

Thesis  
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# Call Centre Employment: A Qualitative Study

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of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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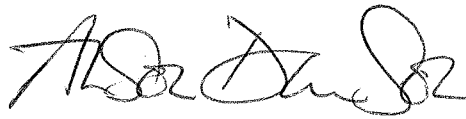
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## Declaration

I declare that this thesis was composed in its entirety by me, that the work described in it was carried out by me, and that no part of that work has been included in any other thesis.

Signature

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alison S. F. Dawson', written in a cursive style.

Alison S. F. Dawson

Date 28 MAY 2003

Dedicated

To my mother

Judy Marina

To the memory of my father

Roger Frederick Harry

And to my infinitely better half

James

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## Abstract

This study explores aspects of the nature and experience of call centre employment. In 1972 only 42% of UK households had a home-based telephone (BIFU, 1996). By 2000 98% of UK homes had access to either fixed-line or mobile telephone services (OfTel, 2001). The commercial exploitation of this artifact is now being realised through call centres employing sophisticated information and communications technologies. Virtually unheard of a decade ago, UK call centres provided jobs for an estimated 264,000 people in 2001 (Datamonitor, 1999). They have increasingly attracted public and academic attention, much of the latter focused on issues of employee control and surveillance. This study uses analyses of call centre-related newspaper articles, a survey of Scottish recruitment and employment agencies, covert participant observation, and interviews with agency representatives and call centre employees to explore issues such as recruitment and selection, the nature and experience of employment, and employee turnover in call centres. The ethics of using covert methods are discussed. Four main conclusions emerge from the study. First, call centre employment can be differentiated from other occupations on the basis of recruitment and selection practices, employee skills and differences in work environments, performance monitoring and supervision practices and regulation of workplace behaviour. Second, job characteristics may predispose employees to low levels of job-related well-being and burnout. Third, levels of employee turnover may be linked to occupational novelty and the availability of pre-employment realistic job information. Fourth, automated systems are beginning to replace routine, repetitive, low value tasks, resulting in changes in the nature of call centre employment. Those jobs that remain seem likely to be more demanding with complex tasks and an emphasis on quality rather than quantity of interactions. The implications of the study's findings and conclusions for future research and for call centre employers and their employees are considered.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

## *1.1 Background*

Between 1972 and 1992 the proportion of UK households with a land-based telephone rose from 42% to 89% and by 1995 up to 93.4% of households had access to telephone services, with more than 50% of households having two or more telephones (BIFU, 1996). According to Office for National Statistics (1999) figures, the penetration of fixed line telephone services in UK households remained virtually static at around 95% between 1997 and 1999. Oftel (2001a) reported that UK fixed line penetration had fallen since 1999, primarily due to the increasing popularity and affordability of mobiles. It was suggested that 93% of UK homes had fixed-line telephone services and that a further 5% used mobile telephones with only 2% having access to neither fixed-line nor mobile telephone services. The increasing ubiquity of home-based telephones generated the potential for commercial exploitation in business-to-consumer transactions, the full realisation of which became possible with the advent of microprocessors in the early 1980s and the subsequent development of the information and communications technologies (ICTs) that now form the basis of telephone call centres.

In the UK the widespread use of call centres developed initially in insurance and financial services sectors. The early adoption of ICTs, combined with aggressive marketing, paid handsome dividends for some but quickly attracted imitators, producing accelerated growth in both numbers of call centres and call centre employment. For example, the telephone-based insurance provider Direct Line, considered one of the earliest UK adopters of call centres, was established by the Royal Bank of Scotland in 1988. By 1996 Direct Line had become the top comprehensive motor insurer with 11.2% of the market, at which time there were more than fifty telephone-based insurance providers in operation. It was estimated that in 1995 approximately 35 percent of all motor insurance had been sold by telephone, a proportion that was projected to increase to 50 percent by 2000 (BIFU, 1996). Subsequent growth in the numbers of UK call centres can be attributed to the spread of their use to other commercial sectors and to recognition of their potential as a tool in customer relationship management, an approach that has attained prominence and popularity in the last decade.

