Selling Skills or Selling Out? Manufacturing Educational Need for Semi-Skilled and Un-Skilled Work

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Suzanne Hamilton

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Abstract

This thesis uses interviews, personal experience and documentary evidence to explore the day to day reality of a call centre environment, and uses this to examine: surveillance issues with reference to five theories, and concluding that Braverman's control theories are alive and thriving in the call centre environment; discuss skill; and address the question of who benefits from the provision of basic qualifications. It argues that although benefits have moved in favour of industry, in the call centre sector which already provides inhouse training, it is the institutions offering call centre qualifications that are the sole benefactors.
Introduction

During the last twenty years in Aotearoa/New Zealand, the incidence of full time employment has significantly decreased and more recently, the quality of employment has also evidenced decline. David Thompson (Listener, 4/9/1999) states that one in four workers are now engaged in part-time work, which he describes as predominantly casual, low-paid and insecure. This figure has increased from one in six workers in 1986 and the trend is likely to worsen rather than improve over time, due to factors such as technology and a global drive towards ‘efficiency’. Nonetheless, in recent years the number of training institutions offering vocational qualifications has burgeoned, as have the implications that a (their) specific qualification is the key to successful, rewarding employment. This has occurred alongside government, union and industry rhetoric that a skilled workforce is the only way toward economic recovery and prosperity (Jackson & Jordan 2000)

Currently for example, there are at least four institutions offering call centre certificates, in Christchurch. I work in a call centre, and having done so for just over four years now, have reservations about the usefulness of such a qualification. Aside from customer service skills, the main job requirement is an understanding of, and ability to apply, organizational policies. Such policies of course, apply within and not across organizations, presumably leaving little scope for such a general qualification.
The purpose of this thesis is to examine who benefits from the proliferation of training qualifications, with a focus on the call centre sector. First, drawing upon the views and perspectives of call centre workers, I will examine what call centre work entails, including what skills are required and what the prospects are. Because of the prevalence of monitoring and surveillance within the call centre industry, I will also discuss theories of surveillance, including an assessment of Braverman’s (1974) relevance; before moving on to a brief discussion of skill, with reference to Jackson’s discussion of clerical work; and then compare and discuss the purpose of call centre qualifications in light of uncritical government and industry support for tenets of the human capital theory.

Call Centres – Definition and Overview

Where once a telephonist took calls and routed them to the appropriate person or section within a business or organisation, there is often now a group of staff with the purpose of answering calls and dealing with the inquiries themselves: a sort of one-stop-shop over the telephone. The staff, known as customer service representatives (CSRs), sit at workstations equipped with a computer, headset telephones, pen and paper, and either field customer service inquiries, make outbound calls or a do mixture of both for the duration of their shift.

Due to high costs of the technology required, call centres (also now known as contact centres) were initially used only by large organisations, such as catalogue ordering
companies and airlines reservations centres. Since the early 1990s however, advances in computer software, internet and phone systems have contributed to cheaper technology and now call centres are operated by a wide range of organisations including help desks, government departments, fundraising organisations, and businesses, such as power or telecommunications companies.

The main attraction of the call centre is that they enable organisations to streamline services (by closing branches for example) and reduce organisational costs, while maintaining or even improving productivity (Izzard 1998, Glen 1999). Call centres are now the fastest growing industry in Australia (Four Corners website) and in Britain, where 2% of the workforce are employed in call centres (Holman and Fernie 2000), and annual growth is 50% (ccnews, website). The United States employs seven million CSRs in seventy thousand call centres, with an estimated 20% annual growth (ibid) and worldwide, the industry is worth US$1 trillion (TradeNZ website).

In New Zealand there are 500 call centres employing about 40 000 people (ACA Research, cited in NZ Infotech Weekly, 19/3/2001). With annual growth estimates ranging between 15% and 25%, call centres are the second fastest growing part of the telecommunications market after the internet, and almost $3 billion is spent on call centres a year (ibid; Kennelly 1998). The public and private sectors are actively encouraging international companies to set up their call centres in New Zealand, promoting state of the art technology alongside cheap labour and operational costs. Trade NZ for example, promotes New Zealand as having a well educated population
with low labour costs (TradeNZ website). This statement is then supported by a graph showing how New Zealand call centre representatives earn lower salaries than any of the nations depicted (including Australia, US, UK, Ireland, Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan).

Nearly three quarters of New Zealand call centres are struggling to recruit and retain staff, and turnover is high: while nearly half are maintaining CSR turnover (or ‘churn’ as it is referred to within the industry) below 15 per cent, one third of the call centres have a churn rate between 16 and 32 per cent, and the remainder, over 33 per cent (TMP survey cited in New Zealand Herald 2001). Various reasons have been given for the churn rates, including the intensity and rigid nature of the work (ibid); low pay and conditions due to the predominantly female, and non-unionised, workforce (Larner cited in New Zealand Herald 2001) and low job security (Belanger cited in The Southland Times 2000). Nonetheless, recruitment agencies, which earn an average $2833 per recruited fulltime CSR (NZ Infotech Weekly, 2/7/2001) are promoting the industry as a fun place to work and a career with prospects, such as becoming a trainer or team manager (NZ Herald 2001).
Methodology

My introduction to qualitative research methods came in my final year as an undergraduate student, when I took a paper requiring the completion of three indepth interviews. Having experienced only quantitative methods prior to this, I quickly developed a preference for qualitative research, for two interrelated reasons. First, there is a richness of information, because of the way data is amassed from the experiences, understandings and perceptions of everyday people involved in the situation being researched. This leads on to my next reason, which is the inductive nature of qualitative research, in other words, the theory stems from the data - and because the data is based on the experiences of participants, the research can be said to be truly people-centred.

Of course, the degree to which the theory comes from the data, or whether the data is in fact made to fit any presupposed theories of the researcher can be debated (O’Connor 2001). I have come across examples similar research topics undertaken with similar methods, which present opposing results, and from there, go on to draw different conclusions about the ways people live their lives. Some time ago for example, I read “Passages 2” by Gail Sheehy, in which different stages of womens’ lives are discussed. Of the women over 40 years old who had not had children, a mixture of single women and those in relationships, all expressed severe regrets and a sense of loss or incompleteness; a point that was strongly (and repeatedly) made by the author. In “Without Issue” by Jan Cameron, which looks in depth at couples who do not have children, the women over 40 years of age (and their male partners) were generally
content with the outcome and direction of their lives. Even accounting for the broader topic in “Passages 2” (that is, women’s lives as opposed to the one aspect of them), and for the fact that Cameron includes men, the contrast between these two groups of women is striking, and clearly reflected the stance of each author: Sheehy represents a conservative view on the natural and rewarding childbearing role of women, while Cameron seeks to legitimate an alternative lifestyle choice. Considering this (and this is only one example) leads me to wonder how often researchers conduct investigations that ultimately serve to confirm and reflect personal, and perhaps, societal beliefs.

Voicing similar concerns, O’Connor (ibid) describes three general approaches to qualitative research, with the interpretative role of the researcher – and recognition of it – varying in each one. (The approaches are guides and can overlap). With the interpretivist perspective, the researcher learns about the views and perspectives of the research participant, and uses these as data (as with the other approaches). The researcher does not however, acknowledge the effect of their own interpretation of the data, whereas researchers using the critical paradigm explicitly address their personal worldview in relation to the research process, and analyse the relationship between researcher and research participant. Moreover, the purpose of this research is to empower marginalised groups, by giving voice to their experiences. With poststructuralism, researchers acknowledge their own as well as their participants influences, with the understanding that every individual lives and interprets their experiences with coexisting and sometimes contradictory beliefs and understandings. This is similar to the discourse theory espoused by Honan, Knobel, Baker & Davies
(2000), who further elucidate that the choices and roles undertaken by individuals are always under negotiation, as well as contextual; that is, dependent upon factors such as location, and who is present. In order to minimise factual errors or misinterpretation, van den Hoonard (2001) suggests that researchers send relevant sections of the draft to the community being researched.

Aside from the question of interpretation, academic rigour and personal integrity can also become issues. There are many easy-to-find examples of so-called reputable research which are later discredited; sometimes quite some time after the findings have been published or circulated, and personal benefits (such as employment or status) accrued. Two local and recent examples spring to mind: one such example is the controversial masters thesis by Joel Hayward, denying the Holocaust. Hayward was granted an embargoed the results of his thesis - ensuring complete protection from public scrutiny - and reaped personal benefits: a masters thesis with first class honours and subsequent employment in a teaching position at Massey University (where he progressed to senior lecturer). Each time the embargo was about to expire, Hayward requested, and was granted, a continuance and it was only after one such request was denied that public scrutiny was allowed and the subsequent controversy arose. The other example is one where three Christchurch School of Medicine scientists, who published their findings in a prestigious international biochemistry journal, presented inconclusive data as if it were substantiated (it was not), to support their claims of an activation effect in experiments they had conducted. This was despite previous correspondence among the three that this same information was completely
inconclusive. For me, an interesting similarity between these cases has been the way secrecy has been used to protect the authors: Hayward relied upon the continued embargo on his thesis; while the Dean of the Christchurch School of Medicine ordered a confidential inquiry, insisting that the (internationally published) article was an internal issue. Although institutions may put checks in place in an effort to prevent such occurrences, such as a code of conduct or rules, there is still a reliance on personal integrity, and van den Hoonard (2001) suggests that training researchers in ‘good judgement’ could address this.

Ideally though, researchers must show that data has been collected in a manner that is appropriate to the research topic, and that data has been accurately reported. As I stated earlier, scrupulous research depends upon the willingness and ability of the researcher to reflect upon the impact of his or her role. Furthermore, because the researcher is the instrument (Patton 1990, my italics), the researcher needs to consider the interplay between writing what is effectively an autobiography, and the life stories of the research participants (van den Hoonard, ibid). For these reasons I will describe the events in my life that contributed to my desire to undertake this research.

My Story

Since completing secondary school, I had worked in a variety of customer service positions within a government department, and for a pizza delivery firm, and found customer service to be soul deadening. Having to implement and explain policies that I
did not believe in, to customers who were quick to use verbal abuse and sometimes implied or actual violence - yes, even in pizza delivery – resulted in an increasingly jaded view of life, and I started to wonder what I would end up like if I continued to work in this field. After spending time considering my personal values, I decided to improve my lot by qualifying to work as a community worker. Talking with others in the field, I ascertained that a degree was necessary, and set about achieving a BA in Education, as well as a Certificate in Social Services and undertaking voluntary work with various agencies: all this with the intention of gaining theoretical as well as practical (if unpaid) experience.

