

Given the level of monitoring that occurs within call centres, and the repetitive nature and the relentless flow of work, a growing body of research leans towards the conclusion that call centre operators have to contend with an 'assembly line in the head' (Taylor & Bain, 1999). Given the nature of many call centre operations, this analogy may be depressingly accurate. It raises an important underlying question: Do call centre operations represent a fundamental departure from traditional control strategies?

Conceptualising Complete Control

Practices such as recording phone calls and voice mail, looking through computer files, or videotaping of employees is a growing feature of many workplaces. As indicated below, monitoring practices are particularly prevalent in the communications and call centre industry. But what does this mean for the way that we conceptualise managerial control?

Advances in technology and greater competition in services have led scholars to suggest that managerial control has reached unprecedented heights. Zuboff highlighted the limitless potential of information technology where:

> the counterpoint of the central tower is the video screen. The web of windows is replaced by procedures for data entry such as microprocessors built into operating equipment... Information systems can alter many of the classic contingencies of the superior-subordinate relationship... they can transmit the presence of the omniscient observer and so induce compliance without the messy conflict-prone exertions of reciprocal relations. (Zuboff, 1998: 322, 323)

Looking specifically at communications and call centre work, others have drawn analogies with traditional control systems, conceptualising 'the tyranny of the assembly line...(as)... a Sunday school picnic compared to the control management exercise in computer technology' (Fernie & Metcalf, 1997: 3). It is alleged that within call centres 'the agents are constantly visible and the *supervisor's power...rendered perfect'*, with the result that the actual use of this power becomes unnecessary (Fernie & Metcalf, 1997: 10, italics added).

Such post-modern analysis of omnipotent managerial power located 'everywhere and nowhere' results in perceptions that employees are straightjacketed by managerial control. Drawing on Weber's imagery of the 'iron-cage' of bureaucracy, Barker (1993: 433) concludes that 'concertative control' at "ISE Communications" controlled employees' actions 'more powerfully and completely than the former system'. Similarly, Blau and Schoerherr (1971) analyse how 'insidious control' rendered direct managerial control obsolete, and Sewell identifies the way in which vertical managerial surveillance combines with horizontal teamwork and peer pressure to create what he describes as an over-riding 'chimerical control' (Sewell, 1998: 397).

More detailed research on call centres has raised important debate about whether managerial control in these workplaces represents a new heightened form of managerial control, as alluded to above, or whether it represents traditional control/resistance models of labour management. McKinlay and Taylor's research on "PhoneCo" indicates that '(t)eam-based work organisation and an empowerment ideology (did) not eliminate the control imperative from the workplace'. PhoneCo emphasised 'total customer satisfaction', and the psychological contract they created with their employees reinforced corporate commitment. 'Psychological types' were identified and human resource techniques were emphasised (McKinlay & Taylor, 1996: 200, 285, 289). However, despite high commitment strategies, the study indicates that worker involvement schemes did not eliminate employee

resistance to managerial directives. PhoneCo employees resisted peer review and, although endorsing teamwork, resisted the disciplinary objectives associated with such structures.

Similarly, Taylor's research suggests that 'employee internalization of attempted normative and discursive controls must not be assumed even when worker behaviour may indicate "consent"' (Taylor, 1998: 100). As Ogbonna notes, compliance and commitment can be strongly inter-related, with the former giving the illusion of the latter (Ogbonna, 1992).

Call centres are major sites of managerial power and control. However they also spawn varying levels of opportunity for employee resistance. Though management is well placed to monitor employee activities, research suggesting that they have achieved total control ignores the ongoing need to gain employee co-operation and commitment. While many call centres utilise extensive surveillance and monitoring systems, they often do so in combination with worker involvement schemes designed to elicit commitment. For example Taylor and Bain's study (1999: 107) of over one hundred Scottish call centres found that 98 per cent used team briefings, 69 per cent suggestion schemes, 44 per cent quality circles, 83 per cent newsletters, and 54 per cent videos. Similarly, Australian research undertaken in 1998 indicated that three quarters of call centre operators were organised around team structures (ACA Research, 1998: 19).