The importance of call centres to the UK is underscored by their contribution to national employment. In 1996 it was estimated that approximately 130,000 people, 1.1 percent of the UK's working population, was employed either full time or part time in telephone call centres (Datamonitor, 1996). According to projections of call centre growth made at that time, by the year 2001 2.2 percent of the UK's working population would be employed in call centres. A more recent report (Datamonitor, 1999) has suggested that in 1998 there were 198,000 people employed in making or answering telephone calls in UK call centres, a figure estimated to grow to 264,000 by 2001 and to 301,000 by 2003.

### *1.2 Defining the call centre*

There is no single universal definition of a telephone call centre (or just 'call centre' as it is frequently termed). In the past attempts have been made to define call centres by function rather than by the specific equipment employed, for example defining a call centre as 'An operation whose principal purpose is to facilitate contact by telephone between a vendor and its customers' (Scottish Enterprise, 1997). This definition is perhaps misleading in that it suggests that call centres are somehow restricted to use in circumstances where there is some sort of selling involved. It does not encompass those call centres which are operated solely for the provision of a service outwith a commercial environment, for example the call centres run by the Benefits Agency for the provision of benefits-related advice, or the call centre operations of agencies such as the Samaritans to provide emotional support to callers. Richardson and Marshall (1996: 308) provided a fuller functional definition of call centres, describing them as 'Offices providing a variety of sales, marketing and information services remotely by telephone'.

As a variation on the functionality theme, some definitions of a call centre have been drawn up in such a way as to cover the industry or sector under discussion but not to be fully generalisable. For example in a 1996 report commissioned by BIFU on telephone banking and insurance call centres are defined as '[Having] two basic functions: to act as a reception centre for customer telephone calls and to centrally process transactions'. The second part of that definition is not universally applicable to call centres, but is a salient feature of call centres in banking and insurance. Occasionally, call centres have attracted more graphic descriptions, for example that of 'white-



collar factories' (Clement, 1997), a reference to the way in which labour is organised and to the physical layout of some purpose-built call centres.

Taylor, Mulvey, Hyman and Bain (2002) suggested that an earlier definition by Taylor and Bain (1999) of a call centre as '...a dedicated operation in which computer-utilising employees receive inbound – or make outbound telephone calls – with these calls processed either by an Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) system' or perhaps by a predictive dialing system (1999: 102) had been adequate for 'the first generation of call centres' but required elaboration in the light of more recent technological developments such as interactive voice recognition (IVR), call blending and web-enabling. They argued however that call centres remained 'defined fundamentally by the integration of telephone and computer technologies'.

For the purposes of the current study I will define a call centre as:

'An environment in which agents representing an organisation are grouped together primarily to manage external contacts with that organisation through telecommunications media'.

This improves upon the definitions given above in a number of important respects. First, it talks of 'an environment' in which call centre activities take place. The working environments of call centres are characterised by the presence of desks, chairs, VDU screens and computer keyboards arranged into 'work stations'. In this respect they resemble typical office environments. The work stations are frequently arranged in central, open spaces in such a way as to achieve maximum occupancy. Rows or clusters of workstations are common, as these facilitate so-called team working. Individual work stations may or may not be partitioned from their neighbours. Although this picture represents a common, perhaps typical, call centre layout it does not represent the only model available for call centres. In some cases small groups of employees located in the same building or across a site are able to act as a single call centre because of the technology employed. It is also anticipated that 'virtual call centres' will become viable in the near future, where individuals can be situated in many locations and yet come together in a 'virtual environment' to act as call centres. In not specifying the particular environments in which call centres must exist, the definition allows for future developments that move call centres away from more established

settings. One thing that will rarely be seen in a call centre is a telephone. It is normal for workers in call centres to wear headsets that enable hands-free telephone conversations and facilitate the use of their keyboards.