Upon completion of these qualifications, I sought employment in a community work sector that was increasingly dependent upon voluntary workers, with few - and highly contested - paid positions. After being unemployed for two months, I swallowed my pride and started attending job interviews in the sector I had previously invested considerable time, effort and money to escape from. Shortly after my first customer service interview, I was offered, and accepted, a position as a half time CSR.

My attitude towards this position and what it represented was cynical and somewhat bitter until two and a half years later, when I managed to obtain a paid, part time position in the community sector. Finally, I could now earn (part of a) living with a sense of pride and achievement. The sense of satisfaction that arose from this flowed over into other areas of my life, even including the call centre position: it became just a job, rather than a daily reminder of failure.
Research Process

After obtaining permission from the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, I informed four of my colleagues of the research aims and asked if they would like to participate in an interview. All responded positively, as well as two CSRs who I know personally and who work in other call centres; both had heard me talking about the research and showed an interest in participating. Each CSR was asked for written consent and given an information form detailing the purpose of the research.

Some questions have been asked about the appropriateness of seeking informed consent for qualitative research. Van den Hoonaad (2001) for example points out the contradiction between safeguarding confidentiality whilst obtaining research participant’s signatures for consent forms. He also makes the point that, unlike most quantitative research, interviews do not entail experimentation, an argument that is further strengthened with the position taken by Honan et al (2000), which is that roles and choices are under constant negotiation. In an interview situation therefore, researcher and participant continually monitor what to say – or omit – and how to say it.

The interviews were guided ones (Patton 1982), allowing for interview participants to tell their own stories in their own words, and ensuring that while the same general questions were asked in each interview, there was leeway to delve into topics arising
that could prove to be of relevance. This approach enables research participants to exert influence regarding content and direction of the interview, and can result in significant insights (van den Hoonoord, 2001). Most of the interviews lasted between one and a half to two hours, with the shortest being fifty minutes, and the longest (spread over two sessions) two and a half hours. Answers or feedback to subsequent questions were sought either by telephone or informally while I was at work. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed, and due to OOS (Occupational Overuse Syndrome) problems I hired typists to transcribe some of the interviews. I paid three typists to transcribe four interviews and each completed a confidentiality form.

My position as a CSR has enabled me to collect further data, and I have made extensive use of data from my personal experiences and as an informal participant observer. Broadly speaking, the former refers to my observations and impressions of events or interactions which have directly included me, while the latter refers to events or interactions which others experienced, and which I have either witnessed, or been informed of by one or more of the people involved. I have also gathered documentary evidence, including workplace circulars and brochures from training institutions.

I found there were a number of issues that arose from being an employee as well as a researcher in the same environment, and will now explain each of these and the approach I took, as this has had at least some impact on which data I included. Firstly, despite the reservations I held about my position as a CSR, I was grateful to have been offered a job, and have honoured all personal commitments I have made with regard to
workplace confidentiality agreements and issues of commercial sensitivity. In any case, my intention is to look at the call centre industry as a whole, and the CSRs I interviewed have worked (at last count) in nine different call centres, in the banking, telecommunications, power and airline industries.

While honouring workplace agreements was easy, working my way through the maze of relationship issues was far more difficult. Associations with my colleagues are pleasant, to the extent that some friendships have developed in the four years I have worked there, and prior to embarking on this research, I had not considered the possibility of conflict between my various roles as colleague, friend and researcher. I was surprised therefore, when in situations I had previously assumed I would use as data-gathering opportunities, to sometimes encounter feelings of discomfort. Upon reflection, this discomfort resulted from a conviction that to collect data in some situations would be to take advantage of the friendship and goodwill I enjoyed with my colleagues. These situations invariably occurred as part of my informal data collection, that is, at those times when spontaneous observation or conversation could yield data relevant to my topic choice. Accordingly, the people involved in these situations were unaware of my intentions as a researcher. Generally, this was no problem, however there were some occasions where I questioned the issue of personal consent: would the person (or people) involved have given this information freely, for example, in a formal interview? Therefore, I have used data from participant observations and informal interviews only where I believe the people involved would have freely offered or described the data if given the choice.
This of course requires my interpretation of the relevant CSRs’ beliefs and values, and thus the possibility of personal errors in judgement. There are two factors however, which work together to balance this predicament: firstly, I have known each CSR for some time and have been able to build a picture (albeit from a personal perspective) of who each person is. Also, each CSR has been offered the opportunity to read this article (as well as to read their transcribed interview, and withdraw any information from it, at any time).

Because I have worked alongside three of the CSRs interviewed, and the remaining two CSRs (from separate call centres) were aware of the fact I work as a CSR, there have been many times in each interview where my understanding was assumed, and verbal information curtailed. This most often took the form of comments, such as ‘you know what it’s like’, in lieu of the explanation or description I was seeking. Although I frequently believed I did know ‘what it was like’, the danger of assuming a shared understanding (or of assuming anything) lies in the possibility that the interviewee might have a different comprehension to mine. Missing out on this information has implications for the accuracy of the data and from there, any discussion of resulting theories. Furthermore, one of the main purposes of an interview is to collect direct quotations from people (Patton 1990): the quotes are the data, and such comments as ‘You know’ or the like convey nothing in terms of information for the reader. What I did to counteract this was to state something along the lines to, ‘yes, I do understand and that even though I work in that same situation, I want to hear in your own words,
what your definition (or understanding or so on) of the (specific) situation is’. This ensured that I was not putting words into CSRs mouths and assisted with obtaining verbal details.

My analysis of the data began after I completed the first interviews. I repeatedly read and reread the transcripts, marking relevant and recurring ideas, and used these to refine subsequent interviews. Over time I developed seven broad categories, and have used data from my personal experiences, participant observations and documentary evidence where it fits into these categories.

After completing the first interviews, I began to question and seriously doubt the value of what I was doing, and my recent reading indicates this has occurred to other researchers also (O’Connor 2001). In the year since these interviews, I have been able to draw out only a few potential reasons and I expect illumination to occur gradually, probably quite some time after this research has been completed. Nonetheless, one of the issues that came to light was the question of who would benefit. As mentioned earlier, researchers operating from the critical paradigm hope to affect positive change for marginalised groups (such as empowerment). Although one of my motivations was to gather information about an issue that I believed to be affecting a sector of the population, I slowly became aware of, then questioned, the implied assumption that giving voice to a group or its issues provides the catalyst needed for change to occur. This left me wondering why I was undertaking research, and from there, to question
what I was doing in assembling others’ experiences, time and energy for my personal
benefit (to complete a thesis).
The CSRs – A Brief Introduction

Doug – Bank Centre

Doug is a 22 year old male from the United Kingdom, with English, Irish and Italian ancestry. He has sixth form certificate, and his work history includes McDonalds, bar work, retail (as a trainee manager) and debt collection, for a major bank in the United Kingdom. Two years ago, Doug immigrated to New Zealand and obtained work as a waiter, while searching for better employment. A short time later he read an advertisement in the local newspaper, requesting call centre staff for a financial institution. His expectations of this position included customer service and a similar level of decision-making to that which he had enjoyed in the United Kingdom. Doug got the position and completed a six week inhouse training course to become a CSR for BankCentre. After four or five months he found he was getting very bored:

The jobs I had in the UK were very decision-making and you had a lot of leeway to make decisions...over millions and millions of dollars in some cases...I found out later on that that wasn't the situation. You really were a parrot and that's not really what I wanted.

In addition to the frustration Doug was feeling with his job, Doug and his team leader had a personality clash which affected the quality of Doug’s life on and off the job. After one year, during which job content remained the same and the personality clash grew worse, Doug left. He began work as a CSR for a large power company, Lightning. Lightning was taken over by another power company, and the new company that
formed sold it’s interest in the power industry, resulting in the closure of the call centre and the loss of jobs for 150 CSRs. (I have yet to catch up with Doug since this occurred).

Fay – Bank Centre

Fay is a 37 year old New Zealander born to New Zealand parents with Scottish, Irish and American ancestry. She passed UE and completed two thirds of a BA before changing her mind to study towards a diploma in Commerce and Management Studies: her observation was that BA graduates ended up unemployed (‘there was (sic) a lot of people churning out BAs and just getting another place in the dole queue’). While studying there she met Tom, her future fiance, who was doing an apprenticeship in electrics. They needed money to get married and set up their life together, so Fay started full time work as a shop assistant, and then as a needle worker sewing feet onto stuffed parrots (‘It was a lovely job for six months…never again.’). The time she put into work and into helping him with his studies meant she had little time or energy for her own, and having completed one year of the diploma she eventually stopped attending.

After the honeymoon Fay worked as a bike shop assistant full time, until she had the first of their two children three years later; upon which, she continued working part time. In 1998, Fay and Tom separated after thirteen years of marriage and Fay needed to increase her income. Work was slowing down at the bike shop so Fay found a job in telemarketing, soliciting donations for charity. She found the commission-only income

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unpredictable and difficult to live on and answered an advertisement in the paper, placed by personnel company Jobplace. Her story continues in text.

Kate – Bank Centre

Kate, 52 years old, was born in New Zealand to parents with Yugoslavian and Irish ancestry. She left school at the age of fifteen with no qualifications, having not quite made the required grade for her papers, and started work in the ledger department with the Bank of New Zealand. Kate left several years later to work as a dental assistant and receptionist, in a sole practice. Kate had always wanted to be a nurse and enjoyed this position, which she learned on the job. She met Jim, a farmer, and they married and had a son. For the next ten years she raised her son and helped her husband on the farm. Once she felt her son was old enough, she began working again, as a bank teller for several years and then transferring to a call centre position within the same bank. Seven years after she started back at work (during which time she and Jim divorced), the bank was taken over by larger one and Kate was informed she would have to reapply for a position in the new company. After attending a group interview (all the other applicants in the group interview were from outside the bank she was working for) Kate was informed she had a position in Bank Centre. She has a mortgage with her second husband Harry and they both need to work well into their 60s to pay this and maintain their standard of living. She has applied unsuccessfully for transfers to other sections within Bank Centre but outside of the call centre. Much as she would like to get a different type of job or win Lotto (‘I don’t want to be sitting with a headset on my head
for the rest of my working days’), she has resigned herself to the likelihood, providing the job lasts, of remaining a CSR until retirement.