Frenkel et al (1999) highlight the varying experience of service, sales and knowledge workers. While distinguishing more traditional forms of work organisation based on regimentation and coercion and opposing empowered models of work organisation, the authors indicate that service workers experienced both elements of discretion and coercion in their work. Therefore, though new technologies have allowed organisations greater opportunities to monitor and evaluate the output of their employees, the characterisation of management enslaving workers within a prison of total managerial control is inaccurate and oversimplified. They suggest that, though the call centre industry generated huge amounts of data to monitor CSR output, 'this did not necessarily mean that workers viewed themselves as trapped in an electronic panopticon' (Frenkel et al, 1999: 141, 268). Much depended on how the information was being used.

A further problem with analyses suggesting new forms of managerial control is the depiction of the employment relationship and managerial processes as a more coherent and rational process than it may typically be (Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995: 620). Armstrong suggests that a central feature of management is the agency relationship – a relationship that involves processes such as trust and performance monitoring rather than a set of static and objective tasks and techniques that can just be applied in the workplace (Armstrong, 1989). Indeed the managerial process is not a homogenous and coherent process that strategically implements organisational policies in a vacuum. Given the contingent nature of organisational activity and the unpredictable nature of organisational actors, the potential for resistance both between and within managerial processes may be significant.

There is little disagreement that call centres have considerable opportunity to monitor and control their employees' activities. However firms often introduce a raft of human

resource strategies designed to ameliorate the negative impact of monitoring and work intensification. Part of the response may be the introduction of 'soft' human resource policies involving incentives and teamwork. Alternatively, management may take a 'sacrificial' strategy, involving managerial acceptance of high turnover and the frequent replacement of burnout employees with motivated and enthusiastic employees (Wallace et al, 2000). Managers in one study believed that:

> Attrition is very healthy in a call centre, very costly, but very healthy. Because of the stressful nature of the job and because you want these people to keep constant energy and enthusiasm, it does the organisation some good if you can pump in some fresh blood. (cited in Callaghan & Thompson, 2001: 33)

Similarly, Callaghan and Thompson (2002) suggest that the impact of poor working conditions can be reduced by targeted recruitment in call centres. This involves the identification of recruits with suitable personalities, including an enthusiastic and positive attitude. The ability to internalise managerial directives about service delivery was important, and, given the repetitiveness and mundane nature of the work, survival skills as well as communication skills were also needed (Callaghan & Thompson, 2002).

The fact that firms introduce policies to soften the blow of employee monitoring and work intensification indicates that management remain concerned to foster commitment and co-operation. Technology can be used to control the pace of work, and workplace culture can be used to reinforce managerial control. However, managerial control does not render employees powerless. Like many other workers, call centre operators respond to their conditions of work in a variety of ways. It is true that collective industrial action is often extremely difficult to undertake. If staff refuse to work, management can re-route calls to those offices not undertaking industrial action. The ability to respond collectively is also undermined by the individual nature of the work and by poor unionisation rates within many call centres. However, as indicated below, employees do respond to their conditions of work in collective ways. Individual employees implement a variety of tactics that allow them to cope with or challenge policies and practices of control. As such, CSRs do manage to gain some power over the conditions in which they work.

The Cases: Servo & Tellcorp

The material presented in this article results from a combination of one-hour semi-structured audio taped interviews, telephone interviews and written structured interviews undertaken between 1994 and 1997 in Servo and Tellcorp, the two main telecommunication firms in Australia. In total 60 interviews were undertaken, comprising 29 employees, 7 union officials and 24 managerial staff. Non-participant observation of team meetings and the labour process also took place. A qualitative approach was chosen because the study was concerned with how managerial policies were experienced at the workplace and how employees responded, collectively, individually, formally and informally to such policies and practices.

The distinctiveness of the case studies, in terms of attributes such as market segmentation, employment practices and workforce composition, means that the findings cannot be generalised to other Australian call centres. The context in which work takes place has a significant influence over the relationship between management and employees. However, given the common technology used in the industry and the similar way work is organised in many call centres, Australian and international call centre workers may recognise many of the issues raised here.

During the period of deregulation in the 1990s, telecommunications firms increasingly expanded their call centre operations. These centres employed CSRs to undertake services such as selling, marketing, account management, preparation of billing information, acceptance of customer complaints and requests for service, within the generic category of 'customer service' (Telecommunications Industry Training Advisory Board, 1994: 15).