Second, the definition refers to 'agents representing an organisation'. This part of the definition explicitly recognises the variety of employment practices used in call centres, particularly the use of agency-contracted temporary employees and outsourcing arrangements. Call centres can represent a large capital investment to organizations, significant proportions of which are investment in the technology, both hardware and software, to run call centre operations. In the era of the microchip, hardware has proved difficult to protect from rapid obsolescence. In addition, there are usually considerable start-up costs, including substantial investments in recruitment and training. High levels of labour turnover, which are not unusual in call centres, also add to costs. Outsourcing is an increasingly widely used option for organizations deciding that call centre capabilities are necessary to maintain or improve their market positions but not wishing to make an investment in facilities of their own. Employees in an outsourced call centre will be expected to respond to external contacts as though they were part of the organisation to which they have been contracted, making such arrangements invisible to the customer. Another strategy adopted by some operators of call centres is the use of temporary staff supplied and employed by agencies. Such employees can be engaged on work for a single call centre operator for long periods without being offered permanent contracts. These employees are also required to present a seamless interface to external contacts, to act as though they were employed by an organization from whom they might be several contracts removed.

Third, the suggested definition refers to employees engaged 'primarily to manage external contacts with the organisation'. Difficulties that have arisen in previous attempts to define call centres may stem in part from the fact that call centres can be categorised as being one of three main types. 'Inbound' call centres only receive contacts. They do not make them in the course of their normal operations. Examples of this type might include advice lines run by government agencies and customer order lines run by mail order companies. Conversely, 'outbound' call centres deal exclusively with making external contacts, rather than receiving them. Call centres that are run expressly to canvass homeowners and to generate leads for field sales staff are an example of this

type. The third type, often termed 'universal' call centres, fulfil both functions. In not specifying in what way contacts with the organisation are 'managed', the definition acts as an umbrella term equally applicable to all three types of call centre. In addition, the possibility that a call centre may have other aims is recognised explicitly by stating that contact management is the primary purpose for the formation of a call centre.

Fourth, my definition does not explicitly specify the manner in which external contacts to or from the call centre are made. It employs the phrase 'through telecommunications media'. Although call centres were originally developed to handle telephone interactions between organizations and those external to them, advances in technology, especially in the area of computer-telephony integration (CTI), are enabling call centres to evolve. The most technologically sophisticated call centres now have the capacity to manage external contacts through a range of media, for example via e-mail or the Internet, and not just over the telephone. This ability to operate across multiple media is likely to be a growing trend within the call centre industry, mirroring the market penetration of personal computers and associated growth in Internet connectivity and use. To tie a definition of call centres to telephone interactions is possibly to build in redundancy, albeit that the majority of contacts handled by call centres are currently by telephone. Datamonitor (1999) estimated that in mid-1999 there were 'less than 30 call centres in the UK with Internet functionality'. Retaining as part of the definition that contacts should be 'through telecommunications media' serves to underline another important feature of the call centre, the fact that contacts are remote but the parties are made to feel proximate by the use of technology.

### *1.3 Aims*

The main purpose of this study is to describe and examine the nature of work in telephone call centres. Call centres are a relatively recent phenomenon, and there is currently little in the academic literature that deals specifically with aspects of work in call centres. However, by 1996 call centres in the USA already employed over 3% of the workforce and, as noted earlier, it had been predicted that by 2001 telephone call centres would employ more than 2% of the UK's workforce (Datamonitor, 1996). More recently Datamonitor (1999) estimated that there would be 264,000 call centre agent positions in the UK by 2001. Given the importance that these statistics

suggest such work has assumed in the early twenty-first century, it is important that the distinguishing features of this type of employment should be understood. This study makes a contribution to that task by providing a 'picture' of work in call centres that helps to identify those aspects of call centre work that serve to differentiate it from other types of employment.