_Beth – Phone Centre_

Beth is a 29 year old woman of Maori descent, in a long term relationship with her boyfriend. After completing Sixth Form Certificate in six subjects she left school and worked variously in hairdressing, as a ski instructor and doing hotel work. She then studied business management at university while doing accounts work at a finance company, and at the age of 21, she moved into motel management, running motels in Fox Glacier. She then moved to Australia to become the manager of a marketing company, responsible for 200 staff. Although considering herself shy and somewhat reclusive at this time (to the extent that her office sometimes acted as a refuge from work crises), Trish’s father had considerable experience in management and she could always turn to him for advice.

Taking a step back to review her life, Beth decided she had too much responsibility at a young age - ‘I just felt I hadn’t lived’ – and returned to New Zealand, where her friends were, to find a job with less responsibility. She found a job as a CSR for a telemarketing company, Phone Centre, where she worked her way up to a management position within a year (described in text). She found that call centre work brought her out of herself, ‘Just the fact that I had to. I couldn’t be withdrawn, I couldn’t be quiet’.

She left Phone Centre to study business management, and on completion of this, wishes
to go overseas to study massage (a form that is currently not practised in New Zealand) and set up a massage therapy centre in New Zealand.

Ann – Airline

Ann is a 38 year old woman who defines herself as a New Zealander. She has Scottish and Irish ancestry and recently purchased a house with her longterm boyfriend, Tim. Ann finished school with three School Certificate papers (English, typewriting and biology) then completed Pitmans Business English exams. From there she worked in various secretarial and receptionist positions before going overseas, where she lived and worked for ten years. She worked as a personal assistant in England, where she also met her partner, Tim. Upon their return to New Zealand (for her father’s funeral), she worked in various temping jobs, then as a restaurant manager, prior to finding work with an airline company, Flying High. Flying High collapsed about a year later and she found work in a competing airline, Plane Sailing. She worked her way through reservations, the call centre, and then various administrative positions until she became the personal assistant to the executive manager. Plane Sailing collapsed three years after Ann joined, and six weeks after (having returned to temping) Ann was offered a CSR position, as part of a Plane Sailing rescue package, with competitor Airline. Ann has been looking elsewhere for permanent work ever since. She has been to a personnel agency, and explained the type of job she is looking for – ‘one that is not going to go bust!’ (To which the response was that nothing lasts forever anymore.)
The Call Centres

There are three main call centres referred to in this thesis and I have named them with regard to the industries they operate within: Bank Centre, Airline and Phone Centre (in the telecommunications sector). The purposes of each are explained in text.
Findings

Setting the Scene

The first thing that struck me when I entered Bank Centre for the first time was the lighting and the colour. I was there for a group interview, for a position as a call centre representative (CSR). Prior to our interview, the manager of the call centre gave us a brief tour of what could be our workplace. He led us from the reception into a large room – enough to comfortably seat 100 staff at any one time – with a straight walkway down the centre.

The dark rust-red patterns on the carpet complemented the red dividing walls, about 1.4 metres high, that surrounded and separated one section from another. Inside each section were further dividing walls, approximately 1.2 meters high, in between any desks facing each other (see appendix). These walls were green, a rich, fir tree shade which somehow complemented the red surroundings. The desks, completely bare except for the computer equipment sitting on each one, were light tan (apparently wood) and chairs were either red or green. Overall, I found the atmosphere to be subdued – quiet yet not quite calm.

Perhaps this was due to the unusual lighting. On first impression it seemed dark and yet not dark. There were no windows, aside from some in the manager’s office and the reception area. Long lights, about 2m in length and 20cm width, descended from the
ceiling at regular intervals. Connected to the ceiling by wire, these lights dangled about half a metre below the ceiling, with the light itself actually aimed upwards, instead of facing the ground. As the manager showed us though, he explained the refracted lighting and the reason for it: to reduce eyestrain by avoiding the reflection of any light whatsoever on the computer screens - also the reason for no windows. He proudly pointed out this was state of the art technology, as was just about everything else in the centre: the height of the desks could be changed, and so could the height and angle of computers, the height of the chairs; and the height and angle of backs of chairs.

He pointed out electronic display boards that were located high on the walls around the room. Every agent in the room, he said, no matter where they were seated, would be able to see at least one of these boards. Called queue boards, they displayed up-to-the-second figures (red numbers on a black background) about how many people were waiting for their calls to be answered and the waiting time of the caller who had been waiting the longest. The information would then change to show how many agents were on calls, how many were waiting for calls and how many were not taking calls at all, usually due to being on a tea or lunch break. I looked at the board in front of me and watched the information change every two seconds, from information on the queue to information on CSRs, over and over.

The manager then pointed out the artwork, one piece in each section, all painted by the same up-and-coming New Zealand artist. This artist was being sponsored by Bank Centre’s parent company and had recently won critical acclaim for some of his work.
Being untrained in the visual arts, these pictures looked to me like ‘run of the mill’ modern art, which is to say indecipherable mergings of colours. In this case, the theme appeared to be red and green (with generous black and brown shades) in similar shades to those already in the room.

Three years later, walking into this area for a shift is little different, except for the decorations which have been added by each section. Every section chooses its own name – this is occasionally updated – and creates a visual banner of this name, as well as supporting decorations, on the walls or wherever permits. One section named Planet X for example, contains a large paper mache orb one metre in diameter, which has been spray painted a silver colour. This orb dangles from the ceiling along with some 15cm alien figures and represents the team name. There is black square of material hanging along one wall, which has eighteen stars of uniform shape and size attached to it. Each CSR in Planet X has subsequently drawn on, coloured in or otherwise designed on one of these stars. Planet X currently has eleven staff and the stars of CSRs who have left remain on the wall. There is also (for some reason now lost to obscurity) a round mirror framed with orange fur. Other section names have included Call Girls, @Team, Digressors - due to the fact team members were rarely on topic during training - and All Bar One, because of the one male CSR in the section.

Additionally, each desk now has at least two or three files crammed with training information for easy access, and A4 sheets of frequently needed information pinned to
the walls. Many CSRs also add personal mementos: jokes, calendars and photos of partners, family or pets.

Arrival for a shift at Bank Centre requires the use of a personal swipe card (one is given to each CSR by Bank Centre, along with a personal 4 digit pin number to be memorised). If CSRs start their shift outside the bank’s open hours of 8am – 4.30pm Monday to Friday (Bank Centre’s hours are 7am – 11pm, seven days a week), they need to use their card to gain access into the building. Once inside the building, CSRs must use their cards twice, firstly to gain access to the stairs or lifts, and upon arrival at the correct floor, to get through the electronically locked door that separates the work area from the lifts (or stairs). Once at their desks, the process of logging in to the computer begins. Thanks to ongoing upgrades, log in time has been considerably reduced and a CSR can now be fully logged in, in around 5 – 7 minutes; ten minutes used to be common. There are nine systems, or programmes that must be logged into, four of which are password protected. These passwords must be changed monthly and cannot be a repeat of any of the last 8 passwords. These security measures have been implemented because safeguarding customer accounts and confidentiality is vitally important. Managers and team leaders often point out that advances in technology have made fraudulent access to bank accounts many times easier than ever before.

Each staff member wears a headset telephone, known as a soft phone because it is connected to the computer. (Telephone functions are completed by clicking on the appropriate pop-up menus on the computer screen. There is a manual telephone on each
desk in the event that the computer system totally crashes.) The headset, which keeps hands free for using the keyboard and for notetaking during calls, has a cord about one metre in length, allowing limited movement away from the desk. Once logged in and in ‘ready’, a beep indicates that a call has come through and the CSR begins their introduction. In most call centres, this is along the lines of, “Welcome to XYZ, this is so-and-so speaking, how may I help you?” From there, the CSR will take calls, one after another, for the rest of their shift.

Recruitment

My own unexpected path to Bank Centre began when I was still unemployed two months after completing my degree. I followed up a tip from a friend of my brother’s, who had heard that there were jobs going at JobPlace, an employment agency.

I called JobPlace and spoke with what sounded like a young woman, Sam, who asked questions about my age, qualifications and work experience, and then informed me she would call the next day between 2pm and 4pm, to do a telephone interview testing my customer service abilities. Sam explained she would ask five questions, one of them being a memory test, and that I was to assume I was responding as someone working in a customer service role. She added that taking notes with pen and paper was acceptable. When she rang the next day, the call consisted mainly of roleplay, followed by an explanation of the memory test: Sam was going to describe a detailed scenario (it was) and ask me to remember items mentioned in the scenario. Having pen and paper was
useful, although the story was told at a fast pace; and aside from thinking what an
unusual story it was (it was nothing to do with customer service) all I remember are two
of the features, ‘red brick wall’ and ‘apple’. Sam gave no feedback until the end of the
call, when she said I had passed that stage and asked if I could come in to JobPlace for
the next stage, an interview.

I arrived at 9am on Thursday morning at JobPlace, which was located on the ground
floor of a modern building, slightly out of the city centre. The interview was taken by
Trish, a friendly woman who appeared to be in her early thirties, and lasted for around
one hour. As I prepared to leave, Trish said she would ‘take me into another room for
the tests, now’, which was unexpected news to me. As she led the way, she explained
there were three tests which would last ‘a couple of hours’. She showed me into an
interior office that had no windows, approximately 3 x 4 metres. There were three
desks along one wall, with a computer, pen and plenty of paper at each desk. Trish gave
a booklet, told me to follow the instructions and asked if I had any questions. Feeling
bewildered, I explained I had not been informed of any tests and asked if I could
complete some now and the rest another time, as I had a lunch arrangement. Trish’s
face darkened, and she informed me in a controlled voice that she had already spent one
hour interviewing me and that the tests had to be done today; that if I did not complete
the tests, I would not have a job. Taken aback (as much by the change in Trish’s
demeanour as by the sudden, apparently negotiable change in my timetable), yet
wanting a job, I agreed to stay.
Trish showed me to the middle desk, where I sat down. After offering a glass of water (which I declined), she left the room. I turned on the computer and read the instructions. The first test required reading the booklet, which outlined the policies of a fictional mail delivery company and answering multi-choice questions on the computer. The questions were those that customers might ask, and I was to answer as if I was a customer service employee in this company. The other tests consisted of data entry exercise and another multi-choice test - this time using a pencil and paper - which measured speed and accuracy. The idea was to complete the test as fast as possible, and the instructions stressed the importance of accuracy. I spent the next 3½ hours completing the tests. While I worked through them, two others quietly arrived and began on the same tests, a middle aged woman who sat at the computer on my right, followed shortly after by a young man who sat on my left. Smiles and polite greetings were exchanged as each sat down; after this no one spoke.