During the 1990s, the larger of the two main firms, Tellcorp, which had been in operation since the turn of the century, adopted spasmodic downsizing campaigns. Staff numbers wavered between around 85,000 in 1990 and 65,000 in 1998. Around 4,500 full-time and 795 part-time workers were employed in the sales and customer service areas of the organisation researched here. By contrast Servo, which was only established in 1992, employed 1,510 of their 5,838 staff in the sales and service areas. Of these sales and service staff, 744 were female full-time employees, 21 were female part-time employees, 736 were male full-time employees and 9 were male part-time employees (Budde 1996/1997: 54; Internal Company Documents).

Apart from size, the two firms were different in several other respects. Due to its history as a government department, Tellcorp retained relatively high levels of unionism until recently. Despite substantial rationalisation in the number of unions with which it negotiated agreements during the 1980s and early 1990s, union representation remained around 90 per cent of employees in the early 1990s (Australian and Overseas Telecommunications Corporation, 1992). However, since the early 1990s union membership has been seriously reduced and collective enterprise agreements have been progressively replaced by individual Australian Workplace Agreements (van den Broek, 2001; Long, 2000).

From the beginning, Servo laid some firm groundwork for individualised relations with their employees. Their elaborate recruitment and induction processes ensured that the firm did not employ CSRs who had accumulated 'old baggage' from other corporate environments. This strategy was designed to help Servo mould their recruits into the 'right sort' of employee (Interview Centre Manager, 1995; Interview Employee, 1995). It generally involved the recruitment of younger inexperienced staff. As the senior human resource manager stated:

> It's very easy to get someone to embrace a certain culture if it's their first or second job rather than their last job. If a more mature person has a certain mindset, then to change that is very difficult. (Interview Senior Manager, 1995)

Servo had a firmly-established corporate culture that undermined workplace trade unionism. Their virtual greenfield status and accompanying individual human resource approach to bargaining resulted in the negotiation of an Enterprise Flexibility Agreement that operated between 1994 and 1997. The agreement restricted union intervention in workplace matters and assisted in keeping union membership rates below 5 per cent throughout the research period (van den Broek, 1997; Interview Industrial Organiser, 1994).

Despite their different backgrounds, both firms during the 1990s advocated similar labour-management practices based on a human resource model. For example, Tellcorp and Servo introduced various rewards and incentives to workers who achieved above-average targets, and senior management undertook regular visits to regional call centres to reward individual CSRs and teams. As well as enlisting employee involvement through teamwork structures, both organisations encouraged social and recreational events and fostered direct managerial relations and performance-based pay structures. The technological infrastructure and the way work was organised were also similar. CSRs were organised around self-managed teams that specialised in a particular product or service, and they were required to remain at their desks logged into their computer for the major part of the day. Staff within both organisations worked with headsets connecting Video Display Units (VDU) and telephone technology at workstations situated in open-planned offices.

The remaining part of the paper focuses on employee responses to control strategies. Firstly, the research provides background information describing the conditions of work within the call centres of the two firms. Although much could be said about managerial control within employment and industrial relations areas, this section particularly focuses on managerial control of the way work is organised. In the subsequent section examples of worker responses and the factors influencing levels of co-operation and resistance are examined. Taken together, these two sections identify the control strategies used by the two telecommunications firms and the distinct ways CSRs responded to the way work was organised.

Control Strategies At Servo And Tellcorp

The physical environment of Tellcorp and Servo call centres is a familiar one. The open plan office design revealed that CSRs worked within teams that specialised in a particular product or service, such as mobile telephone services, and were organised around particular customer groups, such as residential or business customers. Motivational mobiles situated above a team's workstations encouraged teamwork, commitment and quality performance and promoted campaigns to improve sales of particular product lines. Messages such as "MOMENTS OF TRUTH 80% of calls must be answered in 12 seconds" were visible on the floor (Personal Observation). Whiteboards, often located beside each team, reinforced the importance of the group's daily output. Amongst the most dominating visual features of the workplace were the large display boards placed prominently throughout the office.

These boards indicated various statistics, including the number of calls feeding through the automated call distribution (ACD) system, production targets, queue times and call completion times.