The nature of any particular kind of work may be described partly by its 'objective' features, such as the physical environment in which it takes place, reward and remuneration systems, the patterns of hours worked, and so on. This enables those who are unfamiliar with such work to locate it within a mental framework by comparing its features with other types of work. The first of the specific objectives of this thesis is to provide sufficient information to allow the reader to do this. But a description of the objective features of call centre employment might lead to its comparison with other white-collar clerical work such as data inputting. As well as to some extent informing the reader, this could also lead to the development of a misleading picture of call centre work. A simple description of such features cannot tell the whole story. In the same way, for example, that describing the setting for, equipment used and rules applicable to a game of hockey can not provide any real understanding of the nature of the game or enable an explanation of why different individuals might be equally passionate in their love or loathing of it, describing the working environment and physical processes of employment in call centres can not provide an adequate understanding of the experience of working in one.

Descriptions of the subjective experience of working in call centres provide the reader with flesh to hang on the skeleton provided by descriptions of the objective features of call centre employment, enabling them to have a fuller and more complete understanding of what is involved. The second aim of this study is therefore to provide such a description. In addition, the analysis and description of the subjective experiences of a number of individuals employed in call centres may allow for the elucidation of aspects of call centre employment that are otherwise difficult to detect. The final aim is to extract from the data those elements that characterise or define telephone call centre work.

#### *1.4 Research methods*

In addition to the use of secondary sources, this study uses four primary data collection methods: a content analysis and review of call centre-related newspaper articles, a postal questionnaire sent to Scottish recruitment and employment agencies, a period of covert participant observation and a number of semi-structured interviews with employment agency representatives and call centre and former call centre employees. The strengths and weaknesses of these methods and details of how they were used are contained in the chapter on research methods. This section explains briefly the reasons for this choice of data collection methods.

The content analysis and review of call centre-related newspaper articles published over a five-year period provided data on the recent growth of call centre employment in the UK and identified call centre-related issues that have attracted media attention. This method was selected for four main reasons. First, it was felt that the number of published articles might be expected to mirror, and thus provide an alternative indication of, the increasing numbers of call centres in the UK that would complement estimate-based data from secondary sources.

Second, it was believed that a review of newspaper articles would provide an insight into public perceptions of call centre employment, with this having relevance to issues such as recruitment and employee turnover. Third, it was thought that it would be interesting to see whether changes could be detected over time in the issues addressed or prevailing media attitudes towards call centres. Finally, it seemed that newspaper articles might provide a valuable source of additional information to supplement the limited volume of published research on call centres.

A postal questionnaire was chosen to survey the involvement of Scottish employment agencies in call centre recruitment because anecdotal evidence existed of their involvement and a survey would quantify it. It was believed that the questionnaire method was particularly suited to collecting straightforward quantitative data in a form amenable to basic analysis. Whilst the data being collected were not complex, it seemed likely that the information would not be immediately to hand in most agencies and thus a postal survey was more suited to collecting this data than, for example, a telephone-based survey. Additionally, it was thought that being able to complete the

questionnaire at the respondent's convenience might produce a better response rate. Finally, it was believed that a postal questionnaire would prove the most resource-efficient way of obtaining the desired data from a geographically dispersed population.

The primary reason for wanting to include participant observation as a data collection method was that it was felt this would be the best way to understand the experience of this type of employment from an employee perspective. Immersion in the research setting enables the researcher to 'see' things that are so familiar to those operating in that environment that they would not be commented on in an interview. It enables the researcher to experience something of the 'atmosphere' of the setting. Also, importantly, it can provide a vocabulary to be used in other data collection methods, for example interviews, the use of which generates confidence that you, the researcher, might be able to understand things that an informant finds difficult to articulate. It was known that there was an intention to use interviewing as a data collection method later in the study and it was believed that rapport could be established more easily where the subject perceives that they have elements in common with the interviewer. It was also felt that a period of participant observation would help in the identification of preconceptions that might affect the way in which data collected using other methods was interpreted.