Three and a half hours later, a woman who I had not met entered the room and collected my tests. I was ¾ of the way through the speed and accuracy exercise and was told to finish the question I was on. The woman told me JobPlace would contact me and requested me not to call them. She reiterated this: I was *not* to call them as they would get back to me (her emphasis) and I left, tired and late for lunch.

Trish phoned early the following week to inform that I had passed that stage, and asked if I could attend a group interview. The information she had was that the interview was Thursday afternoon at Bankcentre and that if I could not attend this, I would have to
wait until the next intake two months later. I asked if there were other jobs I could apply for at JobPlace and she replied that this (her emphasis) was the position I was being put forward for.

The group interview took place in a classroom-sized room. There were seven chairs placed around a table in the middle of the room, and two chairs at a desk in one corner. Seven people were present for the group interview, as well as Lynn, who would be the team manager of the successful candidates, and Mark, Bankcentre’s manager. After a warm up exercise (each of us explained what we would do if we won a million dollars) Mark explained we were each going to be given a slip of paper, upon which would be written one piece of information. Everyone had different information which we needed to contribute, to solve a riddle that would be given to us. How the riddle was going to be solved was up to us, although we were to only verbally pass on our information: pooling the paper on the table we were sitting around, for example, was not okay. After explaining the riddle (selecting the best person of several for a job) and passing out a piece of information face down to each candidate, Mark and Lynn then moved to a desk at the side of the room and proceeded to watch and take notes. Thirty seven year old Fay, a single parent at the time, recalls her own group interview:

It was more a test of communication skills, listening skills and problem-solving, and also a little bit of assertiveness, in putting your idea forward and backing it up with a reason. You had to listen to what everybody else had to say and, sort of, work through the information they provided, and come up with a consensus from the group 'cos you could only have one answer...You had no idea of what they were looking for. You
were put in with a group of strangers and its like, here we go (laughs)! And you’re being watched and they’re taking notes and its like, what are you writing that for?

Fay

After a phone interview, a face-to-face interview, four hours of tests and then a group interview, I was finally informed of the position I had been put forward and accepted for (with 25 others): customer service representative at Bankcentre. Beth, who advanced to team leader role, went through a similar process when she applied for a CSR position at Phone Centre:

When you rang up for an interview, they would do a 15 minute interview. And then you had someone who rang you and you had to do a role play. And then they’d ring you back for a second interview and in the second interview you’d do more role plays. And this would be just with the temping agency that was doing all the filtering. And then after that, then you’d get to Phone Centre and they’d get you in for an interview.

Beth

Fay, searching for employment for the first time since she had married, found this process bewildering. On the interview at JobPlace:

It was scary as hell! I’d never been to an assessment type interview where they’re basically trying to find what skills you’ve got, what area you can be trained in. Having said that I found them very good and they were nice about outlining the skills that I hadn’t sort of felt as being marketable...um...things like budgeting and time management skills, and things that you do when you’re a single parent on a benefit.
They sat me in front of a computer and gave me a test to do and I’d never sat in front of a computer before. Didn’t know how to turn the damn thing on. Didn’t know my way around the keyboard let alone the screen.

I expected an hours interview and it was five hours long. I hadn’t been forewarned of that so I actually had someone waiting to meet me for lunch. That was quite entertaining.

Fay

Beth, who worked her way up to team leader position while working for Phone Centre, discovered as a team leader that informal training of applicants began upon first contact with the temping agency:

Without you actually knowing, you’re actually being trained right from the word go. Because they got you to do all these [phone] roleplays. And you only actually got to do those roleplays if you were good from the first time you made contact. But they wouldn’t tell you that…You’d go through all this stress and panic for nothing. From the first point of contact you’re actually being trained…And that would take a period of about two to three weeks before you actually got to Phone Centre.

Beth

Some CSRs were able to bypass much of the recruitment process because they were already working as CSRs in for companies with a specific connection to the employing company. Kate for example, was already working as a CSR in a smaller call centre - which was to merge with Bank Centre - and was recruited after attending a group interview with external applicants. Interestingly, although she was informed she would
be attending a group interview, another Powerbank CSR, Linda, arrived at a group interview expecting to be told when she was starting her CSR position with Bankcentre:

Linda had worked for [the smaller call centre] upstairs and came down, she felt – she didn’t even know she had an interview. She thought she was coming down to be told when she was starting. She didn’t realise she had an interview.

Fay

Ann, a CSR now at Airline Centre, was recruited when a competitor airline company collapsed, and Airline took on some of their call centre staff as part of a union-arranged rescue package:

The union came to the party. They went to Airline: Airline said they needed more staff as they were looking at setting up their airpoints completely from here [New Zealand], cos its cheaper labour, and cheaper to run a business from New Zealand than it is in Australia.

Ann

Training

Training for BankCentre began the first working day after the Christmas break. The two training rooms were on the same floor as the call centre but off to the side, down from reception. The rooms were classroom size (one was slightly smaller than the other) and unlike the call centre, had windows along one side. There was a long attached-to-the-wall table, along three of the blank, cream coloured walls. Computer
terminals were placed at intervals on the tables, and a red or green chair faced each terminal.

There were two training groups, each group being the team we were to work in upon completion of the training. The other team consisted of one man, who was the team leader, and nine women; my own team consisted of three men and eight women, as well as the woman team leader. (Team leaders trained alongside their CSRs, learning the same material at the same time). Everyone appeared to be of Caucasian descent.

There were two trainers, one for each team. Jerry and Oprah were in their early thirties and were both exuberantly friendly and outgoing: Oprah trained the other team and we had Jerry. Training for BankCentre would take 6½ weeks, working 9am – 4.30pm Monday to Friday, and in this time we were taught about BankCentre’s products; our individual legal responsibilities with particular regard to the Fair Trading Act, Consumer Guarantees Act and BankCentre’s position on privacy and confidentiality; BankCentre’s history and general banking history; ergonomics; customer service and various tasks such as automatic payments, direct debits, bill payments, setting up phone banking, general inquiries to do with balances, transactions, eftpos, statements and addresses.

For the first week, every morning started with Norm selecting and reading out loud a story from the Chicken Soup for the Soul series (after the first week, he suggested that everyone in the team take a turn) and following this would be a round, with the topic
being chosen by a different CSR every day. The topics chosen included favourite icecream flavour, favourite book, favourite: movie, song, television programme and so on. Then we would move on to our training for the day. At the start of a training topic (two or three topics were usually covered in one day) each team member would be handed out a printed module (for example Automatic Payments and Direct Debits or Phone Banking), anywhere between 20 to 50 pages long. Often Norm read through the module aloud, while CSRs sat at their desks and read silently along with him. Other training methods were used at least once a day such as roleplays, work in small groups and sometimes work on the computers. Towards the end of our training, CSRs each sat with a CSR on the floor and listened to live calls.

The [training] gave us an overview, it set up the framework of what we were going to do, it let us in for what types of things we could expect. It also gave us an insight to the way around our systems, you know, how to go from one screen to the next and where to find things on our system that we needed to know.

Fay

The length of training time can vary between call centres. Training at Phone Centre lasted three (‘very intensive’) weeks and consisted of the trainee CSRs roleplaying a wide variety of possible situations: ‘someone might ring up and be deaf’, for example (Beth). Ann contrasted the training she received at Airline poorly to the training she had previously received at Airline’s ex-competitor:

We had four weeks training on the computer, on the system, on the package – what they had and what they were selling… After that you worked live, but you had what
was known as a buddy: someone sitting beside you. And so for that first week, you might do all the phone work, and the person that’s buddying you will sit there and do the computer while you are talking to the customer, so you are not trying to physically do both at the same time. And you learn as you go along. And after each call that buddy would say to you, ‘Now this, we can try it this way and this is what you did here, this is what you could do differently with the next call’.

Ann, on training at Airline’s ex-competitor

The training at Airline, which had offered a rescue package, was quite different:

They gave us what was normally an eight week training time, condensed into six days and we all had to learn it. They sent us home with chapters with a minimum of one hundred pages each night to learn, and they made us work from 7.30 in the morning to 6.30 each night. Training. All day, every day, for that six days which, as you probably know, there is only so much the brain will take in and then it shuts off.

Ann

Ann, Kate, Doug and Fay specified the importance of practical ‘hands on’ learning about the job:

It’s all very well to look at screeds of paper and having somebody up the front telling you ‘this is what you do’, and on the piece of paper you’ve got the steps to show you where in [the computer system] to go. That’s fine, but it works in better if you’ve got the chance to be able to do it.

Kate

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You can’t replace being out there and having the calls... The difficulty is that when you get out there, you’re concentrating so hard on what you’re supposed to be doing, what’s next, where’s that, you forget about keeping up the conversation... They’re [customers] going to be talking to you, so you’ve got to be listening and doing at once, and that’s a hard thing to coordinate when you are not used to it.

Fay

I believe you learn on the job in a call centre. Certainly when you’ve got a crazy computer system like Electric Centre’s you definitely learn on the job... You have to interpret how to work the system and how to go through the system, and then you learn on the job. And as I say, I said to people coming out of [training], right you’re going to start learning now. Now this is where we are really going to start learning.

Doug

As these comments also illustrate, learning to navigate the computer system is vital. There are no hard copy files to access should the system go down - all of a CSR’s work is completed via computer. Ann and her colleagues, who were required to complete training in six days instead of the normal eight weeks, were not given training in how to use the Airline computer system, and Ann describes how difficult this proved:

It was all... it was like driving around Christchurch without a map. There were so many avenues you could go to to find the info... but at Airplane you were just expected to know.