Throughout their exchange with customers, CSRs were expected to provide detailed product or service information, encourage sales and process billing inquiries in as quick a time as possible. Customer complaints were an important aspect to the job and representatives were expected to expend what Hochschild calls 'emotional labour' in the course of performing their tasks (Hochschild, 1983). Most importantly, the 'wrap-time', which was the time it took to complete the task while off the phone, was to be kept to a minimum. As indicated below, each stage of the call could be monitored, and statistics were generated which measured both the quality and quantity aspects of each call.

Though it varied with departments, CSRs at Servo were generally expected to take calls on the first minute after arriving at work and, apart from break times, to be at their desk and be available to take calls for 80 per cent of the day. Daily reports, which listed the number of calls taken by each CSR, the average time taken to complete the call, how many outgoing calls the CSR made and how long these calls took, were available to team leaders and members. Results for each sales campaign were measured and results were displayed on whiteboards visible to all CSRs on the floor (Internal Company Document; Interview Employee 1996; Interview Team Leader, 1996).

Within Servo, management utilised three key performance indicators (KPIs) through which they were able to assess each CSR's daily output. The first indicator monitored the CSR's service level. This involved the completion of service objectives including benchmarked time periods for call completion. CSRs were aware that the higher the number of calls they took the better would be the performance statistics they accrued, irrespective of the nature of the inquiry. Emphasis on output was counterposed to 'behavioural objectives' embedded in the assessment of service quality. The second KPI assessed the CSR's 'behavioural' qualities, using a customer service index that measured customer satisfaction. The third indicator involved 'call monitoring' of each CSR's interface with customers. By remotely monitoring calls, management could assess how CSRs opened up calls, utilised open and close probes and clarified issues with customers (Internal Company document). After monitoring was completed, worksheets listing employee and customer conversations were distributed to CSRs, with speed and quality of each call the main, albeit contradictory, priorities (Interview Team Leader 1996; Interview Centre Manager, 1995; Interview Employees, 1996 & 1997).

Tellcorp CSRs also worked with ACD systems, enabling a constant queue of calls to be directed to individual employees in the quickest time. Throughout the day, Tellcorp CSRs were required to enter a code outlining the reason for any absences from their workstations, thereby measuring 'unproductive time'. Various expectations about performance were established for CSRs. Team leaders sought to ensure that CSRs answered phones within 12 seconds in 90 per cent of cases, and successful and abandoned calls were benchmarked at 97 per cent and 3 per cent respectively. Management could ascertain when CSRs' phones were on 'not ready' settings, indicating whether they were undertaking

'wrap-up' tasks rather than 'talk-time' with customers. 'Talk-time' represented the amount of time spent conversing directly with customers on the phone, and 'wrap-time' described the amount of time for completing administrative tasks after the customer had hung up (Interview Team Leader, 1997; Internal Company document). In order to maximise talk time and deal with waiting customers, extended wrap time was discouraged.

The ACD system could predict the number of employees needed to process customer demands on a daily basis. It assigned workloads, compared daily output to chart future workload allocation and analysed employee performance. It also listed team availability as compared to branch availability, team adherence to schedules as compared to branch adherence to schedules, and the call's contribution to overall revenue as a per centage. This system allowed management to 'recognise achievement and respond to under-achievement, empower through the assignment of responsibility and accountability and to measure performance' (Interview Team Leader, 1997).

Such performance monitoring and surveillance is not uncommon in the call centre industry. Both case-study organisations relied heavily on technologies that could closely monitor employee output. This involved measuring the number of calls and the time taken, as well as the quality of customer and CSR exchanges. However, as several studies indicate, this dependence did not result in the electronic entrapment of CSRs (Frenkel et al, 1999; McKinlay and Taylor, 1996).

The options open to CSRs were limited to varying degrees in the two case-study firms. For example, while centralised computers monitored CSRs' daily activities within both firms, the level of influence this had over pay and promotion differed between the two firms. Within Servo, statistics played an integral part in influencing promotion prospects and bonus allocations. Within Tellcorp, however, management were not able to use these statistics for individual incentive pay schemes or disciplinary procedures during this period. To some degree this was due to successful union campaigns that restricted the use of individualised payment systems at Tellcorp (Interview Industrial Organiser, 1997; Internal Company Document). This difference may account for the varying levels of peer pressure, both within and between teams, evident in the two firms.