The decision to use covert participant observation was made primarily because of a concern to have an experience of call centre employment that was as authentic and typical as it could be made to be. Research using secondary sources led to the belief that call centre operators were conscious of the increasingly poor reputation of call centres in general. It was felt that the call centres of those employers with whom access might successfully be negotiated would not necessarily represent the experience of most call centre employees. Additionally, there were concerns that the price of access negotiated via call centre employers would be too high, both in terms of limiting the latitude of what it was possible to observe and subsequently discuss and in terms of being perceived by those observed as an instrument of management. The latter might lead to certain aspects of the employment experience being deliberately obscured from me. Also there was a possibility of not being treated as a *bona fide* employee and of concessions being made, for example in terms of the consequences of not reaching required targets. The possibility of negotiating access via the sponsorship of representative bodies such as unions was considered, but

it was felt that there were compelling reasons not to explore this route. First, from secondary research it was clear that unionisation was not the majority experience of call centre employees. Second, there is again a danger of being perceived as an agent of the sponsor, leading those observed to behave differently.

Semi-structured interviews were used with both employment agency representatives and current and former call centre employees. This method of data collection was chosen in connection with the employment agency survey because it allowed the collection of more complex and detailed data than was possible with the questionnaire and gave greater latitude in the issues that could be explored. Interviews were used to collect data on the experience of call centre employment because they provided an opportunity to test the typicality of participant observation experiences, allowed for more depth than a questionnaire would have done, and were a format with which the study subjects appeared familiar and comfortable. The interviews were always intended to produce qualitative data from which to draw or support inferences rather than quantitative data capable of statistical analysis. In view of this and the quantity of data gathered using other techniques, I felt that a relatively small number of interviews would be sufficient to suggest the degree of similarity between the participant observation experiences and those of the interviewees and to allow aspects of it to be explored in reasonable depth.

### *1.5 Chapter plan*

The body of this study is divided into a further ten chapters. The first three of those chapters provide a context for those that follow. In chapter 2 I examine the nature of work and employment in advanced industrial societies. My intention is to provide a wider context in which the development of telephone call centres can be considered. I begin by exploring the contention that we live in a post-industrial society, arguing that the description 'advanced industrial society' is more appropriate. I then examine the economic, political and social characteristics of such societies. The chapter then turns to issues of work and employment in advanced industrial societies. I discuss the changing nature of work and employment through the identification of trends in relation to workplace demographics and the physical and psychological work environments.

In chapters 3 and 4 I review the current state of call centre-related knowledge. The aim of these two chapters is to present a specific framework within which this study can be located. I argue that past research has tended to focus on six broad themes. In chapter 3 I consider the first four of these, namely the historical development of call centres, call centres in a wider societal context, the use of call centres as service delivery channels, and the management of call centres. In chapter 4 I examine prior studies on the issue of call centre work organization and papers that relate at a general level to call centre employees. On the basis of the review contained in chapters 3 and 4 I argue that call centres are a relatively new focus for research and that many facets, for example call centre recruitment and selection procedures, remain relatively unexplored. Additionally, accounts involving the perspectives of individual call centre employees seem to be underdeveloped in the literature.

In chapter 5 I detail the research methods used in this study. The chapter begins with a brief overview of different research perspectives that allows my choice of methods to be put into context. I describe the five main data collection activities involved in the study, namely; a period of general desk research using various secondary sources, a content analysis and review of call-centre related newspaper articles published over a five-year period, a postal questionnaire, a period of covert participant observation and a number of semi-structured interviews. I consider the strengths and weaknesses of the latter three as data collection techniques before reviewing ethical debates on the use of covert methods. Finally I detail and discuss the data collection process, including some of the practical difficulties associated with the use of the methods selected.

In chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9 I present and discuss my data. In chapter 6 I attempt to provide an overview of both the development of call centres in the UK and extent and nature of their use that will form a backdrop to subsequent chapters. The chapter is arranged in three sections. In the first section I present a brief history of call centres in the UK, charting their development by means of the content analysis and review of call-centre related newspaper articles detailed in chapter 5. In the second section using data gathered during the search of secondary sources I discuss the current scope and scale of UK call centre use. In the third section I provide a layman's guide to call centre technology that incorporates excerpts from sales literature gathered as part of the study.