Ann
The thirty-six CSRs do not work alongside Airline CSRs and therefore cannot simply ask one of them for help. They have been located in a separate building (for which the lease expires in one month, according to Ann) and do their best to help each other:

There's no one to ask... It's pretty much like the blind leading the blind really.

Ann

On the Phones

The rostered start time and the actual start time for CSRs differ because CSRs are expected to be fully logged in and ready to take calls at their rostered start time. I arrive 15 minutes early for my shifts which allows for seven to ten minutes to log in, and some time left over for a trip to and from the cafeteria for a cup of coffee. When I asked Kate and Doug what a normal day at Bank Centre consisted of, they both began their responses with a comment about preparing themselves and their computers for the shift:

You make sure your computer is logged on, make sure your system is working correctly, log into the telephone, start to take your calls.

Doug

Kate arrives 45 – 60 minutes early for her shift, which usually starts between 7am – 9am:

I choose to get in as early as I do so as to avoid the traffic and get a decent carpark, so I can get to work and get my computer signed on, and chill out really. Get into work
mode without rushing in and forgetting something and then getting all stressed because
I’ve forgotten something.

Kate

Once logged in, CSRs take and process telephone inquiries. The duration and nature of
the inquiries, as well as the knowledge level required for CSRs, varies between
companies. Phone Centre, for example, where Beth worked, provides telephone
numbers for anyone who cannot find the number they require. Most callers provide the
name and address of the person they wish to locate; the CSR then uses this information
and questioning skills to establish the correct phone number, before transferring the
caller to an electronic voice which reads out the phone number, while moving on to
take the next call. CSRs at Phone Centre take hundreds of calls per shift, most of very
short duration:

Per day I would do seven to eight hundred calls and that was working a seven and a
half hour shift...But you’re able to deal with them really quickly. We were averaging
two to three seconds [per call] at some stage...A lot of the time we would be talking to
the customer for about five seconds and in that five seconds you’d find out exactly
what they want and you release it. Um, but then you have other people who are not too
sure what the name of the company is, but this is what they do, so you look under the
companies, see what they do, then you ask where exactly in the area, the name of the
city where they were, what suburb. So you have to get them to be really specific, so
that you could help.

Beth
CSRs at Airline deal with all flight related inquiries, and make reservations as long as the caller can provide a credit card number. There is a greater degree of work-related knowledge required and call lengths are longer than at Phone Centre, usually averaging two minutes. Two minutes is the suggested time limit per call. This is so that each CSR can book enough reservations to reach their annual targets, set by management:

The KPI’s [Key Performance Indicators] they call them. You’ve got to achieve a million dollars a year per person, that’s what you’re supposed to achieve, which they reckon if you work it out at four thousand dollars a day minimum, that you’ll earn your million dollars a year... So it’s up to you to do the speech to sell it and then get the credit card at the time. Pretty much you’re only allowed two minutes per call, that’s what they estimate, two minutes per call. That’s to, ‘hello how are you? What do you want? Where do you want to go? Right, fine thanks. Pay.’ So it’s pretty cold really.

Ann

CSRs at Phone Centre were also measured:

You were measured on stats plus on time: how much time was spent with the customer on the phone, um, how you handled the customer if they were irritable. And of course, every now and then, you would actually get um (laugh) bomb threats, people ring in with bomb threats, so you were also measured on that too, just to see how calm you remained. Cos a lot of people in that situation, they can get really nervous and lose it and that’s what the caller is looking for. [I asked Beth if she had handled a bomb threat, and when she replied she had, I asked how she had felt] Shit scared. Because...you get this bomb threat, so you notify your supervisor who gets the TM [team manager] and then the whole building is evacuated, and because you’ve [still]
got the call, you’ve got to stay there. And the only other person in the room is your TM. So if there is a bomb there, it’s shit frightening.

At Bank Centre, CSRs deal with a considerably wider variety of inquiries and requests, regarding bank accounts (what types there are; setting up, changing or deleting automatic payments, direct debits and bill payments), interest rates (foreign exchange, term deposit, mortgages), looking for missing salaries, working out fees, establishing why someone’s account has less (or sometimes more) money than expected and other tasks:

A lot of times we also provide basic budgeting support, you know, how to budget for automatic payments going out, why they can’t go out before their pay goes in... What happens if they overdraw their account, what an overdraft is for, what it means, how it operates... We also explain changes to the banking structure, why a branch is closing, why [branches have] merged. Ah, the bank fees, what they’re for - or we try to!

Fay

With wide-ranging inquiries and considerable knowledge required, call lengths are longer again, at around three to four minutes (on average) per call, and Bank Centre CSRs average around eighty calls per day. As with Airline, there are annual targets set by management. The targets differ in that customer service is measured (15 random calls per CSR are monitored every month and rated on the way each call is handled according to a predefined checklist), as is the length of time spent on each call, otherwise known as AHT (average handling time). This includes time spent completing follow up work once the call is completed. Unlike at Airline, where two minutes is a
suggested time limit - although needs to be maintained in order to achieve sales targets - AHT has been set at 261 seconds. What this means is that although variation in call lengths is expected, the average call time must not exceed 261 seconds. Daily reports are generated which give the AHT for each CSR, and these are used to calculate the monthly average. Failure to maintain 261 seconds per call or less, will result in an automatic failure for all targets, including call quality (to be covered shortly).

Call Quality

Also measured is call quality: in Bank Centre for example, fifteen calls per CSR are listened to every month, and rated against predefined criteria, including if the standard greeting and goodbye phrases are used, tone of voice, if the caller’s name is used, how calm and neutral the CSR remains when dealing with an angry or abusive caller and so on. As mentioned by Beth earlier, Phone Centre also has a policy of checking on how CSRs deal with bomb threats. The team leader of each section is responsible for listening to and marking calls, which can be selected at random using computer technology. Calls can also be observed live - that is, as they occur – without the knowledge of the CSR or the caller. Doug, who had a personality clash with his team leader, informed me that she would march up to him during calls and interrupt his conversation with the caller, to tell him what he was doing wrong.

There is a formula to marking the calls, which means that if certain features are incorrectly handled by the CSR more than several times in the fifteen calls, the overall
monthly result for call quality will be zero. On separate occasions I have seen Fay and Kate reduced to tears after being awarded zero: Fay for example, was failed because in two of her fifteen calls she had not used the standard goodbye phrase. (Had she used the standard phrase in these two calls, her rating would have been excellent.) The subjective nature of this form of marking can also provide opportunities for abuse of power: in spite of the fact that Doug received more positive customer feedback (another aspect that is measured) than any other staff member in the company, his team leader told him he had to improve his customer service skills and he was regularly awarded zero.

Boredom

Although the level of knowledge required to work in each call centre varied considerably, all the CSRs felt frustrated by boredom. Advances in technology have lead to an increase in monotony for CSRs, because every task can be completed while remaining seated at the computer:

It's frustrating just to sit on your bum and just take call after call....the feeling of having to be in one place for eight hours a day – or seven and a half hours a day, whatever – doing the same old, same old. There's not a lot of variety in the calls and everything that we can do has to be done from where we are sitting.

Kate

It was only three years ago that I worked in the Airline and when you went to fax off an itinerary, you physically had to get your butt out of the chair, and get up and go to a
fax machine. Well now we don’t have to do that. It’s just, press a button on your computer and it faxes it off, or email it here or... there’s no variety. It’s just straight up call after call after call.

Ann

Doug, in Bank Centre which required the highest level of product knowledge, and Beth, who was promoted to a team leader position, used similar terms to describe their boredom:

I saw it moving more towards a robotic-natured job than a thinking job. They didn’t want someone to think – when I worked at McDonalds years ago as a kid, I think the manager there put it best, when I said, ‘Well, wouldn’t it be easier if we took the chairs away first and sweep there, instead of sweeping around them?’ He said, ‘You’re not paid to think. You’re here to work, not paid to think.’ I think, to be honest, you could take someone out of McDonalds, put them through Bank Centre training and they’d be able to work in the call centre.

Doug

You become a robot if you work in call centres like Phone Centre that are so structured. You do become a robot.

Beth

Aside from the physically repetitive nature of the job (taking call after call), CSRs drew attention to other aspects of the job as being particularly frustrating or tedious. There was the predictability of certain types of calls, such as rude customers, and of recurring situations. At Airline for example, customers often complain they could go to Australia
and back for the price being charged for a domestic flight (Which is when you say, So you’d like international then? - Ann); and CSRs in Phone Centre are required at the end of each phone call to ask the question, ‘Is there anything else I can help you with?’ A common response to this is the request for one (or more) million dollars to be put into the caller’s account; a witty comment, that nonetheless loses appeal when repeated by caller after caller. One year ago, a group of CSRs in my team grew so bored with laughing politely, that they set up a competition, challenging anyone to come up with a witty response. (Although much discussion ensued, no one has yet come up with one.) There are other recurring situations, such as calls about bank fees at the end of every month:

[They ask] ‘Where has my money gone?’ and you sort of think, why do we do this every month, every single month? And if you look back on the customer’s contact logs, every month they ring up with the same questions and it’s like, for heavens sake, do they really have goldfish brains where they forget from month to month to month?

Peggy

And in Phone Centre, where internal communications between the marketing division and the call centre are slow and frequently too late:

You’d have two or three hundred customers ringing up and telling us how we’ve got this product available. And we haven’t been brought up to date with this product so we don’t know about it, and end up having to say to the customer, no, we haven’t. Then the customer saying we’ve got it wrong. And when you get that constantly, there are a lot of people who get stressed out about it.

Cindi
Rosters

One feature that frustrated all CSRs was the lack of choice in how and when to do their job. Rosters stipulate what time a CSR starts and finishes, and specify what time the agent will take his or her breaks and any exceptions, that is, any time that has been rostered away from the phone for a team meeting, training or a one on one (an individual meeting with the team leader to discuss results). A shift usually consists of taking calls for two hours followed by a fifteen minute tea break; calls for two more hours then a half hour lunch break; calls for two hours then the last fifteen minute tea break, and the final two hours taking calls. There are variations however, and tea breaks for example, can be rostered anywhere between 1¼ to 2½ hours after a CSR starts for the day.