Other factors could influence the level and forms of employee responses to monitoring and surveillance. As already indicated, Servo developed a strong corporate culture of individual relations with their employees. As the first direct competitor to the long-standing telecommunications operator, management allocated considerable start-up costs to regular social events and spent a good deal of time and money developing a culture of commitment. The targeted recruitment of young graduates, the firm's smaller size and the promise of advancement and growth could have contributed to a greater sense of commitment, compared to the morale problems that were developing as Tellcorp downsized. Servo's determination to limit formal collective representation meant that employee responses to work organisation were more likely to be individual and informal.

Worker Responses: Peer Pressure And Resistance

Given the competitive nature of the industry, call centre staff were under considerable pressure to perform, in terms of both the quality and the quantity of calls processed. This led to significant levels of work intensification and peer pressure between and within teams. As indicated above, Servo management recorded and distributed CSR output on a daily basis. If a CSR's daily target was not attained and the team leader considered that the time he or she was available to receive customer calls was below standard, a discussion took place between the team leader and the CSR. In addition, given that pay was based on team productivity, measured through time available and 'log in' information, peer pressure could come into play. As one Servo manager stated, this is where the team dynamics kicked in. She observed that some CSRs might suggest that others were 'letting the side down or you're having too much sick leave' (Interview Middle Manager, 1995).

Confrontations about behavioural issues could easily develop from such an individualised and competitive system (Interview Middle Manager 1995; Interview Team Leader 1995). One team leader recalled an incident where one team member was playing "Solitaire" on his computer rather than being logged into the computer to take calls. Another member, noticing that he was 'slacking off', sarcastically remarked that once he had finished the game they could play another one together. The attention this generated from his peers was enough to encourage the offending team member to resume taking calls immediately. As the team leader noted:

> the environment we've created is that your performance will affect the team, so it's a natural reaction that the team works together...[My job is]...not to address them for not pulling their weight but to encourage them to pull their weight (Interview Team Leader, 1996).

Peer assessments could also affect recruitment and retention. One team leader stated that inevitably team members themselves make demands, therefore helping to decide whether an employee 'fits in' (Interview Team Leader, 1995). In this way team members could become gatekeepers to the recruitment process and the maintenance of corporate values and culture management.

Pressure to perform was exacerbated by the fact that team member's productivity influenced payment structures and promotional prospects within Servo. One, recently promoted, CSR indicated that 'one of the first things (the interviewers) look at are skills such as how you achieved impressive results' and your ability to work within a team (Interview Employee, 1996). As such, conflict between management and employees could be displaced to conflict among individual team members or among teams.

Work intensification and peer pressure associated with the team structure also existed within Tellcorp, but they were not as pervasive. One CSR who had been employed at Tellcorp for seven years stated that:

> It's a team effort. You don't want the team to be let down. They (team leaders) have eight teams and they keep showing these bits of paper and they say "this team got so much"...I don't particularly want the $20 coupon that they're offering. I'd say forget it, but because

> it's a team thing you tend to work a little harder because you want the others to benefit. Some of them are keen as mustard to get there, so you don't want to be the one dragging the chain. You don't want to be the one to slow them down so you do your extra little bit. (Interview Employee, 1997)

Another recruit who had only been there for 18 months responded that:

> I'm probably the keen-as-mustard sort of person. I respect people who do try, but also in my case I find that it gets frustrating because you get some people who just can't be bothered... You can get some teams where 80 per cent of them do the work and 20 per cent of them are relaxing. Whereas that 20 per cent could go to someone who deserves it...I won't mention names, but I'll mention it to my supervisor. (Interview Employee, 1997)

Both Tellcorp and Servo CSRs were expected to take 'ownership' of work tasks and were given increased responsibility to service customers' needs (Interview Senior Manager, 1997). A greater emphasis on sales made CSRs' jobs more repetitive and monotonous and limited the opportunities for job rotation and follow-up administrative tasks. Complaints of eye damage from over-exposure to computer screens and back problems from sitting all day in the one position worsened morale within both firms (Interview Employees, 1995 & 1997). In the face of the considerable managerial and peer pressure to meet and exceed output targets, some CSRs resisted managerial directives, while others responded to the issues of overwork and monitoring in more indirect ways.