In Phone Centre, as with many call centres (Holman and Fernie, 2000), CSRs work weekly rotating shifts and can be rostered to start and finish any time between 7am – 11pm, seven days a week. Rosters are worked so that team members share similar starting and finishing times although, within any particular team, CSRs do not start at the same time. Within a team, there may be two CSRs rostered to start at 8.15am on Monday for example, one more at 8.30am, two more at 8.45am and so on. Tea breaks and meal breaks are also rostered at different times:

Your time is not your own. I’m used to managing my own time. When I was a PA I’d definitely get everything done, I’d meet my deadlines and usually well before. I always
used to start at 8 and at two o’clock I might have my lunch, because I wanted to get
everything out of the way. Whereas this is like: ten o’clock, morning tea. Twelve
o’clock, lunch. And it’s like your time management’s not your own. It’s so regimented.
I’ve got to the stage at nearly 38 that I’m like, I’m good at my own time management, I
can get a job done without having to be regimented.

Ann

Monitoring

Once logged on for the shift, CSRs must keep their telephone in the correct state. There
are three possible telephone states: make busy is for any time rostered off the phone,
such as tea breaks or meal breaks, or training or team meetings. Not Ready is when a
CSR is on a call, or completing followup work after a call has finished. When in ‘not
ready’, other calls cannot come through to the CSR. Most importantly, ready is the state
a CSR must be in if not on a call or rostered off. This means the CSR is able to take
calls if they come through.

The time each CSR spends in each of these states is measured to hundredths of a
second, and printed out in daily reports. There is one daily report per section, and the
team leader of each section uses the information in the report to measure how well each
CSR adheres to the roster. This is important in a call centre because any time in make
busy is time spent doing something other than taking calls, therefore, any rostered time
off the telephone must be adhered to exactly. A tea break for example, must be for the
duration of fifteen minutes or less, although cutting into personal time is discouraged,
as the CSR may tire and provide poorer customer service as a result. If a CSR spends more time on *make busy* than he or she is rostered for, an explanation is required. During one week last year for example, my team leader noticed that I had logged in between 10 – 15 seconds after my rostered start time and requested that I make a focus on getting logged in at the correct start time. (Which I did).

In some call centres this can be taken to extremes, such as in the example reported in *The Press* (p17, 21/2/2001), where workers in a London call centre were told that whoever went to the toilet the most would have to wear a disposable nappy. Their manager took a packet of disposable nappies into work and made staff sign a ‘toilet book’ to check how long they were spending in the toilet. The CSR spending the longest time in the toilet would be required to wear one of the nappies. This incident came to light because one of the CSRs concerned reported it to a hotline set up by the Trade Union Congress in an effort to improve working conditions in call centres. Although this is an extreme example, close monitoring of CSRs’ time is common and CSRs must report any unscheduled time off the phone. At Bank Centre for example, CSRs must email a specific section in Wellington with the reason for being off the phone, the time they went off the phone, and the time they went back on again. At Phone Centre where Beth worked, CSRs were required to verbally report the same details to a supervisor employed for this purpose:

I would prefer a job where we were given a little bit more leeway, a little bit more responsibility and a lot more variety. In that... not having to account for every second that we're there for a start, and a little bit more leeway in *what jobs we do* when. You
know, in that this is what you have to do for the day, but we can plan it ourselves as to what we do when….That would be a little more self-management, it would be nice.

Fay

My main dislike would be having to account for every minute of my time. If I’m not logged in when I’m supposed to be, that has to be accounted for in the stats, and it doesn’t look good if it doesn’t measure up.

Kate

You were rapped over the hands if you were a minute late.

Beth

One of the reasons for monitoring CSRs in this way is the service level, which is the percentage of calls answered within a specific time frame. In Bank Centre for example, the service level is 80/20, which means that 80% of calls must be answered within 20 seconds of the call being received, although the service level varies across call centres according to staffing levels and call content. Because only the exact number of CSRs needed to meet the service level are rostered at any one time, the absence of one CSR from the phones can have a dramatic impact on the queue. One CSR going to the toilet means there are less CSRs answering the phone than scheduled and the queue (and waiting time for callers) can go up exponentially. In a call centre, therefore, there is usually a performance manager whose job is to ensure CSRs are on the phone when they are rostered to be. Performance managers use software which can show at a glance what computer state any CSR is in, as this excerpt from an Australian documentary about call centres demonstrates:
There are seventy eight staff here on level seven at the moment. There are five callers waiting and the maximum call waiting time is actually twenty nine seconds. I can see all the reps on the floor here. Basically, green are for those who are actually on a call at the moment and the yellow is what we call after-call work. One of the objects of mine is to limit their time spent on after-call work because, obviously, if they’re on after-call work they’re not taking a call. The red here is what we call AUX. That’s specifically designed for break times and those who are on lunch. I monitor basically anyone who goes over fifteen minutes, which is their break time.

Darren, performance manager (cited from ABC programme transcript)

Prospects

Promotion

In my four years at Bank Centre, approximately two team leader positions have become available every year. Other positions have become available every eighteen months or so, most often trainer positions, although the performance manager position came up once. The team leader positions have all been filled by CSRs from within the call centre, the performance manager position was filled by a team leader, and the trainer positions have been filled by applicants from outside the call centre, frequently also from outside the bank: all have come from a management background. In a call centre that employs around one hundred and ten CSRs, this leaves little opportunity for internal promotion.
There is approximately one team leader per approximately nine to ten people, and if any of the team leaders from our call centre were to leave or move on upwards that’s going to create only one position, so if anyone is looking to move up to team leader and beyond I wouldn’t hold my breath.

Kate

Fay and Ann have applied for transfers from the call centre into other departments within their organisations:

When you get to a certain level as a CSR there isn’t a lot of challenge and there isn’t a lot of other places to move on to, it’s not, for the upwardly progressive there isn’t a lot of space....Unfortunately, applying for jobs in the branch network, Bank Centre has a -some branch staff, especially managerial, will have a preconceived idea about Bank Centre not being very helpful, about not being very trained or being able to cope in a branch environment. They really have no idea of what we do on a daily basis.

Fay

In the first six weeks I’d been at Airline I applied for 11 jobs within the company. I think that the current climate – the fact that all of us – there were 36 [ex-competitor] staff taken on and we’ve all been put in a building by ourselves. And most of the jobs I’ve applied for, it’s like ‘Sorry, but we’re not looking at [ex-competitor] staff at the moment’. They’ve put us in a separate building and they’ve only leased the building we’re in for four months. And we’ve been there three months out of the four already so…that’s probably another reason I’m looking around pretty smart for another job.

Ann

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Beth was a CSR for six months before she was promoted to a supervisor position, and six months later, to a team leader position:

If you are willing to go all the way out to bend over backwards and not have a family life, you can get promoted. Also if you know your job well and selling Phone Centre products as well, if you are able to show you can sell their products. You really had to show you wanted to succeed. Total loyalty to the company, dedication. You become a robot and you really can’t be yourself....When you got to a supervisor role you could be quite creative, but it was still a structured role – but it was better than being a CSR. And then once you got to TM level, there was still pressure because you’ve got 18 – 20 people under you, and you had to make sure they were up to standard.

Beth

*Job Security*

Competition and continual advances in technology are resulting in greater automation and less need for call centres; the next stage is internet based, and this will fade into the background as new technologies replace it (Belanger, The Southland Times 31/7/2000):

First we innovate. Then we automate. Then we terminate.


For phone companies, it’s more efficient to coach the customer to do their own transaction. One day we may make the call centre operator redundant.

Tony Barrell

Call Centre Manager
Call centres can be set up and shut down so quickly you will not know what has happened to you. New Zealand would be better to spend resources on preparing for the next stage in the internet revolution.

Marc Belanger
International Labour Organisation
Cited in The Southland Times 31/7/2000

Recent examples of New Zealand call centres that have closed or relocated, all for purposes of cutting costs and increasing productivity include: Air New Zealand (The Evening post 15/1/2002); State Insurance, which closed two of their five call centres (The Dominion 11/1/2002); ADT Security, which closed its call centre in Christchurch and relocated in Auckland (CSRs were informed they would be given first consideration for the Auckland jobs) (The Press 31/7/2001); Signature Security Systems which also relocated from Christchurch to Auckland (ibid); and Telecom Directory Assistance, which relocated its call centre from Auckland to Christchurch.(ibid).

Wages

Although the CSRs in this thesis felt their wages were satisfactory (if only just. Further detail was unfeasible due to a clause in employment contracts stressing the confidential nature of salary details), and at least some call centres are raising salary levels to obtain or retain staff (The Southland Times 31/7/2000), call centres in general pay low wages
to CSRs. Reasons given for this include competition due to international pressure for business and the high proportion of female CSRs:

[Call centers] are usually established in low wage areas as an attempt to get jobs but become ghettos of the low paid.

Marc Belanger
International Labour Organisation
Cited in The Southland Times 31/7/2000

[Call centers] are very low wage workplaces, sixty to seventy per cent of the workers are women, and it tends to be a young industry that is not unionized.

Wendy Larner
University of Auckland
Cited in New Zealand Herald 2/8/2001

Skills

*Education Level*

When asked what qualification or level of education would be necessary to equip someone with the necessary skills to work as a CSR, completion of some form of secondary school education was considered sufficient, although there was some variation as to what level would be adequate. Doug for example, felt completion of the sixth form was necessary, while Ann believed that fifth form could be unnecessary, depending on the person:
If you’ve never done anything like that before then I think you would struggle with just school certificate. If you have done sixth form studies then I think you are capable of doing the job...the first thing to do is get customer service in any way you can...I think the only way you actually learn whether you can do it or not is by actually going in there and doing it, but you have to have the background for customer service to be able to go into a call centre.

Doug

Depending on the individual applicant, I wouldn’t say you physically need to have School Cert. You might get someone bright enough to do computer work if they’re trained how to do it. They may be very good at the job but they may not have the paper to say they’ve got School Cert or UE or whatever it is these days...Call Centres are probably good for young people, ‘cos its like, to me, working in a call centre is very much like when my brother first left school, dad put him in the territorials for six months. And it gives them that sense of direction and teaches you how to manage your own time. Plus it gives you experience with the general public.

Ann

Skills

When asked what skills were necessary to be able to work as a CSR, all the CSRs stated communication and keyboard skills:

...computer literacy...You don’t have to be a great leader of men to work as a CSR. As long as you’ve got the skills to be able to provide information in a pleasant manner then I think you can do the job.

Doug
Typing skills of course are always an advantage, or computer skills are always an advantage, but that probably that goes anywhere these days.

Kate

Just basic keyboard skills, good command of English, just a general ability to look for customer satisfaction.

Beth

Communication skills were mentioned in the context of being able to meet customer needs and some of the CSRs partnered their explanations of communication skills with comments about one or more personal qualities. Kate, for example, defined customer service in conjunction with personal maturity:

You need to be able to listen and hear what the person is saying, not what you think they are saying... If you can listen to what someone is saying and then pick up on what they might need from what they are saying... I tend to think a level of maturity is desirable because we are dealing, um – we’re just a voice on the other end of the line. The customer can’t see that we’re a pretty young 17 year old just out of school and take a liking to us for that reason. We need to be able to communicate with maturity and be able to adapt to the person, or customer that we have on the other end of the line.

Kate

I think you need a lot of patience no matter what type of call centre you’re in. You have to be able to, on the phone – like I say, when you’re face to face they know what you’re saying and they take it in. But on the phone you may have to say that same comment five times over but you have to know how to word it differently, because
each time you say it you are really giving them the same answer but you are giving to them five different ways, until it sinks in that they’re not going to get anywhere. [When face to face] If I used to say to someone, ‘your flight’s been disrupted, we’ll get you onto the next flight’, that was it. And they knew, there’s no plane, we can’t go anywhere. But if someone’s on the phone it’s like, ‘well it must be there. You must be able to do something else’.

Ann

Patience also, in that sometimes it can be very frustrating to try to get a message across to somebody who doesn’t want to listen, who doesn’t understand, and who doesn’t cope well with new changes or technology…. Patience in that some people just don’t want to know why their account is overdrawn, is because they have taken out more money than they have earned. And you can tell them that six different ways, you can explain it to them…They know the bank fees come out the last business day every month, they’re told that every single month but they forget.

Fay

Also consistently mentioned was the ability to get along with others, colleagues in addition to customers:

Good general people skills. You need to be able to get on with the people you are working with as well as being able to relate to customers.

Kate

Openmindedness, because you are dealing with so many different cultures and people and you’re working alongside people from different countries as well. You’ve got to be openminded.
Beth

...the most important thing to have in a call centre is personality to get on with other people...and really the only other qualification I would say is important is friendliness...if you're finding it difficult to get on with people, then in an enclosed area you may find it difficult.

Doug

There were similarities between the skills recommended by CSRs and the skills sought by organisations employing CSRs. Looking through the Situations Vacant column, and the internal vacancies at Bank Centre for example, all CSR positions request strong (or better) customer service skills and ability to relate well with others:

...We are, therefore, seeking a fulltime Customer Service Representative who has excellent interpersonal skills, a strong customer orientation and sound problem solving abilities. A proven background in sales and customer service, as well as the desire to develop relationships and succeed is essential.


...so if you're considering a change in your career and feel that Bank Centre could be the change and challenge you're looking for, read on and ask yourself the following:

- Are you committed to providing excellent customer service?
- Do you enjoy working in a team?
- Do you have the enthusiasm and talent to work in the fast-paced, demanding environment of a call centre?

If you can answer 'Yes' to these questions, then we'd like to hear from you!
Qualifications

There are a number of institutions offering call centre qualifications, each between twelve and twentyfour weeks duration and with varying costs. Carich Computer Training for example, offer a twenty week full time course, free to anyone over eighteen years old and registered as unemployed. For those who are employed, and under the name of the National College of Multimedia and Technology, the same company offer a part time course spanning twenty three weeks for $1800. This course consists of twelve and a half hours tuition and four to six hours of personal study each week. The Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology offer a sixteen week full time course for $1980, and the Southern Institute of Technology charge $1015 for a twelve week course, or $1426 for a twenty week course.

All offer similar generic training, such as how to ‘operate a word processor’, ‘use data entry skills to input computer data’ and ‘assist customers to buy goods and services by incoming and outgoing telephone calls’. Course descriptions range from the matter of fact, by the Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology, to the inclusion of specific provider benefits: Carich Computer Training state that ‘the design of this course has considerable input from a Call Centre Industry Advisory Committee in Christchurch’, and the National College of Multimedia and Technology state:
We can help you achieve your goal of working in one of today’s most exciting and interesting careers. We’ve talked to the leaders of call centres here in Christchurch. They’ve told us what you NEED (sic) to know before entering the industry. Join NCMT in making sure you are ready for a career in today’s modern call or contact centre.

When asked about their views on call centre qualifications, the CSRs were openminded towards their existence, although felt that certain personal qualities (as mentioned earlier) or customer service experience were sufficient to be a CSR:

I don’t really believe you physically need to have a qualification to work in a call centre as such. So my opinion really is that if you’ve got somebody that’s got a) commonsense and b) a willingness to learn, there’s really no need…At the end of the day you’re not going to get that money back in salary, are you? You’re not getting paid that marvellously to work in a call centre.

Ann

I have spoken informally with Lynn, a team leader who is responsible for hiring CSRs to work in Bank Centre. Lynn is in favour of call centre qualifications, however (to date) has not employed any applicants with call centre qualifications, due to their poor communication skills (they were ‘far below the quality’ of what she considered an acceptable standard for CSRs).
Discussion

Monitoring/Surveillance

One of the issues that particularly concerned the CSRs was the extent of the monitoring of their work. The requirement to justify every minute of their shifts, work to a time limit on each call, and to have a specific number of their calls listened to and measured against set criteria every month generated frustration and a sense of regimentation. Holman and Fernie (2000) came to a similar conclusion with their study of three different call centres in the United Kingdom. All three centres were in the financial sector, took inbound inquiries, and monitored the length and quality of calls. Holman and Fernie’s purpose was to test how stressful CSR work was in comparison with other jobs, and to find what (if any) aspects of call centre work created stress for CSRs. Data was collected through a questionnaire, completed by 628 CSRs and team leaders and interviews. (The number of interviews was not specified). Each call centre required different levels of product knowledge: Mortgage Call CSRs required the most product knowledge, had the longest and most complex calls, and represented the ‘upper, semi-skilled end’ of call centre work; Bank Call took repetitive inquiries of very short duration and was said to represent the sweatshop style of call centre work, while Loan Call was said to be situated somewhere between the two.

Holman and Fernie found that that the wellbeing of CSRs compared favourably with that of office workers and factory workers, and that longer call times equated with greater job satisfaction for CSRs. They also found that across the three sites CSRs felt that the monitoring was excessive, and this was directly connected with the high levels
of anxiety and depression, and low levels of job satisfaction and mental health; furthermore, all three centres experienced high absenteeism and Bank Call had a very high turnover rate. The other two call centres paid their CSRs higher salaries, and this was stated as the reason for their lower turnover. Although CSRs mentioned other areas of concern such as variety, the level of responsibility and opportunities for promotion, Holman and Fernie concluded that monitoring had a far greater effect on CSR wellbeing than any other aspect of call centre work.

While Holman and Fernie's findings regarding CSRs concerns (monitoring, variety, the level of responsibility and opportunities for promotion) are similar to the concerns of the CSRs in this thesis, the scarcity of specific data in their article left some of their claims unsubstantiated. For example, longer call times are said to increase job satisfaction yet there is no mention of what the average call length is in each centre. This omission leads to difficulties in establishing how relevant the variance in call length times is, particularly in light of the fact that the CSRs in this thesis showed dissatisfaction with their jobs irrespective of call length time. Also, despite stating that absenteeism and turnover is 'high' for CSRs, Holman and Fernie do not provide specific supporting data, nor do they mention any data on absenteeism or turnover for the office and factory workers. Their comparision between the wellbeing of CSRs and the office and factory workers therefore, is, at best, incomplete. Their findings on monitoring and its effects however, are similar to, and add depth to, the frustration felt by the CSRs in this thesis. Furthermore, the disadvantages of monitoring do not only
affect CSRs; but also organisations, because of absenteeism and turnover. Why, then, are monitoring techniques employed?

**Theories behind monitoring and surveillance**

From an organisational perspective, the purpose of surveillance is to increase productivity and cut costs (Attewell, 1987). The reasons for why surveillance is chosen in lieu of other methods can vary, and Attewell (ibid) has described five theoretical approaches. *Corporate culture* theorists, for example, assert that prior labour relations within an organisation are the best indicator of how -or if - monitoring will be used. Firms with a history of friendly labour relations may implement monitoring technology, but tend to do so after consultation with employees, and do not use the technology to speed up productivity; while firms with a history of adverserial labour relations are likely to fully exploit such technology without regard for employee wellbeing. *Neo Marxist* theory espouses Bravermans’s (1974, cited in Attewell, ibid) critique of computer technology as a tool used by management to increase control over labour and to cut costs. Neo Marxists predict that workplace surveillance will become commonplace unless curbed by legislation or other means. *Product or technological life* theories are based on the view that products or services in the market have a life cycle, and that once a certain stage in this lifecycle has been reached (maturity), profits stabilise. In an effort to keep profits increasing, monitoring and deskilling may be used. According to this theory, monitoring is unlikely to be used at an early stage of the lifecycle, or when technological innovations reduce costs. *Contingency* theory looks at the ratio of clerical costs to overall organisational costs and how this connects with the
purpose of the clerical labour. Industries which employ a large proportion of clerical labour and which compete against similar industries, are likely to use surveillance technology to reduce staff levels and intensify the workplace. In industries where the primary product is customer service, the costs of clerical labour are low, and the firm wishes to differentiate itself from competitors, technology is used to improve the speed of response or quality of a product, not to increase workspeed. The final example given is that of rapidly growing organisations with a medium proportion of clerical costs, which need to retain the skills of existing clerical labour. These organisations are said to employ technology to assist with repetitive tasks so that staff can focus on the more skilled work. Industrial sociology is an assortment of observations regarding preconditions for surveillance to occur. These include highly competitive and labour-intensive firms, where pressuring workers to speed up increases profitability; the necessity of a glut of clerical labour, due to low morale and therefore high turnover; and repetitive work that involves little or no decision-making.