Collective Union And Non-Union Responses

Due to the low union representation and the anti-union sentiments expressed by many managers within the firm, collective action rarely occurred at Servo (van den Broek, 2001). However, the issue of increased workloads and managerial pressure to reduce call-waiting times did prompt some collective responses. For example, thirteen Servo CSRs, who were employed in an area of the firm with some union members, collectively voiced their resistance to the introduction of 'call forcing' (whereby calls are automatically dropped in to the headsets of CSRs). During their action, the CSRs presented their supervisor with a petition registering their opposition to the introduction of call forcing and their inability to deal effectively with customer inquiries. The petition indicated their belief that customer queues developed from under-staffing rather than from unsatisfactory employee performance of existing staff (Interview Employee, 1995; Internal Company Document). It stated that:

> as there has been no quality circle or our voices heard regarding this matter, we just thought that you should know what we think. The...queue is 50 per cent outbound and 50 per cent inbound - the problem lies with the fact that we are understaffed, not the period of time it takes us to answer the phone (Interview Employee 1995).

The supervisor indicated that he would not respond to the petition, stating that if CSRs had any issues to be taken up they would need to be taken up individually rather than as a group.

While union membership was in decline at Tellcorp, it was still around 40 per cent nationally in the late 1990s (Interview Union Official and Organiser, 2001). As a result, collective action at Tellcorp was more official and formalised than at Servo. In the period before full deregulation and privatisation of Tellcorp, there were mixed relations with correspondent unions. After a period of intense conflict with unions over the introduction of individual contracts in 1993, a period of co-operation prevailed. During this time, unions were involved in negotiating collective agreements that limited the introduction of individual contracts and installed competency-based training provisions. This enabled the unions to influence the pace and nature of workplace reform. The unsuccessful attempt to introduce individual contracts and subsequent strategies to repair the damage caused by the 1993 dispute led to management initiatives to implement a 'participative approach' to labour relations. After 1993, a participative model of industrial relations provided unions with increased consultation in major change initiatives and legitimated the unions' central place within Tellcorp. It also signalled management's retreat from a short-term adversarial and individualistic approach toward a more co-operative and collective long-term strategy. However, by 1997 attention was increasingly focused on developing a new era of employee relations. New senior managerial personnel reinforced the sanctity of managerial prerogative and encouraged the marginalisation of union activities (van den Broek, 2001).

Individual Responses

Absenteeism and turnover constitute the most overt individual and external responses to the conditions of work at call centres. Quantitative data indicate that call centre agents have higher stress levels than coal or gold miners, with the cost of stress-related absenteeism assessed at $150 per employee in 1998 (ACA Research, 1998: 3). As indicated earlier, turnover may be encouraged by managers. One Servo manager felt that after 12 to 18 months in telemarketing employees were 'hitting the end of the road'. Within his telemarketing department, he assessed turnover rates at approximately 60 per cent (Interview Team Leader, 1995). Similarly, each call centre worker in Tellcorp took off an average of 12 sick days during 1998. Central determinants of absenteeism here included job satisfaction, management of wrap time and lack of job variety (Deery & Iverson, 1998: 6). The problem of turnover and absenteeism has become closely associated with the call centre industry, but there are other ways in which CSRs have responded to their conditions of work.

Remote monitoring was implemented to ensure quality customer service. However, CSRs also sought to retain some power over this process. Although not informed about when they were being monitored, CSRs 'learnt to recognise' when monitoring was happening. By identifying when team leaders were absent from the floor, and identifying when monitoring was occurring, CSRs were tacitly foiling managerial monitoring. Similarly, one CSR, who believed that 'everyone was intimidated by their stats', maintained a regular diary noting why he was unavailable at particular times of the day, so that it could be produced to management on request. These provide examples of how CSRs could limit the usefulness and overcome the purpose of monitoring equipment (Interview Employees, 1996).

Another way CSRs sought to control the pace of their work was by engaging in the regular practice of 'flicking'. Thus CSRs sometimes hung up on customers, redirected calls to other areas of the corporation or to other firms, or left customers waiting for lengthy periods (Interview Employees, 1995, 1996, 1997). At Tellcorp, many hung up on customers or flicked customers back into the queue, with one employee stating that between 10 per cent and 20 per cent of customers were 'flicked' each day (Radio Interview, 2000).

The issue of monitoring did not seem as important to CSRs as the issue of managerially-enforced output targets and work intensification. One survey of Tellcorp call-centre operators revealed that, while 40 per cent of CSRs disliked performance statistics used to measure performance, 92 per cent expressed concern over excessive workloads. Similarly Bain and Taylor's survey of 108 Scottish call centres found that 82 per cent of CSRs thought that output targets put pressure on them, while under 22 per cent felt it came from computer monitoring (Bain & Taylor, 1999: 10; Deery & Iverson, 1998: 8). The issue of excessive workloads could also result in CSRs directing their opposition to those who allocated it.

Customer call advisers (CCAs), who forecast daily call loads, set the work output for the subsequent two weeks. Team leaders advise CCAs of the team's weekly schedule and then allocate team workloads and phone availability within the framework of the CCA output targets. However, team leaders and members were often in conflict because the CCA was motivated by productivity statistics, while the team might be more concerned with training, the management of sick leave and the quality of service delivery. Frenkel and Donoghue's survey highlights the tensions that could develop. In their study on call centres in the Australian banking industry, they found that schedulers report to their own manager, with the schedulers responsible for quantitative goals and the team leaders and team managers responsible for quality. This 'lack of integration between these two sets of goals creates confusion, tension and frustration which has negative impacts on service delivery and employee satisfaction' (Frenkel & Donoghue, 1996: 8; Interview Middle Manager, 1997).

CCAs who monitor customer queues exerted considerable pressure on CSRs. For example CCAs might contact team leaders and query why one of their CSRs had been in 'wrap up' for unsatisfactory lengths of time. One CSR stated that 'you didn't feel threatened, you just felt stressed' by the situation (Interview Employee, 1997). Another felt that her team were unconcerned by the statistics, but she expressed annoyance that the CCA could ring to check why CSRs were in 'wrap-up' for longer than the standard seven minutes. She explained that the CCA would:

> ring up our team leader and ask 'what are you doing, are you OK? Do you need help?', and if we're not ready and we're doing an order then we have to log off, quickly finish what we're doing and log back on as soon as we can. We have to explain every little step that we're doing. Even going to the toilet, everyone needs to know about it. (Interview Employee, 1997)

This tension between CCA and team leaders was exacerbated by various factors. For example, the quantity of in-coming calls was set by the CCA's assessment of how many calls each team was able to process. However, circumstances might upset their forecast. For example, complex requests might increase wrap time, and unforeseen sickness or the introduction of new products that required training might overload the system. This meant that CSRs could face unrealistic workloads, with extra pressure being placed on an already-stressed system. One middle manager summed up the feeling of many by observing that CSRs get 'quite hysterical about it at times, it's a very emotional issue in the workplace' (Interview Middle Manager, 1997; Interview Team Leader, 1997).

CSRs in the two case-study organisations felt that an increased focus on statistics was encouraging a 'worse service'. This assessment also comes through other quantitative data. One survey of Tellcorp staff revealed that, while 98 per cent of CSRs thought customer service was important, 72 per cent did not believe that management had a high regard for service quality and 66 per cent thought they were inadequately rewarded for customer service. Similarly, a recent study of a call centre (Wallace et al, 2000) indicates that there was a considerable difference between the espoused and perceived objectives of employees and management. The majority of employees believed that the central managerial priority was low cost, high sales output (Wallace et al, 2000: 176; Interview Employee, 1997; Deery & Iverson, 1998: 12, 13).

Conclusion

Work organisation within call centres has undergone considerable change in the past decade, both overseas and in Australia. As in other areas, the pace and repetition of work has intensified. Though patterns of control and employee response in call centres vary, this research indicates that the introduction of ACD systems and VDU telephone technology has increased managerial ability to monitor employee performance and intensified CSR workloads. It also indicates that, while many employees complied with managerial directives, other employee responses continued to indicate considerable discontent about work conditions. Sophisticated technology has increased call centre management's ability to monitor CSR output, but managerial control is not total. CSRs took various forms of action to resist, and/or reluctantly comply with, the increased workloads and monitoring. Influenced by a variety of external and internal constraints, these actions were taken collectively, individually, formally and informally.

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