The specificity of the product or technological life theory, which refers to particular products or services, limits its application to call centres. While it could be said that call centres came about because customer service itself (across a wide variety of private, public and community organisations) reached a ‘maturity’ stage, this theory is undermined by the caveat that monitoring is unlikely to be used when technological innovations reduce costs: both by the fact that the purpose of the call centre is to cut costs, and because call centres have flourished as a direct result of technological innovations. The contingency theory also has little relevance in this discussion, as such
a wide range of organisations employ CSRs (clerical labour) that differences in the proportion of call centre costs to the overall costs of each organisation are likely to vary, yet all call centres employ similar surveillance techniques.

The wide range of organisations that employ CSRs would seem to be an equally effective argument in countering the corporate culture theory: it is unlikely, after all, that all organisations that operate call centres have a history of poor labour relations. However, while a history of labour relations is unlikely to be productive, a look at the history of CSRs - and their predecessors, telephonists – in general, reveals that surveillance has been occurring within the industry since 1927 (US Women’s Bureau 1963 cited in Attewell, ibid). Furthermore, early attention was drawn to the stress caused by such surveillance:

Standards have been set for speed and performance on all kinds of work positions and calls. In carrying out the duties of her (sic) work...the operator’s performance is being checked or inspected at every step by superiors and service observers. Telephone operating is exacting. A fagged out feeling and tense nerves at the end of the day are common...working under close, hovering supervision. Close supervision and remote observation add to the nervous tension of the job.

US Women’s Bureau, 1946

Cited in Attewell, ibid

Despite this, surveillance techniques have continued to be employed. Invasive monitoring techniques are most likely to occur within organisations where staff are predominantly women, minorities or non-unionised, and the work is unskilled and
repetitive (Marx 1999), a point also addressed by industrial sociology. Marx also specifies that the occupations particularly likely to employ surveillance techniques include telecommunications, insurance, banking and data processing. Nonetheless, these points do not explain why surveillance is used.

The repetitive nature of CSR work and the way in which it is measured have obvious parallels with Braverman’s analysis of Taylorism and deskilling. Taylorism, or scientific management, is a process whereby managers (or their modern day equivalents, such as consultants) reduce jobs to their component tasks, then study and measure them and decide how each task is best performed, so as to ensure maximum profit (Braverman 1974). Taylor’s intention was to increase management control through reducing any dependency upon skilled labour (the simplification of jobs diminishes any need for skilled labour), enabling management control over every aspect of production (Spencer 2000). One example of this is the Police Assistance Line (PAL) in New South Wales, which has replaced police officers with CSRs who have no policing experience, to deal with calls regarding ‘minor’ crimes from all over the state:

The types of crimes that we take are stealing, car stealings, lost property, motor car crashes um, and break, enter and steal offences. I really want my people to spend as much time as they can on the call, to get as much information as they can from the victim and to give them as much help and assistance (sic). But by the same degree I must ensure that they only spend enough time and not too much time doing that, because we must look after all our callers, not just the one on the line... It’s my opinion that the Police Assistance Line will, in fact, be a net revenue earner for the
NSW Police. It'll pay its way in a few years and then it'll start putting money back into the police coffers.

Superintendent Bill Hanington (cited from ABC programme transcript)

Ostensibly, concern for the caller is given as the reason for monitoring call length, however if the needs of the caller were paramount an obvious solution would be to employ more CSRs (clearly money is no object), thus enabling them to spend more time with those callers who need it. It appears that control, in and of itself, may well be the reason for surveillance technology in call centres:

When they first opened factories and they started on the Fordist model with Taylorism, the time and motion studies, this is exactly the same things (sic) we’re seeing in the call centres, where everything’s measured and you can speed things up or you can slow things down if you wanted to.

Sally McManus, call centre manager (ibid)

Braverman was criticised for his determinism, illustrated by the Neo Marxists view that surveillance will eventually spread to all workplaces; however, Braverman emphasised that deskilling would only occur where conditions allow it (such as, perhaps, in organisations where staff are predominantly women, minorities or non-unionised, and the work is unskilled and repetitive) (Spencer, 2000).
Repetitive – but skilled

Despite the repetitive and boring nature of working in a call centre, there are aspects of the job that require high skill, in particular - and as specified by the CSRs - customer service. Because each caller has different life experiences and therefore different levels of understanding – and ways of interacting – about their inquiry, the CSR must adapt his or her language and manner to the caller, and explain situations using words the caller can understand. Thus, even if making similar inquiries, a recently widowed woman who has never dealt with financial matters because her husband had always done so, has different needs to an immigrant who struggles with English, or a householder who calls regularly to balance the accounts. In addition to the idiosyncratic needs of each caller, there is the range of emotions that can be encountered: someone calling for a bank balance and discovering less money than expected in his or her account for example, is likely to be upset and may express anger or shock (or any number of feelings) in any variety of ways. The result is that CSRs are not just responding to inquiries: within and across calls, they need to spontaneously adapt to people with diverse mental and emotional intelligence levels. With no visual clues, CSRs interpret words, tempo, tone of voice, and even silences to ascertain what the caller needs. In this manner, and similar to the secretarial work described by Jackson (1994), the CSR job entails more than simply completing (repetitive) procedures as necessary. The job is far more subjective than it appears, because despite taking place
in a highly controlled and computerised environment, human interactions remain unpredictable.

**The Qualification Industry**

In light of the highly controlled and monotonous nature of the CSR job, and the poor prospects in terms of remuneration, lack of opportunity and turnover, why would anyone willingly pay for a call centre qualification and then seek to work in the sector?

Workers with qualifications - whether certificates, diplomas or degrees - have some advantages compared with those without qualifications, although the advantages themselves have decreased in value over the last twenty years (Marginson 1995). People with qualifications (and the higher the qualification the better) are far less likely to be unemployed, and if unemployed, will remain so for considerably shorter periods than unqualified people (ibid).

Furthermore, government, industry and union groups advocate that a highly skilled, highly trained workforce will lead to more productivity and the ability to compete internationally, and thus economic growth (Garrick 1998; Marginson 1995). This widespread credence given to the human capital theory continues thus: if growth does not transpire, the quality of education is at fault and therefore must be improved; after which, the economic benefits will prevail (Marginson ibid). In New Zealand, as well as internationally, efforts have been put into providing education that is increasingly
responsive to the needs of industry (Jackson & Jordan 2000), to the extent that employers are replacing students as the clients of the training system (ibid); and skills are redefined in terms of workplace function (ibid; Tobias 1999).

Education providers now quantify their programmes or courses by breaking them down into separate and identifiable tasks, which can be easily measured and standardised. This has resulted in a narrow definition of learning that focuses upon measurement of what the learner can do, rather than what the learner knows (Jackson 1994). There is an assumption of an ‘objective reality which is independent of the (subjective) knower’ (Marginson 1995); however as earlier illustrated, customer service ability requires considerable interpretation and judgement on the part of the CSR, rather than a reliance on technical proficiency in performing discrete tasks. The simplicity of the tasks required to obtain a call centre qualification fall substantially short of the high-skill, high-productivity vision.

This brings into question whether call centre organisations, as employers, become the primary beneficiaries of the training system; particularly when considered alongside the (necessary) inhouse training provided by most. Additionally, the banking and insurance industries – which comprise a significant proportion of call centres - have rejected external and standardised training, due to concerns that their competitive positions are closely linked to the quality of staff training; their perception is that standardised training would remove this advantage (NZ Government 2001). In light of these factors, and in light of the difficult working conditions and low prospects for CSRs, and the fact

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that their learning was predominantly ‘on the job’, it would seem that the primary beneficiaries of a call centre qualification (and perhaps other credentials) are the training institutions. This is further evidenced by the proliferation of ‘qualifications’ being offered by an increasing number of private educational or training institutions.

These institutions, like any other business, endeavour to sell their product. The problem is that many are inflating the importance or relevance of their product: the assertions made in their promotional material by the National College of Multimedia and Technology, for example, present CSR work as an ‘exciting career’ as well as imply that industry-specific knowledge is required to be able to work in a call centre (and that they provide it): while the first claim is at least debatable (although I have yet to meet a CSR who considers the job either exciting, or a career), the second is false.

The growth in the training industry has been matched by the number of complaints made by students about their courses: the Commerce Commission has received 120 complaints and inquiries about education in the last year and has reported concern at the high number of enquiries it receives (Commerce Commission, cited in Newsroom website). The Commerce Commission has just successfully prosecuted Christchurch based Design and Arts College of New Zealand Limited, for four breaches of the Fair Trading Act - the College had claimed its course in multi media design and production was for a national diploma qualification when it was a lesser certificate course. Two further prosecutions are being prepared for, both also against private training providers (ibid).
Conclusion

The use of computers to monitor every second of a CSR’s shift, ensures an extreme form of efficiency for the organisation: what other job is able to enforce workers to be on task for 100% of their rostered shift? There are costs however: to the CSR through decreased mental health and high anxiety levels, for example; and to the employer, because of turnover or absenteeism. The cost to the organisation is apparently not enough to warrant a reconsideration of such monitoring, in view of the fact that it has continued unabated for nearly eighty years, and despite ongoing concerns about the personal welfare of CSRs (and their predecessors, the telephonists). Braverman’s discussion of management control has a very real (and perhaps renewed) relevance in the call centre industry, where technology is used to ensure the needs of the employer truly reign supreme.

Surveillance issues aside, the CSR job is an odd combination of repetitive but skilled work. Literally tethered to their desks, CSRs take ‘call after call’ and complete the same procedures throughout each shift, yet each caller is a different person with different needs. The CSR needs to be able to interpret and use auditory clues to establish how best to proceed and communicate with each caller.

Call centre qualifications focus on the accomplishment of generic, measurable and simple tasks however: thereby negating the part of the CSR job that is genuinely skilled, and of a subjective nature; and degrading the definition of training. Furthermore, these qualifications cannot provide what the CSRs valued most about
their training, which was learning how to navigating the computer systems and the product knowledge; both of which are organisation-specific.

Widespread and uncritical approval of human capital concepts that equate highly skilled labour with economic recovery have created an environment that is highly conducive to the proliferation of training institutions. Quantity however, does not equate with quality. The manufacturing of educational ‘need’ is evident in the promotional materials of training institutions: educational and career benefits are being grossly exaggerated, to the extent that a CSR job can be reinvented as an ‘exciting career’. Quite aside from the poor prospects, boredom and extreme conditions, the future outlook for call centres is poor due to technological innovations and ongoing cost cutting.
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Appendix